

“A timely and inspiring contribution.

Highly recommended.”

Otto Scharmer



Worthy of Commitment

Philosophy, Principles and
Practices for Human
Systems Flourishing

Jacqueline Wong | Tan Shang How | Regina Vanda

“The purpose of this book is clear and compelling: to help us create organizations that are truly worthy of people’s commitment—and to be, for the field and the world, a beacon of Living Organization Development, whose superordinate ideal is a world of full-spectrum flourishing.”

David Cooperrider

*University Distinguished Professor, Case Western Reserve University;
Faculty Founder, Center for Business as an Agent of World Benefit*

“This book is not merely a repository of knowledge; it is a testament to the transformative journey of Sequoia Group... I admire and commend their dedication in creating systems that are not only effective but also deeply human—life-giving systems that inspire commitment and foster flourishing.”

Lim Siong Guan

*Founder & Advisor, Honour Singapore; award-winning author of
The Leader, The Teacher & You*

Worthy of Commitment introduces the concept of Living Organisation Development as a practical pathway for creating workplaces grounded in the wisdom of living systems found in nature—places that are productive and also deeply human and regenerative. Drawing upon the authors’ extensive experience as Leadership and Organisation Development (L&OD) practitioners across the people, public, and private sectors, this book illuminates the principles of Living OD in action to unlock flourishing organisations. It seeks to answer a fundamental question: *What does an organisation truly worthy of people’s commitment look like, and how can we create one?*

By nurturing higher levels of Awareness, Aspiration, Alignment, Accountability, and Authenticity in leaders and across organisations, *Worthy of Commitment* serves as your invitation to become an active agent in creating flourishing organisations, nations, and communities. Within these pages, you will discover inspiring ideas and actionable insights on how to apply these principles to enable positive change at any scale.

Worthy of Commitment

**Philosophy, Principles and Practices
for Human Systems Flourishing**

‘As the pace of change and level of turbulence has continued to accelerate, we have been in need of a new kind of OD for some time now. With their powerful reframing of Living OD, this book presents us with a coherent, comprehensive and inspiring approach to organization development that is itself worthy of commitment. This book is a must read for every leader, consultant, and facilitator who aspires to create organizations that can truly flourish’.

— Daniel H. Kim, PhD, Founding Trustee of the Society
of Organizational Learning, North America

‘In my work across the globe, I’ve seen the yearning for workplaces that cultivate flourishing rather than depletion. *Worthy of Commitment* meets that need with wisdom and practicality, offering frameworks that spark imagination while grounding action. A vital read for leaders ready to build organizations worthy of the people within them’.

— Lindsey Godwin, PhD, Robert P. Stiller Endowed
Chair of Management & Academic Director, Cooperrider
Center for Appreciative Inquiry, Champlain College

‘In a time of accelerating environmental and social collapse, the capacity to regenerate and breathe new life into our societal systems has become the most essential leadership capability of our age. This book outlines the principles and practices for transforming systems toward human and planetary flourishing. A timely and inspiring contribution. Highly recommended’.

— Otto Scharmer, PhD, Senior Lecturer, MIT Sloan
School of Management; Chair, Presencing Institute

‘This book is so timely for organisations facing possibly their greatest challenges. The ideas and practical suggestions it offers are inspiring, innovative, and exactly what is needed in such a disruptive world. The strength and value of its content come from the wisdom and experience, combined with the relentless optimism and deep authenticity of its authors. It deserves to become a classic, and maybe it will’.

— **Professor Beverly Alimo-Metcalf**, Emeritus Professor of Leadership Studies, Founding Director, Real World Group

‘I am so pleased that Jacqueline and Shang have finally written a book to enable the rest of us to learn from the unique Sequoia Group way of helping organisations transform! I have always admired the way that they not only apply the latest research and thinking in leadership and OD but they also have a gift of naturally crafting and deepening best practices to be even more meaningful and inspiring to the people they work with. Thanks to this thoughtful and practical book, leaders, aspiring leaders and OD professionals can now learn how to apply some of that Sequoia Group magic too’.

— **Juliette Alban-Metcalf**, Chief Executive Officer, Real World Group; Chartered Occupational Psychologist

‘This book reflects the authors’ deep expertise in organisational development and ability to translate complex ideas into practical impact. It distils over two and a half decades of wisdom and practice into an accessible guide for leaders and OD practitioners committed to building organisations that are truly human, sustainable, and effective’.

— **Ling Yui Fong**, Founder, Open Dimensions, Co-creator of *The Change Activist Framework*

‘Congrats Sequoia on your 25th Anniversary, and on all the impact you have had over the years. I have always admired your commitment to support organisations and communities worthy of people’s commitment, rather than the often asked, “how do we get people to be committed?”. This book is certainly worthy of commitment for anyone who wants to make their organisation or community even healthier, as it is filled with models that help us more clearly see systems and with practical tips on what to do’.

— **Douglas O'Loughlin, PhD, Principal of the Dao of Thriving and Associate Consultant with Civil Service College**

‘This book helps to illuminate what makes organisations – i.e., complex systems comprising systems and humans – click, and what does not. We are honoured to be featured, and grateful for this front-row seat to study how other organisations have successfully learnt, developed, and flourished when we invest in one another’.

— **Alan Goh, Chief Executive Officer, Sport Singapore**

‘The “Living Organisation Development” approach resonates deeply with our commitment at the board to cultivating a workplace where individuals and teams can do their life’s best work. Drawing from Sequoia’s extensive experience in partnering organisations, this book reveals how leaders can view organisations as living systems that integrate excellence, learning, and health – enabling transformative change that creates lasting impact across all levels of the organisation’.

— **Melissa Khoo, Chief Executive Officer, Central Provident Fund Board**

‘I had the distinct privilege of working with Jacqueline and her team to help companies become more purpose-driven and a force for good in society. *Worthy of Commitment* distils the essence of Sequoia Group’s transformative work in building purpose-driven and impactful organisations. I commend this book to leaders and changemakers who seek to transform their organisations to be flourishing and life-giving communities that contribute to building a better world’.

