



# Change the Questions, Change the World Creating the Future's Theory of Everything

*Version 1.01*

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please share it!

**Draft**



February 1, 2015

Dear Reader:

Thank you for helping to make this paper as clear, consistent and powerful as it can be.

This draft is Part 1 of 2 of a white paper that will describe Creating the Future's theory of change and the framework that puts the theory into action. (Part 2 will be the action framework, not yet written.)

The audience for this white paper will be the world - a general audience piece for people who want to make a difference, however they define "make a difference." It will be posted at our website to explain the grounding for everything Creating the Future is doing, for anyone who arrives at our site.

Once this piece is solid, we'll be drafting an executive summary and video as an introduction and invitation for people who share our commitment to accomplishing this mission, and may want to partner with us to make that happen. That is why your help is invaluable in making sure this paper accomplishes all it needs to accomplish!

As you read, please consider the following questions (and please add any questions we've missed):

- Is it clear? Do you get a solid sense of what our theory of change is?
- What stands out to you AS you are reading it?
- What stays with you AFTER you've read it?
- Does the tone of the writing reflect who we are? (Hard to get tone spot on in the first few rounds of writing something this complex)
- If there are things that don't sit right, what is it about those things that doesn't feel right?
- What questions does this raise for you about Creating the Future? (i.e. What is this still not answering?)
- Does it make you want to read the 2nd half / learn more about our work?
- What questions should we have asked here that I did not?

Please share your answers to these questions, as well as any other thoughts and questions, in the comments [at this blog post](#). That will help us keep all comments in one place, for our ease in finding / using them all!

Again, we are all deeply grateful for your taking the time to share your thoughts and make this piece the best it can be. We look forward to hearing from you!

**Draft**

# **Change the Questions, Change the World Creating the Future's Theory of Everything**

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# Change the Questions, Change the World

## Creating the Future's Theory of Everything

At Creating the Future, we envision a world where people are living well individually and collectively, bringing out the best in each other and themselves. We know this is possible, simply because it is not impossible.

The stories of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century Freedom movements are known throughout the world. The Indian Independence Movement. The American Civil Rights Movement. The South African Freedom Movement.

In place of injustice, democracy flourished, economies flourished, freedom flourished. The world saw leaders in those nations with skin the color of the earth itself - a thought that was inconceivable a mere 50 years earlier.

What would it take for the conditions that led to these huge leaps forward in human progress to become the norm for every effort for human progress, everywhere, by anyone?

### **Our Story (and yours, too?)**

In the late 1990's, my consulting partner and I grew frustrated with the fact that no matter how hard our clients were working, and no matter how well-funded they were, how strong their boards, or how focused their plans... the degree of long-term change they were creating in their communities never lived up to what the leaders of those organizations sensed was possible.

Each of those clients thought it was just them. They would share that confession with us, frequently over drinks in a quiet place, feeling that they were missing something that should have been obvious. If only they could raise more money, find more influential board members, create the perfect strategic plan - perhaps then they could make a bigger dent.

Many boards, plans and capacity building initiatives later, that feeling of "what am I doing wrong?" would frequently lead to giving up - we've tried everything, and still we are not accomplishing what we all sense is possible.

Coming from a business turnaround background - not in the community benefit world, but in the million-dollar-business world - we did what we knew. We began to tear things apart and ask a lot of questions to find, "What is stopping these millions of people all over the globe from creating the world they are all working so hard to create?"

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The leaders of these efforts all thought the obstacles were outside their control - competition for scarce resources, or the legislature, or the complex depth and breadth of the issues, or the inability of the organizations in their area to work together.

But here's what we saw:

None of these groups was creating a healthy, vibrant, humane future for their communities because none of their work was aimed at creating that future.

In fact, in capacity building programs and in their work with smart consultants, they were (and still are) all been taught NOT to aim that high, with advice to "Be a hedgehog" and "stick to core competencies."

