

Cecil B. DeMille and the Invasion of the Zebra Mussels

Avoiding the Survival of the Unfittest in the Evolution of Human Services

By John Franz

This is an article about ecology, evolution and business. What do Cecil B. DeMille and zebra mussels have in common? Both were foreign invaders who brought about epic changes in the ecosystems they occupied. And both may have lessons for us as we face an era of breathtaking changes in the human services environment.

Agents of change

When the zebra mussels came to Lake Erie, it was a comfortably polluted, brownish-green semi-swamp with lots of nutrients and an odor all its own. The ecological niches, from those occupied by coliform bacteria up to those harboring the lake's slightly mutated game fish, were all sorted out. The mussels who hitched a ride in through the Saint Lawrence Seaway loved to eat the gunk that made the lake famous, and since there was nothing around that ate them, they multiplied rapidly. In a few years, the little mollusks accomplished what man and the demise of the industrial age could not: Lake Erie was once again sparkling blue and as pretty as a postcard. Unfortunately, problems developed. Mussels were everywhere, clogging up intake pipes and causing damage by their sheer numbers. Also, as noisome as the Lake Erie gunk was, lots of little things (that lots of bigger things lived on) needed at least some of that gunk to survive. As the little things began to disappear, so too did the bigger things. Lake Erie began turning into a great place to swim, but a pretty bad place to fish.

When DeMille came to Hollywood (albeit from Massachusetts rather than any more exotic location) the studio bosses were at the top of the food chain. Directors and actors were hardly noticed. Movies were made totally in-house with everything from the original script, through all the technical work, to the acting, directing and final production carried out by studio employees.

DeMille, some of the other directors, and stars like Lillian Gish began to turn the hierarchy upside down. People started going to movies because of who was in them or who made them, not because of the studio that bankrolled and distributed them. As the monolithic studios faded, they were replaced by complex and ever changing networks of specialists, brought together by producers in different arrangements for each new movie.

In the Lake Erie ecology, for the moment, diversity is being replaced by an almost sterile uniformity. In Hollywood, the homogenous studio structures have broken up into a chaotic sea of

relatively small technical and artistic providers.¹

The ecology of caring

There seems to be as much competition for financial resources among organizations in the collapsing public sector as there is for food, light and space among organisms in our shrinking ecosystems. The violent injection of various resource allocation mechanisms (most of which are called “managed care” regardless of how they actually operate) into the human services marketplace has changed it as dramatically as the zebra mussels altered Lake Erie.

Earlier articles in the Calliope Journal began a discussion of the possibilities for fundamental changes in the way we deliver human services. [[Scaling Up](#), May 1994, [March of the Army Ants](#), December, 1994]

These options were inspired in part by new discoveries that have improved our understanding of chaotic and complex systems and in part by the transformations that are taking place in the way private businesses are organizing themselves. The unremitting pace of technological and sociological change has forced many companies to shift from annual or longer product cycles to monthly and even daily adjustments in their operations. The struggle to keep up has led to a revolution in organizational design that abandons top-heavy, vertical hierarchies for dynamic, horizontally-integrated, project-oriented enterprises.

Making these changes has been hard enough in the world of private industry, but is almost impossible in the public and non-profit sector. It’s one thing to come up with new and better designed widgets every other month, its quite another to create a system in which each individual or family who needs help receives unique, effective, responsive services, when they need them and in the place or places where they are needed.

We are in the midst of an evolutionary frenzy, with pilot projects and reorganizations following one right after another. We’re changing not because we want to, but because we have no choice. Scarce resources, burgeoning client needs, and pressure from the media, the courts and regulatory bodies are all pushing us to constantly re-invent the way we provide care to people in need.

No entity’s survival is assured in this new environment, but maybe we can draw some ideas from DeMille’s revolution and the restructuring in private industry that will assist us in our efforts at self-preservation through redefinition.

First principle: it has to start with outcomes.

Just as various plants and animals occupy and defend certain ecological niches in order to access resources, human service agencies try to fill market niches. At present, however, reimbursement for efforts in human services is based far more on what is done, and who it is done

¹The diversity in Hollywood may be slimming down, witness the new monolith being created by Steven Spielberg and his partners. Similarly, scientists have recently noted that things may be changing again in Lake Erie - the mussels may be eating themselves out of their dominance.

for, than on what is actually accomplished. The environment rewards drama over substance. Programs matching the hottest item in the newspaper have the best chance of living through the next budget cycle. As the visibility of whatever constellation of need an agency is associated with rises, so too do its revenues. Because the entities buying human services are usually so separate from those receiving them, there is little direct communication about what works and what doesn't.

As a result, those who serve the disadvantaged are forced to compete with the champions of the disabled, public protectors struggle against public educators. And the objects of this conflict are paraded and marketed in as brazen a battle for public attention as the fights between Pepsi and Coke or Nike and Reebok.