— **Tony Soh, Chief Executive Officer, National Volunteer and Philanthropy Centre, Singapore**

‘Growing its people and enriching the legacies of their contributions is the most important investment for any organisation in fulfilling its mission and achieving success. Being a Living and Learning organisation sets the foundation for this. *Worthy of Commitment* will be an asset and guide in the journey’.

— **Professor Philip Choo, Senior Advisor, National Health Care Group**

‘An organisation that inspires with its vision, energises with its core values, moves purposefully with its strategies, and delivers results consistently, is a blessing for those who have experienced it. This book, with its wealth of insights and examples, shows the path for building such organisations’.

— **Teo Eng Cheong, CEO, Sino-Singapore Tianjin Eco-City Investment and Development Co Ltd**

‘Sequoia’s frameworks and human-centric approach resonated across age, experience, and organisations – equally effective with battle-hardened union leaders and young executives. Jacqueline and her team’s engagement style helped both groups connect with their true purpose and unleashed new energy and commitment to co-create their future. I encourage any CEO who is keen to build purposeful, humanistic and sustainable organisations to read it’.

— **Tan Choon Shian, Former Deputy Managing Director,
Economic Development Board & Former Corporate
Development Director, National Trades Union Congress**

‘This book is a powerful testament to the art of unlocking human potential through purposeful Organisational Development. It captures the human heartbeat of OD, inspiring ways of working that enable individuals and teams to thrive. Congratulations to the Sequoia Group for this masterful distillation of your mission and transformative work in Living OD, which I have been privileged to experience first-hand’.

— **Lim Teck Yin, Expert Partner, CAA Portas & Chief
Executive Officer, Sport Singapore (2011–2023)**

‘Jacq, Shang and Sequoia have been instrumental in shaping the lives of many leaders, managers, and officers; not just in role-modelling what it means to be committed to learning (as individuals and organisations), but also in helping us see beyond the immediate horizons of daily events, to bring our teams forward towards visions of a better future’.

— **Terence Chia, Former Dean, IMDA Academy**

Worthy of Commitment

**Philosophy, Principles and Practices
for Human Systems Flourishing**

Jacqueline Wong, Tan Shang How
and Regina Vanda

Sequoia Group, Singapore



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About Sequoia Group

Founded in 2001, Sequoia Group is a management consultancy providing solutions in Leadership and Organisation Development. At Sequoia, we believe that organisations are interconnected, living entities that have transformative and regenerative potential. With this belief, we have supported over 200 organisations and communities in their leadership development and transformation efforts over the past two decades, guided by a singular purpose: ‘to create organisations that are worthy of people’s commitment’.

世【Shi】 - *The World*

格【Ge】 - *Character*

雅【Ya】 - *Gracious, Elegant, Beautiful*

Sequoia’s Vision

Engaged Organisations, Flourishing Communities

Sequoia envisions a world where workplaces and communities are transformed into flourishing ecosystems that enable people to thrive and live fulfilling, meaningful lives.

Sequoia’s Core Values

Care, Choice, Commitment, Continuity & Community



SEQUOIA
GROUP

www.sequoia.com.sg



Acknowledgements by Jacqueline Wong

Ten days before writing this acknowledgement, my mother passed away peacefully. She taught me many things, but perhaps the most precious was her love for plants and animals. From a very young age, she gave me the gift and sensibility to nurture and care for all living things. She had definitively green fingers, able to rescue any plant languishing in my care and somehow nurse it back to health. Her plants always flowered and thrived. Perhaps my deep affiliation with trees and nature stems from the way I was raised.

I am deeply grateful to Mr Lim Siong Guan, who graciously wrote the foreword to this book. Mr Lim exemplified leadership as both a teacher and a true servant leader. Everyone blessed to work with him grew as individuals. In Robert K. Greenleaf's essay 'The Servant Leader', the litmus test of true servant leadership is whether people served by such a leader grow as persons – whether 'they become healthier, wiser, freer, more autonomous, and more likely to become servant leaders themselves'. Mr Lim passed this test with flying colours. His abiding concern for people ultimately led him to found Honour Singapore, ensuring that current and future generations of Singaporeans remember and embody the values that made us a nation.

I recalled a time when Mr Lim, working with the Committee of Permanent Secretaries, drafted a Civil Service Corporate

Statement describing the mandate and role civil servants must play in the service of a progressive Singapore. Most distinctly, I remember the line boldly italicised at the end: ‘To Build a World-Class Public Service, Worthy of Singapore’. When I left the service and founded Sequoia Group, it was no coincidence that Sequoia’s purpose statement became ‘To create organisations that are truly worthy of people’s commitment’ – this was the essence I wanted to carry forward through our work as leadership and organisation development practitioners. Therefore, I owe this book’s title to the inspiration I received from him as well.

I wish to also thank Professor David Cooperrider from the Weatherhead School of Management at Case Western Reserve University. My deepest gratitude centres on how he helped me understand that human systems are *heliotropic* – they grow towards what gives life, like plants towards sunlight. At our best, human systems teem with innovation and generativity, coming alive with our finest gifts, talents, and capacity. As OD consultants, we can approach our work not merely to fix ‘what’s wrong’, but by discovering and affirming ‘what’s strong’ – the elements that give life to our organisations, families, communities, and nations when they operate at their very best. This approach not only goes beyond solving problems but also deepens a system’s collective capacity to grow from what David calls the ‘infinite web of strengths’.

