

# Our Organizations, Ourselves



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Parallels between groups of people and our physical embodied experiences have been a source of human insight and theorizing for centuries, from the writings of Plato and Aristotle to contemporary social physics. In recent decades, ideas about systems, complexity, and quantum mechanics have entered into many minds and fields, resulting in cross-discipline pollination and an interdisciplinary revolution in our investigations of our humanity. As our awareness and understanding of our mind/bodies has advanced, so have descriptions of our collectives, aided by the common language of complexity and new measurement tools. Major advances in business perspectives include the impact of systems theory through the concept of “the learning organization” (Senge, 1990), recognition of the importance of emotional intelligence and relationships at work (Goleman, 1995, 2006), and the importance of affect in organizations (Barsade & Gibson, 2007). Those creating the discipline of “neuroleadership” are specifically looking at how neuroscience information can help leaders learn to best guide change (Rock & Schwartz, 2006). Embracing these advances and suggesting more, interpersonal neurobiology (IPNB) brings a vibrant, interdisciplinary, and multilevel perspective to understanding our organizational mind/bodies.

Whether our communities are chosen or required, whether our organizations are no-profit, non-profit, or for-profit, they are where we act together, “as

one body,” to affect our worlds. Any project that involves more than one of us requires collaborative action. As it is our nature to see and develop patterns, routines, and rituals, most tasks requiring humans to coordinate them become more organized over time, and so our collective bodies reflect the same processes of health and well-being (and challenges to those states), that we find in our close relationships, our minds, and our brain/bodies. For groups to survive, they need to be nourished and maintained, like our bodies, remaining healthy enough to live on, whether we measure their health by membership, task achievement, pleasure, or profit. Organizational leaders and consultants find ways to facilitate the health and development of an organism/organizational body, just as healers or teachers encourage the natural growth and well-being of the mind/body of their patients or students.

Daniel J. Siegel (2006, 2007) describes well-being as having three interrelated and non-reducible elements—an integrated brain, a coherent mind, and empathic relationships. The three form a triangle in which each element supports the other two. Another way Siegel offers to conceptualize the integrated flow of well-being is that we embody certain characteristics in that process, summarized in the acronym “FACES”: we are flexible, adaptive, coherent, energized, and stable. Each of these qualities can be applied easily to the individual and collective level. Placing the triangle

of well-being in our workplaces, we can see it expand in metaphorical 3-D, existing within each individual, in the organizational system, and in the local and global environment. IPNB provides a description of what occurs as our minds/cultures create our embodied realities/organizations, and are then shaped by them in continuing acts of co-creation. As we spend our days in this emerging process, it can facilitate or diminish well-being on all levels. Put in practical terms, IPNB gives us significant ideas about how to help businesses be better for people and the planet, with practical applications for training and content development, leadership, and organizational consulting. (Warning: these ideas may also make you a more conscious consumer.)



Why would businesses care about all this well-being? Isn't their focus on "show me the money"? Actually, the imbalanced over-focus on profit is a relatively new occurrence. Historically, businesses involved families and neighbors. While their business practices varied in their relative emphasis on "people vs. profit," how they treated employees, the quality of their product, and how they impacted their surrounds, on this small scale, caring about workers and the local community/environment often merged naturally with being a successful local business. Today's global economy, 24/7 workday, and spiral of innovation pressure businesses to focus narrowly on growth and profit, even as they expand and increasingly impact the well-being of humans and the earth. Consistent

with our IPNB-inspired 3-D view of well-being, the literature supports taking a multilevel perspective, highlighting the connections between the health of corporations and the health of humanity, and between the well-being of employees and their company's success. In other words, what's good for business in the long run *is* what's good for people, and what's good for people is good for business

Our organizations greatly affect us on a personal level as research studies examining impacts on physical health, stress, relationship conflict, and life satisfaction show. Take a minute to gather your own internal, experiential evidence. Recall a best example of an organization in which you participated for some time. Consider the atmosphere, the relationships, the meaning of the work, how "FACES" it was. Enjoy that memory. Now, recall a worst example—you can immediately feel the difference, in your mind/body. (Feel free to return to your first memory before continuing.)

As you may have just discovered, healthy work environments combine supportive relationships, meaningful labor, and opportunities for learning and growth. These factors matter more to most people than income, once a certain level of basic needs is met. IPNB is congruent with the current shifts occurring as businesses acknowledge the interrelated nature of employee and organizational well-being. A recent review of over 15 years of research identified five areas of workplace practices that contribute to positive outcomes on *both* levels: work-life balance, employee growth and development, health and safety, recognition, and employee involvement. These practices were significantly associated with measurements of employees' motivation, stress levels, and job satisfaction, *and* with measurable organization improvements such as retention and productivity (Grawitch, Gottschalk, & Munz, 2006). Effective communication and a better "fit" between implemented practices and the people in that community were necessary to get the strongest results. These research outcomes can be interpreted as evidence that attunement and contingent communication help increase organizational well-being. One healthy sign is that our society's increasing attention to the connections between

organizational and personal well-being is celebrated in lists like Fortune Magazine's 100 Best Companies to Work For and the American Psychological Association's Psychologically Healthy Workplace Awards.

