

Shifting the Patterns

*The journey of a 1000 miles
starts with the first step*

Ancient Chinese Proverb

A brief introduction (2½ pages) to the idea that patterns, often deep-rooted, invisible and taken-for-granted, inevitably underlie performance. And how, if you're seeking higher performance, simply 'trying harder' isn't going to work. We need competence in shifting patterns (or working magic). The best shifts are small ones with high leverage effects. That's transformation! That's working magic!

[Abstracted and adapted from the preface to 'Shifting the Patterns', If Price & Ray Shaw, Management Books 2000 Ltd, 1998]

At one level, the idea is simple. It is that performance reflects patterns, patterns that simultaneously enable and limit levels of performance within certain boundaries or horizons. Our concern is with the patterns, often the deeply embedded patterns, of people, teams, and companies. Our desire is to expand people's capacity, personal and collective, to shift such patterns for a different order of result.

There is a profound connection between underlying patterns and the results that are made possible and realised with, and through, them. This idea, that performance reflects patterns, may be interpreted as so 'simple' that it is hardly enlightening, and so 'obvious' that it hardly needs expanding. How is it then, that people and companies so often seem unable to create those patterns which meet their aspirations for performance in a timely manner? How is it that we so often continue to engage in patterns which fail to generate the results we want, whether in public or private life? It may be easy to grasp the abstract connection between patterns and performance, but the bigger challenge is the actual practice of shifting patterns for major breakthroughs in performance. In this regard, we need to become effective pattern shifters and performance engineers.

Our limited capacity to shift patterns is exacerbated when we deny, and leave unacknowledged, the degree to which we are so often locked-in to patterns that limit, whether these be patterns operating at the personal, inter-personal, cultural, company or inter-company level. This simple idea of a connection between patterns and performance leads to an apparently simple conclusion: If you want to change the performance of people, or a company, then you'd better change those patterns that limit performance. Yet, all too frequently, any aspiration to improve performance is translated into simply trying harder within a familiar established pattern. As a result we tend to drive ourselves insane by pursuing the law of repeated action: "*When in doubt, do what you did yesterday. If it isn't working do it twice as hard, twice as fast and twice as carefully.*"

It appears then, that the practice and capability to really shift patterns is more complex than the mere grasp of the abstraction. When we do try there is often frustration at the small degree to which patterns are actually changed, as well as with the lack of results produced; this often despite considerable financial and emotional expenditure on so-called 'floods of initiatives'. But just as much as one can point to massive expenditure to little effect, one can also point to limited expenditure to transformational effect, truly remarkable results from highly leveraged shifts in patterns.

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What we may begin to see is that our individual and collective competence to shift patterns that limit performance is not well-developed. This question of competence is not limited to whether we can or cannot shift patterns, but, rather, embraces the speed and efficacy with which we can effect shifts. For without timely shifts companies may become extinct - trapped in patterns appropriate to earlier times. Yet it is easy to call for much higher levels of performance from a company, to make demands upon it whether reasonable or unreasonable, that calls for "*more for less, with greater quality and faster than ever before*". But what is going to be the pattern that delivers such results within the particular circumstances and environment of a company?

Richard Pascale has suggested that our shared patterns of thinking - our paradigms - need to shift: *“the ultimate, and largely ignored, task of management is one of creating and breaking paradigms . . . the trouble is that 99% of managerial attention today is devoted to the techniques that squeeze more out of the existing paradigm - and its killing us”*. We suggest that paradigms are but a part, an important part, of any pattern. It may be better to suggest that the prime task of management is one of creating and breaking patterns, and continuously evolving higher performance patterns. And that perhaps too much time is devoted to adding yet more sophisticated techniques onto existing patterns that have either reached, or are close to, their limits.

If the idea of a connection between underlying pattern and levels of performance is so simple, how come the practice of shifting patterns is apparently so difficult to effectively execute? Part of the answer itself lies in a pattern. We suggest that our general cultural training and the urgency of the business world tends to limit inquiry and solution to the symptomatic level. As a result, we often conspire to pursue and provide superficial cures to deeply rooted limits. We fail to distinguish between surface and deep structures. Indeed, people sometimes conspire towards convenience, playing it safe by offering acceptable solutions that won't work, rather than more effective solutions that, in confronting current limits, might not be accepted.

