



*It would seem to be in the nature of a theory that it can restrict thinking.*

- Jay Haley

*When we begin to believe anything, what we believe is not a single proposition, it is a whole system of propositions.*

- Ludwig Wittgenstein

## BEST PRACTICE (IN CHILDREN & YOUTH SERVICES)

### REFLECTIONS ON IMPROVEMENT AND INNOVATION IN THE WORK WE DO

... the Plan of the Rainmakers ...

Best Practice<sup>1</sup> is "in the air" – the air, that is, that surrounds the social services & children's mental health field. I remember first getting wind of it about 10 or 11 years ago when a colleague enthused all over me about wanting to change a program into a "center of excellence". I recall being momentarily caught up short by the novelty of the term, but nothing in the benign connotations swirling around this phrase set off any alarm bells. In fact, I had no real idea that I had just been introduced to a *theory* – let alone a theory pregnant with the promise of being something of a conceptual hurricane.<sup>2</sup> Next, however, (and this is when the alarm bells *did* start going off) it showed up in annual budget discussions with funders where it was mixed in with scary things like "accountability", "outcome measures", and a bunch of other precepts prodding us to "work smarter, not harder" and to "do more with less". Nowadays, it's pretty much everywhere: from casual conversations to grueling strategic planning sessions, somebody is either implementing it or writing a manual about it. A new wind is up – our sails are unfurled and billowing.

Like the wind, Best Practice is a little hard to lay hold of: while it's big on direction and flag waving, it lacks a certain definition. Accepting it more on faith than familiarity, most people have only a vague understanding of what it is or what consequences it could have. Furthermore, as you might expect in a field that is pervasively hierarchical, it blows hot and cold depending upon where you find yourself: notably, it is fancied most in the anxious headquarters of management and the stern bureaucratic towers of the funders; but in the frontline trenches, it is more likely met with misgiving or world-weary resignation.

This divergence in perception between the troops and the ranking echelons reminds me of the old military chestnut (told, of course, from the point of view of the foot soldier):

*Question:* "What's the most dangerous thing in a firefight?"

*Answer:* "A Captain with a map and a plan!"

It may be a tad subtle, but there is a lot of practical wisdom embedded in this frontline skepticism. It's past time we took a closer look at this map & plan called Best Practice – after all, a lot rides on where it will take us. What fresh version of hell could the Captain be calling down upon us? And if it isn't bad news for the grunts, then why is it stirring the unnatural passions of the powers that be and their apparatchiki? For what higher hierarchical problem is it – and this is my ungainly way of segueing into my next metaphor – the *remedy*?

... "Cured yesterday of my disease / I died last night of my physician" ...<sup>3</sup>

*Remedy* it surely is: like "paradigm shift", "MBO"<sup>4</sup>, "TQM"<sup>5</sup>, and "BPR"<sup>6</sup>, "Best Practice" (BP) has become a shibboleth meant to separate the progressive, state-of-the-art *enterprise* from the soon-to-be-extinct *corporation*.<sup>7</sup> From a business point of view, it is now crucial for an organization either to be a "center of excellence" or to be transfusing the vital fluids of somebody else's multiple centers of excellence into its own corporate lifeblood. Clearly, Best Practice is the latest physician to the imperiled company: under its care, corporate anxieties can be put to rest and corporate ambitions gratified. Amongst other things, it promises to:

- (a) tame the chaos & complexity of the service delivery environment;
- (b) achieve unimagined levels of customer satisfaction;
- (c) unleash the productive and creative capacities of frontline staff;

<sup>3</sup> Matthew Prior, *The Remedy Worse than the Disease*.

<sup>4</sup> Management By Objectives.

<sup>5</sup> Total Quality Management.

<sup>6</sup> Business Process Reengineering – or just the dreaded "reengineering" or "restructuring" we are more familiar with. And while we're at it, we could add to the list: "management by excellence", "strategic intent", "management by walking around", "core competencies", "employee empowerment", and "one-minute management".

<sup>7</sup> I use the italicized terms judiciously. An *enterprise* is meant to connote the entrepreneurial spirit: advanced, opportunistic, achievement-oriented, practical, dynamic, energized, etc. In contrast, a *corporation* is a "corpus", soon to be a corpse perhaps: isolated, bounded, conservative, change-resistant, staid, traditional, linear, etc.

<sup>8</sup> *The Information Advantage* at <http://biz.onramp.net>.

<sup>1</sup> Sometimes referred to as "Best Practices".

<sup>2</sup> Well, "hurricane" is a little misleading because it implies complete destructiveness, which is clearly not all there is to Best Practice. That's one of the troubles with cramming too much into this "wind" metaphor. If it weren't so arcane, I would switch hurricane to *simoom* – the blinding Saharan sandstorm that moves desert dunes around like waves in water, obliterating old patterns but creating new ones in their place.

- (d) keep third-party and government funders at bay, in line, and out of the way;
- (e) place the company on the surest, swiftest path to “world-class excellence”; and
- (f) to do all these things with language and theoretical schemes drawn from the cutting edge of scientific and technological thought - so that senior management can sound and look good when explaining organizational changes to befuddled stakeholders and employees.<sup>9</sup>

Nevertheless, as panacean as it looks, BP should not be swallowed whole – especially by those of us who ply our professional craft in the fields of social services & children’s mental health.<sup>10</sup> Before assenting to its power as the ultimate corrective of organizational life, it might be worthwhile to consider its genealogy – after all, to grasp the full significance of a trend, it’s often helpful to gain some insight into the forces that generate and support it.<sup>11</sup>

Whatever its *original* conception (now lost in the myths of time),<sup>12</sup> BP was shaped and championed by two different areas of social endeavor (it’s kind of worth noting that we in Canada, and in the children’s services fields in particular, are only vaguely aware of the first of these endeavors and almost totally oblivious to the second):

- 1) it emerged most forcefully as the favored child of **Managed Care** – that American crusade to curb runaway health care costs; and
- 2) it was also one of those “latest sensations” of the **Management Theory Industry** (MTI) – i.e., that part of American business that supplies the theories, models, & rationales used to understand *and change* the structures & practices of the business world.<sup>13</sup>

So, Best Practice became a celebrity in the world of organizational development & change thanks to the political, intellectual, and marketing resources of two *very* influential social industries.

<sup>9</sup> Okay, to be fair, BP is massively more simple than BPR. In some respects, in fact, its success across so many fields is related to its ability to address and capitalize on the gross failures of BPR – particularly BPR’s focus on “process” rather than “outcome” and its adoption of a complicated engineering lingo (e.g., domain specific architectures, interleaving, de-localized plans, synchronized refinement, integrated definition language, quality function deployment). Nonetheless, management consultants invariably filter BP through their own jargon-enhancing machinery where the core concepts (invariably simple insights) are processed (mystified?) with value-added terminology before they can be packaged and sold as workshops, textbooks, manuals, software, and even Institutes and educational Centers.

<sup>10</sup> Of course, what follows is an interpretation of some rather complex and difficult social issues. As an interpretation, you may expect that it is embedded in my own biases, opinions, and contingencies.

<sup>11</sup> As Carl Becker pointed out: “Historical-mindedness is so much a preconception of modern thought that we can identify a particular thing only by pointing to the various things it successively was before it became that particular thing which it will presently cease to be.” [*The Heavenly City of the Eighteenth-Century Philosophers* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1932), p. 19]

<sup>12</sup> Most likely, BP originated in the software development industry where proto-BP processes like “benchmarking” and “beta-testing” have been in place for nearly two decades.

<sup>13</sup> According to *Psychology Today* (March/April 1997, p. 59), business books in America are a three-quarters of a billion dollar annual industry – and the management consultant business is a \$15 billion annual industry.

However, what ought to be a concern – especially to the social services & children’s mental health field – is the dubious reputation of *both* these industries. Managed Care, despite its sometimes sophisticated rhetoric and propaganda, is at heart a miserly campaign that puts cost control & profit before care: in *any* form, it is the application of the “bottom line” to physical and mental well-being.<sup>14</sup> On the other hand, and equally disconcerting, MTI has a shoddy academic reputation, a poor track record for actual success, and it is notorious for its hucksters, quick-fix artists, ineffectual (but charming) gurus, and expensive fads.<sup>15</sup> Although it is bad form to judge an offspring by its pedigree, one has to wonder: “*What is it about Best Practice that is so attractive to and compatible with these notorious endeavors?*”

At a minimum, before BP is accepted as a guiding strategy for reforming any system of social services or children’s mental health programs, it should be: (a) disengaged from the contentious motives of Managed Care, and (b) stripped of the marketing makeup and theatrical affectations of the Management Theory Industry.<sup>16</sup> With this done, its core elements can come to light and be assessed as to their strengths and limitations – that is, we can better judge their

<sup>14</sup> See Holcomb Noble’s article “Public Health Group Debates Managed Care”, *New York Times*, 24<sup>th</sup> November, 1998.

It is, no doubt, unfair to characterize Managed Care as all bad. Rather, like most complicated social enterprises, it ranges from the admirable to the loathsome. At the admirable end (the Dr. Jekyll end), Managed Care has a noble social purpose: the rescue and revival of one of our most important social resources. It acts as an antidote to the stranglehold that health care providers and manufacturers have had on the health care industry. It often provides access to broader ranges of care (and better coordinated, better monitored care) than could be afforded by individuals and families under traditional conditions. And it definitely focuses resources on the development of preventive (low-cost) interventions. Indeed, some of the largest and most successful Managed Care Plans are even non-profit. However, at the Mr. Hyde end, it introduces bureaucracy and bureaucratic thinking (tied – no, *welded* – to cost reduction) to problems of quality health care. It erodes choice for consumers, undermines trust between doctors and patients, and places saving money before saving lives. Medically necessary care is often sacrificed at the altar of cost-consciousness. Physicians are expected to balance risk against cost, introducing fiscal calculations directly into treatment plans for individuals. And there is persistent, dogged, and tireless pressure for some Plans to turn a profit for their investors.

