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## **Learning to Fly And Other Life Lessons**

**by Marvin Weisbord**

This essay has three parts. In Part 1 I describe a human feat that changed life on earth, the invention of the airplane, and how that also influenced my life. In Part 2, I discuss the OD myths that I revised as I learned my trade. In Part 3, I speculate on that elusive concept called “the future.” I believe it never comes because it’s already here.

### **Part 1**

**“You got to learn how to fall before you learn to fly.”**

**--Paul Simon, 1973.**

For thousands of years humans aspired to fly like birds. For most of recorded history, our species flew only in myths, dreams, and legends--flying horses, dragons, magic carpets. When the sun melted Icarus’ wax wings, he crashed. Then people started building flying machines. They also crashed. The aviation pioneer Otto Lilienthal, on whose calculations the science of flight once rested, died in 1896 when he lost control of his glider. Then two self-taught bicycle mechanics from Ohio, Orville and Wilbur Wright, cracked the mystery.

Wrote Wilbur in 1900 (McFarland, 1953)--

“What is chiefly needed is skill rather than machinery. It is possible to fly without motors, but not without knowledge and skill...for man, by reason of his greater intellect, can more reasonably hope to equal birds in knowledge, than to equal nature in the perfection of her machinery.”

The Wrights built a primitive wind tunnel, re-did Lilienthal’s calculations, and showed why he had died. He had solved only one of three intertwined problems.

The Wrights reasoned that to fly a wing safely you had to--

1. Get it into the air.
2. Keep it in the air.
3. Make it go where you want.

By 1903 the Wrights had built a craft in which they would learn to do all three. Their first flight lasted 12 seconds. Within two years they could stay aloft for 30 minutes. They worked out an exquisite understanding of how each part of an aircraft affected the other

parts. They invented their own wing, elevator, rudder, engine, and propeller. After that anybody could fly. Lindbergh crossed the Atlantic in 1927; in 1969 Neil Armstrong walked on the moon. The Wrights had used “systems thinking” to change human capabilities decades before the term was coined.

### **An Archetypal Impulse**

I recognized my urge to fly at age 6, sitting in the cockpit of an antique plane at the Franklin Institute, the Philadelphia science museum. I wiggled the stick between my knees and pictured myself soaring like a bird over the city. That image stuck in my unconscious; in 1953, studying journalism at the University of Illinois, I found I could pay extra for a three-credit elective and get a pilot’s license.

My guide was Jack McGlone, medium height, red hair, china blue eyes, and an unflappable, self-assured, aviator persona. At age 28, he had commercial, air transport and instructor ratings. He told me that his dream was to be a corporate pilot, ferrying executives around the world. I confessed that mine was a license to view the world the way the birds did. Under Jack’s tutelage, I learned to take off and land, manage stalls and emergencies, read weather reports, file flight plans, and navigate with a map and compass.

Our training craft was an Aeronca Champion, similar to the better-known Piper Cub. It had fabric skin, a wooden propeller, and no lights or starter. To turn the engine, one person held the brakes and toggled switches. A second person spun the propeller. I learned to place my hands flat on the blade, pull down sharply, and step back to keep the prop from taking my head off. I was terrified until I caught on.

The Champ sat nose-high on two large tires beneath its cockpit and one tiny wheel under the tail. Its generic name was “tail-dragger,” a craft built on the same principles as the Wrights’ flyer. I practiced stalls, spins, and emergency landings. I learned a new definition of stalling. In a car, the engine stops. In a plane, with the engine running, you will stall if you get the nose so high and slow down so much that the wings can’t sustain lift. The craft drops like a rock nose first unless you push the stick forward and add full throttle.

The fabled three-point landing, an artifact of tail-dragger days, requires the skill to stall the plane a few seconds before it touches down nose high on three wheels at once. That way it stays down. You do stalls on purpose until you feel secure enough to recover should you stall by accident. You’ve got to learn how to stall before you learn to fly.