When access to resources is contingent on the wrong factors, unwanted results can occur. We must find ways to push the battle beyond fashion. The decision whether to allocate public dollars to building boot camps instead of family support programs cannot be as ephemeral as choosing between buying Air Jordans and The Pump. But as long as we purchase services instead of results, there is always the danger of ecological disaster.

Replacing categorical service units with outcomes as the primary nutrient for the human service ecosystem won't be easy. There aren't many strategies out there that work consistently for everyone, even when people seem to have similar needs and problems. Interventions which help some people turn their lives around put others into a tail spin.

One way to start is by selecting a few key measurable results which a cross-section of the community can agree to endorse. Moving towards these goals can become the standard by which success - and reimbursement - are judged. How can we place quantitative measure on our expectations? We start with what we've got, and proceed to what we want. If more than 50% of youth who are currently placed in our correctional facilities are found to recidivate within a few years, we have a baseline for our selection of a goal. If only 15% of youth who are identified as having a severe emotional disorder ever graduate from high school, that at least tells us where we have to start.

Communities must be clear about what constitutes acceptable services. There are a variety of methods for doing this, and it is likely that different communities will establish different standards for what they feel would be good results, but the core has to be objective and specific. Even if at present no programs come close to hitting these goals, once concrete standards are in place a context is created for judging effectiveness. Everyone thought the 4 minute mile was impossible. Is having a 100% graduation rate or a 0% recidivism rate any more far-fetched?

If outcomes are established as the measure for success and reward, the question shifts from "What should we do?" to "How can we do things better?" Because meeting complex needs is so difficult, no one has any absolute answer. The most successful organization in this environment will be the one that learns and adapts the fastest.

Projects should build their organizational components around achieving community-validated outcomes. But in the horizontally-integrated world of organizations these components are beginning to look a lot different. Various authors have suggested a variety of new concepts to

use when describing organizational anatomy, but for our purposes, three are sufficient: process elements, structural elements and value elements. ²

Process elements that support innovation and individualization

How can we modify our practices to obtain improved outcomes? Earlier articles in this series have noted that improved results seem to be coming from agencies that have shifted from offering deficit-driven, standardized services to providing unique, supportive responses directly tied to the specific constellation of needs that each individual or family presents.

To date, individually tailored care has usually been offered by small organizations serving narrowly defined populations. These programs were excellent laboratories for testing new human services technologies, but the time has come for broader implementation. Only by moving the discoveries of these pilot programs into the mainstream can we establish realistic competition for what remains of the human services budget.

When a service provider addresses the concrete and unique needs of an individual or family, regardless of the nominal category or categories in which those needs might be classified, a helping relationship that emphasizes both individualization and innovation should have at least four aspects: *Asking, Listening, Responding* and *Learning*.

Asking Carefully. If we are serious about meeting individual needs we have to find out what those needs are. And the only way to do that is to ask openly and honestly. The way we ask is likely to vary a great deal from agency to agency and individual to individual, but somehow we have to create an atmosphere of trust in which individuals and family members will reveal their strengths and weaknesses with the expectation that we will take what they tell us seriously.

Listening Attentively. But if we ask, we have to be absolutely committed to hearing and acting upon the answers. That means we not only record what our clients tell us, but we help them put those answers into a form which engages them, is directly focused on addressing their concerns and supports an enthusiastic movement toward action.

Responding Creatively. Here is our central challenge. How far are we really willing to go to obtain positive outcomes? Will we keep trying strategy after strategy until we find something that works? Or are we locked into one or two interventions? If our first guess doesn't work do we assume that the problem is a resistant parent or a recalcitrant child? Do we have the freedom to dream wild dreams with our clients, and the will and the institutional support to put those dreams into action?

Learning Continuously. We learn as much or more from our mistakes as from our successes. The organizations most likely to survive the erratic swings in the public sector environment will be those who can not only support constant innovation but also capture the insights gained from each new attempt and use them to help everyone else approaching or referred to the organization for assistance.

²These elements are adapted and greatly simplified from concepts developed in Bolman, Lee and Deal, Terrence, *Reframing Organizations*, San Francisco, Jossey-Bass, 1991.

Structural elements that support individualized care

Tom Peters, one of the leading prophets calling for a radical restructuring of our obsolete, vertically-stacked industries, suggests that in the business world of the future there will be three basic organizational structures: *system integrators, specialized subcontractors and independent talents*.³ All three will exist independently, but will still be associated in a complex and ever changing network of formal and informal relationships. A certain arrangement of representatives from each of these elements will be drawn together for the duration of a given project; but in Peters' view huge, static, long-standing companies combining all of these elements are the dinosaurs of our age.

A good example of the new business environment is post-DeMille Hollywood. Motion picture producers are the system integrators, putting the right people and organizations together based on the nature and needs of the movie they want to make. These days, all one needs to make a movie are an idea, a telephone, a well-stocked Rolodex and the nerve of a riverboat gambler. Producers subcontract with specialized providers for everything from financing and insurance to special effects and marketing. The specialized providers then subcontract again with individual talents for script writing, acting, makeup, camera operation and so forth. The producer also contracts with a director to hold everything together. The team stays together for the weeks or months it takes to make the movie, and then disperses until they happen to meet up again on some new project.