I suppose we would have some assurance if BP was championed only by the Dr. Jekyll side of Managed Care; however, this is not the case. BP is in favor across the entire spectrum: “cost containment” is the banner everywhere; “efficiency”, the battle call; and “Best Practice”, the sword. If anything, Hyde’s storm troops wield it higher and strike more accurately.

<sup>15</sup> See Mickelthwait & Wooldridge, *The Witch Doctors* (NY: Random House, 1996) – for a history and exposé of the Management Theory Industry, and for an analysis of the failure and shortcomings of BPR (pp. 23-42). Concerning the former, they write: “Management theory, according to the case against it, has four defects: it is constitutionally incapable of self-criticism; its terminology usually confuses rather than educates; it rarely rises above common sense; and it is faddish and bedeviled by contradictions that would not be allowed in more rigorous disciplines... Modern management theory is no more reliable than tribal medicine. Witch doctors, after all, often got it right – by luck, by instinct, or by trial and error.” (p.12)

<sup>16</sup> If the reader is interested in the fully tarted up version of BP, I recommend the Arthur Andersen book *Best Practices: Building Your Business with Arthur Andersen’s Global Best Practice*, authored by R. Hiebeler, T. Kelly, & C. Kettman (1998). This consulting firm identifies over 200 “sub-processes” that can be used to measure how well your company is doing.

usefulness as strategies for improving our own organizations (and system).

So what, then, are the core elements of BP?

... the quest for the "one best way" continues ...

At heart, BP appears to be a fairly simple and non-contentious set of concepts. In most forms, it involves the following:

1. **Identification of an organization's (or system's) functional areas.** Most typically, these targeted functional areas are detailed subsets of: administration, service delivery (or product manufacturing), human resources, and communication (internal & external).
2. **Identification of centers of excellence.** A center of excellence is a functional area within the organization, system, network of related businesses, or even an area within a competitor's business that is acknowledged to function better than any other<sup>17</sup> – in other words, an area that is *best* at solving its problems and getting its job done.
3. **Establishing benchmarks.** A benchmark is a standard of performance formally expressed as a policy, a procedure, or a technology that mimics the policy, procedure, or technology used in the center of excellence. Once codified, benchmarks are used to reorganize the targeted functional area. When they are in place, the organization can refer to its own functional area as a center of excellence. [In essence, benchmarks are used to "morph" the targeted functional area into a spitting image of the center of excellence.]
4. **Commitment to continuous improvement.** Benchmarks, as it turns out (not too surprisingly), are both *incomplete* and *temporary*: no organization is so thorough that it can ever run out of areas in which to implement best practices; and, since "the only constant is change", even the benchmarks that are carved into the new policies & procedures soon age and sour. Unlike their physical namesakes, they make no effort to resist either the Law of Augmented Complexity or the Second Law of Thermodynamics.<sup>18</sup> As a result, the organization (or system)

<sup>17</sup> In fact, BP is so flexible that the center of excellence does not even have to be located in the same field of business. All that is required is that the functional areas be conceptually compatible. For example, a hospital serving a large inpatient population may not want to adopt another hospital as a center of excellence for its reception/admission/room assignment functions. Instead, a *hotel* may offer the methods and logistics (and technology) that ensure the highest standards of efficiency and patient satisfaction.

<sup>18</sup> The Law of Augmented Complexity states that "there is nothing simple that can't be made more difficult". The Second Law of Thermodynamics is, of course, entropy: left on their own, things will tend to maximum disorder. The original benchmarks were notches in a stationary support into which a surveyor placed an angled iron rod used to determine position and elevation and tides. They were perfect little Cartesian devices to simplify calculation and resist the distorting effects of entropy – anchors in Absolute Space weaving an eternal pattern of reference points. [I see in them the objective correlative of that hopeless, romantic dream of Enlightenment: "I must go down to the sea again / To the lonely sea and the sky / And all I ask is a sailing ship / And a star to steer her by".] The modern versions, however, are appropriately Heisenbergian: indeterminate and subjunctive – transitory corks bobbing and rolling in a ever-changing sea of spacetime. [Like Bic pens or Gillette razors, if you rely on them too much, they disappear.]

must devise a permanent survey process of all potential centers of excellence.

If the sales pitch is right, BP girds the organization for **sustainable performance** in the face of change and uncertainty. Like corporate caffeine, it energizes significant focus on customer satisfaction, time, cost, and quality. There is even a Darwinian flavor to BP that excites the competitive manager: it is a clear and simple recipe for clawing one's way to the top – *and with very little expenditure of creative effort*. After all, the hard part (devising the better mousetrap) has already been done by someone else.

Still, it is difficult to grasp exactly what it is about BP that is new and original. None of its core elements are actually foreign to traditional management theory or practice. The radical notion of cribbing ideas from non-related industries or fields goes back decades. And the fundamental premises of *breaking an organization up into functional areas* (not to mention the severance of action into endless "sub-processes") and *establishing measurable standards* were inherited directly from Taylorism, which has been around in one form or another since the turn of the century. Even its name, "Best Practice", is a not-very-veiled echo of the Taylorism motto - "*the one best way*".<sup>19</sup>

It seems that what is innovative about BP is not so much its *substance* as its *packaging*. Perhaps it is, as Paul Strassmann suggests, just the next "buzzword" in MTI, nothing more than "a



figure 1: The Self-Reinforcing Cycle of Best Practice<sup>20</sup>

collection of long proven management techniques that will apply to value-creation, gaining market share, improving international competitiveness, boosting the value of the dollar, improving

<sup>19</sup> See Robert Kanigel, "Taylor-Made", *The Sciences* (May/June 1997).

<sup>20</sup> I lifted and revised this figure from one of literally thousands of Best Practice sites that can be found on the Internet. It is typical in identifying process stages that fold back onto a loop.

employee morale, stimulating innovation, improving government efficiency and enhancing managerial effectiveness.<sup>21</sup>

Certainly, I agree that it is based on some credible and “long proven” techniques – and it is appealing in a logical and common-sense fashion. But, *pace* Strassmann, it is much more than a mere “collection”. The manner in which it packages its elements is crucial to the effect that it has on an organization. Indeed, this packaging is important *both* for how it binds the elements together *and* for what it excludes. To see this, however, we must look with a “jaded and unquicken eye”.<sup>22</sup> After all, it is always prudent in the company of salesmen to live by the consumer’s credo: *caveat emptor!* BP comes to our door like any product or service - we should grant its peddlers the same suspicion and reluctance we give every door-to-door drummer.

... “riding on a smile and a shoeshine” ...<sup>23</sup>

The most general critical observation to be made about BP is that *there is absolutely no scientific evidence that supports its numerous claims.*<sup>24</sup> There are abundant anecdotal and *post hoc ergo propter hoc* claims of the kind typically found in advertisements & sales campaigns – but no studies that have used rigorous controls or any other scientific means to enforce validity & reliability. Partly, this lack of scientific rigor is due to the want of a common & precise definition of the term “best practice”: BP has become so widely used and so various in its application that it has come to mean different things to different people, depending upon which core element is emphasized.<sup>25</sup> But mostly it is due to the fact that *such rigor is not required to sell the product.* BP already has the essential ingredient needed to make it a competitive in the MTI marketplace. That is, it has the *appearance* that it works; it does not need to prove the *substance*. In the marketplace, perception is all<sup>26</sup> – and,

certainly, BP has refined a prestigious, even compelling, perception that it works. It is in no one’s best interest – except, perhaps, the consumer’s - to rock the boat. Even those that have the social charge to guard the gates of intellectual and academic honesty play along. As John Mickelthwait points out: “You would imagine that management professors would police the frontiers and enforce intellectual standards, but they don’t. The reason is that they, too, get seduced by money. They all want to write the next book that tops the best-seller lists.”<sup>27</sup>

What is compelling about BP, then, is not the grounding that it supposedly has (but really doesn’t have) in the rigor of *scientific proof*, but the *rhetorical ploy* that is used to sell it. This ploy convinces potential consumers that BP and its wonderful claims (higher quality, satisfied customers, lower costs, world-class excellence and competitiveness, efficient & effective service, dynamic & innovative communication, high employee morale & commitment, etc.) are right using a four-fold strategy:<sup>28</sup>

First, consumers are prepared emotionally for a higher level of suggestibility by negative emotional arousal. This is done by reminding them of the volatility & threatening nature of the economy and the aggressiveness of their competitors – or, in the case of Public Sector consumers, reminding them of the nastiness & unpredictability of government, third-party, or volunteer funders. The chaos, misery, and failure of recent restructuring is pointed out to paint a background of worry and tension that must be plaguing the consumer’s every working moment.<sup>29</sup> The production of anxiety & fear are important in the rhetorical process because they create the

<sup>21</sup> Paul Strassmann, “The Roots of Business Process Reengineering”, *American Programmer* (June 1995).

<sup>22</sup> William James, “On a Certain Blindness in Human Beings”, in *The Will To Believe*.

<sup>23</sup> Arthur Miller, *Death of a Salesman*.

<sup>24</sup> Which is **not** to imply that it therefore doesn’t work. I am simply making the point that there is no *scientific* evidence that it works. Oddly enough, there is no proof that “Best Practice” is a best practice.

<sup>25</sup> Indeed, in a perverse kind of reasoning, the very diversity of BP application and its denotative fuzziness is used both as a kind of proof that it actually works – *why else would it spread so rapidly through such a tough-minded and pragmatic industry as business management?* – and that it **can’t** be scientifically investigated – *how can so many different forms be fairly compared? Besides, if we are confident that each of the bricks (core elements) are sound and “long proven”, isn’t the house they build going to be just as sound? Isn’t that the lesson we all learned from The Three Little Pigs?*

Of course, lack of precise definition and variety of form & application have not stopped other types of social endeavors from being investigated and measured scientifically – although, admittedly, such measurement has not completely eliminated controversy and disagreement.

<sup>26</sup> Well, if it’s not exactly **all**, then it’s the better part. While it’s a truism that if something doesn’t work at all, people will eventually stop buying it, this truism doesn’t stop a lot of useless products & services from getting an initial share of their market niches – enough to make them attractive to unscrupulous profit-mongering. Conversely, products or services that work quite well but have the opposite perception (e.g., beta video systems, the Edsel, early alternative disk operating systems) rarely take off. Every salesman and every marketing executive knows that perception is what sells – the supporting myth is that *quality* keeps ‘em coming back.

