

Robert E. Quinn

— — — — — **Building the Bridge
As You Walk On It**

A Guide for Leading Change



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Praise for *Building the Bridge As You Walk On It*

“Prepare yourself for a journey into intellectual, emotional, and spiritual integrity—a journey that will span the remaining course of one’s life.”

—Allen C. Bluedorn, author, *The Human Organization of Time*

“Bob Quinn makes exquisite use of real-life experiences in such a way that his book is engaging as well as profound. It speaks to me directly.”

—Ricardo B. Levy, founder and chairman of the board, Catalytica Energy Systems, Inc.

“This book is not about superheroes, but about how each one of us has the power to create positive change—if only we are willing to see and step into our own capabilities.”

—Sim B. Sitkin, director, Fuqua-Coach K Center on Leadership and Ethics, Duke University

“For someone who has struggled for twenty-five years with change, personally and professionally—as an internal change agent, external consultant, and academic—*Building the Bridge As You Walk On It* provides a profound integration of the self/other/organizational contexts and a timely reminder that all change is self-change.”

—Mike McGrath, vice president of consulting services,
Executive Development Associates

“I picked up *Building the Bridge* on a gray, rainy California morning thinking I would peruse a few pages before a nap. I laid the manuscript down only when the last page had been turned many hours later. No nap! Instead a bright awakening to insight and wisdom regarding leadership that Robert Quinn lucidly structures through stories carefully paired with precise conceptualization.”

—André L. Delbecq, Thomas J. and Kathleen L. McCarthy
University Professor, Leavey School of Business, Santa Clara
University

“Quinn details the practices to follow in the journey towards the fundamental state of leadership. Leaders of corporations, governments, nonprofits, community action, families, academic departments—all find resonance with this book!”

—Laurie N. DiPadova-Stocks, founding director, Scripps
Howard Center for Civic Engagement, Northern Kentucky
University

“This book provides a guide for change that leaders at all levels of the organization can understand and use. More important, it will help them become people who really like themselves. Because they live and act from principle, they will not have to worry about the craziness of organizations and life.”

—Lloyd Baird, director, the Leadership Institute, Boston
University

“With more and more people reading this book, the notion of resistance to change may gradually fade. Quinn’s attractive concept of positive deviancy is not only an antidote to resistance but a way of thinking and acting that embraces change.”

—W. Warner Burke, Edward Lee Thorndike Professor of Psychology and Education, Teachers College, Columbia University

“Effective leadership is crucial for successful organizational change, but the person as leader is often ignored in discussions of change. This wonderful book places the person of the leader front and center. It invites, encourages, and inspires its readers to find in themselves the leadership of which they are capable.”

—Jean M. Bartunek, professor of organization studies, Boston College

“This book highlighted for me that leadership is an endogenous development, not an exogenous event. The most effective leaders are those who remain coachable themselves, and focus on developing themselves.”

—Bert Whitehead, author, *Facing Financial Dysfunction: Why Smart People Do Stupid Things With Money*

“If you or your family or your organization are in pain, and you want the pain to stop but it won’t, read this moving, action-oriented book.”

—Bill Torbert, author, *Action Inquiry: The Secret of Timely and Transforming Leadership*

“Robert Quinn’s book is fascinating, I wish its valuable insights had been available to me when I led a major bank. It is so easy to glide along in your comfort zone. I was particularly taken by the quote ‘real leadership is about moving forward in faith, and doing so requires both head and heart.’”

—Jack Hoag, director, First Hawaiian Bank and BancWest Corp.

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Preface

A book emerges as an author attempts to meet the challenges of life. This book takes root in many contextual patterns but two are of particular note. The first concerns my experiences at the University of Michigan.

During the past few years at the Michigan Business School, I have been involved in a movement. My colleagues Kim Cameron, Jane Dutton, and Gretchen Spreitzer and I have been facilitating the emergence of a new field that we call positive organizational scholarship. This field brings together scholars who focus their research on that which is unusually positive in organizational life. They seek to understand not ordinary patterns of organizing but patterns of positive deviance, that is, behavior at the far right of the normal curve. It is behavior of extraordinary positive impact.

