

TRUST *is the* LUBRICANT of ORGANIZATIONAL LIFE

LESSONS *from the* LIFE and CAREER of HENRI LIPMANOWICZ

— by —

Arvind Singhal¹

 *On a bright summer day* in early June, 2005, a silver metallic Volvo station wagon pulls into the driveway of a large brick house in Summit, New Jersey. The neighborhood, some 30 miles from the skyscrapers of New York City, is plush and affluent, dotted with large ornate houses. With its well-manicured lawns, Summit is home to several of America's corporate leaders and Wall Street bigwigs, who enjoy the comforts of spacious suburban living, and easy access to the Big Apple.

Riitta Lipmanowicz steps out of the driver's side of the station wagon, and opens the back door. A large, friendly dog hops out, sniffing the

ground, as Riitta unbuckles her precious cargo: her two granddaughters, Tessa and Sofia. To my eyes, Tessa looks about four years old and Sofia a shade under two.

"Grandpa, Grandpa, where are you?" Tessa's singsong voice echoes through the shrubs as she races inside the house. The toddling Sofia cannot keep pace with her older sister, but Riitta helps her along. As Tessa darts from the kitchen entrance into the living room, a sixty-something man, with salt and pepper hair and wearing khaki trousers and a full-sleeve blue denim shirt, tiptoes down the staircase, hiding by the living room wall. While Tessa continues to call out to her

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grandfather, and as the tiny Sofia catches up with her sister, the man-in-hiding, with a playful wisp of a grin, steps into the living room, approaches the two girls and whispers: “Here I am.”

Kisses fly in the air, screams of delight permeate the tall ceilings, and tiny hands cling to the denim sleeves.

Riitta, glances at her husband, and softly exclaims: “Oh, Henri!”

“What did you get for me, Grandpa?” Tessa asks.

Two colorful Ndebele dolls with ornate metallic jewelry adorn the side table, suggesting that Grandpa prepared in advance for greeting his granddaughters. He playfully hands the dolls to Tessa and Sofia, explaining the dolls are from South Africa.

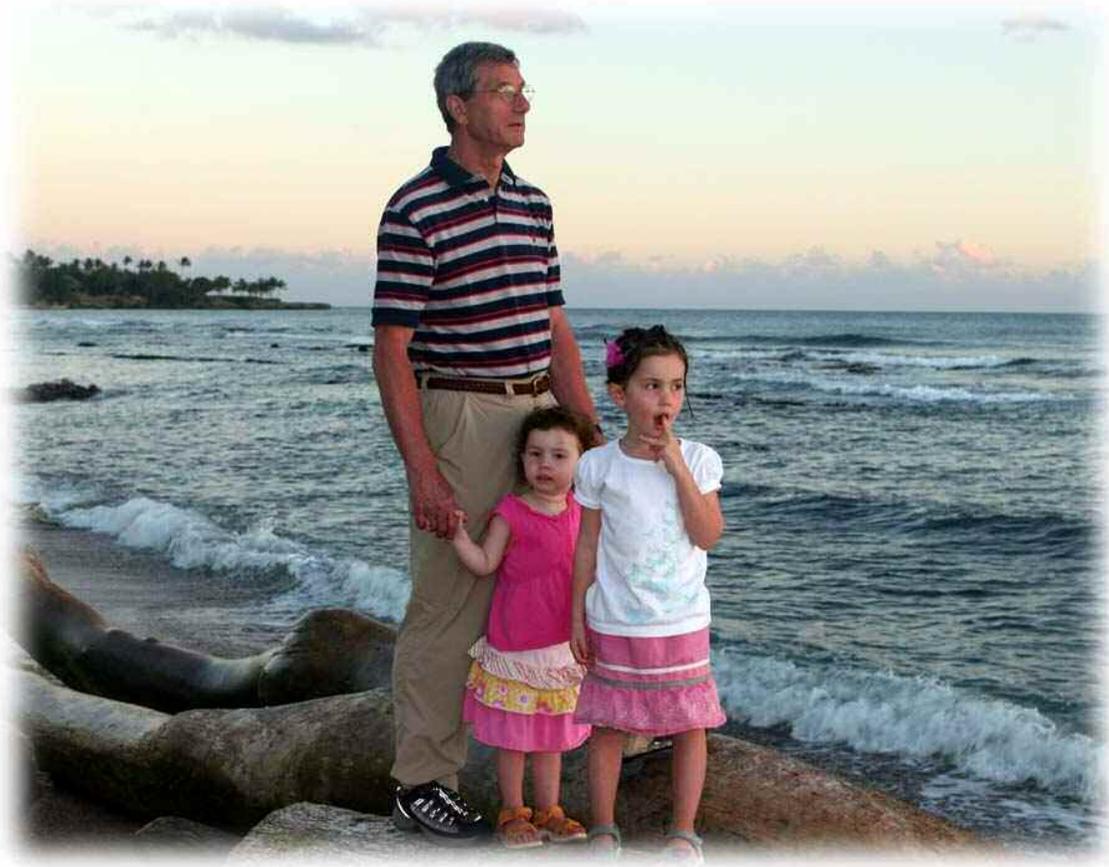
Looking at Grandpa Henri, I cannot tell that he has just returned (earlier that morning) from

South Africa. The 30 hours of flying and airport time does not show in the presence of adoring granddaughters.

There are many ways to introduce Henri Lipmanowicz – Grandpa to Tessa and Sofia, or husband to Riitta for some 36 years. A black and white picture on the mantel shows a young Henri and Riitta on their marriage day in the late 1960s, walking the streets of Helsinki, Finland. Henri wearing a formal suit, sporting a playful grin (which now seems familiar), holds an executive briefcase, and a glowing Riitta — in a white dress and neatly groomed hair – walks by his side.

“Why the executive briefcase?” I muse. “That too on one’s wedding day?”

The briefcase holds clues to another facet of Henri’s life – a life of extraordinary achievement and accomplishment as a corporate executive. The spacious brick house in Summit — with its



A reflective Henri Lipmanowicz, on the coast of the Dominican Republic with two of the important ladies of his life. 2006

well-manicured gardens, a gated swimming pool, and its artfully decorated living room – further echoes a life of understated affluence.

Eight years previously, in 1997, when Henri Lipmanowicz – just short of his 60th birthday — decided to retire from Merck, the giant pharmaceutical company, he was President of Merck Intercontinental Region (MIR) and Japan, responsible for Merck’s operations in over 160 countries of Asia, Africa, Eastern Europe, parts of North America, South and Central America, and Australia and New Zealand — that is, everything outside of United States and Western Europe. At retirement, Henri was overseeing Merck business worth a whopping \$3 billion (U.S.).

As one spends personal time with Henri, and talks to those who have known Henri from his heady corporate days, and since then, one quickly realizes that Henri Lipmanowicz is, qualitatively, a different type of organizational leader than most others.

If one poses the question – what distinguishes Henri from others? — the simple answer might say Henri’s managerial style embodies many principles of complexity science.

Interestingly, for most of his corporate life at Merck, Henri did not know about the emerging science of complexity; for him, it was “plain common sense”.

Henri’s Journey

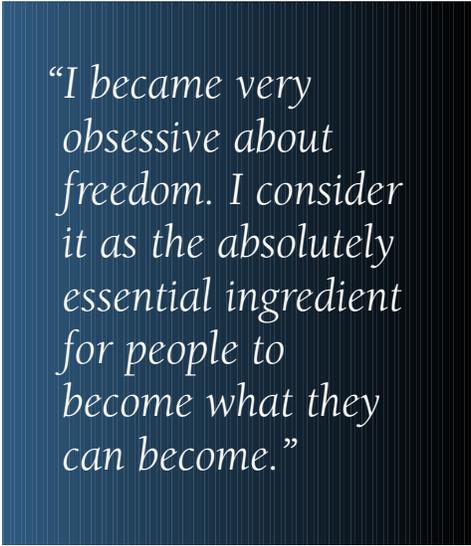
As we sit by Henri’s backyard pool, with the afternoon sun shining overhead, Henri reflects on his life’s journey. While we munch on a deli lunch of open-faced sandwiches, three-bean salad, hum-

mus, and ice-cold lemonade, Tessa splashes in the pool. Grandpa keeps a close watch on her while he ambles down memory lane.