<sup>27</sup> *Psychology Today*, *op. cit.*, p. 62. MTI, after all, is an *industry* as well as an academic field – and the interests of the former outweigh those of the latter. It is a field in which ideas, like BP & BPR & TQM, get quickly turned into products & services: consulting fees, seminars, institutes, videotapes, books & manuals, lecture circuits. There is very little incentive for intellectuals to criticize on purely scientific or academic grounds: the consumer wants solutions, not criticisms. So, while criticisms abound (especially as each new fad reaches its senescence – as BPR is doing now), they are almost always in the service of the New Kid On The Block, the next sure-fire remedy for organizational woes.

<sup>28</sup> Sort of a Bad Cop/Good Cop/Another Good Cop/Really Good Cop technique.

In the following analysis, I rely heavily on Edward de Bono’s *Practical Thinking*, in which he lays out the various ways that the feeling of “being right” is created. His most important observation is that, contrary to what we believe, “being right” is not a matter of having our ideas correspond correctly with reality (this would be “philosophical rightness”). Rather, it is a **feeling** - as in we believe we are “right” when we **feel** we are right, not when we finally get our thoughts to fit with the facts. Indeed, it is quite common that we have got the facts all wrong, but still we believe ourselves to be right.

<sup>29</sup> Of course, this tactic is not unique to BP; rather it is a basic stratagem of MTI: “... management theory, more than any other branch of academia, is propelled by two primal human instincts: fear and greed.” (Mickelthwait & Wooldridge, *op. cit.*, p. 7) BP works on the failure of BPR just as BPR worked on the failure of TQM before it (and TQM worked on the failure of MBO, and on and on ...). The secondary tactic of always promising more than can be delivered supplies the frustration & disappointment that keep the business cycle of MTI products moving: “And, from the management industry’s viewpoint, the beauty of the system is that none of the formulas work – or, at least, they do not work as completely as the anguished or greedy buyers hope. The result is enormous profits for the gurus but confusion for their clients.” (Mickelthwait & Wooldridge, *op. cit.*, p. 60)

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sense of *urgency* needed to short-circuit the consumers' critical capacities.<sup>30</sup>

Having lathered up the prospective consumer, the second part of the strategy involves what may be called "consensual rightness", which is promotion of the feeling that BP must be right because (a) the people in-the-know in MTI (the gurus and their emulators) are all endorsing it, and (b) so many first-rate, avant-garde companies have flocked to its shore. Can such experience be wrong? Surely the wisest and best expertise in the field has thought through the implications and strengths of BP in the most intensive and profound way. It would be a grave mistake to be left behind *this* crowd when the stakes are so high.

The third part of the strategy is an appeal to the "logical rightness" of BP – to the smooth and self-supporting ways that its core elements link together to form a comprehensive system: each piece fits nicely with its neighbors. It is a tidy assemblage of moving parts, all reinforcing each other and spiraling into a repetitive pattern. It is a closed system (safe from the grip of logical entropy), but one that is constantly in motion. [See *Figure 1*.] As such, it appeals to both the conceptual side of the consumer (which is interested in *consistency & coherence*) and the hard-boiled side (which is interested in *action & practicality*).

Finally, and most importantly,<sup>31</sup> BP is wrapped in a linguistic robe of commanding majesty – it is decked out in the unassailable garb of what Edward de Bono calls "emotional rightness". This kind of rightness is the expansive feeling we get in our chest and gut when we hear certain words – words to which we have been conditioned since infancy to have strong positive emotional responses (for example: *honesty, courage, integrity, dignity, justice, responsibility*).<sup>32</sup> As charismatic politicians know very well, if you

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<sup>30</sup> It's an obvious point, but worth emphasizing, that emotional arousal is a key ingredient in *any* persuasive endeavor: e.g., debate, advertising, psychotherapy, or TV talk shows. Alerting a target (like a consumer, client, or opponent) engages the fight/flight/fright response and narrows the higher reasoning processes in the brain, making the target susceptible to external guidance in the form of suggestions and solutions. Even the structure and method of my argument in this paper plays off this mechanism: to increase the likelihood that the reader will be more receptive to my thesis, I have shamelessly used the *caveat emptor* stratagem – putting the reader on an alert about the motives of the Business Sector.

But let me defend myself! Although such a rhetorical subterfuge has probably become stylistically ingrained in me personally, there are times when it is appropriate to "fight fire with fire". In fact, this metaphor is extremely apt when one thinks about how it is that firefighters handle the threat of large forest fires: **they use fire** (that is, controlled fires to dampen and break the direction of uncontrolled ones). Hopefully, the *caveat emptor* alert creates the same kind of emotional dampening and permits an engagement of the critical capacities on the issue of BP.

<sup>31</sup> The first three steps of the rhetorical ploy are fairly standard in the industry: they can be found in BPR, TQM, and MBO – and they constitute true elements of what Kuhn would call the "paradigm" of this field of endeavor. It is in this fourth step that BP distinguishes itself from other fads. Although it is present in these other fads, it remains largely part of the supporting cast, a background against which the central premise shines. BP, however, brings it center-stage and makes it one of the major players.

<sup>32</sup> In effect, it is the other side of the first step of this strategy. Instead of being *negative* emotional arousal, it is *positive* emotional arousal. Its intended effect, however, is the same: the subversion of critical thinking. *And* the conditioning need not reach back to infancy: it may just as easily come from the current circumstances of our lives. Peer groups are a natural source of these emotional triggers, especially in their capacity to confound belongingness and identity with certain phrases. Like Pavlovian

pepper a pitch (or even a thoughtful analysis) with enough of these words, their glamour sticks to the bones of your argument, lending an awesome luster and credibility, whether deserved or not. So it is that **Best Practice** improves **quality, effectiveness, efficiency, & customer satisfaction**, while demanding **commitment to continuous improvement and sustainable performance** in the **quest for excellence**. We could even throw in a nod to things like **accountability, flexibility, world-class performance, and dynamic leadership**. BP *must* be right because it *sounds* so right.

In regard to this last step in the rhetorical ploy, MTI theorists have always been sensitive to the fundamental importance of language in their field. Usually, though, this sensitivity has taken the form of making language more complex and abstruse. As Adrian Wooldridge points out:

*One problem is that this is a discipline which aspires to be a science without really being one, so as a psychological compensation, management gurus use lots of scientific-sounding words. They never use a clear English word when they can use an abstract one like "reengineering," because it gives the impression that what they're doing is preordained by logic.*<sup>33</sup>

MTI has been rife with the aspiration to scientific credibility by the *appropriation of terminology*, rather than by the *incorporation of techniques & principles*.<sup>34</sup> The high-water mark of this tendency was

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dogs, our thinking shuts off and we start drooling and wagging our tails in the anticipation of good things whenever the bell of these phrases goes off. In my own field of expertise, for example, I know an author has to be credible (and I start to get intellectually excited and less critical) if he/she uses any of the following words or phrases: deconstruction, narrative, constructivist, solution-focused, dominant discourse of power, Derrida, Foucault, postmodern, evidence-based, empirically validated ...

<sup>33</sup> *Psychology Today*, *op. cit.*, p. 62. Consider also Bill Boisvert's slightly more vitriolic characterization: "Whether they steal fire from the Harvard Business School or find enlightenment through a long pilgrimage in Oriental lands, all popular business books share certain idiosyncrasies. They euphemize their tautologies as 'common sense' and their lists of slogans as 'practical guides,' as if management theories are both self-evidently true *and* arcane enough to require a hands-on primer and costly seminars. Like nursery rhymes, they are fascinated by numerology and alliteration, freeze-drying their 'findings' into nuggets of doggerel like 'the Three C's: Customers, Competition, and Change' or Tom Peters' typically long-winded 'Seven S© Framework: Structure, Systems, Style, Staff, Skills, Strategy, and Shared Values.' And to make reading fun for executives, they eschew logical exposition and an organized search for evidence in favor of brief, happy anecdotes about take-charge department heads, couched always in the cajoling rhetoric of cereal-box propaganda." [in Frank & Weiland (eds.), *Commodify Your Dissent* (New York: W.W. Norton, 1997), p. 83]

<sup>34</sup> "The average management book reads as if it had been translated from German, with nouns used as verbs and sentences that meander this way and that. Words like 'reengineering' have a pseudoscientific air, meant to suggest that companies are machines, which can be retuned by clever technocrats." - Mickelthwait & Wooldridge, *op. cit.*, p. 326. Or better yet: "There is something remarkably flatulent about management language." (John Mickelthwait, *Psychology Today*, *op. cit.*, p. 61)

Actually, the Mickelthwait-Wooldridge thesis is that Management Theory is composed of two poles: the pseudoscientific side, originating with Taylorism and best represented today by BPR; and the humanistic side, originating with Peter Drucker and best represented by Tom Peters. Fashion in MTI tacks back and forth between these two options in response to Management urgency and anxiety (i.e., the natural cycle of greed and fear).

reached by BPR and its hard-edged engineering lingo. BPR took hold partly because MTI language in the late 80's had softened considerably under the influence of the humanistic theorizing of Drucker and his disciples:

*After years of listening to academics, consultants and management gurus preaching about individual empowerment, teamwork, partnership, participative management, knowledge-driven enterprises, learning organizations, self-actualization, employee gain-sharing, common bonds, people-oriented leadership, fellow-worker trust and long-term career commitment, the aggressive language offered by the originators of reengineering seemed to offer welcome relief.*<sup>35</sup>

The failure of BPR, however, to live up to its promises, and the hardship it bequeathed to many companies, individuals, and families, begged a *reaction formation* against its unnecessary complexity and abstractness.<sup>36</sup> BP capitalizes on this reaction formation by offering itself in a simple, clear, emotionally compelling language.