In an interview David conducted with Peter Drucker, he shared Drucker’s insight that ‘strengths don’t just perform, strengths transform’, and that leadership’s timeless task is to ‘forge an alignment of strengths so strong that it makes our systems’ weaknesses irrelevant’. Through his discovery, research, and

codification of Appreciative Inquiry, David and his colleagues – Ronald Fry, Diana Whitney, Lindsey Godwin, and many others in the appreciative inquiry community – pioneered an approach to theory-building and process consulting that begins with the assumption that every system we attempt to help already possesses inherent values and strengths. Through dialoguing and discovering these life-giving, life-affirming values and factors, people become reinvigorated, energised, and whole. From this place of inherent wholeness, change and transformation become possible.

David always reminded people at the end of his talks that ‘the appreciable world is so much larger than the one we know’. As scientists readily admit, what we know about the universe represents only the beginning of all that is knowable. Through him, I made a mid-course correction that fundamentally shifted my practice’s direction – what my colleagues and I now call Living OD at Sequoia Group. When you read the foreword he wrote, you’ll understand why so many philosophies and principles for our practice were inspired by the positive organisation development field that originated from the MPOD (Master of Science in Positive OD) programme he pioneered with faculty from the Weatherhead School of Management.

I am also forever indebted to the mentors, partners, and collaborators with whom I had the privilege of working closely and learning from. First on this list are Dr Daniel Kim, a giant in systems thinking and organisational learning, and Diane Cory, a coach and incredibly talented teacher, who taught me the art and science of deep facilitation and transformational change. Beyond the tools and frameworks they gifted to our field, their humanity and authenticity awakened so many of us to our true north and life purpose. Through their role modelling, Diane

and Daniel taught me that this capacity is inherent in all living systems – the leader’s job is to help access that deeper capacity and remove barriers that obstruct it. In the chapter Living OD for Organisational Learning, you’ll see several examples of tools and frameworks they generously made accessible, which we’ve adopted as part of the Living OD toolbox.

Regarding our leadership practice, we owe our deepest and most profound gratitude to Professor Beverly Alimo-Metcalfe, founding CEO of Real World Group, and Juliette Alban-Metcalfe, current CEO of Real World Group. Bev and Jules are trailblazers and pioneers in engaging transformational leadership. They decoded the black box that helped countless leaders access the key to their employees’ hearts – answering the crucial question: what does it take to create organisations that fuel high performance and sustain well-being in the most authentic and sustainable way? Their groundbreaking work through the TLQ™ (Transformational Leadership Questionnaire) model and the Real World Leader (RWL™) democratised leadership, making it possible for everyone to learn and become better leaders, not exclusive only for leaders at the top or in C-suites.

My final acknowledgements go to my colleagues and teammates at Sequoia Group, past and present. A special recognition goes to my current team: Regina Vanda, who patiently helped curate our insights and performed the painstaking work of gathering, weaving, and articulating the tacit thoughts from our experience base through research and publications. Regina is a co-author and a true pillar for Shang and me for this book project. My other Sequoia colleagues – Zafirah Mohamed, my thinking partner and creative muse whom we can always count on when entering uncharted waters; Druga Rajendran, a courageous practitioner

and faithful colleague who consistently steps up for the most complex projects and missions, including leading our overseas expansion; Angela Sujadi, executive coach and our chief branding and marketing officer, who writes LinkedIn posts because she's genuinely excited to share our work with the world and believes more people should know about Sequoia and the Sustainability Institute's mission; Shubaashini Vijayamohan, whose positivity, purposeful drive, and talent with groups lights up every room; Azam Sa'at, our champion for enterprise excellence and continuous improvement; and Tan Yih Chan, Sequoia's anchor and rock – we can do what we do because you take care of everything else.

Every one of you is family to Shang and me, connected by our common genealogy of purpose and passion for helping organisations thrive. We are honoured by your care, choice, and commitment. This book is also a tribute and testimony to your contribution to the field.

Finally, to my co-author and partner at Sequoia Group, Shang – this book exists because of your unwavering belief and persistent encouragement. Without your constant support and nudges, this book would have remained hidden in the recesses of our consulting archives. Your gift of seeing people's true potential has defined not only our partnership but also your approach to everyone you encounter. Thank you for your relentless commitment to helping people fulfil their highest potential. Your ability to believe in others and see the best in them has transformed countless lives. This book is a testament to the power of that belief.

Jacqueline Wong
Senior Partner and Founder,
Sequoia Group



Foreword by David L. Cooperrider

This is a very special book. Right at the outset, I want to share that this book is written with such grace and gentleness, and with such clarity and profound conviction, that I did not want to set it down. It's a book I'm now giving to all my graduate students in Organization Development and Change and every executive and manager in every organization I work with. *Worthy of Commitment: Philosophy, Principles and Practices for Human Systems Flourishing* is a timely and courageous contribution – perhaps even a field-defining one. It invites us into a transformative new story about organizations, leadership, change, and life itself.

At the root of nearly every major challenge we face today – whether personal, organizational, or planetary – is a call for a new way of understanding ourselves, our work, and the very purpose and patterns of our lives. The old industrial-age paradigm – built on top-down control, linear logic, reductionism, separation, and the organization-as-machine metaphor – is breaking down. In contrast to the still-dominant mechanistic worldview of the Industrial Era, *Worthy of Commitment* guides us into an expanded paradigm – one in which our organizations and communities are seen not as engineered machines, but as living, dynamic, self-organizing systems. Indeed, a new story is emerging. And in its place, something vibrant and necessary is breaking through. This time, *life* is solidly at the centre of its plot.

The authors – Jacqueline Wong, Tan Shang How, and Regina Vanda – are no-nonsense visionaries.¹ With decades of experience across more than 200 organizations and with over 30,000 leaders, they’ve catalyzed profound change for people, teams, organizations, economies, and ecosystems. Now, in this remarkable book, they distill that experience into a robust and coherent framework they call ‘Living OD’.