I mastered stalls and approach patterns. Setting the plane down gently was another matter. I choked as the ground came up. I would raise the nose too soon, stall high, and produce a bone-crunching drop to the runway. “That,” McGlone said the first time, “was a controlled crash!” So I’d keep the nose low and fly the front wheels into the runway, bouncing 30 feet into the air. “It’s your anxiety,” McGlone said. “You’re way too tense!” Most students soloed in eight hours. I needed ten, landing with sweaty palms, body coiled

like a spring. Then I learned to take deep breaths.

One day, after putting the little plane down acceptably a few times, Jack had me pull over. He climbed out and yelled above the engine noise, "It's all yours." I doubted this day would come. "Are you *sure*?" I yelled back. McGlone nodded. He pointed to a parallel landing strip where I saw an Aeronca identical to mine make a beautiful three-pointer. "There goes the best student I ever had," he shouted. "He never makes a mistake. I *worry* about him! I mess him up on final approaches so he can learn to get out of trouble. But *you*? *You* I'm not worried about. *You* know how to correct every mistake there is!"

I soloed without incident, and flew two solo cross-countries over Midwestern farms. Flying a plane with no electrical system requires skills and knowledge that birds don't need. You must learn how a machine behaves in wind, rain, snow, heat, and cold. You cannot fly before dawn or after dusk. You cannot fly if you can't see the ground. You must not fly into clouds. You navigate using visual landmarks. A magnetic compass tells you direction, not location. For that you need a map. You compare the roads, rivers, schools, hills and valleys below you with what the map shows. In an Aeronca Champion on a clear day you might climb high enough to see a checkpoint 10 miles ahead. Each time you fly to a new airport, you are doing something you never did before.

Nearing the end of the course, Jack wrote in my log, "Student moves stick & rudders too often and too fast. Does not look around enough." Nonetheless, he passed me. On a sunny June morning just before my 22<sup>nd</sup> birthday, a federal examiner gave me my final check ride. I planned and flew part of a route he selected, did stalls, and reacted to simulated emergencies. When it came time to land, I lined up on the runway and set that Champ down whisper-soft between two peach baskets 300 feet apart. It was the prettiest three-point landing you will ever see. I knew then that my dream had become reality.

In graduate school in Iowa City I joined a flying club. One weekend I took three friends to Chicago and made a night landing at O'Hare. I flew a roommate to see his girlfriend in another city. I landed in snow and barely made it out after hopping over a fence. One day I made several passes at a dirt field before realizing I was flying with the wind instead of into it. Another time I set down at the wrong airport.

I flew mostly for fun. After I started consulting, living in Vermont in summers, I practiced instrument flying by hiring a local instructor to sit with me as I piloted a rented craft to and from Rutland to Boston, Hartford or Albany where I could board big planes to go see clients. The instructor returned to pick me up. It was cheaper than chartering and made summer work an adventure.

Some 30 years after my first solo, my inner 6-year-old had scratched his primal itch. Despite many close calls, I quit the sky with a perfect safety record. I had corrected every mistake I made. In the *Institute of Aviation Alumni News* that year I read that Jack McGlone had realized his dream too. He was a senior Captain based in Chicago with

American Airlines.

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**In the 1890's the inventor Thomas Edison set out to make a storage battery powerful enough to run an electric car. After years of frustrating trials, a discouraged associate told him they had done 8000 experiments and hadn't learned anything. Edison countered that they had learned a great deal. "We know eight thousand things that don't work!" – Oft-told tale**

Nobody is born to fly. It took humans thousands of years to master what birds do instinctively. The Wright's breakthrough in 1903 came when they made systems "thinking" experiential. After repeated trial and error they figured out how to get a plane into the air, keep it in the air, and make it go where they wanted. After that even a natural dodo like me could be an eagle. Still, I had to learn the same way that Orville and Wilbur did—by doing it.

The Wrights' example stuck with me through 50 years of teaching, researching, managing, and consulting. I came to understand "change" as requiring that you do something each time that you never did before. Clients could not get what they wanted without opting for a journey into the unknown. Nor could I.

My friend and mentor Eric Trist used to say in response to any request, "I think we can help you with that." This was not bravado. He knew that if he got people on a learning trip, they would discover what was doable, and he would refine his theories of change. That was the meaning of "action research." A wholly predictable outcome—what works in *this* situation--was always worth the trip. My security blanket became framing every project as action research, me and the clients finding out together what worked for them.