... "Let's not reinvent the wheel!": the defeat of innovation through habit ...<sup>37</sup>

A second critical observation about BP is that *it confounds innovation with mimicry*, and thereby weakens an organization's vital focus on creativity and learning. The process of searching out centers of excellence, translating them into benchmarks, and morphing a functional area into a clone of the original center is often

<sup>35</sup> Strassmann, *op. cit.*

<sup>36</sup> Like Managed Care, BPR is probably not all bad. Certainly its defenders would claim that the problem of BPR's failure is not the failure of BPR but the failure of nerve: unsuccessful companies lack the intestinal fortitude to see it through aggressively. Even Strassmann (*op. cit.*) points out that BPR is really not new – just a return to some basic insights about industrial management. Its form may be off-putting, but its intentions are good. [Need we remind Strassmann what the road to hell is paved with?] Besides, it has generated some really neat computer software to assist in system analysis.

Concerning the paradoxical success/failure of BPR, one prominent review concluded: "In all too many companies, reengineering has been not only a great success but also a great failure. After months, even years, of careful redesign, these companies achieve dramatic improvements in individual processes only to watch overall results decline. By now, paradoxical outcomes of this kind have become almost commonplace. A computer company reengineers its finance department, reducing process costs by 34% - yet operating income stalls. An insurer cuts claims process time by 44% - yet profits drop. Managers proclaim a 20% cost reduction, a 25% quality improvement - yet in the same period, business-unit costs increase and profits decline." [Gene Hall, Jim Rosenthal, and Judy Wade, "How to Make Reengineering Really Work," *Harvard Business Review*, November-December 1993, p. 119.]

BPR's objective lack of success - as measured by financial security, profitability, & productivity of the organizations that adopted it, Peter Keen estimates that 50% to 70% of BPR projects fail [*The Process Paradox*, 1996] - is completely independent from consumer satisfaction with it. At the height of the BPR craze (1995 – a time when objective standards were available), *CFO Magazine* and The Ernst & Young Center for Business Innovation did a customer satisfaction survey that showed 55% of financial executives approved of it, and another 34% gave it conditional approval – even though only 18% thought BPR met its goals and a further 27% thought it had only a modest net positive effect.

<sup>37</sup> In an old ad campaign, BMW adopted the motto: *the defeat of habit through innovation*. For BP, I suggest this little variation.

referred to as "innovation". While the benchmark activities are indeed "novel" from the point of view of the targeted functional area, they can't be considered new in any other sense.<sup>38</sup> Innovation, by definition, happens one time only. The repetition of an innovation is not another innovation: it is *imitation, replication, reproduction*, or, at best, *reformation* – and, as Edmund Burke succinctly put it, "To innovate is not to reform." Similarly, the repetition of the process of imitation is not innovation either: it is simply a *habit*. Only in the Orwellian terminology of MTI can the institutionalized habit of imitation fob itself off as innovation.

Still, what – if any – is the danger in this? The answer is that in a continuously changing environment (which is, after all, a cardinal premise of MTI), *creativity* – i. e., the invention, generation, or discovery of new behaviours, practices, and solutions – is absolutely essential to the long-term welfare and survival of an organization.<sup>39</sup> New and unique conditions demand the capacity for new and unique responses. However, commitment of resources to such activities is often perceived to carry higher than tolerable risks and a miserable cost/benefit ratio. Imitation, on the other hand, is both low-risk and dirt cheap.<sup>40</sup> BP capitalizes on this differential by simply excluding the high-cost, high-risk activity (i.e., *creativity*) and recommending the focusing of resources & rewards exclusively on *imitation as the strategy* for adaptation & survival. Let someone else invest in the chancy and energy-consuming activities related to research & development. This approach, in effect, makes the organization *parasitic*<sup>41</sup> - rather than *symbiotic* (exchanging material & knowledge with its environment) or *self-controlled/self-directed* (able to generate its own responses to its changing environment based on its unique contingencies and context).<sup>42</sup> And it is extremely short-sighted: an organization needs *both creative and imitative capacities*. BP tacitly but unashamedly promotes the desiccation of organizational creativity and the dependence of an organization on external sources of answers to its problems.<sup>43</sup>

<sup>38</sup> It is fairly clear from the BP literature that innovation in this restricted sense (i.e., as something new from the point of view of the targeted functional area) is the only sense in which BP is interested in being innovative. Otherwise, BP advocates the minimal output of *creative energy* [which is different than *procedural energy*, of which BP has more than its fair share] – indeed, its core message to the consumer is, "Let's not reinvent the wheel!"

<sup>39</sup> In its formal manifestation, the creative function within an organization is usually referred to as Research & Development. There are also informal manifestations such as new ideas contributed by frontline staff as they go about solving their daily problems and responding to unique challenges.

<sup>40</sup> Though some may characterize it as just plain laziness. In the Xerox age, it is just easier to photocopy someone else's Mission Statement and Policy Manual, change a few words – *voilà!*

<sup>41</sup> It may not be a "one trick pony" – more like a "200 sub-processes pony" - but for sure all its tricks are really someone else's [a kind of Milton Berle of theories]. Leadership used to entail the courage of breaking new ground, the daring to "boldly go where no one has gone before". BP leadership, however, stays as far away from the edge as possible. It's now a matter of "go boldly only where someone else has gone before".

<sup>42</sup> In short, it must have what anthropologists call *local knowledge*.

<sup>43</sup> A cynic might hypothesize that the atrophy of the creative function is really just another step in the establishment of a dependency relation of the organization buying BP on the products & services of MTI. The production and packaging of innovative (creative) practices will become an industry by itself. Where these practices were once the proprietary property of the organization's interaction with its environment, under BP the organization is cut off from learning from that environment (or, in more

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BP sells the Emperor a new set of clothes. The price, however, is steep: it amounts to nothing less than his creative spark (soul?) and his intimate connection with the unique circumstances & contingencies that define his authentic and singular nature. But this time the deal is a lot better than he got in the proverbial fairy tale because the clothes aren't invisible ... instead they are a really spiffy set of hand-me-downs (and a lifetime discount coupon from the local vintage clothing store).

... the "high, hard ground" of theory and the "swampy lowland" of human life ...<sup>44</sup>

The third and final critical observation I will make about BP is that *its epistemology*<sup>45</sup> is based on the mechanistic "commodity model" of knowledge – that is, the Cartesian conceit that knowledge (in the form of ideas, facts, principles, concepts, axioms, etc.) is composed of self-contained, bounded, & contextless objects that can be abstracted both from the physical world (through codification in language) and from the social world that actually produces it<sup>46</sup> – thereby making it free from the distortions of interpretation and contextual qualification. Donald Schön<sup>47</sup> called this epistemology Technical Rationality, which he saw as a legacy of the Positivist crusade to ensure human progress by "harnessing science to create technology for the achievement of human ends."<sup>48</sup> For Technical Rationality, knowledge is *in* the codified facts, theories, axioms, etc. Technical Rationality "leads us to think of intelligent practice as an *application* of knowledge to instrumental decisions"<sup>49</sup>.

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BP-positive language, relieved of the expense and frustration of such learning). Consequently, it must get its sustenance (novelty) from an outside source. In effect, a new "need" has arisen – and it won't be long before MTI capitalizes on responding to that new need. [Advertisement on the Internet for Andcor Best Practice solutions: "*Andcor will help you avoid the most common organizational pitfalls associated with rapid growth. With our guidance, your organization will have the right solutions at the right time. Through our vast network, Andcor can also help you establish strategic alliances with quality experts whom can further strengthen your ability to achieve your business goals.*" (cf. www.andcor.com)]

<sup>44</sup> The perspective in this section relies heavily on Donald Schön's work in *The Reflective Practitioner: How Professionals Think in Action* (USA: HarperCollins, 1983).

<sup>45</sup> I am using "epistemology" in its most general and non-technical sense: it is, as Gregory Bateson put it in *Mind and Nature* (1979), "how particular organisms or aggregates of organisms *know, think, and decide*" and "the study of the necessary limits and other characteristics of the processes of knowing, thinking, and deciding." (p. 250) More basic than any "theory", epistemology is important because: "... the deepest order of change that human beings are capable of demonstrating is epistemological change. A change in epistemology means transforming one's way of experiencing the world." [Bradford Keeney, *Aesthetics of Change* (NY: Guilford Press, 1983), p. 7]

<sup>46</sup> It is worth noting at this point that the social world is agonistic and complex – uncertain, unstable, unique, & rife with value conflict. It is exactly these characteristics that the commodity model winnows from the field of knowledge.

<sup>47</sup> Donald Schön was Ford Professor of Urban Studies and Education at MIT. From 1990 to 1992, he served as chair of the Department of Urban Studies and Planning. Schön was a major thinker in the philosophy of learning and practice. He died in 1997.

<sup>48</sup> Schön, *op. cit.*, p. 31.

<sup>49</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 50. Of course, Taylorism – BP's granddaddy - is one of the more extreme forms of Technical Rationality. Frederick Winslow Taylor was the first person to reduce the complexity of work (or practice) to actual mathematical equations. His intention was to transfer knowledge from the

Knowledge, then, becomes a kind of durable that can be packaged, stored, processed (e.g., made standardized & predictable), transported, and sold – in other words, it becomes *merchandise*. This merchandise is circulated throughout the consuming organizations like replaceable & exchangeable components within a large machine. Of course, servicing the machine (analyzing the functioning of its components and retooling them as needed) becomes the job of organizational *technocrats* – i.e., *professional* experts in the design & maintenance of the component parts. These technocrats solve problems by reducing complexity and dysfunction into their own component parts<sup>50</sup> which are handled (processed) by routinized practices (i.e., practices that eliminate the unpredictability of actual thought).<sup>51</sup> In BP, this commodified knowledge is called *benchmarks*; it is stored in policies, procedures, & technologies; it is applied in centers of excellence; and it even has a kind of "best before" date indicating its shelf life.