The Positive Organizational Scholarship group meets regularly to discuss key questions, and we participate in research presentations and in larger conferences. Recently we finished the first book on the topic (Cameron, Dutton, and Quinn, 2003). We have also organized a research center. In all of this activity, we have been focused on the question, What gives rise to extraordinary patterns of positive organizing? The question consumes my interest.

During this time, another contextual pattern was also unfolding. For thirty years, I have maintained one foot in the world of research and one foot in the world of action. During this time, I have been trying to both study and create more positive patterns of organizing, and as I have done so, it has become clear that some notions are more important than others.

One key notion is the fact that entropy—the dissipation of energy, slow death—operates on both the human ego and the organizational culture. Individuals and organizations are continually pulled toward entropy. This happens while individuals and organizations deny that their decisions are taking them individually and collectively toward slow death. Denial takes place because people are terrified of remedy. The remedy is to make deep change. No one ever wants to make deep change because that means letting go of control. This book is about how real people find the courage to make deep change.

This book is the third in a trilogy on the process of helping individuals and organizations to make deep change. The first book was *Deep Change: Discovering the Leader Within* (1996). The second book was *Change the World: How Ordinary People Can Accomplish Extraordinary Results* (2000). When I published *Deep Change*, the book started slowly and then took off. It very gradually became one of the publisher's all-time best-sellers. This meant that *Deep Change* was a word-of-mouth book: people read it and then recommended it to others. Some of the readers wrote to me. They liked the book because it helped them in engaging in the very difficult process of making personal and organizational change. They told me how they used the concepts to navigate a personal crisis or to lead the transformation of their organization. These were usually potent episodes. The publication of *Change the World* in 2000 stimulated still more readers to share their reactions.

In 2002, the publisher asked me to update and revise *Deep Change*. I agreed and began the revision project. Then a surprise occurred: the revision became an entirely new book. The new book emerged because I ended up listening to some very special people. I contacted the people who had written me those original letters, and I asked them to write a full account of what happened when they used *Deep*

Change to make deep change. They shared cases ranging from very personal transformations to the transformation of major organizations. Every case was intimate, candid, rich, inspiring, and instructive.

Each person spoke of significant outcomes. One example comes from a man you will meet later. For four years, he worked at the head of his organization and thought of himself as a leader. Then he experienced a crisis that led him to make a deep personal change. Afterward he wrote of the impact on his organization: "I have a critical mass of individuals from both the staff and board who are willing to look at our challenges in a new way and work on solutions together. At our meetings, new energy is present. What previously seemed unimaginable now seems to happen with ease. I sometimes wonder why it seems so easy, why we now have such a positive culture."

He wonders why his organization that was once quite ordinary is now extraordinary. Then he goes on to answer his own question. The answer defies what is written in almost all textbooks on management and leadership. It defies common understanding and practice. It is a promising answer in that it suggests that every one of us has the capacity to transform our organizations into more positive, productive communities like his. Yet it is a painful answer that almost no one wants to hear. That is why it is not in the books on management and leadership. Painful answers have no market. The man states: "I know it all happened because I confronted my own insecurity, selfishness, and lack of courage."

In that seemingly illogical and impossible sentence is the essence of this book. From the many people who read and applied *Deep Change*, we learned many lessons, but this one is most central. We can transform our organizations by transforming ourselves. This is one of the central answers to

the question asked among my colleagues: What gives rise to patterns of positive organizing?

A NEW APPROACH TO LEADERSHIP

This book provides an approach to leadership that is derived from the reports of people like the man I referred to. The central argument is that most of us, no matter how high or low our position, spend most of our time in the normal life state. In this state, we tend to be comfort centered, externally driven, self-focused, and internally closed. Yet it is possible for anyone, no matter how high or low their position, to enter the extraordinary state which I call the fundamental state of leadership. In this state, we become results centered, internally directed, other-focused, and externally open.