Business bodies have grown so powerful that their strength and circulatory systems dramatically affect well-being in our world. In an interview about business as a human community, Peter Senge stated, "The major issues in the world—energy, climate change, food, water, materials waste, and toxicity—these cross all boundaries and in many ways are the key interdependencies between developed and developing countries. And business fits right in the center of that web of interdependence" (Senge, 2006, ¶ 1). Unfortunately, current analyses of the corporate and political world suggest that many social bodies are seriously ill, suffering from obesity, addiction, denial, attention regulation issues, as well as a lack of perspective, connection, and compassion. From your own experience, you may wish to add other metaphorical diagnoses. Not surprisingly, these larger systems' disorders mirror what is happening on the level of individuals as well. In these ill conditions, some businesses continue to amplify the harm being done, affecting community health, the frequency of stress-related events, and environmental destruction. In his brilliant interpersonal and neurobiological analysis of runaway consumerism, first developed in American people and businesses and now spreading around the globe, Peter Whybrow (2005) refers to our dissipating empathy as "the immune system of a civil society" (p. 218). The current state of business is harming our immunity by fostering desire over need, mindless consumption over mindful nourishment, excitement over empathy. At the same time, we are ignoring serious, perhaps catastrophic threats to our long-term survival as a species and an ecosystem.



If we allow the belief in the false dichotomy of profits and people to fade away, we can begin envisioning a world where business organizations create and prosper while fostering empathy, connection, and responsibility—a healthy, balanced, integrated business body. Slowly, we struggle with a different way of doing business focused by new questions. What will our business bring to life, make happen, add to the world? What values will it embody? How will we measure its health—its success and impact, its cost and worth? How do we balance those? On how many levels will we consider our business's capacity to influence well-being—for employees, for those who use the products or services, for the organizational body itself, for the larger world? This might become a mindful reflection process for organizations, leading to increased connection within and without. A small example of this new business mentality is the increasing consideration of "green" issues (environmental impact, sustainability) in products and policies. Some larger businesses already have executives in charge of "eco-responsibility." Of course, in our human drive for expansion and innovation, we have already morphed "going green" into a business venture of its own, with products, consultants, companies, and marketing slogans.

In recognition of how each organization and the entire business system is crucial for the future of personal and global well-being, two new books by important integrative thinkers of our time suggest solutions that are consistent with IPNB. Thich Nhat Hahn (2007), Zen master, human rights activist, and author of dozens of works, chose to focus his recent book, *The Art of Power*, on the multilevel problems and potentials of business and work life. He defines the true nature of power as found in mindfulness—a clear, present mind with the intention of compassion—and discusses how we can apply Buddhist wisdom to turn our work, leadership, and workplaces toward those practices

that increase well-being on all levels. In an appendix, he includes a personal narrative written by Yvon Chouinard, who founded the clothing company Patagonia. Thich Nhat Hanh writes that Patagonia's example shows "how compassion and mindfulness can make our businesses a pleasure for ourselves, and a gift for our employees and for the world" (p. 201). Chouinard's story is an inspiring example of the emergence of a healthy organization, an illustration of FACES flow in organizational practice and leadership.

In another recent publication, Riane Eisler (2007) extends her decades of scholarly work about civilization, human history, and the age-old conflict between dominator and partnership models to an analysis of the economic system. She calls for the creation of a "caring economics," and briefly makes reference to neuroscience findings about attachment and the development of empathy as she formulates a new economics that works for the health of people, businesses, and the planet. "A partnerist economic theory recognizes that in the course of evolution both men and women developed an enormous capacity for caring, creativity, and consciousness—and that rules and practices that encourage rather than inhibit this capacity are foundational to an economic system that works for all" (p. 151). An analysis of psychological and economic data brought Diener and Seligman (2004) to the congruent conclusion that well-being should be the primary goal of our economic, social, and health policies, and can be measured by peoples' experiences of positive emotion, engagement, satisfaction, and meaning.

Internalizing an IPNB perspective can encourage those engaged in organizational consulting and leadership development to attend to the ingredients that increase well-being within and without. We have learned to picture the outcome of progress toward an integrated brain, coherent mind, and empathic relationships as the FACES flow of

coherence. This state is a continual negotiation between chaos and rigidity, imaged as the two riverbanks (Siegel, 2006). To extend this metaphor, consultants/leaders can help organizations stay on course, riding the rapids when necessary—a kind of emergence management. Creativity and innovation often require some trolling near the chaos bank, but with enough order and sense of mission to keep the forward momentum. As Senge (2006, ¶15) said, "to be an effective visionary you must also be connected to the realities of today."



Organizational consultants and internal leaders can create the bridges or links of integration: between today and tomorrow; people, organizations, and the planet; co-workers, departments, and customers; intentions, goals and actions; profits, costs and values. When they do this, they are acting like the middle prefrontal cortex for the organizational mind/body,

able to draw the many components influencing their enterprise into an integrating flow of energy and information that produces response flexibility, empathy, and morality. They provide a regulated, mindful, and compassionate presence, similar to attuned therapists, teachers, and parents, that promotes continual reintegrating and rebalancing, as the organization moves from one stage of growth to the next, responding to new stimuli from the environment and its interior. In this way, the organizational body returns again and again to the FACES flow, not losing course, or crashing into the riverbanks.