It was true that by sticking to what they did well, they would be rewarded with funding, which would allow them to keep doing their work. Most of the organizational leaders we worked with had successfully navigated that path; their organizations were stable, with solid programs, solid funding and a solid team.

Yet these same leaders shared almost in whispers how draining it was to be repeatedly told that the very reason they got into this work in the first place - to make a huge, honking difference - was just not realistic.

### **Our Quest**

"The Twentieth Century will be chiefly remembered by future generations not as an era of political conflicts or technical inventions, but as an age in which human society dared to think of the welfare of the whole human race as a practical objective."  
~ Arnold J. Toynbee

What would it take for groups and individuals to create the change they so passionately wanted to see?

For years, we sought the answer to that question.

We knew from recent history that there were groups who didn't set aside their dreams - they boldly chased them, and the results were revolutionary, from the Internet and the cell phone to the South African Freedom movement, from the development of oral contraceptives and the mass production of automobiles to the U.S. Civil Rights movement.

Through our research, coupled with almost two decades of experimentation and the developing practice of Creating the Future's fellows, what we have found flies in the face of the common knowledge we all assume as "the truth."

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Contrary to that common knowledge, change does not have to happen slowly; it can happen very fast. Change does not have to happen by incremental baby steps; it can happen dramatically.

And contrary to the common wisdom that “change is hard,” in the work of the 100+ Creating the Future fellows around the world, the process of change can be joyful.

The key lies in the questions we are asking - the assumptions that lie at the heart of not just the work of people in social change organizations, but in every business, every government program, and in our day-to-day lives.

Sharing those questions is what Creating the Future is all about. And it is what this paper will describe.

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## Part I - What is happening when humanity takes dramatic leaps forward?

At Creating the Future, our mission is to change the questions embedded in the day-to-day work of individuals and organizations, so that everyone naturally brings out the best in each other and in our world.

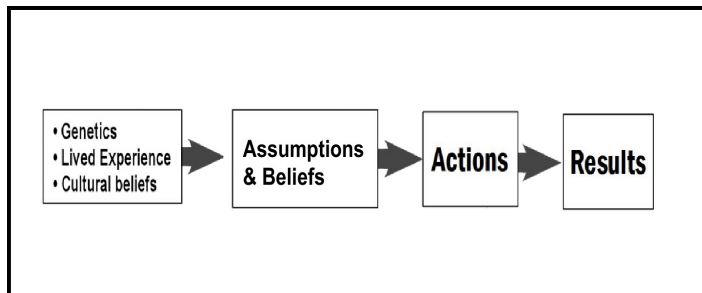
As we seek to accomplish Creating the Future's mission, one core assumption guides every aspect of that work: the interdependent reality of causality.

Everything that exists today is the result of countless causes-and-effects that have come before us. And through cause-and-effect, everything we do today is creating the future.

When we think about cause and effect, we tend to think about actions - past actions that have led to the world we currently inhabit.

But the cause to each of those actions lies in our thoughts - our assumptions and beliefs about the situations we encounter and about the people in those situations.

We are what we think.  
Everything that we are arises with our thoughts.  
With our thoughts, we create the world.  
~ *The Buddha*



Our assumptions and beliefs create the actions that create the results we achieve.

Here are just a few examples of the countless assumptions that have guided day-to-day life since our species first walked this planet.

- People will rob you blind if you aren't careful.
- People can be trusted.
  
- The world is flat.
- The world is round.

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- There will always be poverty.
- All earth's inhabitants can live well, individually and collectively.
- There will always be war.
- People can live in peace and harmony despite their differences.
- Dark-skinned people are inferior to light-skinned people.
- Light-skinned people are inferior to dark-skinned people.
- Judging people based on skin color is absurd.

Assumptions are the stories we tell ourselves that we believe simply to be “the truth” - the questions we are answering that we don't even realize have been asked.