When we enter the fundamental state of leadership, we become a distortion to the social system in which we reside. We are a new signal to which others must respond. In this sense, we become creators of a new order. We become a stimulant of positive organizing or the emergence of a more productive community. The man who thought he was a leader captures the phenomenon. He entered the fundamental state of leadership, and his organization changed. It was at that point that he became a leader indeed.

His personal transformation gave rise to positive organizing, to a more productive community. He suddenly had a critical mass of people who saw things in a new way. They were more willing to join together and produce innovative initiatives. They were more energized. Seemingly impossible accomplishments began to happen in an effortless way. Leading suddenly became easy. That effortless accomplishment was born of agonizing change. In

this book, you will learn how to enter the fundamental state of leadership.

ABOUT THIS BOOK

This book presents a radical, inductive, and applied theory of leadership. *Radical* means returning to the root or foundations of a thing. The foundation of leadership is not thinking, behavior, competencies, techniques, or position. The foundation of leadership is who we are—our identity or foundational state. When people alter their interior world, they also alter their exterior world. As we come to understand this fundamental framework, our understanding of leadership is radically altered.

Inductive means we build the theory not from abstract numbers but from the actual observation of people who are transforming. These are not normal people living in the middle of the normal curve. These are people who are temporarily at the far right end of the curve. These are positive deviants. A theory derived from such observation will not be a normal theory of leadership but a unique theory that does not derive from the identification of normal patterns.

Applied means we are focusing on the how. We are providing an approach that tells people what they can do if they want to radically alter and improve the groups within which they reside.

The book is divided into three parts. Part One introduces the stories of some of the people who read *Deep Change* and then made deep change themselves. The stories are intimate, compelling, and transformational. To read them is to be inspired. Across the stories, we see important patterns. The stories help us to come to an alternative view of leadership. I thank these incredible people for their marvelous contributions.

In Part Two, we journey even further from the realm of normal leadership thinking and move to a more dynamic and complex view of leadership. In doing so, we explore eight unusual concepts that are presented as practices that can help us enter the fundamental state of leadership. To illustrate the eight disciplines, I have drawn cases from *Change the World: How Ordinary People Can Achieve Extraordinary Results* and *Letters to Garrett: Stories of Change Power and Possibility*. In this sense, this book contains the best of three books.

In Part Three, we turn from the emphasis on changing ourselves to how we can best learn to help others change. We approach the question from the point of view of helping others that we associate with entering the fundamental state of leadership. We then approach the question from the point of view of education and training. How do we teach people in a classroom to enter the fundamental state of leadership?

At the end of each chapter are a variety of tools, including sets of questions that can be used for reflection or discussion, designed to help readers make progress. It is my hope that they will help readers to construct a radically more positive world.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Many people have helped along the way with this book. John Bergez has been extraordinary as a developmental editor, and Kathe Sweeney has been a most supportive editor. Pauline Farmer has worked tirelessly on the manuscript. Many colleagues, students, and family members have contributed opinions. Horst Abraham, Susan Ashford, Kim Cameron, Jeff DeGraff, Jane Dutton, Bill Leigh, Ryan Quinn, Shauri Quinn, Shawn Quinn, Gretchen Spreitzer, Anjan

Thakor, Karl Weick, and many others have made contributions that have shaped my thinking. I am particularly grateful to those wonderful people who have made deep change and then had the courage to share their own stories. Those stories are gifts to help each of us more frequently enter the fundamental state of leadership.

Ann Arbor, Michigan

February 2004

Robert E. Quinn

*Dedicated to Kim Cameron, Jane Dutton, and
Gretchen Spreitzer. Thank you for spending so
much time in the fundamental state of leadership.
You have thus made it possible for me to live in
the flourishing of a productive community.*

PART ONE

An Invitation to the Fundamental State of Leadership

"What lies behind us and what lies before us are tiny matters compared to what lies within us."