In order to focus on the multiple levels in which businesses can increase well-being, leaders must develop their mindsight (Siegel, 2007), the "capacity to see the mind in ourselves and others" (p. 278), which supports self-awareness and empathy. As a result of linking like-minded individuals together around a common goal, organizations can also begin to exhibit mindsight. We can see evidence for this when the concrete

policies and procedures that regulate the flow of energy and information in the organization support the goal of the enterprise being a conscious, compassionate, interdependent member of the larger community that includes their employees, their society, and their ecosystem.

With neuroscience in the mainstream, the business world is rapidly making use of its discoveries. Examples include neuromarketing (how our brains make decisions to buy) and neuroproducts (how to slow the aging brain's decline, for example). At the research level, an case in point is the Leadership Neuroscience Project, which is correlating brain activity measures with psychometrics to see what distinguishes the leader's brain, anticipating business and military applications. Some of these uses of neuroscience are sure to be premature, shortsighted, or over-oriented to profit. One way to encourage using the new knowledge for greater well-being is to help businesses become grounded in the overall framework of IPNB. Such a focus intrinsically brings neuroethical considerations into business applications. Certain types of organizations may be excellent natural arenas for IPNB applications, including healthcare, education, creative or progressive businesses, and family businesses, although we need not limit our vision to just these. As experience proves that profit and broad-based well-being are compatible, this growth in business perspective will surely gain momentum.

Imagine more organizations with mindsight at work. As I consult with businesses and leaders, IPNB illuminates my approach to organizational life. In my work, I do an organizational well-being check, considering the 3D perspective, assessing FACES qualities of the organization, and gathering information about different aspects of integration between employees and the organization, and the organization and the world. As I listen to the

members of the group narrate their experience, I consider the mind/body of the organization, the individuals, and their connections. I am aware of my own work history and memories—volunteer, self-employed, employee, executive, consultant—mindful of how my own experiences may color my perspective.

The interventions I offer are grounded in IPNB principles, respectful of the business's mission and purpose, and developed with awareness of where an integrating FACES flow needs to be encouraged in this particular organization. Whether physical, personal, relational, or procedural, all new processes seek to increase some aspect of organizational integration. When leaders within organizations are able to internalize the framework and concepts of IPNB, these interventions feel more congruent and are more easily implemented. In a future article, I will share specifics and stories about applications with organizations.



In order to bring mindsight to the world of economics and work, and help the business body move toward a state of health, we need to mindfully change ourselves. Using our own middle prefrontal resources to take in the larger picture, we can begin to assess organizations that have a place in our lives.

These might be the venues where we lead, work, or shop. How might we develop a broad vision and communicate it to others? What are our resources for doing this? What will this vision look like in embodied form? Sometimes we may feel powerless in the shadow of big business and mammoth organizations. However, in small ways, we all interact daily with these powerful, pivotal systems, providing nourishment in the form of our money, time, energy, and values. Complexity theory tells us that, in nonlinear dynamic systems, small changes can lead to big results. IPNB suggests that all systems created by human minds, from neural networks to global economies, move

toward an integrative complexity unless their forward flow is constrained by obstacles. Once we embrace the idea that growth means gaining more well-being rather than more stuff, one powerful constraint will be removed. Our daily mindful

decisions can become one voice in a chorus for change that flings open the windows of possibility. In the box below, you will find reflective questions that can lead to actions encouraging this life-affirming endeavor.

## **Toward Being a Conscious Consumer**

*Consider how you engage with the business body, your place in the commercial flow of energy and information, the cycle of contributing and consuming—your time, your effort, your money, and your choices. We will explore a small piece of our part in the human exchange, of services and things, of people and profits, of workers and owners, stores and companies and conglomerates. For now, take a few moments to reflect on how you influence well-being through the power of your choices in consumption.*

*\*Reflect back on your week, remembering the places you've been and the money you spent. Pick some tangible object you purchased and enjoy(ed). Remember finding and obtaining it, and review its presence in your life since then. What has it brought you? Did it last for a brief time or will it continue? What feelings and sensations do you associate with it? Did it increase your well-being?*

*\*Where, when, and why did you buy it? From whom? How was it made? Travel back through the possible chain of buyers and sellers, back to the designers of this object and of all the materials needed to make it. How many hands touched this, how many humans are part of the creation and distribution and history of this object? Did the work increase their well-being? If you want, you can take a few deep breathes and extend thanks and gratitude to all of those whose time and energy are connected to you through this object.*

*\*What resources of planet Earth were used to make and distribute your object? How easily are they duplicated, replaced, renewed? Did this influence the ecosystem's well-being? Acknowledge your footprint.*

*\*With your mind open to all the interconnections represented in your object, ask your self: Who received from you? What did you support in our world? What did you give, get, and take? How can you allow this awareness to inform your future choices?*

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