Of course, philosophical underpinnings rooted in positivistic and mercantile metaphors ought not to be surprising in a product hatched by an industry that is, after all, both *modern* and *commercial* in nature. It reflects nothing more than the pervasive consistency of BP in form, content, & principles. Indeed, to the extent that some knowledge *can* be usefully commodified, Technical Rationality is no doubt a very valuable social asset. Certainly, it is the basis of our modern economy and our vast social wealth.<sup>52</sup> And I am not suggesting that – pardon the cliché – we throw the baby out with the

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inarticulate guesswork of the craftsman to the charts & tables of the scientific investigator. Once captured in slide rules, there was no longer any need for individual judgement or know-how: knowledge could be carried off the shop floor, banked in the front office policies and directives, and doled out to control cheaper units of manpower (cheaper because they did not need to be knowledgeable, only capable of following orders). [See Kanigel, *op. cit.*] I have no doubt that this process marked the birth of "It's not in my job description!" – i.e., the workers' capitulation to the expropriation of their expertise.

<sup>50</sup> In the commodity model, *everything* has component parts – even the processes for dealing with component parts. I am reminded of the William James story (true or not, still marvelous) in which he is confronted by an elderly lady following one of his general lectures on cosmology. After informing James that he has got it all wrong – the Earth most certainly does not float mysteriously in empty space – she enlightened him with the fact that it stood on the back of a giant turtle. "Ah, but what does that turtle stand on?" asked James. "Why, another turtle, of course!" she replied patiently. And before James could respond with the predictable rejoinder about what *that* turtle must stand on, she cautioned him: "It's no good, Mr. James. It's turtles all the way down!" So it is in the commodity model: component parts *all the way down!* [Again, this proclivity to break things up into smaller parts is central to Taylorism as well – so we can see that it's in BP's genes.]

<sup>51</sup> Mickelthwait & Wooldridge tie this epistemology into the professionalization of management: "The premise behind this change was that a set of general concepts and generic principles could be applied in all circumstances. Belief in these universal ideas weaned managers from their earlier reliance on improvised in-house management practices and prepared them to become consumers of mass-produced and mass marketed managerial techniques." (*op. cit.*, p. 60) Technical Rationality sweeps aside *local knowledge* in favor of *universal knowledge*.

<sup>52</sup> Commodification of knowledge made *professionalization* possible; and the "professions have become essential to the very functioning of our society. We conduct society's principal business through professionals specially trained to carry out that business ... Our principal formal institutions – schools, hospitals, government agencies, courts of law, armies – are arenas for the exercise of professional activity. We look to professionals for the definition and solution of our problems, and it is through them that we strive for social progress." (Schön, *op. cit.*, pp. 3-4)

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bathwater by rejecting BP because it is grounded in an epistemology both dehumanizing<sup>53</sup> and passé. Rather, I am suggesting that in understanding the nature of the epistemology that informs BP we can also understand some of its major limitations. Understanding such limitations, we can then assess our options for overcoming them.

BP is, thanks to its fettering by this mechanistic epistemology, limited because its metaphors, upon which two of its most important elements stand, are ultimately inadequate for the needs and purposes of our field. In case these metaphors are not obvious, I will repeat them. They are:

1 *Knowledge is a Commodity* (it can be generalized, abstracted, packaged, stored, processed, transported, and sold; it is value-free, interchangeable, and time-limited);

and

2 *An Organization is a Machine* (it is an arrangement of nested component parts that work together in a systematic, mechanical fashion; it has identifiable structures and functions; it can be diagnosed, maintained, retooled, and even reengineered).<sup>54</sup>

In some types of social endeavor, practices based on these metaphors will yield valuable results.<sup>55</sup> The question has to be asked, however: *Are they adequate as a map to guide us in developing the knowledge and organizations necessary to be successful in delivering social services & children's mental health programs?* Remember, Horatio,<sup>56</sup> the map may not be the territory – but, if it's to be useful at all, it must tell us what we need to know. Does the map of Technical Rationality tell us what we need to know? Or are some fairly significant landmarks missing?

Certainly, *some* of the knowledge necessary for providing social services & children's mental health programs can be codified & packaged as *recipe* responses to our consumers (i.e., the children & families that are our clients). Discretion, judgement, & the willful artistry of the frontline therapist<sup>57</sup> can be severely and productively limited when:

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<sup>53</sup> "Dehumanizing" is precisely the word that best describes the reifying nature of the commodity and mechanistic metaphors of modernistic philosophy (what I refer to in other parts of this paper as "modernism"). It is quite literally the removal of the human from processes (such as knowledge and organizational development) that are inescapably human in nature.

<sup>54</sup> Even the term "organization" is blatantly metaphoric, comparing as it does the grouping of people acting together to an "organ". "Organ" may have a biological, as compared to mechanistic, flavor to it, but it remains nonetheless just another version of the machine metaphor, more sophisticated but still inadequate as a description of human behaviour in groups.

<sup>55</sup> For example, these metaphors are perfect for the production of things like cars and computer software. They are exactly the kind of thinking that fosters standardization, precision, and control. In fact, any type of social endeavor that requires mass response to highly defined, clear, concrete, commonplace, normative, and unexceptional needs is best-served by this kind of epistemology.

<sup>56</sup> As Shakespeare put it: "There are more things in heaven and earth, Horatio / Than are dreamt of in your philosophy."

<sup>57</sup> I am assuming here that the representative worker in our field can be defined as a "therapist" – and I use this term in its broadest sense: all "helpers", professional *and* paraprofessional, within the social service & children's mental health field [see *What Works [Who Works]*, *TI*, *vi*, #1]

- a) the problem, dysfunction, or need of the client is blatantly typical and can be categorized as a highly recognizable syndrome, symptom, or diagnosis;<sup>58</sup> or when
- b) the response to a client involves ensuring the safety, security, or protection of someone.

These are important functions in our field and the knowledge necessary to perform them is vital; however, they comprise a relatively small part of what the field is really all about and a small part of its knowledge needs. To gain a broader and more accurate conceptualization of these needs, I propose the following schema:

## MECHANICS

Sometimes the problems, dysfunctions, or needs of the clients are indeed "typical" – or at least highly predictable, repetitive, or specific (as above). A therapist can respond with treatments or interventions which are, in turn, typical, repetitive, and specific – and have been proven to produce identical and measurable results when properly applied to the targeted problem. The body of knowledge generated to ensure such standardization and consistency is the basis for calling various parts of our field by the term *profession*.

In this type of situation, diagnosis & technique supplant judgement & creativity: the therapist is called on to suspend critical & analytic thinking and exercise only the skill of following a recipe (usually one laid out in a "manual") in which he/she has been thoroughly trained, evaluated, and certified. Outcome is a function of the knowledge codified in the technique (*à la* Technical Rationality), not the capacity, inventiveness, or originality of the therapist. Indeed, the therapist is held to account by how little variation there is from the steps spelled out by the technique – and *quality* of service is defined by how close to the standard the therapist sticks. [This is one of the expectations that both Managed Care and "manualization" place on therapy.]

The "human" factor is largely eliminated from this type of situation: the client's condition and its treatment are not affected by the client *as an individual* or therapist *as an individual* – either of the latter may be replaced without affecting the expected result.

Most of the time, however, clients have an annoying way of foiling the intentions and expectations of the mechanical process described above.<sup>59</sup> Their perverse humanity insists

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<sup>58</sup> It has been my experience that any client problems, dysfunctions, or needs that fit this description usually have a biological nature or cause. In this regard, the "medical model" of psychotherapy – a mechanistic & commodity epistemology *par excellence* – is perfectly appropriate. After all, a broken arm is a broken arm – not a matter of context or interpretation. We expect the medical responses to it to be extremely predictable and consistent no matter who has the condition and no matter where it is treated. [That being said, however, it doesn't take a whole lot of critical ingenuity to discern that the "medical model" is really a very poor map of what medical treatment is really all about.]

<sup>59</sup> I was tempted to call the first type of knowledge-need "scientific" because of the emphasis on observable, repeatable, predictable, controlled, and universal characteristics. However, as pertinent as these things are to science as a social endeavor, they are - in the most important way possible - NOT what science really is. The term usually applied when science is

upon stamping an idiosyncratic character into their problems, dysfunctions, and needs: no two clients – even if stamped with the same diagnosis – are ever identical. The originality and imagination of humans as they entangle themselves in the contingencies and relationships of their lives are inexhaustible and unprecedented.

In this type of situation, the rules of engagement cannot be “read-only”, pre-programmed *instructions*. Instead, they must be *guidelines*: provisional starting points that initiate service to a client but do not dictate the therapist’s actions. Inevitably, discretion and judgement<sup>60</sup> enter the therapeutic process, since the standards (techniques) are understood to be fallible and incomplete rather than written in stone. The professional body of knowledge – so carefully constructed and maintained by technical methods – stops being a *recipe binding action to predictability* and becomes instead a *context prompting innovative action*.

When this happens, the process of therapy leads not to standardized, predictable results. Rather, results become raw precipitates of the interaction between (i) the standardizing impulse of professionalism, (ii) the unique circumstances & contingencies of the client, and (iii) the inventive, individual judgement of the therapist. They are, in other words, not mass-produced, carbon copies of some template, but jazzy variations on a theme, a one-of-a-kind thing – in short, a *craft*.

*The craft ideal is that each product is a little different; the commercial ideal is that they all be the same, and interchangeable. In the industrialization process, commercial production has been made very efficient through standardization, leading to pressure to apply analogous technology in all areas of endeavor including the professions. Many of us in child and youth care question this model, however, as at least partly inappropriate to the medium in which we work ...*

*The craft perspective, on the other hand, holds with those who maintain that the human services cannot be effectively standardized in the same way because their success is a function of the practitioner’s interpersonal sensitivity and effectiveness in applying the requisite knowledge and skills contextually ... Further this must be done in situations where the*

reduced to these characteristics is “scientistic” or “scientism”. I prefer to respect the larger and more accurate understanding of science by referring to these secondary characteristics as merely “mechanical”. Indeed, I find the kinds of activities presented in this schema as “craft” much closer to my understanding of real science - it is a bridge between the universal and the particular, the general and the unique, and science works *both* sides of this bridge in a very special way.

<sup>60</sup> Of course, judgement may emanate from either the individual (personal capacities, experiences, etc.) or from the practice community (the collective wisdom of trial-and-error experiences, clinical traditions of consultation, etc.). Andrews & Bonta [in *The Psychology of Criminal Conduct* (1998)] refer to this type of judgement as the *principle of professional discretion* and they make it one of the four basic pillars of service to youth in conflict with the law: “The principles of risk, need and responsivity do not provide the final word on offender assessment. Although they provide an empirical basis to offender assessment, sooner or later there will always be a case that does not fit the formula. There is room (and a need for) [*sic*] professional judgment, which can serve to override these principles of assessment in the unique case.”