“If you understand, things are such as they are.  
If you do not understand, things are such as they are.”  
~ Zen master Gensha

The stories we tell ourselves don't change the actual facts. Whether we believe the earth is round or flat, it is what it is.

Regardless of facts, however, the stories we tell ourselves will determine what we do with those facts. Our actions will be determined by our assumptions, whether those assumptions are empirically accurate or not.

The answer to our frustration, then, is not going to be found in our well-intentioned quest for social innovations. It will be found in changing the assumptions upon which those innovative plans are built.

### **The Assumptions Embedded in Humanity's Huge Leaps Forward**

In our research and development work, we have found three core assumptions that determine the success or failure of any endeavor - business, community, science, interpersonal.

- 1) Assumptions about what is possible
- 2) Assumptions about other people
- 3) Assumptions about resources

The difference between what happens when humanity takes huge leaps forward vs. endeavors that struggle in frustration can be found in what the leaders of those efforts believe about these three assumptions.

### **Assumptions about What Is Possible**

One of the traits that separates humans from the rest of our animal brethren is our ability to envision a future different from the present.

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When humanity takes huge leaps forward - whether in social, scientific or technological progress, that change is led by the assumption that unless something is impossible, it is possible - that we can achieve anything we reach for.

Cell phones and space travel and the legalization of same sex marriage are not the result of magic; they are the result of cause and effect. In each case that cause-and-effect began with the assumption that a future significantly different from the present is possible. From there, steps were put into motion to make that potential reality.

One of the most commonly referenced examples of this is the US Civil Rights Movement, if for no other reason than its aims were so deeply ingrained in our psyche via Dr. King's "I Have a Dream" speech.

"I have a dream that my four little children will one day live in a nation where they will not be judged by the color of their skin but by the content of their character."

Within 50 years of that speech, during a time when southern states in the U.S. prohibited African Americans from voting - and within only 8 years of the last U.S. state to remove laws prohibiting interracial marriage from their constitution\* - the son of an interracial couple became president of the United States. Four years later, the people re-affirmed that this was not a fluke, electing him to office again.

Unless something is physically impossible, it is indeed possible. And because each of us is creating the future every single day, whether we do so consciously or not,\*\* humanity's huge leaps forward are consistently the result of our reaching beyond the norm of what others assume is possible, and then leveraging cause-and-effect to make it so.

### **Is this assumption the norm?**

To answer this question, let's begin where many professionals learn the assumptions that will guide their work - in the world of academia, where the road to advanced knowledge leads to advanced degrees in business (Masters in Business Administration), government (Masters in Public Administration), "nonprofit" / community development (Masters in Nonprofit Management) or in the burgeoning academic field of Social Enterprise (where fields of study blend aspects of nonprofit management with a solid MBA program).

\* Per Wikipedia: [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Loving\\_v.\\_Virginia#cite\\_ref-17](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Loving_v._Virginia#cite_ref-17)

*Despite the Supreme Court's decision, anti-miscegenation laws remained on the books in several states, although the decision had made them unenforceable. Local judges in Alabama continued to enforce that state's anti-miscegenation statute until the Nixon administration obtained a ruling from a U.S. District Court in United States v. Brittain in 1970. In 2000, Alabama became the last state to adapt its laws to the Supreme Court's decision, when 60% of voters endorsed a ballot initiative that removed anti-miscegenation language from the state constitution.*

\*\* From: *The Pollyanna Principles: Reinventing Nonprofit Organizations to Create the Future of the World*

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People who have become expert in those areas of management and administration frequently rise quickly in organizational leadership positions. Others, however, choose to share their expertise by consulting, where new management systems seem to spring up every few years - Six Sigma, Lean Manufacturing and the like.

The thing all these degree programs and management systems have in common is that they are all about responding and managing - reacting to existing circumstances and improving upon what already exists.\*

And while management thinking is the foundation for much of organizational decision making across all sectors, that thinking is at its most potent when organizations enter into strategy sessions - the opportunity for organizations across all sectors to create their future.