Living OD is a shift from simply a human-centered approach to change to a *life-centric* organization development. I believe that this volume reflects the future OD that wants to be born, and it involves embracing the full spectrum of life’s systems – including Nature, People, and Planet. It’s a call to see ‘life’ and ‘aliveness’ not as abstract metaphors, but as the generative ground of all flourishing. Drawing from nature’s wisdom and blending pioneering methods such as Appreciative Inquiry, Dialogic OD, and life-centric Design Thinking, the authors show us how to lead in ways that are more whole and more elevating, than the broken-down machine models of ‘fixing’ and ‘problematizing’, ‘gap analyzing’, and ‘deficit-based’ theories of change *management*.

The purpose of this book is clear and compelling: to help us create organizations that are truly worthy of people’s commitment – and to be, for the field and the world, a beacon of Living OD, whose superordinate ideal is a world of full-spectrum flourishing: that is, *a world where all economies and organizations can excel*,

1. I want to, in all transparency, give a shout-out to Jacqueline Wong, one of my greatest graduate students, excelling in the Master of Science in Positive Organization Development at Case Western Reserve University. Graduating in 2009, I could sense and see vast potentials in her – potentials for pioneering thought leadership and potentials for leading our field and building better organizations, communities, and societies – for which I am forever filled with gratitude and respect.

*where all people can thrive, and nature can flourish, not just now but also across the generations.*²

For organizations, what does such a flourishing organization look like? The authors' original research and growing practice suggest that visions of a flourishing organization integrate three essential aspects: organizational excellence, organizational learning, and organizational health. These are not separate pursuits but interwoven expressions of systems that come alive, are productive, and are generative forces, designed to create mutual value and open vast vistas for people and the planet to thrive.

To be sure, this book is both a visionary guide *and* a practical toolkit. It helps readers approach the crucial work of leading change in any organization by showing how to focus the co-creation of the future based on transdisciplinary insights drawn from the wisdom of living systems. Moreover, readers will learn how to build safe containers for open, honest, and generative conversations that lead to shared commitment and breakthrough innovation *for flourishing*.

One of the book's most important contributions is its introduction of the five 'Living OD' areas for activating discovery and genuinely collaborative design. These '5-A pathways' are nourishing nutrients for change, capable of being more than the sum of the parts, mirroring and multiplying across the '5-A's':

- Awareness – Insight into the organization's internal dynamics and external ecosystem
- Aspiration – The level of shared vision jointly held with stakeholders

2. Cooperrider, D. L., and L. Godwin. (2022). Our Earthshot Moment: Net Positive OD for the Creation of a World of Full Spectrum Flourishing. *The Organization Development Review*. 54 (1), 29–43.

Worthy of Commitment

- Alignment – Coherence across systems, structures, capabilities, culture, and practices
- Accountability – A deep sense of co-ownership for results
- Authenticity – Clarity and commitment to the organization’s purpose and values

With powerful stories from the field, including actionable how-tos and a clear systems view, the authors help you see how to activate the ‘better and better’ dynamics that define healthy, life-centric organizations – the result: a fertile framework for flourishing.

This compelling book will inspire change-makers, OD and HR teams, and leaders in every domain of management, enabling people to see change-making not with fear, but with fresh anticipation – anticipation of the inspiration, hope, and joy that emerge when authentic co-creation takes root. As organizations commit to the principles of Living OD, they will find that enduring cycles of generative change can grow into something akin to a redwood forest, with deeply woven roots that support them in towering together. It is an invitation for us all to become stewards of aliveness and champions of life-centered value creation.

So, if you’re ready to move beyond yesterday’s paradigms with something that equips and empowers everyone in your organization to become **co-creators of flourishing systems**, and...

If you’re ready to embrace Living OD and build an organization truly **worthy of everyone’s commitment**...

If you're ready to help usher in a future where **flourishing becomes the standard** and not the exception... then you are in precisely the right place.

Start here. Start now. This book may **change the way you lead** – and live – forever.

David L. Cooperrider

University Distinguished Professor, Case Western Reserve University

Faculty Founder of the Center for Business as an Agent of World Benefit & Honorary Chair of the Cooperrider Center for Appreciative Inquiry at Champlain College

Author of *The Business of Building a Better World: The Leadership Revolution That is Changing Everything* (with Audrey Selian) and the five-volume series of *Advances in Appreciative Inquiry* (with Michel Avital)



Foreword by Lim Siong Guan

Organisations are the place where human potential is discovered, nurtured, and fulfilled. To seek out human potential is to be smart. To leave out human potential is to waste opportunity.

As Singapore celebrated 60 years of independence recently in 2025, we are reminded of the culture of honour that has been central to its success. Like the nation, this book calls for organisational culture to be nurtured, which yields enduring success. Whether in nations or organisations, the principles outlined here resonate universally: when we honour human potential and foster environments of mutual respect and purpose, we create systems worthy of commitment.

When you act with honour, you will always strive to do the right thing. Organisations that are truly worthy of commitment care deeply about the well-being of employees, customers, suppliers, stakeholders, and the planet, because it is the right thing to do. They strive for what I would refer to as Total Sustainability – financial, societal, and ecological sustainability, doing what is right not just for the current generation but also to ensure that future generations also have an equal opportunity to prosper and flourish. As the authors explain in the book, research shows that when employers honour and show genuine concern for employees, their people are more motivated to go the extra

mile, putting in discretionary effort to do their best every day at work. They are simply more engaged. In turn, these organisations tend to attract and retain the best talent and outperform others in the same sector or industry.

But the commitment to live out the winning culture has to start from the top. Leadership is key in ensuring that the board and senior team are willing to do whatever is necessary to assure the long-term success of the organisation. Leaders have to articulate a clear and time-enduring purpose with the necessary core values and make them the fundamental building blocks of the organisation. This is easily said but not easily accomplished in an era of quick-fixes and short-term pressures. It will be a real test of your convictions, but the rewards are well worth your time and energy in creating a clear and enduring set of practices embedded into the life and culture of your organisation.