*“product” is emergent and the task is defined as much by the dynamic and often unpredictable, step-by-step responses of clients and others as by the expertise of the worker.*<sup>61</sup>

Occasionally (but far from rarely<sup>62</sup>), therapists are confronted with client problems, dysfunctions, or needs that are entirely unresponsive to either the standard diagnostic categories or the standard intervention techniques of therapy<sup>63</sup> - so that *nothing works* or application of the usual labels and techniques actually makes the client’s condition worse.

In these situations, the professional body of knowledge becomes a *limiting factor* (a box), rather than a source of recipes and guidelines.<sup>64</sup> At this point, the therapist - if he/she is to be a help to the client rather than simply declaring the client “untreatable” - must “think outside the box”. The knowledge needed to solve the problem no longer lies in the *theories* of the profession (*à la* Technical Rationality), rather it lies in the *action* of the therapist<sup>65</sup> -

<sup>61</sup> Beker & Baizerman, “Beyond Professionalism”, *Journal of Child Care*, #1(1), 1982, pp. 16-17.

<sup>62</sup> Dr. Ephraim Friedman supposed that “85 percent of the problems a doctor sees in his office are not in the book.” [cf. Donald Schön, *op. cit.*, p. 16] This is an amazing statement because medicine is one of the pure – or what Nathan Glazer called “major” – professions: its goals, attributes, & contents are extremely rigorous & specifiable. Indeed, it, along with engineering, is a model for all professions. Social Work and the other professions in social services/children’s mental health, on the other hand, are “minor” professions – characterized by a high degree of ambiguity in method, content, & goals. One could reasonably expect that *higher* than 85 percent of the problems seen in these offices are “not in the book”. Perhaps it is these situations that should be labeled “most often” in the experience of the field.

<sup>63</sup> The conventional psychoanalyst Adam Phillips writes about the “drama” in therapy as driven by the patient’s need to escape the “already narrated, examined life of developmental theory”. Cf. *On Kissing, Tickling, and Being Bored* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1993). Milton Erikson refers to this unique aspect of a client’s life as “a universe of one” (“The Nature of Clinical Evidence”).

<sup>64</sup> Jay Haley identified this limiting capacity of the professional body of knowledge in his brief history of the development of therapy (“Therapy – A New Phenomenon”): “The theoretical analogies, or metaphors, trapped everyone into a particular way of thinking and so helped prevent us from conceptualizing the new forms of therapy developing. It would seem to be in the nature of a theory that it can restrict thinking. In this particular situation the analogies were too limited to deal with the complexities and changes in the field.” [*The Power Tactics of Jesus Christ and Other Essays* (New York: W. W. Norton & Co., 1986), p. 151] In essence, this is what I am describing as the limitation of BP – its underpinning metaphors (epistemology) restrict thinking in the social services & children’s mental health field because they are not suitable for applying to the complete range and complexity of the field’s knowledge needs in its primary service (i.e., therapy).

<sup>65</sup> “[...]here is nothing strange about the idea that a kind of knowing is inherent in intelligent action. Common sense admits the category of know-how, and it does not stretch common sense very much to say that the know-how is *in* the action ... There is nothing in common sense to make us say that know-how consists in rules or plans which we entertain in the mind prior to action. Although we sometimes think before acting, it is also true that in much of the spontaneous behavior of skillful practice we reveal a kind of knowing which does not stem from a prior intellectual operation.” (Schön, *op. cit.*, pp. 50-51)

in the therapist's ability to create a definition of the problem, to give it its unique form and coherence:

*In real-world practice, problems do not present themselves to the practitioner as givens. They must be constructed from the materials of problematic situations which are puzzling, troubling, and uncertain. In order to convert a problematic situation to a problem, a practitioner must do a certain kind of work. He must make sense of an uncertain situation that initially makes no sense ... When we set the problem, we select what we will treat as the "things" of the situation, we set the boundaries of our attention to it, and we impose upon it a coherence which allows us to say what is wrong and in what directions the situation needs to be changed. Problem setting is a process in which, interactively, we name the things to which we will attend and frame the context in which we will attend to them.<sup>66</sup>*

In constructing problems & solutions, setting boundaries to attention, imposing coherence, naming things, and framing contexts, the therapist goes past the mechanics of scientific rigor, past even the exercise of a crafty discretion and judgement – all the way to willful artistry. By what better name than *art*, could this "certain kind of work" be called?

*It is this entire process of reflection-in-action which is central to the "art" by which practitioners sometimes deal well with situations of uncertainty, instability, uniqueness, and value conflict.<sup>67</sup>*

Although this schema presents the knowledge needs of the therapeutic endeavor as a taxonomy with three distinct classes, it would be more realistic to think of them as simply phases within a continuum – a continuum that stretches from the high ground of *rigor* (the mechanical) to the swampy lowlands of *relevance* (the artistic):

*In the varied topography of professional practice, there is a high, hard ground where practitioners can make effective use of research-based theory and technique, and there is a swampy lowland where situations are confusing "messes" incapable of technical solution. The difficulty is that the problems of the high ground, however great their technical interest, are often relatively unimportant to clients or to larger society, while in the swamp are the problems of greatest human concern.<sup>68</sup>*

<sup>66</sup> Schön, *op. cit.*, p. 40.

<sup>67</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 50.

<sup>68</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 42. There is a general tendency in our society to reward professionals that practice on the high ground of rigor with higher status, pay, certifications, and respect – even though their work and results are not more socially useful or relevant. [Indeed, there is even a considerable body of critical literature that claims professionalism is not just over-valued but actually counterproductive. Summing up the case against professionalism, Schön notes: "In public outcry, in social criticism, and in the complaints of the professionals themselves, the long-standing professional claim to a monopoly of knowledge and social control is challenged – first, because professionals do not live up to the values and norms which they espouse, and second, because they are ineffective." (*op. cit.*, p. II, italics added)]

Measured against this continuum, the limitations of BP are quite evident: it functions well on the high ground but quickly loses its effectiveness and appropriateness as it slides into the swamp. The question for the social services & children's mental health field is *what kind of field do we have?* To the extent that it is high, hard, and dry, then BP should be our first choice. But if we are more swampy than dry, *what then?*

The second metaphor (*an organization is a machine*) underpinning BP is also inadequate for the needs and purposes of the organizations in the social services & children's mental health field – in fact, it is ultimately inadequate for *any* organization's needs and purposes. Metaphoric embellishment aside, an organization is not really – certainly not in the most important sense – a *machine*: it does not consist of fixed and moving mechanical parts operated by mechanical or electrical energies that unthinkingly and automatically produce an effect or fulfill a function. It cannot really be constructed, engineered, retooled, repaired, assembled, or disassembled. Under certain circumstances, however, it helps to think of an organization as a machine because a large part of what an organization must do is make its processes and products predictable and repeatable. We may call this machinelike aspect of an organization its *structural system*, and as Schön points out:

*Formal organizations are task-systems, systems of roles and rules, within which individuals serve as agents for the realization of organizational values, missions, policies, and strategies of action. Individual members contribute to the accumulation of organizational reservoirs of knowledge about the environment, strategies of action, and experiences which sometimes become exemplars for future action. Individuals' contributions enter into organizational memories, maps, and programs, on which other individuals draw as they enact their roles ... formal organizations also have a powerful interest in the stability and predictability of organizational life. An organization is a cooperative system in which individuals depend on the predictability of one another's responses. Managers must rely on the predictable behavior of their subordinates.<sup>69</sup>*

Knowledge that can be commodified by Technical Rationality is suitable for housing in institutes of higher learning, protected by licensing, and sold back to consumers as value-enhanced. In this way, "ordinary" knowledge is mystified into the "extraordinary" knowledge of a profession. To critics on the political left (e.g., Ivan Illich, John McKnight, Magali Larson), this mystification is seen as an instrument of social control by which the "haves" subjugate the "have-nots" – and its demystification is a matter of social justice. To proponents on the political right, however, such mystification is simply an incentive system that rewards the best minds in our society and encourages the continuous transformation of swampy, lowland messes into productive, high ground solutions. Without this incentive, there could be no distribution of solutions through society: all knowledge and expertise would be locally bound. In this perspective, real social justice means making solutions universally available and rewarding those who make this possible.

<sup>69</sup> Schön, *op. cit.*, p. 327. Schön calls the most rigid form of the *structural system* a *bureaucracy* – bureaucratization happens when the structural demands of an organization dominate all of its purposes and goals. Also: "Organizations, furthermore, are repositories of cumulatively built-up knowledge: principles and maxims of practice, images of mission and identity, facts about the task environment, techniques of operation, stories of past experience which serve as exemplars for future action." (p. 242) In this passage, Schön ties together the two mechanistic metaphors.

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Undoubtedly, the *organization-is-a-machine* metaphor advances and sustains this interest.

However, an organization also has a powerful interest in *change* and *innovation*, in the survival/adaptation processes identified above as *creativity*. An organization must have more than just the bureaucratic capacity to remain stable and integral; it must be able to move forward, to modify its responses & behaviors, to develop & evolve. Schön calls this aspect of an organization its *learning system* – and this system is diametrically opposed to the *structural system*, in the sense that conditions conducive to one are adverse to the other: the *learning system* pivots on *surprise*, on *differentiation*, and on *complexity* rather than on *predictability*, *replication*, and *simplicity*. While the *structural system* establishes **Order**, the *learning system* – to resort to another MTI buzzword – *thrives on Chaos*.<sup>70</sup> This aspect of an organization would be better served by a metaphor like *an organization is a person* than by the machine metaphor. After all, *creativity* and *learning* presume qualities such as agency, design, intention, value, flexibility, judgement, surprise, differentiation, and so on – qualities that we associate with the *human* world, not the *machine* world.<sup>71</sup> Schön acknowledges this “person-like” nature of the *learning system* by pointing out that it depends upon some very social and all-too-human capacities within an organization, specifically: (a) the competence to surface negative information (i.e., information that contradicts or challenges the organization’s formal policies, values, and beliefs); (b) the confidence to tolerate uncertainty & confusion and to resolve the conflicts of value that flow from those conditions; and (c) the courage to publicly air sensitive issues and organizational dilemmas. In short, the organization must have its share of *social skills*<sup>72</sup> for which a machine metaphor would be wholly inadequate either as a basis of understanding or as a prescription for development.<sup>73</sup>

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<sup>70</sup> It can't be emphasized too strongly that my argument in this paper is **not** that *bureaucracy* is a bad thing and *learning* a good thing. My point – and I believe Schön's as well – is that there must be a balance between the two necessary systems. Certainly, too much *bureaucracy* leads to *rigor mortis* and the petrification of an organization. But too much *learning* – that is, too free a rein on the agonistic, innovative, and unpredictable aspects in an organization – can lead to unproductive situations like change for the sake of change and loss of organizational direction – a kind of *tumultus mortis*, death by too much fooling around.