Born and raised in France of Polish parents, who considered themselves lucky to survive Hitler’s Holocaust, Henri came to the U.S. on an exchange scholarship in the early 1960s, to get a graduate degree in chemical engineering at Yale. Bored with the staid curriculum (most of which Henri had completed in France), and “put off” by the all-male elitism that pervaded the university campus, Henri transferred, a year later, to attend Columbia University in New York City, earning a master’s degree in industrial engineering and management.

Henri’s student visa allowed him, after the completion of his degree, to undertake practical training in the U.S. for 18 months. To “gain some work experience,” Henri joined the business planning unit of Anheuser Busch. When his 18-month tenure was ending, and it was time to return to France, Henri sought employment opportunities with American companies with business operations in Europe. Around the same time, Henri’s mentor and department chair at Columbia, Sebastian Littauer, told him about a letter he received from Merck, “looking for Ivy-educated multi-lingual Europeans.”

“I had never heard of Merck and I was not interested in pharmaceuticals,” recalls Henri. Consumer product companies, such as Procter and Gamble, looked more attractive. However, goaded by his Columbia mentor (“it doesn’t cost you anything to go to the interview”), Henri spent the day at Merck’s international headquarters in New York City. He remembers: “I had the



“I became very obsessive about freedom. I consider it as the absolutely essential ingredient for people to become what they can become.”

most fantastic series of interviews and conversations. I was offered a job on the spot.”

Henri had served in Merck for only 18 months (including a nine-month stint in Canada), when the company posted him to Finland as the Managing Director of its small subsidiary — a sales, marketing, and medical unit — which was losing money and considered a lost cause. “We have nothing to lose in Finland,” Henri was told. “If you can run the place, manage people, and turn things around, perhaps you will have a future in Merck.” “I was just a kid,” remembers Henri — barely 30 years old.

When Henri arrived in Helsinki, he noticed the dozen-plus employees took little pride in their work and lacked a sense of identity. “What changed quickly,” Henri noted, were the intangibles — “the relationships, the way people connected and interacted with each other.” Henri encouraged a climate of openness, so everyone knew

what was going on. Hierarchy was debunked, fostering meaningful horizontal interactions.

Clear organizational objectives were set collaboratively, foremost of which was “to be uncompromising in quality and to be different.” By the time Henri completed his second year in Finland, revenue was up 50 percent. There was also an upside in Henri’s personal life. Henri fell in love with co-employee Riitta and they married in Helsinki.

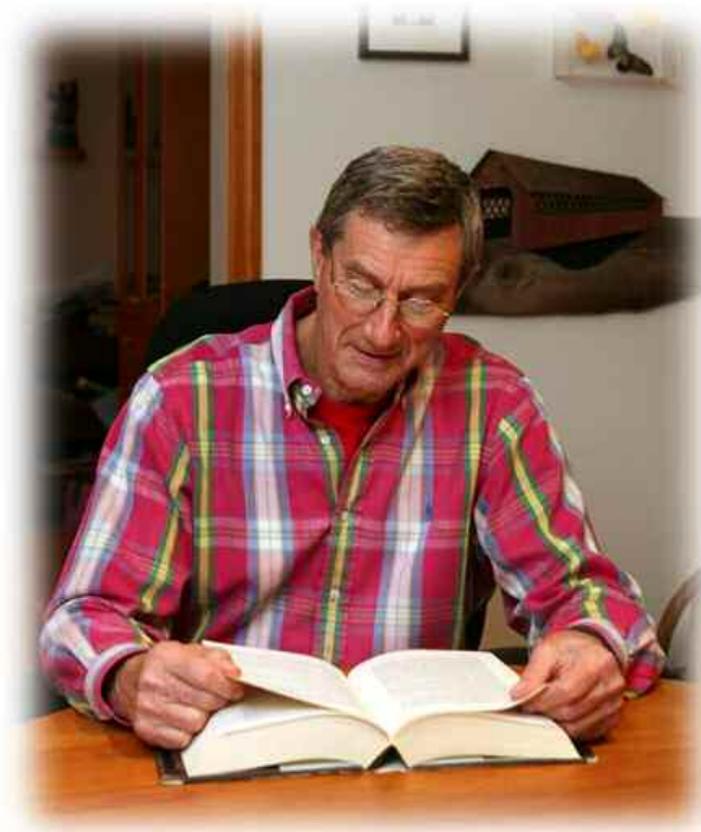
Henri’s success in Finland did not go unnoticed. He was soon promoted to be Merck’s Regional Director in Scandinavia, in charge of four countries: Norway, Sweden, Denmark, and Finland. His stock within the company was rising. A couple of decades later, it would take him to a top position!

The Making of Henri

Henri’s parents were Polish Jews, who left Poland without passports in the wake of rising anti-Semitism, arriving in France in 1930, wading their way through Germany and Belgium. They settled in the small town of Carcassonne in Southern France, where Henri’s father worked as a tailor. Henri was born in 1938 in what he notes was “a poor family of immigration parents” and grew up quite “aware of his family’s roots.”

Growing up in France, under the close shadows of Nazism (his father was prisoner of war during World War II), and deeply mindful of the anti-Semitism which claimed over six million Jewish lives in Hitler’s death factories in Europe, Henri notes: “I became very obsessive about freedom... I consider it as the absolutely essential ingredient for people to become what they can become.”

Adds Henri: “I feel so deeply and so personally about freedom that I hate to be



Home represents another haven for learning.

told arbitrarily what to do, or what I cannot do.” So, early in life Henri internalized the belief “that if I don’t like something, it is highly likely that others would also not like it” This personal yardstick of treating others with respect has characterized Henri’s life and career.

As a child, Henri learned the value of self-reliance and risk-taking, noting: “I could not use my name or my father’s legacy to move forward. I needed to be good enough to feel that I was not trapped, that I could be myself. So, to be ‘free’, I had to be successful ”

Henri was a brilliant student, jumping a few classes in school, before he undertook his studies in chemical engineering in Toulouse and Paris. A competitive summer scholarship provided Henri, barely 21, an opportunity to work in Poland. He arrived in Poland “not speaking a word of Polish.” While he spoke German at work, he picked up Polish quickly. Similarly, his English was “dismal” when he arrived a year later in the U.S. But, thanks to long stints in front of the television set, he picked it up quickly.

For Henri, learning a language is not just an exercise in self-reliance, it also provides a window into a different culture, reflecting a different way of knowing and expressing. Henri’s respect for diversity – in thought, perspectives, and opinions – can, in part, be attributed to his wide exposure to different languages and cultures – both at home, school, and work environments.

While Henri is fluent in French and English, and comfortable with German, Finnish, and Swedish (and Polish, once upon a time), he grins and notes: “I still swear and count in French.”

Retirement and Giving Birth to Plexus

“Why did you retire from Merck?” I ask.

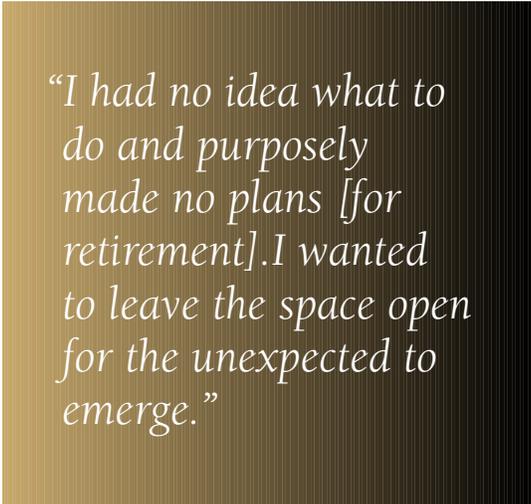
Henri grins and notes: “I wanted to leave Merck at a time of my own choosing — at a time when the going was good. Merck’s Intercontinental Region and Japanese operations

were thriving; my division had been the fastest growing for several years in a row. It seemed like an ideal time to go. During my years at Merck I observed that executives at the top levels of the company quite often retired unhappy: some overstayed, some were pushed aside. I was determined to avoid ending what had been (for

the most part) a wonderful career on a sour note. Also, my father who was living alone in France was getting quite old, unable to travel to the U.S. anymore, and I wished to spend more time with him before it was too late. The idea of not suffering from permanent jet lag and of having time for family and friends was also most appealing.”

“Was it difficult to retire?” I ask.