The authors have undertaken precisely such an endeavour to distil the core practices, which can help more organisations establish the right organisation development practices for long-term success and sustainability. This book is not merely a repository of knowledge; it is a testament to the transformative journey of Sequoia Group and its team over 25 years of working with more than 200 client organisations across the public, private, and people sectors. I admire and commend their dedication to creating systems that are not only effective but also deeply human – life-giving systems that inspire commitment and foster flourishing.

This work draws from Sequoia's Living OD framework, a philosophy that views organisations as living systems with infinite regenerative potential. It presents principles and

practical approaches for individuals to find their place within families, communities, organisations, and nations, contributing to collective flourishing. The authors have distilled decades of lived experience into actionable insights – insights that are both timeless and timely.

I wholeheartedly recommend this book to leaders, practitioners, and citizens who aspire to shape cultures that are resilient yet adaptable – cultures anchored in time-tested values while embracing the uncertainties of the future. It serves as both a guide and an invitation: to courageously build systems where people thrive and where collective well-being becomes the foundation for sustainable success.

To the authors, I extend my deepest congratulations. This book is not just a contribution to the field of Organisation Development; it is a gift to all who seek to make a meaningful difference in the world, to all who want to contribute what they can to make theirs a thriving world.

Lim Siong Guan

Founder & Advisor, Honour Singapore

Award Winning Author of *The Leader, The Teacher & You*



Introduction

This book is an inquiry into what it takes to create a world where organisations and the people in them flourish. We are systems living in systems. We live in families, workplace teams, communities, nations, and earth ecosystems. Organisations – or human and social systems at various scales – keep us alive. From our earliest days, we learn to commit to them and participate as members so we can survive and hopefully flourish. Yet, these systems are not always life-giving. People experience childhood trauma, family violence, burnout, a toxic work environment, discrimination in the community, and forced migration. Sometimes, it feels like the organisations and communities of which we are a part threaten our survival and diminish our chance at a flourishing life.

At its heart, the fundamental question we have to ask ourselves is, ‘Is this system truly worthy of my commitment? What is my role in making this a place that is worthy of others’ commitment?’ As Margaret Wheatley wrote in her book *Who Do We Choose to Be*,¹ ‘Are you willing to use whatever power and influence you have to create islands of sanity that evoke and rely on our best human qualities to create, produce, and persevere?’

1. Wheatley, M.J. *Who Do We Choose to Be?, Second Edition: Facing Reality, Claiming Leadership, Restoring Sanity*. Berrett-Koehler Publishers, 2023.

Over the past 25 years, Sequoia Group encountered this fundamental question again and again as we supported over 200 organisations and communities in their journey to become more effective, forward-looking, purposeful, healthy, and whole – in short, to flourish. Each unique client journey has informed our approach to organisation development (OD), one that is predicated on the principles of what it takes to thrive and flourish as a living system.

We are encouraged by the countless servant leaders we met along the way, people who are these very islands of sanity, from senior C-suite executives to the most junior levels, who led others through crises and somehow inspired others to transcend self-interests and act in service of something larger than themselves. It is their stories and examples that formed the inspiration behind this book. We learnt from working with thousands of leaders what it takes to shape a flourishing culture, host honest, open conversations about what matters most, and nurture the health and long-term well-being of people all the time without compromising the well-being of marginalised communities and Planet Earth. We also learnt that for this to be possible, the work must be genuinely lived from the inside out.

When the COVID-19 pandemic hit, non-essential developmental programmes and client engagement work came to an abrupt stop. Like many other professional service firms, Sequoia had to undergo an austerity drive to keep business afloat. The nationwide restriction to stay home for months on end took its toll, with no clear end in sight. We were faced with the possibility of having to close our doors after 20 years of operation. At the time, a client of Sequoia, a large national institute for adult learning, who had been keen to start an external OD consultancy service, heard about our situation and offered to hire our entire consulting team on a retainer

basis, with the agreement that they would become full-timers once the pandemic ended. This was clearly a safer option for many of our staff, as this meant job assurance and security.

We each had to ask ourselves, ‘Is Sequoia worthy of my commitment?’ Many of the consultants felt it was still a ‘yes’, and they were determined that Sequoia will not go down this way without a fight. The question became an invitation and motivation to sharpen the clarity and coherence of the organisation – why are we here, and what are we here to do? We redirected the unplanned excess of time and energy we had to reimagine possibilities for Sequoia amidst disruptive and rapidly changing contexts. Out of the crisis came a renewed focus on our aspiration to become a ‘beacon for Living OD’, by enabling more organisations to prioritise well-being in the long term. The idea for this book was also born so that more people may have access to the OD approach that Sequoia has used over the past two decades to help numerous organisations and communities to learn, transform and thrive. We also reflected on how we might deliver the same ‘high-touch’ in-person sessions and workshops in a ‘high-tech’ and engaging way, so that we can make use of the COVID-19 lock-down period to help organisations refocus their priorities on people and purpose and emerge stronger. As a case in point, not only did our firm survive, but we also remained financially solvent over the three years of the pandemic.

More importantly, the fundamental question of commitment led us to conclude that our work to develop flourishing organisations is more essential than ever. COVID-19 shored up the fragmentation inherent in our social, economic, and political systems. The way we worked and lived together was radically disrupted, and more rapid changes will continue to characterise

the road ahead. In this light, we returned with greater conviction to our purpose – to create organisations and communities worthy of commitment.

We write *Worthy of Commitment* to all who want to make organisations in all their forms and scales worthy of people's commitment. This is a collective enterprise – it must be done together. While we recognise how human systems can be unhealthy and even destructive, there is great hope and regenerative capacity when we collectively see that flourishing is possible. Having witnessed this healing and restorative process repeatedly in our OD practice, research, and lived experience, we write with the hope of inspiring and empowering you to contribute to the healing work of human systems and make flourishing organisations a reality in your unique context.