In each generation people and organizations must learn the same lessons all over again for themselves. It did not matter that my flying teacher was a world-class aviator. All I had were minimal knowledge and mediocre skills. Luckily I was blessed with the motivation to risk. That turned out to be enough.

In the OD business my job was to help clients discover what *they* were ready, willing and able to risk. I developed expertise in creating ways to help them find capabilities they did not know they had. I got a great sense of freedom and power from that practice. I discovered 8000 things that don't work. I made every mistake there is until I learned to avoid repeating them. I also learned not to fear error.

If you venture into the unknown you will encounter the unknowable. That is where the valuable lessons lie. Over some years, I mastered a few things I could replicate successfully anywhere in the world. One was changing the conditions under which people interact instead of trying to change the people. I called that structural rather than behavioral change. It made possible systemic changes unavailable any other way.

I put my kids through college following up consulting reports my clients could not

implement. By opting for what people would do rather than telling them what they should do, I made a decent living. I also learned patience, acceptance of human frailty, and appreciation for those with the courage to attempt things they had never done.

I learned that everything is connected to everything else and that you can't just change one thing. I learned that people can coordinate and control their own work better than anybody doing it for them. I learned that no organization ever equals our hopes for it. I learned that people nearly always are better than their systems. I learned to accept others' faults by accepting my own. I learned to fly by flying. Those few lessons, all these decades later, still strike me as worth a few bumpy landings.

## ***Part 2***

**In the Wizard of Oz, my favorite consulting parable, the Wizard, a master of smoke and mirrors, scares people into doing things they did not believe they could. He promises to give a scarecrow brains, a tin man a heart, and a cowardly lion courage if they will kill a wicked witch, a difficult, dangerous, uncertain task. They succeed by using heart, brains, and courage, the right stuff they had all along.**

**When Dorothy's little dog Toto pulls aside a curtain exposing the Wizard as a fraud, she exclaims, "Oh, you are a very bad man!" Replies the Wizard, "Oh no, I'm a very good man. I'm a very bad Wizard!" Then he adds something anyone aspiring to OD should take seriously. "Can I help it if all these people believe I can do things everybody knows are impossible?" In 1908, Frank Baum, the Wizard's creator, understood the pitfalls of projection.**

I learned to do OD by doing it. I became an exponent, advocate, and framer of projects to help people learn from their own experience. Along the way I freed myself of several OD myths that for me perpetuated bumpy landings. Myths are defined as stories handed down in cultures, organizations, and families. We enjoy them as guides for behavior. That's where the fun ends.

The myth of Icarus flying too near the sun warned people not to do it. The myth that no human could run a four minute mile discouraged some runners from trying. Even the Wright brothers bought the flying myth until they figured out a human analog by watching birds. I bought into the OD myths that follow until I recognized their fallacies by watching people, not least myself.\*

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\*See Chapter One in *Productive Workplaces* (2012) for more myths.

### **The Sustainable Change Myth**

When I got my first big OD contracts circa 1970, I accepted that good consultants "built in" follow-up mechanisms with organizations. These were methods, systems, skills (I was never sure which) to reinforce new leader behavior, solidify learning, assure ongoing collaborative problem-solving, and promote a more productive "way of life." Heaven knows my colleagues and I did our best to sustain change. When a client spent a million dollars on an expert consulting report, we got it implemented for a tenth of that. We were the cheapest insurance a client could buy. All they needed was a way to follow-up and sustain the change. Right?

Let the record show that many organizations where we did our finest work no longer exist, e.g. Scott Paper, Digital Equipment, Bethlehem Steel, People Express Airlines. I once felt guilty that I lacked the skill to “build-in” follow up. I did until I realized that nobody could do it. Surely you know by now that “sustainable change” is an absurd oxymoron. The best we humans can hope to sustain is commitment from one meeting to the next. That is a priceless change worth having. If you want a new culture, make every meeting congruent with the culture you want. Change is not a “one-walk dog.” You have to do it again every day.