It's possible that an analogous restructuring is taking place in the human services arena.

System integration. Seeing the big picture, knowing which pieces need to go where. The likely candidates for developing into system integrators are county and state human services departments. They carry primary responsibility for insuring that efforts across the spectrum of individual needs are carried out in an effective and balanced way, and for mediating between legislative, executive and judicial mandates and direct service delivery. As public agencies evolve into system integrators, they will probably spin off aspects of their operations that are functionally more akin to those offered by specialized providers and individual talents. And to stay in touch with the changing needs of the community, county agencies will have to share power and oversight with broad-based community groups who objectively establish outcome measures, judge system performance and allocate rewards.

Specialized operators. Knowing the breadth and depth of a specific service technology. Keeping abreast with changing technology is a full-time task. When a system integrator begins to put together a new project, it should be able to choose the best providers in each area the project will encompass. One source for these providers are today's non-profit organizations. But just as public agencies may evolve into different forms, so also may the non-profits. If Peters' vision is accurate, massive, multi-function agencies will begin to restructure into related, and mutually-supportive but essentially independent components, each of which will have to sink or swim based

³Cf. Peters, Tom. *Liberation Management, Necessary Disorganization for the Nanosecond Nineties*, New York, Knopf, 1992.

on its ability to continually improve the effectiveness of the specific technology it manages.

Independent talents. The artists of service delivery. In the new, horizontally-integrated systems of care, the crucial players will not be the directors or the managers, but the line staff who put the project into operation. When outcomes and on-the-spot innovation make the difference between survival and extinction, the basic purpose of the other two structures will be putting the right people in the right place so that real changes can occur.

Fundamental values of an evolutionary system of care

When vertical hierarchies no longer exist to support the ongoing structure of a system of care, the maintenance of core operating principles for the system becomes essential. As with selecting the specific outcome measures that the system will reward, defining and maintaining the system's core values will be the task of the representative community group acting in concert with the system integrators.

One example of operating principles a community may wish to consider are those proposed by Karl Dennis, John VanDenBerg and their associates. Over the past ten years they have articulated a set of values that they and others call wraparound.⁴ Although there is no wraparound bible, some of the precepts espoused by wraparound projects around the country include:

- As a person's needs become more complex, service options for that person should become more unique. Traditionally, our systems of care have used their most rigid and standardized responses for people with the most difficult problems. When all else fails, we put the person in a hospital or institution where everyone gets up at the same time, receives the same basic suite of services, eats the same food, etc. If our goal is control, this is one way of doing it. But if the goal is individualized support, strategies must become far more diverse.
- Unconditional commitment: A project should be responsible for obtaining a positive outcome, whatever it takes. Wraparound programs generally operate without using punitive discharge. If the first plan doesn't work, the project comes up with a new plan. When clients leave, they do so because they no longer need the help or services the project offers, not because they have been identified as resistant to treatment or because they no longer fit the project's treatment profile.
- Strength-based service delivery. Rather than catalog the deficits and weaknesses of an individual or family with complex service needs, a project using wraparound builds its plan around the discovery, support and enhancement of the client's strengths.
- Cultural competency. Each family has its own culture, drawn in part from their ethnicity and national origins, but also from the perspective and values that have grown out of the family's life experiences. The only way to achieve effective competency in the family's specific culture is by respectfully asking, listening and learning about what the family believes and values.

⁴Wraparound has been described in several Calliope Journal articles, cf *Learning to Wraparound*, February, 1994 and *Some Notes on Wraparound and Paradigm Shifts*, April, 1994.

- Family focus. We have begun to rediscover the fact that each one of us exists primarily in the matrix of our family and core relationships. Our needs come into existence and are met within this context.
- Community-based services. In some ways, this may be the most controversial value in the wraparound constellation. Wraparound providers hold as a matter of faith that we can meet the needs of any individual without sending them out of their community.

Dinosaurs and ducks: the complexity of organizational evolution

Carl Sagan, among others, has popularized the notion that the dinosaurs never really disappeared. Evidence in basic anatomy and embryonic development indicates that instead the monsters of old simply rearranged their organizational elements and evolved into sparrows and eagles, penguins and ptarmigans. As birds they were better able to adapt to environmental changes and could fill far more ecological niches.

Perhaps that is what is happening in these days of rapid change in the format of human services delivery. As our organizations shed their inflexible scales and unleash the rigid hard-wiring of their deterministic brains, the world looks pretty scary and chaotic. But if what is emerging are diverse new species of organizations characterized by creativity, flexibility and adaptability, things may not be so bad. With luck, we can learn enough about diversity and innovation from folks like Tom Peters and Cecil B. DeMille to help us survive the invasion of the zebra mussels.

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