Driven by the assumption that “You can’t get where you’re going unless you know where you are,” planning routinely begins with intensive research into current circumstances - SWOT analyses, environmental scans, root cause analyses, regression analyses and other systems intended to ensure the plan is data-driven and evidence-based. The intent of this first step of researching and analyzing the data is to ensure the plan is rooted in reality (i.e. able to assuredly react to the present).

Because data is, by definition, a description of the present or the past, all those plans and programs that are built on a foundation of data are tethered not to our dreams for the future, but to our present reality.

Some forward-thinking strategists and organizations suggest that their work is not reactive, but proactive and preventative. Sadly, prevention is actually a future-facing way of reacting to what’s wrong, by making sure those bad things don’t happen in the future.

Pursuing ideas that are not a data-driven reaction to the present is so outside the norm that there is actually a name for it - blue sky thinking.\*\* The assumption in that name is clear: Unsupported by facts, these ideas are speculative, a luxury only for those with the money and time to spend on such frivolity. Such non-data-driven blue sky ideas - the kinds of ideas that put people into space and gave South Africa and the U.S. black presidents after centuries of structural racism - those ideas can be expected to be met not with encouragement, but with the admonition to “get real.”

\* See end notes for a course list for Leadership degree programs, where the curricula are almost identical to management degree programs.

\*\* Per Wikipedia: [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Blue\\_sky\\_research](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Blue_sky_research)  
Blue skies research (also called blue sky science) is scientific research in domains where “real world” applications are not immediately apparent. It has been defined as “research without a clear goal” and “curiosity-driven science.” It is sometimes used interchangeably with the term “basic science.”

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Lists of problems and reactive thought processes trigger the same fight-or-flight brain chemicals that we share with the rest of the animal world. Those chemical-driven responses manifest as fear, discontent, frustration, divisiveness and blame. And they set the stage for the collective frustration faced by leaders in community work and the business world alike - the feeling that “we’ve tried everything and nothing ever changes.”

However, the encouragement to dream, and to then determine what it would take to make those dreams a reality, sets a different stage. It creates an environment for curiosity, creativity, exploration. That encouragement drives us to reach for that “blue sky” and to make it so.

Rooted in the reality of cause-and-effect, decisions that lead to significant human progress are those that eschew the norm of reactivity that guides our current day-to-day decision-making. Those leap-forward results are instead rooted in the cause-and-effect assumption that creating a world different from the one we have now is possible, simply because it is not impossible.

### **Assumptions about Other People**

When humanity takes huge leaps forward, that change is rooted in the cause-and-effect of assuming the best in people, rather than suspecting the worst.

One of the reasons we find inspiration from dramatic social change efforts like the South African Freedom movement, the Indian Independence movement, and the U.S. Civil Rights movement is the fact that these movements brought out the best in people whose “best” had been systematically and intentionally stifled.

Those movements assumed that people within the movement would resist non-violently to pain and prison and the very real potential of death. They assumed that people outside the movement would be moved enough by the contrast of that peaceful resistance being met with brutal force that they would demand change. Both inside and outside the movement, those supporters rose to the occasion, with results that are now ensconced in history.

The same holds true repeatedly in the world of business innovation as well. Bringing out the best in others has led to business developments that have markedly changed how we live our lives.

Costco insists on paying its employees a wage that allows them to not just survive, but thrive, with opportunities for advancement that consistently rank Costco not only as a great place to work, but successful at generating profits. Costco has proven that bringing out the best in their employees is not at odds with success in the low-price retail market.