### **The Training-Will-Fix-It Myth**

In the 1970s OD’ers trained thousands of people to listen, cooperate, confront conflict, solve problems, set goals, talk straight, and be responsible. Many people reported that they improved relationships with partners, spouses, kids, and co-workers. What they did not do was improve organizations. To do that the trainees would need to change policies, procedures, systems, technology, programs, and work methods. These acts their organizations did not permit. To quote a favorite tune of mine, “You can feed it all day with the vitamin A and the bromo-fizz, but the medicine never gets anywhere near where the trouble is.” (Frank Loesser, 1948)

Training is existentially valuable. Get all you can. Do not mistake training for organizational change. Measurable performance follows employees’ influence in the design, control, and coordination of their work. Get everybody involved in improving the whole system, not just themselves. People may change their own behavior without training if they have the authority to fix structures first.

### **The Profit-Is-Everything Myth**

Greed may be the *second* greatest motivator for business executives. For most of them control comes first. If profits were the dominant driver of change, every firm would have its employees redesign, coordinate and control their work. They would replace supervisors with resource finders/trainers. I learned this in the 1960’s experimenting with multi-skilled work teams. I put people with narrow skills in leaderless teams, gave them their own customers and told them to “teach each other your jobs.” I was astonished to see productivity rise 40% (Weisbord, 1985).

For three decades I repeated variations in several firms. All got superior results. Yet, none adopted self-managing practices as “a way of life” in other units. Most managers and supervisors valued control and acceptable results over self-managing teams delivering spectacular ones. Some called that “the animals running the zoo,” despite persuasive evidence that the animals did it better.

### **The Hard Data Myth**

This myth says that if you show people the “data” they will do the right thing. I have shown many potential clients the data proving 20%+ gains in places where multi-skilled workers control their work. The only people I convinced were those who needed no convincing.

The “shadow” side to the data myth is that you can find scientific studies for and against anything from red wine and exercise to solar panels, windmills and clean coal. You can use statistics to prove anything. Pollsters can frame questions to get the answers they seek. “Do you believe taxes are too high?”

Resounding yes. “Would you support a tax cut if it meant poorer education for your kids and more potholes on your street?” No, no, no. What you choose to believe is a function of your upbringing, genes, education, social class, ethnicity, almost anything but numbers. Somebody else’s results are about as motivating as flying blind without instruments. Nobody can do it!

Today I would advise clients to try new things for themselves, trust their experience, and amass their own data. They can always revert to an old system. Indeed, whoever follows them probably will.

### **The Diagnosis Myth**

To change a system, says the myth, you need an accurate diagnosis of its strengths and weaknesses. But do you? As author of an organizational diagnosis book still used worldwide, I like the concept. In applying it though, I made three discoveries. One, what you look for is what you find. Two, some things are more worth finding than others. Three, people are more likely to act on what they find for themselves (Weisbord, 1978).

There are more diagnostic categories than stars in the galaxy and grains of sand on the beach. Everybody has preferences. Some consultants favor dysfunction, conflict, irrationality, resistance, defensiveness, finger-pointing, and favoritism. Some consultants celebrate radical acts of selflessness, initiative, empathy, problem-solving, even constructive sabotage. (I coined that term to describe people ignoring rules to make things work the way they should.) It’s all there all the time.

“Personality problems” can explain practically anything, from low quality, systems failures, missed deadlines, hospital patients getting sicker instead of well. Usually these are symptoms of integration failure. Working with Paul Lawrence in medical centers, I learned that interpersonal animosities, real as they were, usually started as structural problems, e.g. turf wars (Weisbord, et al, 1978). “Silos” bring out the worst in us. That’s because nearly everyone wants to do a good job. What stops them are systems keeping them apart. Multiple levels of management guarantee silos.

One reason my “Six Box Model” went viral has to do with its simplicity. It was emphatically not a medical model. It had non-judgmental, understandable categories—Purposes – Structure – Relationships – Rewards - Helpful Mechanisms - Leadership. Implicit in this framework is that you can’t change just one thing. Each box influences the others. It’s a leader’s job to monitor the balance.

In my early consulting days, I collected data and ran feedback meetings. That is an eye-opening experience humbling if you aspire to change human behavior. People questioned my data, even when I used their words. They denied, revised, and glossed over what annoyed them, tending to find fault with the medium rather themselves. The better the report, the harder people fought it. I soon learned that the antidote for this malady was teaching people to assess their own organizations. People who did that together usually went on to make needed changes.