—RALPH WALDO EMERSON

In 1996, I published a book entitled *Deep Change: Discovering the Leader Within*. The premise of the book was that anyone can be a leader of change, but to do so requires the transformation of self. Some readers shared their reactions and described how the book helped them in their own journeys into deep change. They usually also described the profound impact those journeys had on their own lives, the lives of the people around them, and the systems and organizations of which they were a part.

In reading their stories, I began to notice some shared characteristics. Analyzing these characteristics led me to develop new model of leadership. I began to think of leadership not as behaviors and techniques but as a state of being. Leadership is first about what we are. I call the new model the fundamental state of leadership.

Seeing leadership in this new fashion also helped me to conceptualize practices that can help people more frequently enter the fundamental state of leadership. These practices, in turn, led to radically new proposals for how we can develop leadership in ourselves and others. These three notions—what the fundamental state of leadership is, the practices that can help us enter that state, and the

implications for leadership development—are, respectively, the subjects of the three parts of this book.

As the book unfolds, the fundamental state of leadership will take on increasingly precise meaning. We begin, however, where my own journey began—with the stories of people who have had the courage to embrace deep change. Each of these stories illustrates a facet of the fundamental state of leadership and its impact. Read these stories attentively and receptively. Each of them is about someone who has entered the creative state. Each is a story that illustrates the truth of Emerson's statement: "What lies behind us and what lies before us are tiny matters compared to what lies within us."

CHAPTER ONE

Building the Bridge As You Walk On It

"I decided to acknowledge my fears and close off my exits. Suddenly, my workplace became a place filled with people doing their best to either avoid deeper dilemmas or face them and grow. The previous importance of titles and roles began to melt away before my eyes.... My own change of perspective led me to see a new organization without having changed anyone but myself."

—JEREMY FISH

How do we create extraordinarily positive organizations? This is the central question that integrates the research of my colleagues at the Center for Positive Organizational Scholarship.

The organizations we study tend to excel in two areas. They do very well at accomplishing their central, instrumental task, like making quality products, educating people, or providing health care. And they also excel in a second domain. The people who work in them tend to flourish. They are deeply connected to the objective, and they are deeply committed to one another. As a result, the

organization can do things that other organizations cannot do.

I usually refer to such organizations as *productive communities*. They are not only highly productive but highly nurturing places. They are places where people live by the highest of human values, extending themselves for the instrumental purpose and for one another.

Recently my colleagues and I visited such an organization. We went with the director of nursing at a large hospital to visit one of her outstanding units. As always happens when we visit these kinds of settings, we were inspired by deeply committed human beings performing well beyond normal expectations.

We asked some questions about their culture of success, and they spent a half-hour describing the innovative practices that had developed in the units. These practices were unique and very impressive. It would have been tempting to believe that they were the explanation. Eventually the director of nursing shook her head. She said, "Don't be fooled by these practices. They are important, but they are a consequence, not the cause."

The other people in the room nodded. They all knew what she was talking about. One of them began to speak of the woman who had run this wonderful unit for over a decade. They spoke of her in reverent tones. We posed probing questions, asking them to describe specific incidents. Some of the respondents spoke in tears as they shared the ways this woman had changed their organization and their lives.

Afterward the director told us that of her sixty managers, she has five or six like the woman we just heard about. No matter where she assigns them, they build units that achieve extraordinary performance.

One of my colleagues asked, “What do they do?” There was a long silence. Finally the director said, “That is the wrong question. It is not what they do, because each one of them is unique in how they pull it off. It is not about what they do; it is about who they are.”

“It is not what they do, because each one of them is unique in how they pull it off. It is not about what they do; it is about who they are.”

In that last sentence is a key to positive organizing and productive community. Management and leadership books are naturally preoccupied with the search for behaviors, tools, techniques, and practices that can be exported and imitated elsewhere. It may be that they are telling us about the wrong thing. Organizational excellence tends not to be a function of imitation. It tends to be a function of origination. It begins with one person—the one in ten who has the capacity to create productive community. In this hospital, five or six out of sixty supervisors fit this category. If we examine one hundred plant managers or one thousand CEOs, we tend to find the same pattern. The majority are normal. And a few are extraordinary in that they know how to enter a creative personal state that gives rise to a creative collective state. I call that personal state the *fundamental state of leadership*. The collective state is productive community, which emerges as someone in the fundamental state of leadership attracts others into the process I refer to as “building the bridge as you walk on it.”