“It is always difficult to leave a job that you love doing and people that you care deeply about but it was a ‘happy’ retirement,” reflects Henri. “It was happy precisely – and paradoxically - because I chose to retire at a time when I was both happy and very successful. There were a bunch of memorable farewell parties in various parts of the world. I remember them as being warm, happy, and fun. A lot of people came to these parties, including secretaries and office personnel whom I had worked with over the years.” After a moment’s silence, Henri grins and notes: “In fact, it was pleasant. My heart was warmed by the ‘I will miss you’ whisperings and hugs.”



“I had no idea what to do and purposely made no plans [for retirement]. I wanted to leave the space open for the unexpected to emerge.”

“What kind of a retired life did you have in mind?” I ask.

“I had no idea what to do and purposely made no plans,” Henri notes. “I wanted to leave the space open for the unexpected to emerge. I decided I would not do what retired corporate executives traditionally do – that is, serve on corporate boards. I wanted to do something meaningful and different, but did not know what.”

Serendipitously, around the time of his retirement, through some mutual friends, Henri’s path crossed with Curt Lindberg, a senior official of VHA, Inc. — an alliance of 2,200 community hospitals — and a leading proponent of using concepts from complexity science to address intractable health care issues.

“Curt is the greatest network builder I have met,” muses Henri. “I admired how he had brought together corporate executives, health care professionals, science writers, and academics around the common purpose of learning how to use complexity science concepts in health care. I enjoyed the time I spent with this network. We met several times over the next two to three years.”

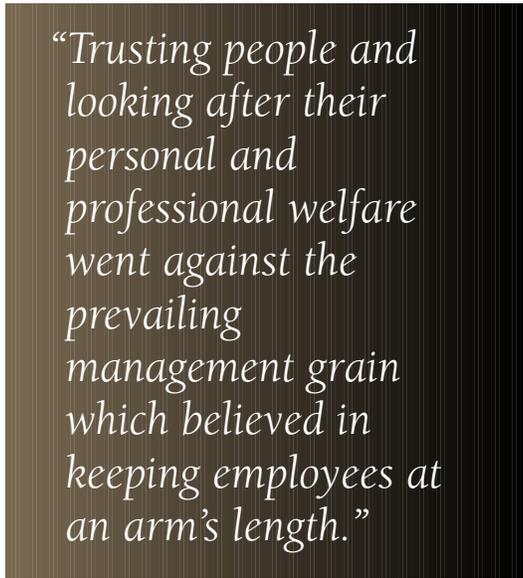
“Were some directions emerging on how your retirement was going to go?” I ask.

Henri notes: “There were several possibilities. One brewing idea was to start a small Foundation and engage in meaningful philanthropy around the mission of helping executives develop organizations where people thrive. Around the same time, I heard that Curt’s job at the VHA was being retrenched. I told Curt what my ideas were and

asked him to consider the possibility of joining me to start work on the prospective Foundation.”

“What happened then?” I ask.

“Ten of us – all interested in complexity science – met in Pittsburgh”, recalled Henri. The discussion centered on what work should come next for Curt and how to continue the complexi-



“Trusting people and looking after their personal and professional welfare went against the prevailing management grain which believed in keeping employees at an arm’s length.”

ty network that he had developed. Out of these deliberations came the idea of establishing Plexus Institute, a non-profit organization. Its mission: “To foster the health of individuals, families, communities, organizations, and the natural environment by helping people use concepts emerging from the new science of complexity.”

A few months later, in Fall 2000, Curt and Henri took the lead in incorporating the Plexus Institute in Allentown, New Jersey. Curt would serve as President. Henri was elected Chairman.

So, three years after his retirement from Merck, Henri Lipmanowicz was back in “business” — this time at the helm of a nonprofit corporation, promoting a wider understanding of complexity science concepts to improve the quality of peoples’ lives.

“Giving birth to the Plexus Institute with Curt and others was one of the most meaningful events in my life,” mused Henri.

“How have your last five years been with Plexus?” I ask.

“I enjoy my time with Plexus immensely for I feel that I am learning all the time and meeting lots of fascinating people such as you,” noted Henri. “And now I am even more convinced

about the value of complexity science for business leaders and organizational managers.”

Experience Meets Science

It was only a couple of years prior to his retirement from Merck that Henri was formally introduced to the field of complexity science. Upon the recommendation of one of his colleagues, Henri read two of Margaret Wheatley’s books — *Leadership and the New Science* and *A Simpler Way*.

The books grabbed Henri: “They gave me a language, a framework rooted in science, to see the connections and threads of certain conventional and unconventional managerial practices which really worked for me at Merck.”

“What unconventional practices?” I ask.

“I routinely engaged in what the conventional management wisdom considered as deviant behaviors.”

“Like what?” I ask.

“For instance, I made a decision early in my career that I would choose to trust people. I would give people the benefit of the doubt and I would organize on the assumption that, for the most part, people inside the company could be trusted,” noted Henri. “And, that if people were treated fairly, with respect, the outcomes will mostly be good.” After a pause, Henri added: “Trusting people and looking after their personal and professional welfare went against the prevailing management grain which believed in keeping employees at an arm’s length.”

“So close relationships, personal connections, and trust were at the center of your management practice,” I echoed.

“Yes, and it was consistent with what Meg Wheatley was writing and what my experience told me. That is, in a complex system such as an organization, order arises from the interactions between the people, and the nature of that order is a function of the quality of those interactions.

In a complex system, such interactions generate self-organizing patterns that are beyond the control of management. Therefore the quality of relationships between actors is often more important than the quality of the actors,” noted Henri. “What Meg Wheatley did was she validated my convictions, backing them with science. I, of course, had justified them all along on the basis of common sense, my lived experience, and my understanding of individual psychology in group situations.”

“Did you ever meet Meg Wheatley?” I ask.

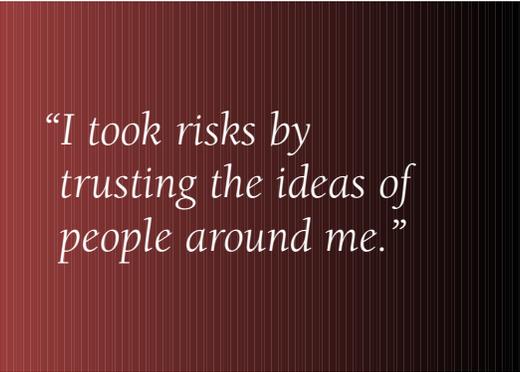
“Yes, I invited her to Merck. She spent two days with my management team. We sat in stuffed comfortable chairs and dialogued non-stop – there was no agenda. It was beautiful. It was profound and at the same time we had a ball. She too had a ball.”

“So, Meg Wheatley was an important influence on you,” I probe.

“Yes, when I first read her, I said ‘Wow! This is beautiful!’ It was something I was missing. She helped string together my various ‘deviant’ experiences.”

Trust: The Lubricant of Organizational Life

I encourage Henri to reflect back on his managerial practices at Merck. “What did you do to develop trust with co-workers?” I ask.



“I took risks by trusting the ideas of people around me.”

Henri reflects: “Consciously, I took the responsibility to act in a way that people could trust me. I went out of my way to be truthful, to share all information freely, and to reward people for speaking their mind including disagreeing with me. I tried to avoid manipulating people. I worked hard to create safe spaces for sharing ideas, and to practice what I call ‘active honesty.’ It sounds obvious and simple but it really isn’t, which is why so many leaders don’t inspire trust. I believed that people would not trust me if I didn’t first demonstrate by my actions that I trusted them. So I took risks by trusting the ideas of people around me.”

“My trust clearly cost the company money. But it was worth every cent!”

“Can you give me an example?” I ask.

In response, Henri shared a story from his early days with Merck in Finland. The year was 1969 and Henri was trying to put Merck’s Finnish operations back on track. He remembered:

“I hired Jorma Mantovaara — a very talented, knowledgeable, and dynamic Finnish man as my Sales Director, luring him from Winthrop, another pharmaceutical company. Within weeks of his

joining our company, he came to me with an idea. He suggested that instead of using a detailing presentation brochure – which had printed headlines and text - to make presentations to physicians, our sales reps should perhaps use a flannel board on which we could stick, and move around, the various presentation props.”

“What did you say to Jorma?” I ask.

“I said that’s an interesting idea. Why not try it?” After a pause, Henri noted: “In essence, I was telling Jorma I trust you and I am prepared to take a risk with your unproven idea. This was early on in our relationship and it

was a very big thing for Jorma as he could not get his previous boss at Winthrop to even try it out.”