What does an organisation worthy of people's commitment look like? In Chapters 1 to 5, we look at the evolution of OD as a field over the past five decades and why there is a need for a contemplative shift in the way we approach our work – integrating the conventional diagnostic interventionist approach with a dialogic invitational approach. We introduce the philosophy and principles behind what we have come to call 'Living OD'. It is an approach to organisational development that sees organisations as living systems. Drawing from the wisdom of natural living systems, we distil principles that provide the foundational awareness and sensibilities required for effective OD practice in dynamic living systems. We then briefly articulate the leadership and organisational capacities that enable flourishing organisations.

The second part of this book – Chapters 6 to 9 – dives deeper into the core practices of Living OD. How do we co-create

organisations worthy of commitment? More than a collection of theories, methods, or tools to ‘do’ OD, the practices are interconnected capacities that coherently and holistically support OD practitioners to ‘be’ in service of a healthy living system. Through case studies of different organisations and communities, we illustrate how the capabilities are integrated and applied in practice, responding to emerging needs and guided by the principles in the first few chapters to help enliven these systems.

The final chapter reflects on the growing relevance of Living OD now and in the future. What is next for human system development? How can we help human systems to flourish? Living OD was a field born out of the understanding that organisations and communities consist of microcosms of the larger living system, each inherently creative and capable of adapting and evolving. We explore the implications of this on the role and focus of OD to enable human systems to flourish.

In calling this emerging practice ‘Living OD’, ‘living’ is both a verb – an embodiment of OD as a way of life – and a noun – to remind us that OD is an open body of scholarship, action research, and grounded practice. It is a field capable of adapting and evolving, just like the living systems it seeks to nurture, develop, and serve.

This is an open book, a living resource that will continue to evolve as we collectively learn about what it takes to nurture thriving organisations and ecosystems. Whether used in group learning or read alone, we hope it will be useful as a catalyst for reflective conversations you might have with fellow practitioners, leaders in your organisation, and colleagues in your learning communities.



Part I

Living OD
Philosophy and
Principles



Engaging and Transforming Living Systems

We can't impose our will on a system. We can listen to what the system tells us, and discover how its properties and our values can work together to bring forth something much better than could ever be produced by our will alone.

Donella H. Meadows

Organisational development (OD) is a field of knowledge and practice aimed at helping organisations become effective, adaptable, healthy, and sustainable. Traditionally, OD is applied only to workplace organisations, but as geopolitical, planetary, and societal challenges continue to bring forth exponential levels of uncertainty, the scope of OD must also expand to support the development of higher levels of collective consciousness and actions.

With this backdrop, Living OD is developing organisations and human systems through the lens of living systems. This lens invites us to understand organisations not as machines to be fixed, but as living ecosystems – dynamic, interconnected, and continuously evolving. The living systems lens offers a revolutionary framework that has gained momentum over the past few decades. To understand why a shift is needed from the lens of machine metaphor to that of living systems, we explore what they are and how they differ.

The Mechanistic Lens

If we understand organisations through a machine metaphor, they are perceived as non-living entities with a static function to generate a predetermined output. This worldview was popularised with the advent of scientific management, postulating that organisations operate in parts and are measured by their efficiency. In this schema, the organisation is seen as an assemblage of separate components, and people within organisations become factors of production – cogs in a machine designed to perform predetermined tasks. Efficiency is driven by specialisation and division of labour. The system is most effective when each part is optimised, and the whole is understood as merely the sum of its parts, operating independently and connected by a centrally defined set of rules, processes, and procedures. In such a system, roles and functions are clearly defined and delineated.

Hierarchy is created so that there is supervision at successive levels to manage the coordination functions, including dispensation of resources in centralised budgeting and performance management. In perceiving organisations as machines, effectiveness depends on compliance to predetermined roles and functions, operating within the paradigm of a fixed budget. While this allows control, an unintended side effect is a rigid system, slow in adapting to new and increasingly complex external environments.

The Living Systems Lens

When we consider organisations as living systems, we see that they can be adaptive, free-to-will, and meaning-seeking. Like any other living systems, they are dynamic, and they can grow, evolve, decline, and regenerate. In addition, they learn by interacting with other living systems and interpreting these new experiences with the goal to thrive and flourish. The goal for such an approach is to first understand the

system's overall purpose and objectives and how each sub-component plays an important role in service of the whole. In turn, each of these sub-components is also an intact whole in itself. While a machine is also made up of distinct interconnected component parts, the difference is the emergent property of living systems.

In organisations, this means job roles and decision-making need to be shifted to the level where responsibility is possible – where people are most attuned to what's emerging and can respond effectively. Rather than following a blueprint, employees are empowered to sense, interpret, and adapt, moving beyond predetermined functions. The mutual understanding and shared sense of connection to the larger purpose between the individual parts create room for constant feedback, learning, growth, and healthy adaptation to emerging needs.

The Need for a Contemplative Shift

Apart from carving out the function that has been externally predetermined, the outcome and impact of a machine cannot be self-defined. There is no inherent sense of meaning, purpose, and autonomy to speak of. Hence, mechanistic development of organisation is limited to producing the predetermined output and optimising machine functioning. In this case, the goal of OD would be to identify, define, and solve problems that get in the way of the machine's functioning. Hence, the OD approach looks like this: identify the problem, diagnose root causes, design solutions, and implement fixes. There is nothing wrong with this, and it is in fact an essential OD skill to be able to facilitate the transformation of a system from sub-optimal to more optimal performance.

However, this approach falls short when applied to living systems. In healthcare, we can diagnose organ malfunctions

and provide medications to improve the organ's functioning. But this is merely a surface intervention. It does not address the deeper patterns of health that exist in the relationships between all parts of the living organism with its external world, such as an unhealthy lifestyle that led to the disease in the first place. Nor does the intervention cultivate the system's capacity for self-directed change, growth, and regeneration.

