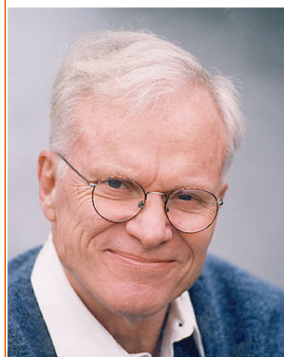
Challenge and Response: The Key to Survival in a Constantly Changing Environment

By William Bridges



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We are constantly hearing about competitiveness, game plans and winning. In a society as sports-minded as ours, those terms strike a ready chord. All the more so when we seem to be falling behind in a game where we were once the dominant player.

But the sports metaphor is dangerously misleading. It suggests there is a coherent "game" going on, and the "winners" will come out ahead because they beat the "losers." It suggests they win because they are a better "team"—better talent, better training, better strategy.

In fact, a rapidly changing organizational environment such as today's offers only very short-term victories to those organizations that set out to beat the opposition. The long-term advantage lies with those organizations that focus on the environment as a whole, not on the competition. We are in a time of rapid evolutionary change, and becoming preoccupied with the competition is as shortsighted as it would have been for the dinosaurs to peg their survival on a competition with the amphibians. The dinosaurs dropped out of the picture not because they were beaten by any other type of creature but simply because they did not respond successfully to the challenge of a changing environment. It is not by competing but by capitalizing on change that today's organizations will survive.

The key to capitalizing on change lies in understanding and utilizing the cycle of challenge-and-response. As the historian, Arnold J. Toynbee, demonstrated in his *A Study of History*, the great civilizations have risen to power not because of their advantages but because they treated their disadvantages as challenges to which they discovered creative responses. Toynbee shows, for example, that Athens rose to dominance in the Classical world after its soil was depleted. Instead of being destroyed by that major setback, the Athenians treated it as a challenge to find a new way to participate in the economy of their day.

The Athenians responded creatively by turning to the cultivation of olives, which could draw on much deeper supplies of nutriment and water than field crops could. They rebuilt their economy around the export of olive oil, which further challenged them to build a merchant marine to carry it, a mining industry to get the silver to pay for trade, and a pottery industry to build the amphoras to contain the oil. New responses, thus, create new challenges at a lower level of the social organism.

In a like manner, when their sacred site, the wooden Hekatompedon, was burned by the Persians around 480 BC, Athenians responded creatively again: they gave up wood for stone and built the Parthenon, which became the symbol of their greatness. Once again, it was by responding in a new and creative manner to a serious challenge that the society achieved its world prominence.

Toynbee's point is as easy to illustrate with examples from the business world, although our preoccupations with competition leads us to underestimate their importance. Jobs and Wozniak designed Apple I, not because they wanted to beat the competition or even because they really wanted to create a computer. They created their groundbreaking PC because they lacked the money to buy the Heathkit, which everyone knew was the only way to build your own computer. Brother got into typewriters, not because they hankered for that product line but because the market for sewing-machines, their main product, proved to be shrinking. Again, it's capitalizing on a difficult situation rather than "beating the competition" that carried the day.

Vitalink Communications, the California corporation specializing in wide area networking, got into that business only because its original effort in earth stations for satellite communication went down the drain. And to go from the mundane to the comic, the contemporary sitcom grew

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out of the original "I Love Lucy," which was itself a response to a challenge that would be doomed a less creative crew: Lucy and Desi wouldn't live in New York, where all TV comedies were then filmed. Instead, they decided to film the show on 34mm and distribute it across the country through CBS affiliates. (In the process, their response also created the possibility of TV reruns, because the movie film kept its quality much longer than the then current kinescopes did.)

The point is not that competition is not worth thinking about. It is simply that competition is only of critical importance when the game is not changing very significantly. When a business or industry is going through a profound transformation—and there is hardly one that is not doing so today—competition blinds people to the real challenge, which is capitalizing on that change. Competing for market share in today's markets is all too much like fighting for deck chairs on the Titanic. Or it is like the Baldwin Locomotive executives that focused on competitors and were proclaiming as late as the 1950s, "They'll never replace the steam locomotive."

Challenge-and-response: that is the key to success in a time of deep and systemic changes. Most strategic planning is superficial by comparison, for it only concentrates on getting a bigger slice of existing pie—which is not likely to be around for very long.

There is another advantage to challenge-and-response thinking. And that is that it is relevant at every level of the organization. Leadership's decision to launch a new product line or change markets presents upper-level management with a challenge: how do we redefine the missions and even the identities of our units in the light of this new organizational direction? Upper management's responses to that challenge present middle managers with their challenges: how do we reorganize our efforts to serve the new unit mission? And those reorganizations challenge supervisors to come up with new responses at the team level—which, in turn, challenge rank and file workers to come up with new responses on the individual level.

This cascading of challenge-and-response is important, because it breaks the strangle-hold of the dangerously passive reactivity that develops when managers see their job simply as "carrying out" the orders of those above them. In a dynamic marketplace, every level of the organization must see its situation as a challenge, calling not for compliance but for creative response. When that happens, people are no longer victims trying to cope the best way they can. They recover a sense of control and purpose in what they are doing.

The cycle of challenge-and-response, operating at each level of the organization, is the dynamic of organizational renewal and development. And, incidentally, it also knocks the socks off "the competition," just the way Athens did.

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