“How did the flannel board fare?” I ask.

Henri grins: “All the sales reps thought this was a crazy idea. They had a whole raft of reasons to explain why it would not work including where would one put the flannel board given the doctor’s table was always crowded. But it worked like a charm....it was a big success. Doctors were intrigued by this novel mode of presentation and made space on their tables. The flannellograph

Table 1. Henri’s Dos and Don’ts

Dos	Don’ts
Build on Trust	Depend on Controls
Give Freedom to Experiment	Reward Conformity
Share Problems and Failures	Kill Bad News
Celebrate Accomplishment	Punish Failures
Admit Your Mistakes	Abuse Your Authority
Take Risks	Stand Still
Be Connected	Isolate Yourself
Be a Role Model	Expect Others to do More than You
Make Work Fun	Allow Boredom

(as it began to be called) resulted in a more interactive, dynamic, and memorable conversation between the sales reps and the physicians. Unbelievably, the physicians, absorbed in the presentation, were giving our reps double the time than they did previously. They now had more questions, which meant that the reps had to be better trained. A small change in a presentation prop had a series of cascading positive outcomes. In retrospect, the flannellograph is a good complexity story. By changing the quality of interactions, without changing the actors, whole new patterns developed.” Then Henri broke into a laugh and noted: “Above all, the flannellograph was fun.”

“What did the flannellograph initiative do to your relationship with Jorma?” I ask.

“It cemented our relationship as we worked closely on creating flannellograph presentations and developing this new medium. I gave Jorma credit for implementing this idea, and he became more and more creative. By trusting his first idea, by opening a space for experimenting with the flannellograph, other possibilities for innovation and creativity opened up. As the safe and supportive space grew larger, we moved further and further out on the edge of our capabilities to do things that were truly unique.” Henri leaned back, sipped his lemonade, and said: “Innovation, as you know, happens on the edge.”

“So trusting people can yield surprising, and even far-out, outcomes?” I ask.

Henri replies: “Yes, if a relationship is involved, trust is fundamental. But trust does not

have to be blind. In trusting people, I knew that I had to be prepared to be disappointed periodically. But that was a price I was willing to pay. The benefits of trusting all the people who deserved it were far too great to reverse course because of some occasional disappointment. Trust is a two-way street, and I wanted my employees to know that they could trust me to trust them.”

“Can you give me an example of when you trusted someone, and a price had to be paid?” I ask.

Henri scratches his head: “Yes, I can. Here is a story from when my trust clearly cost the company money.” But Henri quickly added: “But it was worth every cent!” Henri recalled: “In 1992, Merck’s New Zealand operations were headed

by Chris Moore, a young bright man, who reported directly to me. One problem for Merck in New Zealand was that their product distribution system was expensive, and Chris wanted to try a different distribution strategy. However, I felt that the new course of action that Chris recommended was not the right choice. We had long, open, free-spirited discussions about the various options, and I explained to Chris my position, including the pitfalls of his recommendation. But Chris felt strongly about his position, was convinced that it was the right one to fix the problem, and stood by it.”

“What did you tell Chris?” I ask.

Henri grins: “I told Chris you know how I feel about this. But I also see what your position is. You have to do what you personally believe is

“Imagine how healthy your body would be if your lungs started lying to your heart. Or if your liver and kidneys only exchanged information once a month! Now reflect on the feedback patterns that occur in most organizations.”

certain managers. There were occasions when I had previously worked with or known these people and, for some reason, did not trust them; perhaps I found them to be dishonest, untruthful, or unreliable. These managers were often highly ‘capable’ people and hence had survived, or perhaps even thrived, in the company.”

“What would you do with such ‘inheritance?’” I quip.

Henri’s tone rises an imperceptible notch: “I would meet these people without ado and say ‘There is no point in us trying to work together.’ And, the interesting thing is that usually there was no outrage; no surprise. It was almost as if they were expecting it.”

“No surprise. Why?” I ask.

“When you practice what you preach, you develop a reputation. I guess people who had worked with me knew that Lipmanowicz values honesty, integrity, and openness. Word does get around, especially if you’ve been with the company a long time.”

“So, in essence, Henri, these people were fired?”

“Yes, they were let go and, usually, on generous terms of severance. It was a civil process and was clearly in everyone’s best interests.”

“So trust has a soft and a hard edge,” I muse.

Trust, Complexity, and Organizational Life

“How does the notion of trust in relationship fit with a complexity science framework?” I ask.

Henri, who had obviously thought a great deal about this topic, answered cogently: “Any healthy complex system – whether an organization or an organism – is dependent on instantaneous, authentic, and accurate information exchange between and among its constituent parts. The level of trust in a relationship determines the quality of the information that is exchanged. In a trusting relationship, more

authentic information will flow more quickly and reliably, allowing for more feedback loops. If the level of trust is low, less information will flow between the interacting agents, and the information will be distorted and delayed. So, trust is the lubricant of relationships, of organizational life. Whether the trust levels are high or low, order will emerge no matter. But what kind of order do we want? Whether or not the patterns of interactions in a group are more healthy than dysfunctional is influenced by the level of trust within the group. ”

“How does this lubricant of trust manifest itself in organizational life?” I ask.

Henri’s assured reply is laced with three decades of business experience: “People are open and transparent only when they trust you. Only when people trust you can they come to you and expose their vulnerabilities. Subjects that are usually not talked about, that are sensitive, that are taboo, become talkable. Trust improves the quality of the feedback on a day-to-day basis. In most organizations, an employee receives feedback once a year – in the form of a performance evaluation which more often than not is cursory at best. Circular feedback loops should be on-going, all the time, not annual.”

After pausing to sip some lemonade, Henri continues: “Think of an organization as a complex system such as a human body. Now imagine how healthy your body would be if your lungs started lying to your heart. Or if your liver and kidneys only exchanged information once a month! Or if the neurons in your brain withheld information from your eyes? Now reflect on the feedback patterns that occur in most organizations.”

As I reflected on Henri’s emphasis on building trusting relationships and providing continuous feedback, it dawned on me that these represented attributes of a consummate mentor.

On Mentors and Mentoring

Henri is grateful to the mentors he had in life. He remembers with fondness a senior marketing official of Merck Canada, who mentored him early in his career when Henri underwent a nine-month training in Canada. “He was helpful, generous, and treated people with respect. I had countless discussions with him, and looking back, I learned a lot from him because he gave me a lot of his time. Time is our most precious commodity, much more so than money. How much we give to someone is probably the best measure of how much we care about that person”.

Prior to joining Merck, Henri was closely mentored by his department chairman at Columbia, Professor Sebastian Littauer, a Russian Jew, who was a student of Norbert Wiener (father of cybernetics) at MIT. Notes Henri: “This would not have happened in France. A French university would not have had the informality that would have allowed a close mentoring relationship with a professor.”

Henri reflects on Littauer’s lasting influence on him: “He’s the guy who encouraged me to think in ways other than logical and deductive. At that time I had no clue what he meant by inductive reasoning and an experimental approach. He taught me that you could try something, and question it, and if it works, it’s good. That was ridiculous to me. In the engineering science I had studied, you didn’t do anything until you found a perfect solution.”

After a reflective pause, Henri added: “Your mind opens up the moment you have accepted this idea of trying things to see if they work. It is the first step in understanding and appreciating the process of adaptation and evolution.”

Henri, himself, is a quintessential mentor and revels in the privilege and vanity that comes with it. In his own words: “The most satisfying and enjoyable thing to me is to see individuals and

groups blossom, succeed, and achieve beyond their own expectations.”

“So, what took you to South Africa this past week,” I inquire, sipping some lemonade.

Henri launches into another riveting story (he loves storytelling) of his travel to South Africa to mentor and advise a former Merck employee, now the CEO of a company, with whom Henri developed a close relationship some decades ago. He values Henri’s counsel, and Henri loves the challenge of introducing complexity science principles into an organization thousands of miles away from home.

Curt Lindberg makes the following observation on Henri’s mentoring: “When Henri goes to Merck now, even though he is retired, all the people he mentored come to talk to him. His impact on the company and its people is palpable.”

Once a mentor, always a mentor! “Mentoring has longevity,” I muse.