<sup>71</sup> Of course, the machine metaphor does have a term for dealing with the people in an organization, but its reductionist straitjacket cuts off everything about them that is essentially human (their unpredictability, uniqueness, agency, complexity, confusion, values, differences, emotion, rebelliousness, surprise, autonomy, etc.). Instead of “people”, they become “human resources” – which is a fleshy *commodity* but not a *community*. The disrespect inherent in the term “human resources” is amazingly hidden from view and almost never challenged within an organization – but the impact it has on the people in that organization is quite visible in the actions that are carried out on them. [It's another Orwellian irony that someone who “likes to work with people” often ends up in the Human Resources Department.] Typical of the hollow respect for people as people, one recent radio advertisement gushes that “our people are our most precious asset” – an *asset*, of course, being disposable property.

<sup>72</sup> Schön even goes so far as to identify the imperfect world of petty and personal politics – with its “win/lose games of attack and defense, deception, and collusion” (p.328) – as essential elements of the *learning system*.

<sup>73</sup> Schön's distinction between the *structural system* and the *learning system* within organizations dovetails nicely with Mickelthwait's & Wooldridge's distinction between “scientific” and “humanistic” management. Mickelthwait & Wooldridge see trends in MTI bouncing back and forth between these

... *The Taming of the Shmoo* ...<sup>74</sup>

To summarize the case against Best Practice:

1. Although emotionally, logically, anecdotally, and consensually attractive, *there really is no hard, scientific proof that organizations that adopt it actually become more efficient and effective* (or meet any other goals of organizational improvement).<sup>75</sup> Its appeal cannot be attributed to it being a value-free theoretical model chiseled from relevant experience and tempered by scientific research. Rather, it is principally a marketable product of the Management Theory Industry - in effect, the most recent iteration of Taylorism dressed up in the soft, fuzzy language of Humanistic Management.
2. *It sacrifices the creative and learning capacities of an organization to a low-cost, low-risk habit of mimicry*. Based on the Tayloristic belief that an organization's productivity and performance are rooted in abstract calculations, standards, & policies (rather than in the collaboration, commitment, ingenuity, and capabilities of the *people who are the organization*), it encourages *both* (a) the degeneration of an organization's innovative and leadership capacities *and* (b) the dependence of the organization on external sources of ideas and solutions.
3. *It is at best a partial map of the epistemological territory that comprises the social services & children's mental health field*. The most vital characteristics of the *knowledge* needed to meet the purposes and goals of therapy – that is, of the type of *thinking* needed to negotiate the limitations and intricacies of therapy and the *decision criteria* that promote appropriate action in therapy - are all lost on the procrustean bed of BP's Technical Rationality.

These criticisms, however, are **not** an argument to do away with Best Practice. Somewhere short of a fatal dispatch but well into envious griping, they are meant solely as a serious caution against letting the toxic elements underpinning BP haphazardly infect the structures,

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two poles. Scientific management focuses exclusively on bureaucratic needs, while humanistic management focuses on learning needs. Both types of management are required in a delicate balance if an organization is to survive *and* thrive. However, MTI trends focus on one pole to the exclusion of the other, causing an inevitable – sorry, another intolerable buzzword – *backlash*. Of course, selling “balance” between these extremes is not really in the interest of MTI: the constant reevaluation between the scientific and the humanistic generates a necessary strategy of “planned obsolescence”.

<sup>74</sup> A shmoo, for those too young to remember, was a character from Al Capp's comic, “Li'l Abner”. Like BP, shmoo delivered answers to human prayers without humans having to work for anything. Also like BP, they reproduced effortlessly and people had an unsettling habit of becoming dependent upon them, growing lazy and complacent. Shmoo represented the “something for nothing” desire of mankind. Of course, the analogy does break down because BP-shmoo are hardly free.

<sup>75</sup> Indeed, if it is anything like its immediate precursors, TQM & BPR, it may follow the short-term-gain-long-term-pain syndrome: initial enthusiastic changes are followed by unanticipated negative consequences. [MTI relies upon this syndrome to fuel its long-term marketing strategies.] There is a *Hawthorne-like Effect* involved in the marketing of any change strategy to an organization: i.e., any change will have positive results when the change is actively sought or controlled by the participants – but the effect is independent of its sustainability.

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relationships, and activities of the therapeutic field. Much of what BP has to offer an organization is indeed “good medicine”, but like chemotherapy too much of a good thing will have unwanted consequences. Understanding the dangers and limitations of BP allows us to confine its application to those areas of organizational development and organizational purpose & goals that are best-suited to its competence with standardization, measurement, predictability, commodification of knowledge, and so forth – in short, to those areas where organizational behaviour is, or can be made, productively machinelike. BP, in the form I have presented here, is simply not appropriate for those areas that demand real innovation, creativity, flexibility, unique responses – in short, those confusing, complex, unpredictable areas of organizational behaviour that depend upon human commitment, ingenuity, and collaboration to effect organizational purposes & goals.

Of course, proponents of BP are quick to point out that it was never meant to be just the mindless duplication of what another organization does. Unlike the straw-man version presented here, *real* benchmarking is supposedly a very creative, unique, and unpredictable process. The foreign ideas/practices from the host, after all, have to be adjusted & modified, tweaked & polished, fine-tuned & dithered – in short, *customized* - to fit the parasite’s idiosyncratic needs [and we’ve got just the *software/manual/seminar to help you through this dark passage!*]. Thus, it is a highly skilled activity that requires judgement, ingenuity, and a host of other “human” capacities. If one wants to truly understand BP, one must see it *in vivo* and not simply judge it by its presentation on the lifeless stage of theory.

Besides watering down the strong variety of BP – which is a good thing – and being essentially self-contradictory,<sup>76</sup> this version does little to mitigate the impact of the criticisms: It says nothing at all to counter the lack of research confirming its effectiveness. It opens a small back door to organizational creativity, but confines it to the kitchen of detail juggling and jiggling, far from the *learning system* where the radical innovation and true leadership necessary for organizational survival and growth are nurtured. And, finally, it ignores the different kinds of knowledge strategies needed to make the organization successful in meeting its goals & purposes.<sup>77</sup>

It does, however, present us with the opportunity to reframe benchmarking in a way that *can* make it part of an organization’s *learning system*, rather than just part of its *structural system*. Edward de Bono points out quite succinctly that the “over-all purpose of creativity is to change ideas or produce additional new ones.”<sup>78</sup> One

way to accomplish this purpose is the introduction of a mechanism that challenges old ideas and provides a stock of new ones into an organization. Clearly, BP has the potential to be such a mechanism.

A major element in the contextual frame of a conceptual model is its interpreted *intention*. When the intention of BP is simply the obliteration of old practices and the infection of the organization with pre-packaged new ones, nothing creative (no real learning) is going on. What can be changed is this *intention*. BP can be shifted from being understood as a means of obliteration<sup>79</sup> and infection to being understood as a means for *challenging old ideas* and *providing a stock of new ones*. Given a different intention, different steps in the mechanism become possible – and so do different outcomes. Specifically, the old stock of ideas (which in some important way preserves the organization’s accumulated wisdom and expertise) can be *rejuvenated* rather than *obliterated* – that is, what is practical, relevant, unique, and effective about the old ideas/practices can be *sharpened* through critical exchange with new ideas or *augmented* by convergence of old and new.<sup>80</sup> The ideas/practices that emerge from this challenging and enhancing process, then, will be neither a continuation of the same old story nor a star-struck imitation of the new kid on the block. Instead, they represent genuinely innovative and adaptive practices – new behaviours and solutions nourished by (a) the existing capacities of the organization, (b) the accumulated wisdom and experience of the organization, and (c) fresh

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matters of creativity: more than any other author in the MTI literature, he attempts to make creativity practical by codifying the components of the creative process into repeatable techniques. His work is often just a recipe for creativity. I believe it was from his concept of *lateral thinking* that the precious “*Think outside the box!*” catch phrase originated. Nonetheless, I admire his strategies and techniques. They are invaluable tools in the creative process whatever their philosophical roots.

<sup>79</sup> Like its immediate precursor, BPR, BP capitalizes on the recent MTI trend of “revolution” – it has become appealing to businesses to relieve the anxiety of influence by institutionalizing rebellion: “Capitalism, at least as it is envisioned by the best-selling management handbooks, is no longer about enforcing Order, but destroying it. ‘Revolution,’ once the totemic catchphrase of the counterculture, has become the totemic catchphrase of the boomer-as-capitalist. The Information Age businessman holds inherited ideas and traditional practices not in reverence, but in high suspicion.” [Thomas Frank, in Frank & Weiland, *op. cit.*, p. 38] While I agree with the gist of what Frank means here, he has got the problem of Order quite wrong. MTI capitalism is not rebelling against Order *per se*, but against the Order that is grounded in local traditions and unique solutions. This type of Order is not easily commodified – like houseplants, it tends to die when uprooted. MTI, through products like BPR and BP, wants to sell its own kind of Order (the kind with mass-produced capability and expiration dates). [Indeed, Information Age capitalism’s relation to local Order is even more complicated than simple opposition or revolution. Opposition/Revolution is the agenda of the day only for those local Orders that constitute the “core” consuming classes – i.e., the “haves” with economic buying power. However, the local Order of the “margins” – i.e., the “have-nots” bereft of economic participation – supplies the templates for revolution that get sold to the “haves” (which is why the ghetto, the barrio, the closet, etc., have become the source for our children’s clothing, music, art, and language). But, of course, even this marginal local Order is not preserved in its appropriation by capitalism, only exploited and neutered as it is re-tooled by the Procrustean jaws of marketing.]