Living systems do not just function; they possess an inherent intelligence that guides their evolution. They are not problems to be solved but patterns to be understood, nurtured, and caused to grow. The shift to a living systems lens requires us to move beyond diagnostic thinking to *dialogic inquiry* – from fixing what is broken to cultivating conditions where life can flourish. This complementary approach invites us to attune to what is emerging, to sense the subtle currents of meaning and connection flowing through the system, and to support the system's natural capacity for growth, adaptation, and transformation. This has always been the essence of OD as a practice field.

Transcendental Properties: Why Living Systems Are Fundamentally Different

The fundamental distinction between living systems and machines lies in their emergent, transcendental properties – qualities that arise from the whole that cannot be predicted or understood by examining the parts alone. A machine, no matter how complex, remains the sum of its components. Disassemble it, and you can understand precisely how it works. Reassemble it correctly, and it functions identically. But living systems possess something more – an emergent aliveness that transcends mechanical assembly.

Consider a human body: You can study individual cells, organs, and biochemical processes in isolation, yet consciousness,

creativity, and the capacity for love emerge from their interaction in ways that cannot be reduced to neurotransmitters and electrical signals. The whole is not merely greater than the sum of its parts – it is qualitatively different, operating at a level of complexity that gives rise to entirely new properties.

In organisations, these transcendental properties manifest as culture, collective intelligence, shared meaning, and the capacity for coordinated innovation. You cannot design a thriving culture by engineering its components – it emerges from the quality of relationships, the patterns of communication, the shared stories and rituals, and the distributed sense-making that occurs when people authentically connect around purpose. An organisation's capacity to adapt, learn, and regenerate cannot be installed like software; it emerges from the living network of relationships and the conditions that allow collective intelligence to surface.

Living systems are also characterised by their capacity for self-organisation and *autopoiesis* – the ability to continuously regenerate and renew themselves. Unlike machines that require external maintenance and repair, living systems heal themselves, grow, and evolve through their own internal processes. They are not passive recipients of external interventions but active agents in their own becoming. This self-organising capacity means that living systems have an inherent wisdom about what they need – they know how to move towards health when the conditions are right.

Furthermore, living systems exist in a constant state of becoming – **they are processes, not objects**. A machine has a fixed design and optimal state. A living system is always in flux, constantly responding to its environment, learning from experience, and evolving its structure and function. What appears as a problem from a mechanistic view may actually be the system's

adaptive response to changing conditions – a necessary discomfort in the process of growth and transformation.

From Diagnosis to Dialogue – A Continuum for Organisation Development

Given these transcendental properties, a purely diagnostic approach to OD is fundamentally mismatched to the nature of living systems. Diagnosis assumes we can identify problems objectively, prescribe solutions from outside, and implement fixes that will produce predictable results. But when working with living systems, this approach fails for three reasons.

First, the observer is always part of the system. There is no objective external standpoint from which to diagnose. Our very act of observing and questioning changes the system we are examining. The relationships we form, the conversations we initiate, and the attention we bring all become part of the system's dynamics. We cannot stand outside and fix – we can only participate and influence.

Second, the system's wisdom exceeds any external expert's knowledge. The people within the system hold crucial tacit knowledge, embodied understanding, and contextual awareness that no external diagnosis can fully capture. They feel the subtle undercurrents, sense what is emerging, and understand the nuances of their relationships and culture in ways that remain invisible to diagnostic tools. To ignore this distributed intelligence is to miss the very resources needed for genuine transformation.

Third, sustainable change in living systems requires internal commitment and meaning-making, not external compliance. You can diagnose a problem and prescribe a solution, but if the system does not generate its own understanding and ownership of the

change, it will revert to familiar patterns the moment external pressure is removed. **Living systems change when they discover new meaning, not when they follow new instructions.**

This is why a dialogic¹ approach is essential for long-term systemic health. Dialogue creates the conditions for emergence – it opens spaces where new insights, relationships, and possibilities can surface. Through authentic dialogue, the system can:

- Surface its own collective wisdom and intelligence
- Generate shared meaning and purpose that transcends individual perspectives
- Build the quality of relationships that enable adaptation and resilience
- Discover its own patterns and make sense of its experience together
- Create internal commitment to change through genuine understanding rather than external compliance

In dialogue, we work with the system's emergent properties rather than against them. We trust the system's capacity for self-organisation while providing reflective space, asking generative questions, and helping make visible the patterns that are difficult for the system to see from within. **We become partners in inquiry rather than external mechanics.**

The dialogic approach recognises that development is not about installing predetermined solutions but about cultivating conditions – much like a gardener cultivates soil, provides light and water to allow plants to flourish according to their own nature.

1. Bushe, Gervase R., and Robert J. Marshak. (2014). "Dialogic Organisation Development." In Jones, Brenda B., and Michael Brazzel (eds), *The NTL Handbook of Organisation Development and Change*, 193–211. The NTL Institute.

We cannot force a living system to grow in predetermined ways, but we can create conditions where its inherent capacity for health, learning, and regeneration can express itself more fully.

For long-term systemic health, this means moving from episodic interventions that fix immediate problems to ongoing practices of dialogue, reflection, and collective sense-making that strengthen the system’s capacity to navigate complexity and uncertainty. It means building the system’s muscle for adaptation rather than just solving today’s challenges. It means trusting that the system, through dialogue and relationship, can discover its own path to wholeness – a path that no external diagnosis could have predicted or prescribed.