Grey Warner, Senior Vice President of Merck’s Latin America Division, who worked with Henri for nearly a decade and considers him to be his mentor, provided the following insights: “Henri has an extraordinary intellect,” and “an inquiring mind that operates with the assumption that things are rarely what they seem at the surface.”

Those who know Henri well, including Grey and Curt, immediately grasp his innate ability to “open up conversations”. In essence, he rarely, if ever, takes a position which puts a damper on discussion, discussion, or free exchange of ideas.

Henri genuinely invites discussion by often saying something like this: “I am not sure about this issue; it seems like one we should explore, what do you think?” Or “for the sake of discussion, what if we played devil’s advocate;” or “Are there other possibilities which for some reason we have not yet broached?” The purpose of these discussions is to achieve clarity, to foster openness, and build trust. Once the ball rolls, Henri listens and questions with intensity.

When I probed Henri on his intense questioning, Henri laughed and broke into another story: “I was talking on the phone recently with Harald, one of my old friends from Scandinavia. He was the person I selected to be the Managing Director in Norway when I became Regional Director of Scandinavia. The Norwegian organization was in bad shape but Harald and I worked closely and were able to turn it around. We were reminiscing about the old days and at some point Harald asked: ‘Henri, do you remember the most important word I learned from you?’ I had no clue what he was referring to and so I said ‘No, Harald, I don’t remember.’ He replied ‘Why?’ I said ‘because I am getting old and forgetful.’ Harald laughed out loud and said: ‘I am not asking you why, I am telling you that the most important word I learned from you is WHY, the word WHY. You always asked why and, after you got an answer you would ask why again, and on and on until we finally got to the bottom of the issue and everything was clear.’ I got what he meant and roared with laughter!”

In any interaction, Grey notes that Henri “really connects with you – both in a professional and personal manner.” Henri gave a lot of room to his managers, as he did to Grey, to experiment, to make mistakes, to learn, providing support as needed: “He keeps the nonsense away from you so you can do what you do best.” Further, notes Grey: “Henri revels in introducing people to new things, and has a willingness to look for new and different ways of doing things.”

In many respects, Grey notes, “Henri becomes a father figure – one who has expertise.

And you respect him and at the same time have affection for him, as he does for you.”

In 1993, Henri appointed Grey to head all of Merck’s operations in Latin America. Grey was surprised as he was “not the obvious choice for this job.” When Grey asked Henri for a job description and list of responsibilities, Henri

noted: “The job is to determine what needs to be done, and to do it.” As they discussed the various constituencies, both external and internal, that Grey’s new position would need to address, Henri advised: “Focus on a few important things and do them well.”

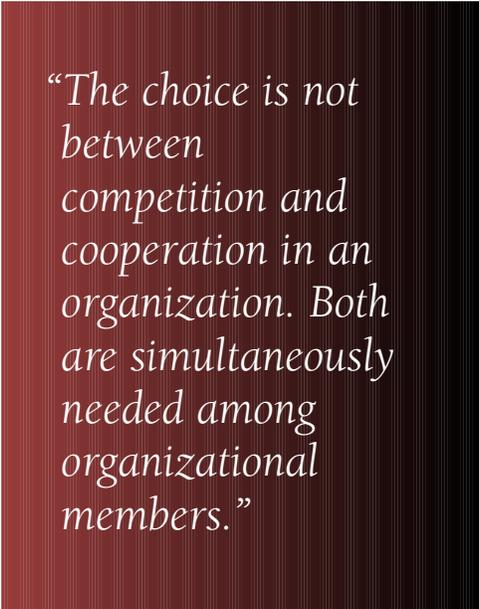
Grey notes, “Henri was always available for consultation,” much like a sounding board. While the ownership of all important decisions rested with Grey,

Henri, as boss, would “quiz me on the process of arriving at those decisions”. And, “if people or personnel issues were involved, Henri would always probe a bit more.”

As I reflect on my association with Henri over the past couple of years, and especially focus on the past eight months (during the course of writing this article) in which we talked either face-to-face or by phone for about 15 hours, I realize Henri’s serendipitous mentoring influence on me.

Serendipitous Mentoring

In October, 2005, a few days after I had returned from Vientiane, Laos after participating in a UNICEF-sponsored workshop on HIV/AIDS and Children, Henri and I spoke on the phone. The purpose of the phone call was for me to dig deeper into Henri’s management practices and see



“The choice is not between competition and cooperation in an organization. Both are simultaneously needed among organizational members.”

their connection to complexity science. However, Henri showed a genuine interest in my participation in the Laos workshop, posing several questions about how it was structured, who the participants were, and what the outcomes were. At first I thought this was just chit-chat, but after talking about this for some 35 minutes, I began to sense it was more.

Henri asked me: “What was the design of this workshop?”

I answered: “We had three days of presentations. People got up, revved up their PowerPoint presentations, spoke to the audiences, and if time allowed there were questions and answers.”

Henri asked again: “So, what was the design of the workshop?”

I repeated pretty much the same banalities as I had done moments before.

I heard Henri sighing: “Sounds like the workshop had no design. People came and talked. The agenda was set, time-bound and rigid. It seems lecturing was privileged and there were few opportunities for people to interact, catalyze their diverse experiences, and for ideas to shake, ferment, and emerge. An opportunity lost,” Henri sighed some more. “Next time you attend such a workshop try and inquire about the design well in advance and see if you can influence it to foster more participation and interactions. If you succeed you may end up contributing to the quality of the outcomes much more than with your presentation.”

Then we moved on to discussing other things.

However, over the next two months, I found myself repeatedly reflecting on Henri’s question “What was the design of the workshop?” I reflect-

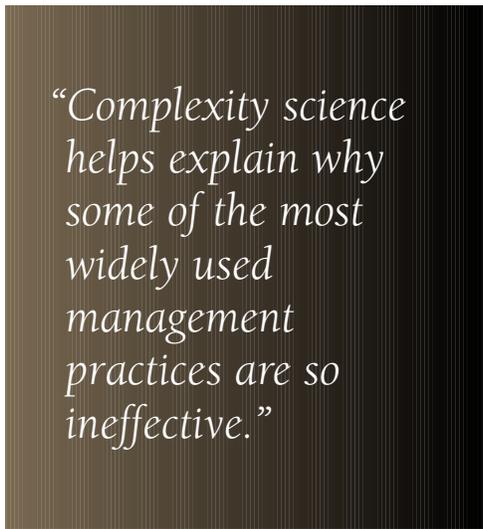
ed on my past 16 years of teaching practices at Ohio University. I reflected on how I constructed (or rather “designed”) my course syllabi, my class activities, and my assignments. Even though I thought I did a pretty good job of creating a comfortable learning environment in my classroom and fostering conversations and interactions

between and among participants, I asked myself how I could “design” my courses differently to create even more opportunities for interaction. I asked myself how I could create more possibilities for class participants to bring their knowledge, experiences, and opinions to the subject matter at hand, rather than “filling” them with a fixed dose of content

derived from the assigned readings.

In Winter Quarter 2006, based on my reflections on Henri’s pointed question, I found myself changing the “design” of my two courses. I incorporated a wider variety of learning approaches than I ever did before, including self-study, group discussions and keynote presentations, storytelling, role plays, fishbowl conversations, double circles, guest speakers, case-studies, video viewings, reflective learner notes, and synthesis papers. I began to give more weight to learner-centered reflections in the form of daily-journaling of ideas, reducing reliance on middle or end of the quarter instructor-centered assessments (i.e. mid-terms and final exams).

What perceptible changes can I see in my courses this Winter Quarter? The classes now run themselves, the participants are now more fired up, and we end up discussing topics and issues which would have never found a place in a pre-planned, teacher-centered, lecture-style format. To use Henri’s words now there is “more ferment-



“Complexity science helps explain why some of the most widely used management practices are so ineffective.”

tation” and more “chemical reaction”. I wish to call it “creative alchemy.”

Those who have worked with Henri talk about his gift of “adding value” to any conversation, however, mundane it may seem.

Isn't that what mentors do?

A small chit-chat conversation on a certain HIV/AIDS workshop in Laos creates ripples in a classroom in Athens, Ohio, some 9,000 miles away. Welcome to non-linear dynamics!

Lessons for Organizational Leaders

What simple lessons might Henri's life and corporate career hold for others?

Henri reflects: “I learned that how you do things is often more important than what you do. For example, enthusiasm can be more important than the actual task in terms of quality of outcomes. An enthusiastic group can achieve fantastic results.”