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Other businesses at the forefront of their industries, like Patagonia and Netflix, assume their employees are dedicated, loyal and responsible, and treat them that way. Netflix provides unlimited vacation time. Patagonia's corporate employees set their own hours, with structures in place to make sure they are not working weekends (they can't get into the building!). Both these companies, and others like them, are thriving and growing.\*

This is not a new phenomenon in the world of business. Going back 100 years to a time when factory conditions bordered on diabolical and the Triangle Shirtwaist Factory fire was a fresh memory, Henry Ford addressed issues of employee turnover not by locking people in, but by encouraging them - offering twice the going salary and reducing the work day. The benefit he immediately found? His employees could afford his cars, furthering his mission to make autos affordable to the common man - a development that changed the course of human history.\*

Employees are not the only people involved in a successful business. Bringing out the best in customers has proven repeatedly to be a model for business success - and not just at the Nordstrom's end of the scale. Return policies at retailers like Amazon.com and Trader Joe's ("You didn't like it? Bring it back!") consistently make customers feel appreciated. And Bed, Bath and Beyond's unspoken yet almost universally implemented coupon policy - disregarding expiration dates and accepting multiple coupons per purchase - makes customers feel like the retailer is on their side.

But it's not just about bringing out the best in employees and customers. In business, it is about expecting the best in competitors as well - which is to say, seeing competitors (suspecting the worst) as allies and partners (assuming the best).

In its start-up days, Amy's Kitchen had great recipes and a passion for making healthy, organic, vegetarian food available to everyone. But the founders had no background in mass producing and packaging that food.

So founder Andy Berliner did the unthinkable.

"I called the engineering department at Swanson - one of the nation's oldest frozen-dinner brands - and asked how they made pot pies. I told them who we were and what we were doing.

They told me how they do it - this is what we do, this is the kind of machine you use, this is how we mix it. Swanson's solution to the problem was a complex mechanical system. We didn't do it quite the same way - we took a few more steps - but we learned the basic idea of how it's done. [Swanson] helped us think about the process and the equipment needed."\*

\* See end notes for citations (final paper will have each note individually numbered to coincide with end notes.)

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The history of human progress is a history of bringing out the best in others, and having high expectations that they will rise to that high potential. And the business world has proven that these assumptions are not only good for society - they are also good for business.

### **Is this assumption the norm?**

In “The Pollyanna Principles,” I noted the following:

“Consider the phrase “Human Nature.” Do we invoke that phrase when we are talking glowingly about our brethren? Hardly. We use the phrase to focus on our greed, our fear, our selfishness - all the things we dislike about being members of this species.”

With those traits as our assumption of what it is to be human, we have institutionalized those assumptions into the decision-making frameworks used in our day-to-day lives.

“We have strict rules about employee time off. Give them an inch, and they’ll take a yard.”

“Let our competitors tour our facility? Are you crazy? They would steal every idea we’ve had!”

“Our return policy is posted right there. If we took yours back, we’d have to take everyone’s back.”

“I’m so tired of crap employees. No one wants to actually work anymore!”

Type the words “Wall Street Costco” into Google, and one of the top auto-fill suggestions will be “Wall Street demands Costco cut salaries.” \*

And consider the Human Resources Department of any major employer - the department whose job has evolved over the years to now have the often unspoken (and sometimes explicit) primary mandate of protecting the organization from employee lawsuits. Far from being a place of encouragement to develop our humanity within the organization, the HR department is too often the place where rules and policies are developed to protect the company from its employees.

Suspecting the worst in people led humanity to the Inquisition. Bringing out the best in us led to the Renaissance.

Suspecting the worst in people led to Europe’s devastation during World War II. Bringing out the best in people led to the European Union.

\* See end notes for citations (final paper will have each note individually numbered to coincide with end notes.)

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Suspecting the worst in people has led to the US having the largest imprisoned population in the world, and the world's second-highest per-capita incarceration rate. \*

Bringing out the best in people has led Denmark - a country with the second-highest number of radical Islamic fighters per capita - to institute a program for rehabilitating jihadists, providing counseling, help with readmission to school, meetings with parents and other outreach efforts. It has led to statements like this one, from the mayor of the city that pioneered the approach...