The practice of shifting patterns is also problematic because of the complex interconnections of sub patterns within larger structures that have both generalised similarities and unique differences. Generalised solutions which ignore the unique attributes and circumstances of particular backgrounds will have limited effect. Equally, inventing unique solutions may be criticised as conduct akin to continually reinventing the wheel. What's important is to see the similarities *and* the differences.

A different way of asking why patterns are so difficult to shift is to ask why established patterns seem so easily to persist. Here we draw a parallel with the natural world where patterns of physical form and existence appear to last pretty much unchanged over millions of years. The discovery of the evolutionary process, and of the contribution to it of genes and genetic replication, does much to explain the constancy and change of physical patterns of life forms. Genes are the fundamental building block upon which physical form takes shape. They are, so to speak, at the root of the biological pattern and seek to replicate themselves and their existence by continuation of their host, the particular species. But reproduction is not perfect. New species emerge by accident through random variation or mutation of genes, the resultant variation in physical form then being favoured or otherwise by the prevailing and perhaps changing environment. When favoured, the new form takes over from the old leading to the extinction of the established species in favour of the new.

We identify a similar process in the world of human organisation: the same dynamics operating within a much more rapid timescale. Here we are talking not about the physical form of a company but its 'living form': how it is organised, what it does, the purposes it serves, the principles it operates from, how it interacts with its environment, and so on. In short we call this the living pattern of the company. If genes shape the physical pattern of species and species variants, what shapes the living pattern of companies? Genes may be viewed as the prime unit of biological inheritance, units which form part of richer biological complexes that determine physical form. We draw and expand upon the idea of the 'meme' as an equivalent unit of cultural inheritance. It is argued that memes form part of richer complexes which, in turn, shape and determine company structure and practices. In a similar manner to the gene, an established meme is intent upon replicating itself by continuation of its host, the particular form of company. We suggest that new species or variants of companies emerge through similar evolutionary processes. Ultimately new variants of companies emerge through the variation or mutation of memes. The key difference is that this does not have to be left to accident or random variation. We can, by human intention and creative act, wilfully change the basis upon which any pattern of company is built.

What triggers such changes? Crisis often serves to shift the pattern of a company. Whether it is rapidly falling profits, declining market share, product/technology obsolescence or some other cause, the crisis operates as a pattern interrupt. The company is forced to confront its limiting pattern. The difficulty with leaving it to crisis is that crisis may come too late. Furthermore, crises place companies into adapt mode: forced to change by virtue of their environments. There is an alternative mode, the generative or creative, where, on the basis of company vision, it is realised that the envisioned future cannot be reached using existing pat-

terns. The fact that we can't get 'there' from 'here' is confronted. The force for change, once committed to the vision, is then internal, rather than external circumstance.

However, whatever it is that serves to operate as a pattern interrupt, and whatever patterns are interrupted, it does not mean that there is a sustainable *shift* in pattern. When deep structures are unaffected former patterns often reassert their dominance. Patterns are often so self-sustaining that they resume even after considerable interruption. Thus it is so often that: *plus ça change plus c'est la même chose*.

There is no prescription, no fixed recipe, for how patterns may be best shifted. At least not one that is applicable for each and every circumstance. There is, though, a process or approach that we may acquaint ourselves with. In doing so each of us may become better pattern cultivators. We can learn to 'see' the invisible, beneath the surface, patterns that so often serve to limit performance. And only in seeing them, and understanding their origins, can we be free of their grip and empower ourselves to shift those that limit for something else that will help us achieve the results we desire.

The pattern of our logic is easily captured: It is that possible results are bounded (simultaneously released and limited) by the pattern that gives rise to them. If you want a different level of result, and you are near the limit of the pattern that gives rise to that result, then you must shift some aspects of that pattern. The design and practice of a new pattern makes a new result possible. Yet familiarity often blinds us. In addition, the pattern, like the gene, is bent on replicating itself and thus avoiding extinction. Many patterns are so deep-rooted, inter-connected, and invisible, that attempts at change all too frequently do no more than scratch the surface. To initiate a sustainable change in the amalgam and dynamic of patterns - to shift the patterns - requires an expanded capacity to break free from our cultural inheritance - the established patterns - and to breakthrough to something new.

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Though the pattern of our logic may be simple the practice of shifting patterns for a different order of result often meets with considerable resistance!

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