“How can one fuel enthusiasm?”

Henri notes: “People are more enthusiastic about things they have chosen themselves. You can't make people enthusiastic. What you can do is help them discover something about what they do that is meaningful and important. In this regard, recognizing achievement, however small, yields much”.

“What else?”

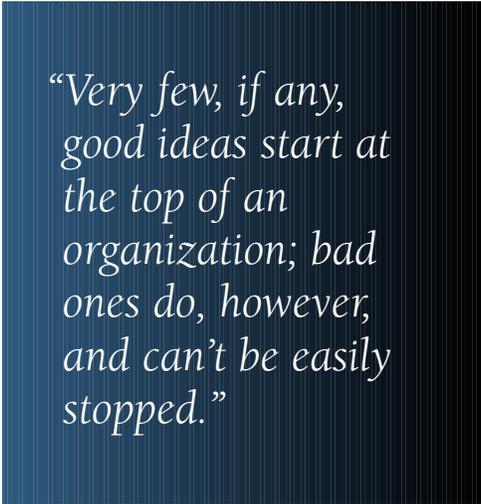
Henri notes: “Most importantly, people don't like to be treated like cattle or robots. They don't like being beaten, physically or otherwise, and they don't like being exploited. They want to be listened to. People appreciate honesty and trust, and what gets organized around honesty and trust is what's important. There are a number of

processes that can help surface peoples' enthusiasm.”

“What makes for a good manager?”

Henri responds: “Foremost, a good manager works for the people who report to him/her, developing quality relationships.”

“What else?” I ask.



“Very few, if any, good ideas start at the top of an organization; bad ones do, however, and can't be easily stopped.”

“A good manager should not see things as black and white. I've become much more aware that much of life is organized around the coexistence of several shades of grey. Trying to achieve something that is predicated on the idea that you get one thing at the expense of another is not the real world. Organizational life is many

things at once. Many paradoxes must be cultivated instead of resolved; for instance we need both change and stability and, the more we want to change, the more we need stability to make it possible. Similarly the choice is not between competition and cooperation in an organization. Both are simultaneously needed among organizational members. Cultivating the paradox means pushing simultaneously for more cooperation and competition; a productive tension is then induced among organizational members that lead to a higher and healthier quality of each. Similarly, managers need to encourage both the expression of a diversity of views and the generation of a strong consensus. A consensus without diversity is worthless; it means acting like clones or lemmings. And diversity in views without the capacity to reach a consensus spells chaos. Another conflict in organizations centers on autonomy (or decentralization) and connectedness (or centralization). It is a worthless battle. What we need to figure out is how to increase both autonomy and connectedness at the same time. When we look at

things with one set of lens it may make for a compelling picture, but it blinds us from seeing other images.”

I asked Curt Lindberg, Henri’s colleague at Plexus Institute, if he could provide an example of Henri’s ability to see, hold, and bring multiple perspectives on an issue.

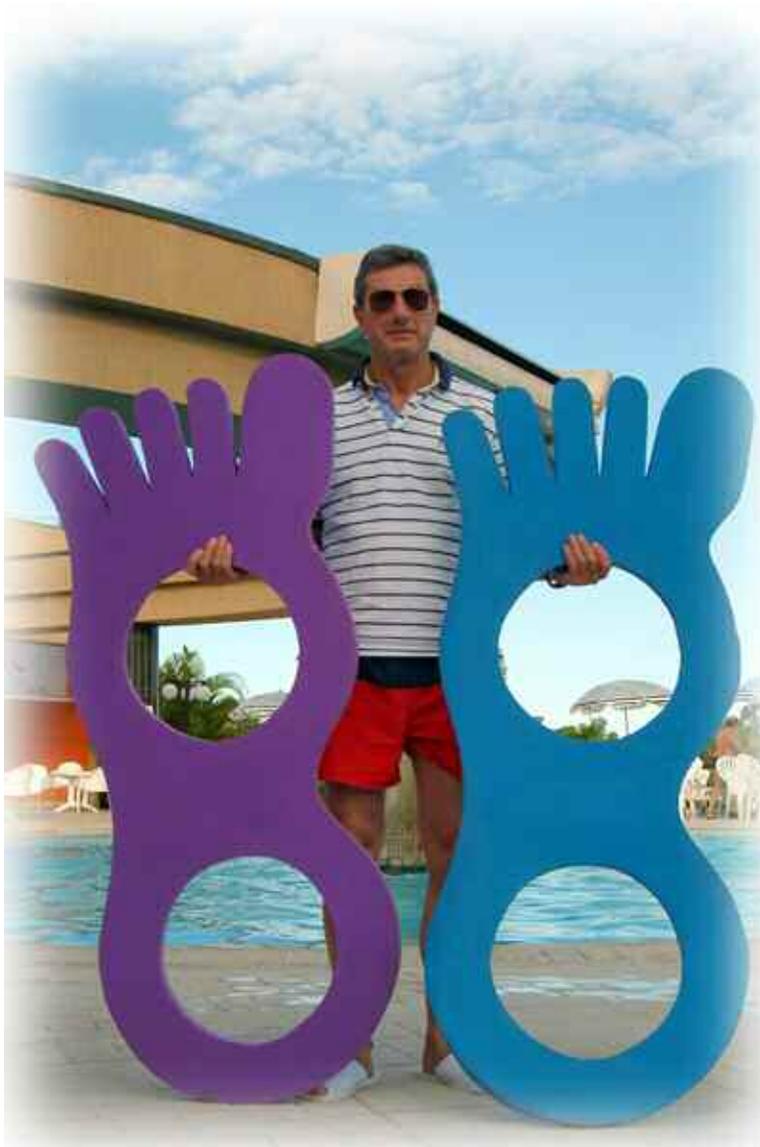
Curt noted: “Last year Plexus Institute’s Board [of which Henri is Chair] conducted my perform-

ance evaluation, and in this process solicited written observations from each trustee. Henri shared the following statement with the trustees: ‘It is clear that Plexus would not exist without Curt or that it would have turned into a different animal. The flip side of it is that Plexus, because it is so dependent on Curt, is too much a reflection of who Curt is.’ So, Henri has an uncanny ability to simultaneously hold and express multiple perspectives, thereby enriching, enhancing, and deepening the understanding of that issue,” Curt noted emphatically.

Henri grinned and added: “Plexus Institute at this time is a small organization with not enough diversity of perspectives. Without diversity there is no fermentation, no chemical reaction, and no broaching of new possibilities. A healthy organization is one in which there is diversity of perspectives and unbridled trust – a place where people can be unabashedly different and yet joyously co-exist.”

In closing, I ask Henri, “What lessons does complexity science hold for organizational leaders and business managers?”

Henri replies: “Complexity science offers a new way of thinking and acting, a new way of making sense of the world around us. It gives leaders concepts and metaphors from the natural world to better understand social structures; concepts such as self-organization, distributed control, emergence, the role of diversity, non-linearity, and the role of networks. Complexity science helps explain



The Open Space Law of Two Feet says if you're not learning or contributing where you are, march your two feet to a place where you can be more productive.

why some of the most widely used management practices are so ineffective.”

“Can you say more?” I ask.

“Yes, unlike conventional management thinking which privileges central control of the organization, complexity-inspired management assumes that order of the whole system does arise from distributed control — from interactions among individuals, leading to self-organization. This is a fundamental difference. So the foremost task of an organization leader must be to help create the conditions that foster free interactions between diverse agents, and unleash the talents, creativity, and risk-taking ability of people.

“What are the benefits of such an approach?” I ask.

Henri replies: “You can’t have a truly productive and effective organization, regardless of its mission, if the people in it are not really turned on and feeling personally responsible for what goes on around them. This will not happen unless people are directly and truly involved in the decisions that affect their work and role.”

“But, Henri, does this not fly in the face of the dictum that top managers have to make all the decisions and always be in control?” I ask.