“We cannot afford not to include them back in our society and make sure that their path of radicalization is changed, so they can be an active part of our society.” \*

The result of suspecting the worst in each other plays out daily in the workplace, as employees seek to gain control and advantage among their peers - a direct result of systems that seek control and advantage over them.

Rooted in the reality of cause-and-effect, actions that lead to significant human progress are those that eschew the assumption that people cannot be trusted and must be tightly managed / controlled. Instead, actions that have led us along the path of progress are those that bring out the best in others, rooted in the cause-and-effect assumption that people will respond well if we treat them well.

### **Assumptions about Resources**

When humanity takes huge leaps forward, that progress is rooted in the assumption that there are adequate resources to accomplish our dreams. This is not an assumption that “I have plenty of money and can therefore make this happen.” It is instead an assumption of what Creating the Future has labeled Collective Enoughness - the assumption that together we have everything we need; that it is only on our own that we experience scarcity.

The story of Stone Soup comes to mind:

In days of old, a poor traveler came to town. Going door to door asking for food, everyone replied that they were poor themselves and had nothing to share.

“Because you are so poor,” the traveler tells them, “ I will teach you how to make soup from a stone.” He then places a stone at the bottom of a cauldron and fills it with water. “I just need an onion,” he announces. As someone runs to fetch an onion, he notes, “we could also use some carrots.”

And so it went, item by item, until together, the town had made a rich pot of soup.

\* See end notes for citations (final paper will have each note individually numbered to coincide with end notes.)

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Huge leaps forward in social progress - and often in business as well - often appear to outsiders to be touched by an angel. They marvel that for certain people, resources consistently seem to appear as if by magic - sometimes in the form of money, often in the form of the thing they actually need (the things the money would buy).

But of course it is not magic, and it is not “the universe providing.” It is the understanding that resources are not scarce; they are everywhere. And that we have more together than we could ever have on our own.

In Bucks County, Pennsylvania, the domestic violence organization A Woman’s Place and the Coalition to Shelter and Support the Homeless (CSSH) met to find ways they could help each other. It took almost no time to form an alliance that not only helps both organizations, but helps the community. \*

A Woman’s Place has an ongoing need for safe and reliable client transportation. CSSH has a van and volunteer drivers who transport homeless individuals at night; by day, the van sits unused.

A Woman’s Place has social media and communications resources that can help get the word out about CSSH’s much needed donation items, and a thrift store that can act as a collection point for those donated goods.

The leaders of these two organizations assumed that together they had resources to share. It was only on their own that they experienced scarcity.

The same goes for the story of Amy’s Kitchen. Their founder assumed the wisdom he needed was not just out there, but available to him. The result has been steady growth in sales and market share, to the point that Amy’s can now claim one of the most coveted assets in the grocery store world - freezer shelf space and lots of it.

“The feeling of wealth is enhanced when you give, not when you take, since, subliminally, giving means you have enough to share, while taking means you may not be getting enough. Giving is a relief. Taking is a burden.”

*Robert Thurman - Infinite Life*

Efforts like these tend to attract more resources, because that sense of enoughness brings out the best in others, fueling their sense of potential by replacing their fear of scarcity with the calm of enoughness, which creates a spirit of generosity. That sequence leads to more and more resources, creating the image that “Good things always happen to that group. They’re just lucky.”

\* See end notes for citations (final paper will have each note individually numbered to coincide with end notes.)

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But it's not luck. It's simply the knowledge that together we have everything we need.

And humanity's huge leaps forward are consistently the result of our sharing those resources towards the common good.

### **Is this assumption the norm?**

It doesn't take this white paper to state the obvious "normal" assumption: Resources are scarce, whether we are working in the business world or the social change arena.

That assumption leads to all the bad behaviors we ascribe to "human nature" - greed, selfishness. If resources are scarce, then I cannot trust you, because you will, in fact, steal my stuff. If resources are scarce, then my dream will be to have enough resources to do what I need to do.