THE ORIGINS OF THIS BOOK

As I noted in the introduction to Part One, this book originated in the messages I received from readers of my book *Deep Change*. The people who wrote to me usually told me how they had used the book's concepts to navigate a personal crisis or lead the transformation of their organization. Later, I contacted them and asked them to write a full account of what had happened. They shared cases ranging from very personal transformations to the transformation of major organizations. As I read those cases, I began to have new insights about the process of deep change. Eventually I began to formulate a new concept: the fundamental state of leadership.

In this book, you will meet some of these people. You will discover what the fundamental state of leadership is and what practices are likely to help you enter it. As preparation and background, let's do a quick review of the notion of deep change.

THE BACKGROUND

An anchor on a ship is a device attached by a rope or cable that is cast overboard. The anchor digs into the bottom and holds the ship in place. The anchor is thus a useful tool that keeps the ship from aimless drifting.

In a dynamic world, the tools that we usually see as assets can turn into liabilities. I remember, for example, watching a movie about a ship caught in a sudden storm. As the storm grew in ferocity, the sailors realized that they had to cut away the anchor. They chopped madly at the rope so they

could avoid being swamped. Their only hope was to ride out the storm on the tumultuous sea. They needed to be free from what was normally a useful source of stability. Their lives depended on it.

Over time, it is natural for both individuals and for organizations to develop anchors. Individuals, for example, develop a system of beliefs about how they can best cope in a world of scarce resources. This system becomes a personal identity. We sometimes refer to this anchor as an ego. Organizations also develop systems of belief about identity and coping. We refer to this anchor as the organizational culture. The individual ego and the organizational culture are normally valuable sources of stability.

Yet like ships, individuals and organizations are often confronted by storms. As individuals, we may need to cope with physical illness, the death of a loved one, divorce, abusive treatment, burnout, job loss, or other life demands. In organizations, we may need to cope with recession, new competitors, regulatory changes, evolving customer preferences, and many other such challenges.

These storms are usually preceded by dark clouds and other signals of danger. While the signals often call for a transformation, or what I call deep change, we tend to resist. When our old habits of thought and action seem to be ever less effective in the face of the change, we are slow to abandon them in favor of learning our way into a transformed state. To cut away our anchors and move forward into the storm of real-time learning is no easy decision.

In fact, rather than accepting the need for deep change, most of us practice denial. We rationalize away the signals that call us to courage and growth. We work very hard to preserve our current ego or culture. To give them up is to

give up control. Normally we work hard to avoid the surrender of control. Instead, we strive to stay in our zone of comfort and control. Given the choice between deep change or slow death, we tend to choose slow death.

Yet nature tends to have its way with us. The path to slow death still ends at death. For individuals, it can be the death of the ego or the body. For corporations, it can be the death of a particular set of assets or the overall enterprise. As we progress down the path of denial, our agony grows. The growing pain tends to force us to do what we do not want to do. We make deep change.

When we make deep change, we enter the fundamental state of leadership. This central concept will be developed and defined over the next several chapters. Here we meet some people who have learned to make deep change. Their stories provide a first look at what it means to enter the fundamental state of leadership. From these stories, we can also specify the objectives of this book.

OBJECTIVE ONE: HELPING PEOPLE WHO ARE ASSIGNED TO LEAD CHANGE

Jeremy Fish is a physician and an executive who was in charge of a transformation at a regional medical center in California. He found this task most challenging. In fact, he describes his feelings as the “emotions of a patient facing cancer.” As he moved forward in the transformational process, he felt a combination of fear, hope, and dread.

Most managers charged with leading a transformation have such feelings. As they move forward, they become increasingly aware of the political dangers. They begin to feel more and more insecure. While trying to convey confidence, they find themselves contemplating escape