Smiles Henri: “In my humble opinion, leaders are paid to help make their organization successful, not to implement particular management practices. To thrive in today’s fast changing world, organizations need a continuous flow of good ideas and passionate people to implement them effectively. For that, command and control is not very useful because the emergence of good ideas can’t be programmed. Very few, if any, good ideas start at the top of an organization; bad ones do,

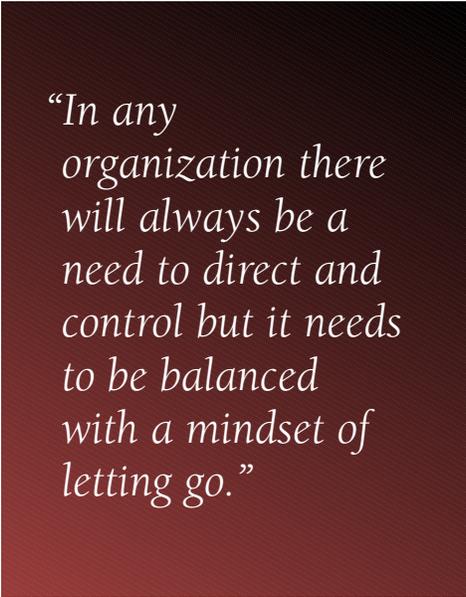
however, start at the top and can’t be easily stopped. Enthusiasm can’t be ordered to sprout at the will of senior management. What works is giving everyone the freedom and opportunity to participate fully in the generation of ideas and in their implementation.”

“Do you really mean everyone? Is that practical? Wouldn’t involving everyone turn into an unending process?” I ask.

The conviction in Henri’s tone is now palpable: “Yes, I mean everyone if at all possible. And, no, it does not have to be time consuming given the enormous amounts of time wasted by the more traditional top down approaches. First, the notion that managers have a choice about involving people in the decisions that affect them is an illusion.

There is no choice; people will be involved no matter what. The only choice is when. One can involve them in the process up front or deal with the consequences afterwards during implementation when people do not understand or resist the new ideas. Second, involving people up front creates an invaluable opportunity to benefit from the collective intelligence and creativity that will emerge from the inclusion of multiple voices and experiences. The quality and validity of what will emerge from such an inclusive process will infallibly be superior to what can be generated by a small group of experts. Finally when it will be time to implement, the involvement of everyone up front will ensure a much, much faster and reliable process.”

“That sounds so clear! And reasonable! Why don’t all organizational leaders follow this inclusive approach?” I ask.



“In any organization there will always be a need to direct and control but it needs to be balanced with a mindset of letting go.”

“Because that is not the way 99.9% of managers have learned or been trained to operate. I am no exception. In my thirty years at Merck, which I believe to be one of the best corporations in the world, I never learned that either. Whatever I did that was in that mode was out of personal instinct and conviction, not because it was mainstream practice. There was no training about group processes; you just picked up how to do it by looking around you. What was customary and institutionalized was top-down decision-making. Decisions were either taken alone, informally in small groups, or more formally in a senior management meeting.”

“So how can one involve large groups of people in a manner that is time effective?” I ask.

Henri’s eyes light up; his voice is collected – almost sage-like: “There are a number of processes that can be used to achieve high levels of participation such as Open Space, Conversation Cafés, Appreciative Inquiry, and Positive Deviance. What these processes have in common is that they facilitate and encourage the emergence of self-organization. Instead, sadly, the traditional group process used millions of time every day in organizations around the world is the business meeting. No matter whether the organization is for-profit or non-profit, the format is basi-

cally the same: a series of PowerPoint presentations followed by some form of limited discussion usually dominated by two, three, or four people. This standard business meeting process is designed – purposely or not – to limit or prevent participation. The agenda is tightly controlled, as is the schedule, as is the slate of attendees. Decisions are made by a small group and then imposed on others who were not included but perhaps the most affected. No wonder there is so much resistance to change in organizations and why so many change efforts eat a lot of time and resources. And, they often end up not making much of a difference.”

Opening the Space in Venezuelaⁱⁱ

Keith McCandless, who often co-facilitates with Henri in various organizational settings, recounts the following story from Caracas, Venezuela.

“It looked like Henri had not slept a wink. He had been up all night writing the script for the first 15 minutes of an Open Space Technology meeting. We were working together with all 200 members of Merck’s Venezuela subsidiary. Tension hung in the air and gloom was palpable

Table 2. Complexity-Inspired Management Practices are About a New Way of Thinking and Acting.

Conventional Management Practices	Complexity-Inspired Management Practices
Leader as Director and Controller	Leader as Liberator, Stimulator and Cultivator
Top-Down, One-Way	Open Free-Flowing Interactions Among All Employees
Predicting and Forecasting	Valuing and Preparing for Surprise.
Understanding Unpredictability, Rigid Implementation of Plans	Emergence from Flexible Experimentation
Solving and Fixing Problems	Building on What Works Well

as only a week ago the subsidiary had gone through significant downsizing. Everyone in the company – from the telephone operator, mailman, clerical staff, to top management — was included for an unprecedented three day event. The Managing Director of Merck’s Venezuela operations, Alison Joslyn, welcomed the participants, noting such an all-inclusive meeting format had never previously been attempted at Merck.

The pressure was on. The beginning of an Open Space session relies heavily on establishing trust with the participants. Participants must believe that the conveners and the facilitators really mean what they say — that each participant has the responsibility and the freedom to organize around the most important challenges faced by the company. The agenda is created on the spot by the participants, not the organizational leaders.

Henri looked tired but in control. Spanish is not one of the five languages he speaks. His text needed to be translated on the spot by a Merck colleague David Gasser. David had never experienced the exhilaration of Open Space.

Henri and David worked together like seasoned improvisationalists. They cracked jokes, played with language, offered some physical comedy, and established the creative tension needed to launch the meeting. All this in the center of two concentric circles with 200 pairs of eyes glued to their every move.

The critical moment came soon after Henri outlined the ground rules of Open Space. Any participant could step forward and take responsibility to convene a working group around any organizational challenge they deemed to be important. Other participants have the freedom to join any group for open discussions, or move around between groups. Usually, once an invitation is issued to the participants to step forward, a facilitator can expect a long uncomfortable silence before anyone steps forward to the center of the circle to launch a group.

Not in Venezuela and not for Henri. Within a split second of Henri’s invitation, three then six then a dozen people jumped out of their seats and headed straight for Henri. His surprise was palpable as it was rare. He hesitated, and then stepped back a little. He seemed ready for everything except an avalanche of enthusiasm. David gave Henri a little nudge forward and he regained all his composure. For the next several hours, we all stepped back and watched the unfolding of self-organization in full splendor.

On the evening of the third day, when the Open Space meeting ended, all participants celebrated with a joyous party. People danced and sang. Over a cocktail, an employee confided: ‘I have worked in this company for over 20 years. Thanks to the Open Space meeting, I feel I was listened to – for the first time.’”

Reflecting on the Venezuelan Open Space events, Grey Warner, Senior Vice President of Merck’s operations in Latin America (who considers Henri as his mentor) commented: “By bestowing his trust, Henri helps people find the courage to try very different things. As leader of the subsidiary, it took enormous courage for Alison Joslyn to convene the Open Space in Venezuela. She was able to do this in part because of the trust her management bestowed on her to try something very different. This is part of the legacy that Henri left at Merck.”

On Directing and Controlling

“Henri, are you suggesting that leaders should stop directing and controlling?” I ask.

“No, not at all,” responds Henri. “In any organization there will always be a need to direct and control but it needs to be balanced with a mindset of ‘letting go’ – that is, trust the people and the process. It requires a willingness to be directed by the collective inputs of those deep down in the organization, especially those on the

frontlines and, also heeding the voices of the outsiders with which the organization interacts. However, letting go is not easy to learn or do; it is inevitably messy compared to the ‘on-the-surface’ orderly top down process. It scares the leader because there is no way for him/her to know in advance what outcomes this type of open discussion process will generate. Also, leaders are leery of cutting down presentations and making space for conversations as it just doesn’t look leader-like! ”

“Henri, please explain what you mean by ‘on-the-surface’ orderly?” I ask.