Navigating the Four Continuums for OD

Taken together, this living systems approach to OD is actualised through the four continuums that an OD practitioner needs to embody and facilitate, as shown in Figure 1-1. Rather than

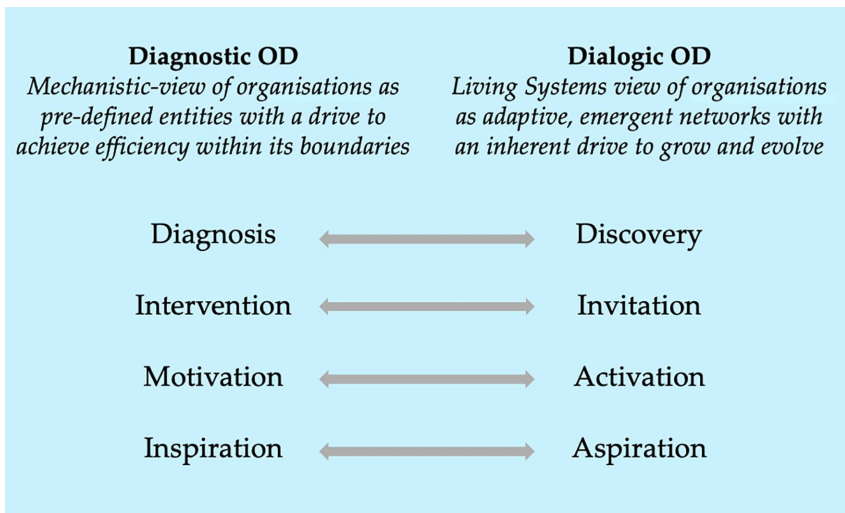


Figure 1-1: The four continuums of diagnostic to dialogic OD

representing binary choices, these continuums invite us to expand our range, from mechanistic interventions to dialogic partnership. Together, they embody the practices needed to work authentically with emergence, collective intelligence, and the transcendental properties of living systems.

From Diagnosis to Discovery

Diagnosis assumes that there is a problem to be fixed and that data collection can help us isolate the root cause. This mechanistic approach treats symptoms as malfunctions requiring expert analysis and prescribed solutions. While this may help stakeholders recognise that something needs attention, it fundamentally misunderstands the nature of living systems. When we engage in diagnosis, we remain outside the system, imposing categories and frameworks that may not reflect the system's lived reality.

To understand where a system truly is, not just its surface problems but its latent aspirations and possibilities, we must move towards discovery. Discovery is a collaborative journey undertaken with the system, not upon it. When we engage key stakeholders and leaders through processes of co-discovery, we surface the system's own assumptions, shared visions, hopes, and dreams. This is not passive data collection but active meaning-making that reveals the organisation's deeper potential and what it is genuinely calling forth for evolution.

Discovery honours the system's transcendental properties: its emergent wisdom, its collective sense-making, and its capacity to know itself in ways no external observer can fully grasp. Through discovery, we learn not just what is broken, but what is wanting to emerge.

From Intervention to Invitation

In the mechanistic model, change is something done to a system. As a result, interventions are designed by experts and implemented top-down, with success measured by compliance. But when we shift to invitation, we honour the system as a living entity with its own agency, intelligence, and right to choose its path.

When we craft invitations rather than interventions, we begin to view our work as partnership and collaborative inquiry rather than expert prescription. Invitation creates spaces where people can choose to participate, to bring their full selves, and to contribute their unique insights and creativity. It recognises that any attempt to force change upon a living system will be met with resistance, adaptation, or surface compliance that masks deeper unchanged patterns.

This continuum reminds us that our role is not to pull a system towards predetermined outcomes but to create containers of reflective spaces, generative questions, and conditions that allow the system to discover and choose its own direction. Invitation acknowledges that they, not we, are the ultimate agents of transformation. Partnership is not just a nice practice – it is what genuine OD has always been about, though often forgotten in the allure of expert-driven models.

From Motivation to Activation

Motivation, in the traditional sense, relies on external drivers, incentives, consequences, or persuasive messaging designed to move people towards predetermined goals. But this creates dependency on external energy sources and fails to tap the

intrinsic energy that emerges when people connect to genuine purpose and meaning.

Activation catalyses self-drive, emerging from within rather than being imposed from without. When people engage in authentic dialogue about what matters, when they build relationships with each other and with the organisation's deeper purpose, something fundamentally different occurs. They activate their own commitment, creativity, and agency. This is not manufactured enthusiasm but the natural expression of living systems connecting to their inherent purpose.

Through activation, we help people connect to their own inner authority and collective wisdom. We create conditions where energy flows organically from the system's core rather than being pumped in from outside. This shift from motivation to activation recognises that sustainable change requires the system to discover its own reasons, generate its own energy, and commit from a place of authentic choice and meaning.

From Inspiration to Aspiration

In traditional change efforts, inspiration often comes from charismatic leaders who paint compelling visions and attempt to inspire followers to pursue goals defined from above. While this may create temporary excitement, it does not deeply root the vision in the lived experience and aspirations of those who must bring it to life.

Rather than inspire buy-in towards a predetermined future, we cultivate aspiration: the authentic, self-generated longings, and commitments that emerge when people connect to what

truly matters to them. Aspiration is personal and collective simultaneously; it honours both individual purpose and shared purpose. When we invite people to articulate their own dreams in dialogue with others, the organisational vision becomes not something imposed but something co-created, owned, and shared by stakeholders throughout the system.

Aspiration creates resilience because it is rooted in genuine meaning, not external persuasion. People who are connected to their own and collective aspirations bring sustained commitment, creativity in the face of obstacles, and the willingness to navigate uncertainty together.

Towards Wholeness

In summary, these four continuums – from Diagnosis to Discovery; Intervention to Invitation; Motivation to Activation; and Inspiration to Aspiration – shape the fundamental reorientation and mindset for how the practitioner may approach OD. They offer a map for navigating change, beyond the diagnostic paradigm, by recognising that organisations are living systems with an inherent capacity for agency and self-directed evolution. In this light, the goal of OD is to create the conditions for genuine dialogue, for the emergence of collective intelligence, and for the long-term health that comes when systems are empowered to discover and pursue their own paths towards wholeness.

With this expanded view, we will be diving deeper into the living systems principles in the next chapter to unpack the underlying assumptions and implications for how we might ensure that the right conditions are in place for human systems flourishing.

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