<sup>80</sup> It can even work the other way around: new ideas/practices can be sharpened on the grindstone of old expertise. And this process is **not** to be confused with the customization and fine-tuning exercises of the BP proponents. Such adjustments are all done after the fact – i.e., they are simply the streamlining of the imitation (like anti-rejection drugs ensuring an organ transplant).

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<sup>76</sup> It is self-contradictory in at least two ways: First, a cribbed idea/practice, no matter how much it is powdered & perfumed, is either substantially preserved in the benchmarking process or it is substantially changed. If the former, then the criticisms stand as valid and powerful limitations on BP. If the latter, then we are not really talking about BP at all because what gets constructed is something new and, therefore, untried, untested, and unable to lay a claim to the quality of being the “best”. Proponents of BP can’t have it both ways. Second, if the contention is taken seriously, it is saying, in effect, that real knowledge does not lie in the codified standards, policies, & practices (as its principles maintain), but in the mysterious thought processes of the people making the adjustments and modifications.

<sup>77</sup> It ignores them or it takes them so profoundly seriously that it undercuts its own premises – it’s hard to tell. [I suppose this space of indecision, where form contradicts content, could be a deconstructive door into the BP discourse. I will, however, resist knocking.]

<sup>78</sup> *Practical Thinking* (Markham, ON: Penguin Books, 1971), p. 160. There is a paradox (hopefully not just a contradiction) in appealing to de Bono on

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perspectives.<sup>81</sup> In this way, BP can be implemented in an organization in a manner that preserves the necessary balance between the organization's *structural system* and its *learning system*.<sup>82</sup>

#### AFTERTHOUGHTS

[1] The gist of the preceding essay was conceptualized and drafted more than five years ago – when the idea of Best Practice was obviously more of a force to be reckoned with in the field of children's services. That force seems to have abated quite a bit.<sup>83</sup> Certainly, "best practice" is still around: it's hard to imagine that any funding initiative or proposal (let alone any program or service description) would be written without some reference to it. These days, we genuflect to it without a second thought (probably without even a first one). However, this new taken-for-granted "best practice" is only a shadowy mutation of the Best Practice juggernaut I have challenged here: the benchmarking, the analyses of functional areas, the continuous improvement strategy, and the self-conscious centers of excellence have all largely disintegrated, giving way to a generalized background noise of common sense. [Who, after all, doesn't believe that our goal should be to provide the best possible practice?]

So what happened? Well, I think there are two quick answers:

First, it's in the nature of MTI theories that they have short shelf lives – after all, they depend upon the constant generation of emotional

responses from the consumer (particularly the *anxiety* that one will be bettered by one's competition/rivals and the *excitement* of being part of something novel and advanced, i.e., something that gives one an edge over the competition/rival). To maintain an emotional receptiveness, the message must keep changing; otherwise, the consumer habituates to it and a more cautious reflection starts to set in (usually on the tail of questions like "Is this really making a difference?" and "Can we afford to keep committed to it?"). Naturally, the MTI competitors are always knocking on the door with the next Best Thing.

I find it interesting (and, admittedly, a self-serving confirmation of the position I have taken about the limitations of Best Practice) that some of the MTI gurus have recognized that Best Practice does not capture the comprehensive knowledge needs of organizations – that there are also those "local" sources of knowledge that should not be overlooked.<sup>84</sup> As an example, I offer the following excerpt from the MIT Sloan Management Review website. In it, the reviewers point out the wisdom now being pursued by the leading thinkers in the study of organizational leadership and change:

*The importance of implementing best management practices is widely understood. However, the authors argue, best practice alone is not enough. They use examples of three high-performing companies to show that those companies not only use standard best practices but also embrace internally developed idiosyncratic "signature processes" that reflect the history and values of the organization and executive team ... The mechanisms by which signature processes develop differ from those associated with best-practice ideas, however. The latter are often adapted from shared knowledge originating outside the company, whereas signature processes start with the values that internal executives champion.*<sup>85</sup>

Second, Best Practice in our field (indeed in the larger field of all human services) has been eclipsed by – or perhaps the better word is "subsumed by" – another trend, namely: evidence-based practice [EBP] (also known as: evidence-supported, empirically validated, or empirically-supported treatment[EST]). The superior influence of EBP was hinted at near the beginning of this particular essay when it was indicated that BP was lacking precisely because there is no evidence that it actually works [see page 4 above]. [See also the first article in this journal, *What Works [Who Works]*, for a look at our practice with youth in conflict with the law from an EBP perspective.]<sup>86</sup>

[2] Perhaps the major point of this essay is the necessity for balancing *both* improvement and innovation – i.e., we ought not sacrifice the latter on the altar of the former (just as it would be short-sighted to do the opposite as well). We need both capacities if

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<sup>81</sup> Again, my argument in a nutshell is that MTI BP sacrifices (a) & (b) on the altar of (c), presuming that there is always "one best way" for a function to be designed or a purpose to be met.

<sup>82</sup> Two points:

First, I don't expect that this modification will be acceptable to proponents of BP because it eliminates the key element of BP, namely: the belief that there truly and absolutely is "one best way" that can be commodified, standardized, measured, and sold. My interpretation of "best" is radically relativistic: "best" is simply "what is best for *this* organization at *this* time under *this* circumstance".

Second, from the perspective of de Bono's theories on creativity, there is no reason why the ideas/practices imported from external sources need to be the "best" in their field or function. Random, arbitrary, and wildly dissimilar ideas/practices can serve equally well as challenges and sources of new ideas. However, I do endorse staying with the identification of what are supposedly the "best" because this label overcomes a certain resistance to new ideas. By nature practical and opportunistic, people will be more open to a new idea if they are convinced from the start that it is relevant and effective for their purposes.

<sup>83</sup> On the other hand, even as late as 2003, a leading figure in correctional thinking, Dr. Reginald Wilkinson, was touting "best practice" as the only solution to the formidable turbulence convulsing the correctional field:

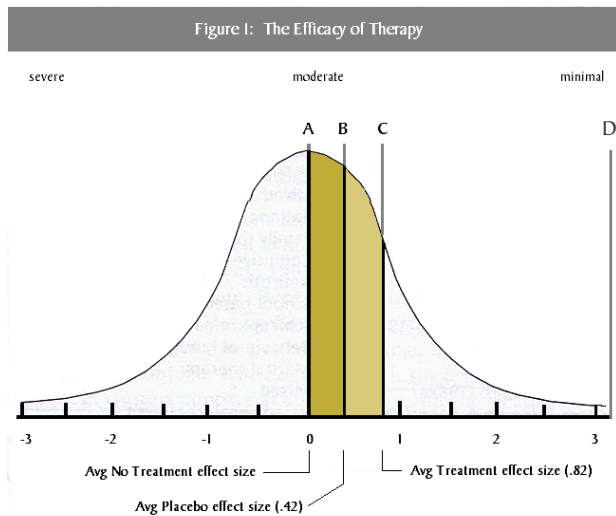
*It is evident that correctional administrators and leaders must navigate through the white waters of incessant change. For the foreseeable future, they are also going to be confronted with the need to make decisions within an environment of severe budgetary constraints ... In this context, the concept of best practices becomes both relevant and mandatory. More than ever before, it is critical that correctional best practices become part of the mainstream of how we conduct our work. The notion of best practices is responsive to the public's conviction that the justice system no longer represents a credible response to the problem of crime. Choosing to embrace correctional best practices provides an indispensable foundation for responding effectively to change, tight economic constraints, and public cynicism regarding the outcomes that are produced by those working in our profession. [see: [www.drc.state.oh.us/web/Articles/article91.htm](http://www.drc.state.oh.us/web/Articles/article91.htm)]*

<sup>84</sup> That is, that there is more to organizational functioning than just "mechanics" or technical knowledge – there is also a "craft" and an "art".

<sup>85</sup> The review is of an article called *Beyond Best Practice* by Lynda Gratton and Sumantra Ghoshal (2005). See: [sloanreview.mit.edu/smr/issue/2005/spring/11](http://sloanreview.mit.edu/smr/issue/2005/spring/11). [There is something both fascinating and brilliant in this line of thought: be prepared – the MTI gurus are going to start selling us our own local knowledge under the rubric of "signature processes".]

<sup>86</sup> The rise of the influence of EBP/EST in our field is a story better left for another time. At this point, all I will say is that, however it started, it was given a huge boost by (a) the historical animosity between behavioral psychology and psychoanalysis [with the former believing EBP was a lethal blow to the latter] and (b) Managed Care [which saw it as a method for controlling medical practice].

we are to keep our organizations and our field relevant and growing. One way of thinking about this balance is to consider the measure of therapeutic effectiveness as it is represented in the bell curve [à la Michael Lambert] reproduced in *What Works [Who Works], Talking Incoherently*, v.1, #1:



At best, Best Practice would ensure that our service efforts moved our effectiveness from line A to line C – and that’s with the assumption that local knowledge (or “signature processes) make absolutely no contribution to effectiveness (a highly unlikely assumption). But our professional (and ethical) goal should be to move the line representing effectiveness completely to the right side of the diagram (line D) – i.e., we should have the goal or ideal that all clients receiving therapy improve to the point of being fully and normally functioning human beings. Best Practice cannot get us there by itself: the best it can do is pull everyone up to the current state of effectiveness (line C) – a not unworthy goal, but far from where we truly want and need to be. To reach line D, we need *innovation* – we need new and creative solutions – and these are built not on mimicry and homogenization of knowledge, but on the mysterious practice of the professional therapist trying to navigate the swampy lowlands of human life. What organizational and systemic supports can we put in place to impel us past the limitation of Best Practice?

- *Terry Henry*