“In the usual top-down way of implementing organizational changes, the part that is visible to management, namely what is happening in meetings, is most of the time orderly. Scripts have been rehearsed, presentations are smooth, and people hesitate to voice strong opposition to issues that have been decided at higher, sometimes the high-

est, levels. Everything looks under control. The messy part is swept under the rug thanks to a well controlled agenda. However, the dissension resurfaces as soon as people walk out of the meetings — in the corridor conversations and through the grapevine. That is where disagreements are aired and people reinforce their misgivings about the proposed changes. That is where they invent ways of delaying implementation, avoiding it altogether, or neutralizing it. That’s the invisible mess under the surface which takes a huge effort to overcome because it can’t be apprehended. How can you deal with obstacles that you don’t even know exist because they are not discussed in your presence? In contrast, in an open participative process, the mess comes bubbling to the surface and remains visible for all to see until common solutions or resolutions emerge. That is a very uncomfortable time for senior management; things look quite out of control and there is no



The spirit of a lifelong learner: An insatiable curiosity about the surrounding world.

certainty that there exist some good solutions on the other side of the mess. I have been through a whole bunch of such messy processes and, no matter how used to them I have become, my stomach still grinds and crunches, poised for an unexpected somersault. It takes a great deal of self-control and trust in the process to not jump in to stop the mess.”

“Henri, how can you not interfere when you know that the rug that you are standing on can be pulled from under you?”

“I silently chant mantras like: ‘it’s a mess, that’s a good sign, something essential is happening. There is no way to avoid the mess. Better a mess now with everybody having a chance to participate than later. This is not about you Henri; the group needs to work its way through the issues. You can’t solve the mess for them; they have to do it themselves. You can’t go from doing things one way to doing them another way without a messy transition. If it weren’t messy, worry and worry hard. You knucklehead you know

Endnotes

i Arvind Singhal is Professor and Presidential Research Scholar in the School of Communication Studies, Ohio University, where he teaches and conducts research on the role of communication in organizing for social change and promoting public health. He is author of several books, including *Organizing for Social Change: A Dialectic Journey of Theory and Practice* (Sage, 2006), *Combating AIDS: Communication Strategies in Action* (Sage, 2003), and *Entertainment-Education: A Communication Strategy for Social Change* (Lawrence Erlbaum, 1999). In recent years, Arvind has become a keen student of complexity science, and serves on a voluntary basis on the Science Advisory Board of the Plexus Institute in Allentown, New Jersey, of which Henri is the Chair of the Board and founding member.

In the past two years, Arvind met with Henri Lipmanowicz several times at various Plexus meetings, visited with him at his home in Summit, New Jersey in 2005 for an in-depth personal interview, and followed that up with six phone conversations (including one when Henri was vacationing in France). This article is a product of complexity-inspired processes: it was dialogically co-constructed with Henri and his various colleagues over several iterations until certain patterns emerged and self-organized themselves into headings and paragraphs. In this process, Arvind conducted interviews with Grey Warner, Senior Vice President of Merck’s Latin America Division, Curt Lindberg, President and founder of Plexus Institute, and Keith McCandless, a Seattle-based leadership consultant who along with Henri co-facilitates complexity-inspired processes in organizational settings. This article also draws upon an interview of Henri conducted by Prucia Buscell and Curt Lindberg on June 26, 2005, while driving in a car from New Jersey to Boston. Both Grey and Curt and Keith provided feedback on previous versions of this article, and Prucia provided a transcript of Henri’s car interview which was an invaluable resource. Velvet Miller and Nancy Espenhorst, both colleagues of Curt and Henri at Plexus Institute, helped out in various ways to take this manuscript to completion. This article arose out of a coffee conversation with Curt Lindberg, who sees incredible possibilities, and makes them happen.

ii The author is grateful to Keith McCandless for sharing this Open Space story from Venezuela, and to Grey Warner for his help in contextualizing it.

damn well that if you interfere you will crash the process and the energy of the group will dissipate.' To tell you the truth sometimes I can't resist not stepping in. Then I hope that there is somebody present who is smarter than I am who shoves me back gently into my 'letting go' role."

I ask: "Henri, what is the contribution of complexity science to what you just described?"

Replies Henri: "Complexity science has given me the confidence to back these ideas and processes. It comes from understanding and appreciating how, in nature, an infinite number of marvelous and beautiful structures have emerged, from crystals to plants to living organisms, through self-organization. When I look at how nature operates, I see the importance of self-organization, diversity, emergence, networks, interactions and relationships, cooperation and competition. When I put this understanding of complexity science with what I have learned about individual and group behavior, it validates the processes and concepts I have outlined. This validation is essential because there exists a sea of opposing viewpoints rooted in a linear, cause and effect, mechanistic view of organizations. These stereotypes are unfortunately reinforced daily in management practices, in educational institutions, and in the media. People want to have simple answers to complex questions and there are plenty of consultants happy to oblige with the latest how-to fad."

As the sun's rays begin to slant and radiate a reddish-orange hue over Summit, New Jersey, I ask: "Any final words, Henri, on complexity-inspired managerial practices?"

Henri leans back and notes: "In a complexity-inspired management practice, the leader is not a controller, but rather a liberator, a stimulator and a cultivator, a role model and an influencer. People in all organizations are hungry for this kind of leadership because, for the most part, they are suffocating under the weight of top down directives, processes, and bureaucracy. If such

leadership is offered, they will inevitably respond with quantum jumps in performance" (Table 2).

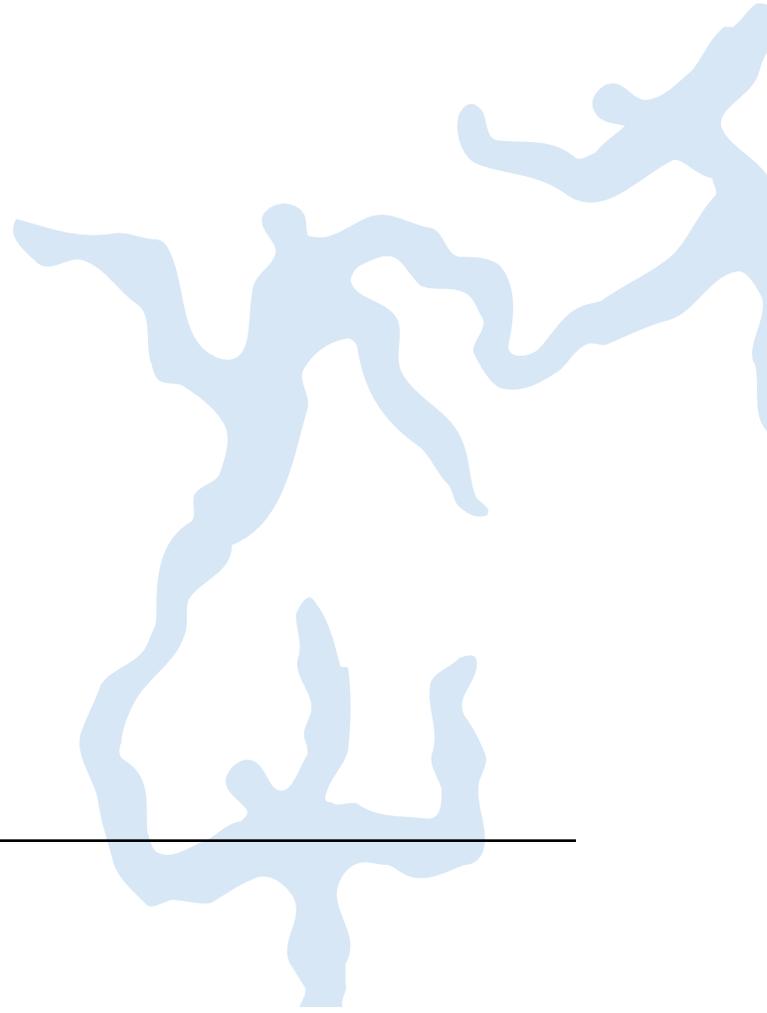
While my free-flowing conversation with Henri Lipmanowicz draws to a close, I carry the echo of our dialogue forward:

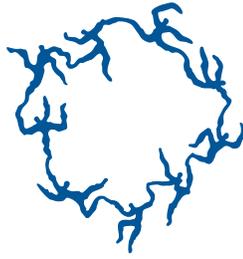
"Believe in people. Let go. Trust is the lubricant of organizational life."

What do you think? ■

Thanks to the Lipmanowicz family for the picture of Henri with grandchildren.

Thanks to David Gasser of Merck for other photos.





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“On n’entend bien qu’avec le coeur.”
 (“One understands well only with the heart.”)

– Antoine de Saint-Exupery
Le Petit Prince

We wish to thank French Sculptor Michel Rico for his permission
to use his sculpture, *LaRonde*, as a logo for Plexus Institute.



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“Fostering the health of individuals, families, communities, organizations and our natural environment by helping people use concepts emerging from the new science of complexity.”