

Adjacent opportunities: Ordinary magic

Ron Schultz
ISCE Research, US

I have always thought of myself as a fairly pragmatic person, not taken in by trickery or prefabricated illusions other than my own. I remember going to the Magic Castle in Los Angeles and watching the close-up magicians. My goal was to search for the slight of hand and at what point in the trick it actually occurred. I had a friend who had been in a play on Broadway with a famous magician, during which my friend was involved in an illusion that required split-second timing on his part to avoid the death that seemed unavoidable to the observer. He also requested not knowing how the trick worked, fearing that knowing too much would make him think too long about what he was doing, and thereby spoil the trick and drastically reduce his survival rate.

We are amazed by the skill of a magician, surprised by the revelation, but always left with the reality that it is only a trick, and that we were somehow willingly deceived. It is the emergence of the unexpected that thrills us. The knowing that as astounding as the illusion is it is after all a visual misperception that makes it work, and we are perfectly fine with that knowledge.

Our willingness to be deceived aside, I would offer that there is perhaps another form of magic that is less manipulative and misleading, and might actually be more useful in an organizational context. Now, I know, going into a client and saying, I'd like to introduce a little magic into your enterprise is not going to be met with the same child's excitement when she discovers there was a coin hidden behind her ear. But how easy has it been to sell emergence? And those of you who read my last column on Applied Chutzpah may think I'm at it again. Well, I am.

To me, magic is nothing more than a transformation by the unexpected, an unanticipated crossing of the outward appearance of how things normally show up. Now there are some who might use a similar description for what happens when they are met by an unforeseen and profound emergent event. Some

among us refer to this experience as "ordinary magic." Not everyone is able to see the magic or the emergence. As Michael Lissack, Hugo Letiche and I describe in the forthcoming book, *Miracles and Nasty Surprises*, in our managerial attempt to sanitize out the nasty surprises we often miss the emergence of the new and innovative. And when we ignore or miss the emergent, the previously unseen adjacent opportunities that are revealed along with it are also missed. Managers often refer to this sanitation process as their ability to be pragmatic or of being efficient, because as every organizational manager will tell you, "magic doesn't just happen."

Now before you start branding me as yet another woo-woo practitioner out to conjure something from nothing, let me first share a view of the pragmatic from William James, courtesy of Chauncey Bell. *Pragmatism asks its usual question. "Grant an idea or belief to be true," it says. "What concrete difference will its being true make in anyone's actual life? How will the truth be realized? What experiences will be different from those which would be obtained if the belief were false? What, in short, is the truth's cash-value in experiential terms?"*-William James, in *Pragmatism* (1907)

Now, to the cash-value of this adjacent opportunity. If perception, ideas, and thought is the pragmatic world we encounter as human beings, then contrary to those who might wish to solidify things, the pragmatic world is actually one of mind and quite fluid. This also implies that unlike Madonna, ours is not the material world it appears to be. When everything is material and solid in our world we might actually be losing our pragmatism, because there can be no transformation by either the expected or the *un*. In a solid state, all material can do is deteriorate or decompose. However, in a world of mind, in which perception and thought are prescient, the material can be transformed for the simple reason that nothing is solid and within its fluidity it is capable of reforming. Of course, not everyone views

the world this way. For those who do not, the only magic that can exist in the world emerges through deception and illusion. Emergence itself is a threat, because it attacks the very order they are trying so hard to solidify.

But for those who are not afraid of the unexpected emergent and who, upon recognizing the adjacent opportunities that are revealed along with its arrival are capable of transforming the world with these new opportunities, magic happens. This is not deception, but ordinary magic. In our need for predictability and order, we have tried, in vain, to sanitize out that which is inherent for the regeneration and life of the system. It is also why we are always so surprised when the unexpected happens and completely alters the world we encounter.

How do we prepare our organizations for an emergent world? We begin, as Michael Lissack might suggest, by becoming better at looking for the cues that signal that the emergent bus is about to arrive. The only real preparation an organization can undertake is to get itself to the bus stop so that when the right emergent bus shows up the organization is ready to board it. Unfortunately, emergence doesn't run on a specific schedule or along a specific route. But just because it arrives unexpectedly, doesn't mean it won't arrive. Perhaps, this is the role of the corporate cue-spotter, to be the magician who prepares the organization by setting the stage for the transformation about to take place. In this case, in which we are dealing with the kind of magic where rabbits pull magicians from hats, the adjacent opportunities that become available to an organization are limited only by the imaginations of its cue-spotters.