It is established change business wisdom that teaching people to fish beats doing it for them. One reason Future Search has been a global success is that it requires that people with authority, expertise, information, resources, and need be in the same conversation. When they share their perceptions, everybody gets a picture of the whole that nobody had before. Each person knows what matters to

everybody else. That is a diagnostic milestone beyond price. Those who do the work are the only ones who can diagnose *and* fix it. In the same room they must fish or cut bait.

### **Fortune 500 Myth**

We consultants liked claiming Fortune 500 companies as clients. When “personnel” departments discovered experiential training in the 1960’s, they became conduits for OD. They put organization development on the map. Big public firms paid well, changed fast, and needed lots of help. We were made for each other.

We soon ran into roadblocks. First, good OD required continuity in leadership. Big companies liked to “fast track” talented people. Our projects rarely outlasted the managers who initiated them. Second, systems integration was the heart/soul of good OD. Whether a project involved software, spreadsheets, machinery, or plans and policies, the only consequential variable was the extent to which people could cooperate. I imagined myself managing a dance among economics, technology and people.

Engineers drove change. The finance department policed costs. When systems blew up, human resources—the function with the least authority—had to clean up the mess. They often turned to us for team-building. Integration became our job, getting a Humpty-Dumpty of engineers, accountants and “people” people in the same room to see if they could put themselves back together.

Top teams came up against interfaces they could not crack. Corporate staffs sought to control divisional managers who resisted policies made elsewhere. The people tended to be way better than their systems. The companies danced to a tune called quarterly dividends. It was orchestrated by distant analysts with zero responsibility who had more influence on the stock price than anybody else. We could unlock creative ideas, ameliorate the pain, even engender hope. What we could not do was “develop” companies that (a) were publicly traded, (b) paid quarterly dividends, and (c) churned executives at the top.

It took me some time to realize that the work world defies my control. It *never* goes the way I prefer. All I could do was the best I knew how. That’s what the clients were doing. If we wanted change, we had to try new things. Our big limitation was global. Local action was all we could influence.

I could only do OD one meeting at a time, no guarantee after that. Success meant getting to the next meeting and the next. We could go on until (a) the environment (e.g. markets, technology) ruled that this business was over, (b) an executive with more clout and less stake than the client, blocked the next move, or (c) the client who hired us got promoted, was fired, or quit.

Knowing this was one ingredient of what my partner Peter Block (2011) called “flawless consulting.” We learned to vet our clients as carefully as they did us. The contract was paramount. We wanted clients willing to do what they had not done before. I knew in advance we would not build for the ages.

### **The Learning Organization Myth**

People learn. Organizations have Alzheimer’s. Each new generation must learn old lessons again for itself. Trying to capture, bottle, and import good “norms” from the past or from another much-hyped company was impossible. Helping people rediscover old wisdom for themselves was doable, even



profitable. We found we could help people fly if they were willing to learn by flying. “They get wonderful results,” said one erstwhile client in referring us. “But you have to understand that they make you do most of it yourself!”

For two decades after leaving the consulting business I ran and taught a three-day planning event called “Future Search.” Indeed, Sandra Janoff and I showed more than 4000 people around the world how to do it for themselves. I liked that work because it required all the key players in the same room. Whatever did or did not happen was up to them. I saw people who had never worked together do things that none believed they could. We documented positive results from these conferences all over the world (Weisbord & Janoff, 2010). These data will convince no one, except perhaps you.

### **The Meetings Waste Time Myth**

The first thing I learned when I started consulting was the endemic cynicism people heap on meetings. My projects, I soon came to appreciate, proceeded only via the reviled, maligned, and unavoidable meetings that everyone loved to hate. Meetings were the best shot we had at making organizations better. Meetings of the right kind, that is. I became a fan of purposeful meetings, interactive meetings, meetings that matter, meetings where people solve problems and influence decisions, meetings that included the right people because any other meetings were a waste of time (Weisbord & Janoff, 2007).

My last bit of advice is that you disabuse yourself and those you work with of the meeting myth. Time is a non-renewable resource. Make every encounter worth the time you put in.

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## **Part 3**

### **The Future Never Comes, It’s Already Here**

**“Can’t help but wonder where I’m bound.” —Tom Paxton, folk singer, 1963.**

I will close this essay by iterating a theme I added into the 2012 (25<sup>th</sup> anniversary) edition of *Productive Workplaces*. I concluded after 30 years of Future Searches that the best way to manage the future is to understand it as happening now. To “predict and prepare,” to quote Russell Ackoff (1974), was futile. You can only act today.

We humans are notably bad at prognosticating. Among my treasured books is *The Experts Speak* (Cerf and Navasky, 1984). It is a compendium of hundreds of predictions by respected people in their fields. Their future visions ranged from wrong-headed to laughable.

Wilbur Wright in 1901 wrote his brother Orville that “man will not fly for fifty years” (McFarland, 1953). Two years later they did it. In 1913, an editor of *Scientific American* prophesied that airplanes were unlikely to ever carry more than seven people. Lord Kelvin, famous British physicist, called X-rays a hoax in 1907. Thomas Watson, IBM’s founder, predicted the world market for computers would be five. Darryl F. Zanuck, head of 20th Century Fox Studios, declared in the 1940s that “video will not be able to hold onto any market it captures after the first six months.” The British Astronomer Royal called space

travel “utter bilge” in 1956, and Henry Ford II in 1957 assured his dealers that “the Edsel is here to stay.”

Experts, of all people, should know better. In the first *Productive Workplaces* (1987) I quoted Shell Oil’s futurist Peter Schwartz who foresaw a long period of stability after the turbulent 1970s. The turbulence never abated. In the United States, technology companies collapsed after the turn of the Century, just as people were conjuring an endless economic boom. We saw earthshaking corporate bankruptcies, driven by deceit, fraud, and mismanagement (e.g. Enron and WorldCom).

The world entered a long recession in 2008 after a housing mortgage scandal and rampant shady banking. Indeed, nobody controlled mega-corporations. Insatiable for quarterly dividends, some substituted dubious accounting for accountability. Global terrorism affected the security and economy of every nation. Millions of people lost their homes and migrated, often meeting hostility. The struggle for mutual acceptance among races, genders, ethnicities, and religions grew more frantic, while the gap between rich and poor widened. Political parties polarized beyond redemption.

We had cornucopia of new technologies, in the arts, biotechnology, communications, education, entertainment, genetics, health care, media, recreation, and warfare. Devices intended to explain, ease, and simplify life, made it more complex. Corporations decided that green was good business. Many changed their stories more than their habits. Floods and earthquakes accelerated worldwide. Politicians were paralyzed by public debt. Such observations made up the “present” situation in the world circa 2016. All of these events and trends once lay in the future. Now all are past.

I challenge you to predict the future of OD. Would you rather be wrongheaded or laughable? What I believe after half a century of seeking is that both past and future exist only in the present. Everything we think or do happens now. Today is the future we imagined yesterday. It’s dissolving into the past by the second. Knowing that is the best asset a consultant can acquire.

Improving companies and communities can be satisfying work if you avoid the megalomania of believing you build organizations to last. You can only do OD today in whatever meeting you have. You can only do OD with the people in the room. You can only capitalize on the expertise, experience, hopes, fears, and dreams of those who do the work. Figure how to get everybody improving whole systems. If you put energy into doing that you can make a difference, not some day, but every day. If you tell me that that is pie-in-the-sky, I reply that so was flying until 1903.

### **Working on Yourself**

If you want to land an airplane, you do it over and over again until you get it right. If you want to help others do they what they never did before, start with yourself. You cannot acquire too much self-knowledge. There is a lifetime of personal work for each of us in exploring our “shadow” sides, integrating the voices that tug us away from humane impulses. We’re never finished, and the right time to do it is every day. Indeed there is no other time.

As my erstwhile workshop partner John Weir used to say, if you’re having a fantasy, go first class. When you walk into that meeting, imagine the best. Fantasies come free. Be prepared to deal with people the way you find them. Realize that you can’t change them. You can give them opportunities they never

had. You have the capability to do things you never did before. So does everyone else. You learn to fly only by flying.

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