The assumption of scarce resources is at the root of competition vs. cooperation. It leads to closing ranks and hoarding - information, talent, wisdom, skills, and just our stuff - things we have in abundance and might otherwise share if we weren't afraid that we didn't have enough.

Rooted in the reality of cause-and-effect, decisions and actions that have led to significant human progress break that cycle by acknowledging that it is only on our own that we experience scarcity. Together, we have everything we need.

### **Where did these norms in decision-making come from?**

The best we can do is to be agile in responding to current circumstances and preventing bad things from happening.

If we don't suspect the worst in people, they will hurt us.

There's only so much resource to go around.

Many of you reading this will have an instant, visceral "that's not true" response to those statements. Throughout the ages, the wisest among us would have agreed with you, as they, too, saw the potential we humans have for living well, individually and collectively.

So then how is it that these negative, fear-driven assumptions become the basis for decision-making and strategy in the majority of organizations, across all sectors? Where did these cultural systems, rooted in fear and negativity, come from, and how is it that they have become our "norm?"

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**Assumptions: Stories we tell ourselves, that we believe to simply be “the truth”**

Whether it is via genetics or our environment, each of us first acquires our assumptions about reality at home from our families. Those assumptions are then handed down from generation to generation, through both nature and nurture.

Peeling back the layers of generations that came before us, it becomes clear that the answer to “where did these assumptions come from?” lies at the point where we can go back no further.

The dawn of humankind.

In the beginning, when humans first appeared in the heart of Africa, life was scary. Fresh off the evolutionary train, we lived like animals - hunting and foraging for our food, huddling together in packs for safety. The chemical-based fear mechanisms we inherited from our animal forebears were critical for our survival during those dangerous times.

And we needed all the help we could get! Food was scarce, and our survival depended on constant vigilance to keep others from taking the very things that would keep us alive. Suspecting the worst in each other meant the difference between surviving or perishing.

In those early days, the best we could hope to accomplish was to survive, hopefully to the ripe old age of 33. \*

Our survival as a species depended on our uniquely human ability to hand down stories - verbally from parent to child, and in writing on the walls of caves. “These are the ways to survive, my child. Learn them, and hand them down to your own children.”

And that’s what we have now done for 100,000 years - handed down the stories necessary for our survival in a reality that, for the vast majority of people in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, no longer exists.

These days, intellectually we know those stories are no longer true. We know we can accomplish anything, from landing on the moon to using our wristwatches to share videos of cats with people who don’t speak our language, far across the globe.

But in the places where we should be dreaming the biggest dreams of our lives - in school and in the “strategic” planning sessions of our adult work lives - the frameworks that guide our thinking are rooted in that 100,000 year old assumption demanding that we “get real” and “focus on what is practical,” and “stick to core competencies.”

\* See end notes for citations (final paper will have each note individually numbered to coincide with end notes.)

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Intellectually, we know from study after study that if we create circumstances for bringing out the best in each other, we humans repeatedly rise to that best.\*

Yet we continue to build our societal constructs upon the 100,000 year old assumption that the prudent thing is to suspect the worst in each other - to protect ourselves, and by extension our organizations and our nations, against the worst traits we share with the rest of the animal world.

And as both social and industry collectives have known for years - and the “sharing economy” is proving in our modern times - together we absolutely have everything we need. “Money” may be scarce, but as we are seeing with people sharing their homes and their cars and all the rest of the stuff we really need in our lives, money is not a resource - it is a means, not an end.

And yet our entire modern society is constructed upon an international banking and financial infrastructure, the sole purpose of which is the accumulation and exchange of money as an end unto itself, ensuring that the 100,000 year old assumption of scarce resources will endure.

One is reminded of the family whose recipe for baked ham began with cutting off both ends, not realizing that the source of that advice, handed down from generation to generation, is rooted in the fact that Great Grandmother’s baking pan was too small for her ham. \*\*

The stories that led to our species’ survival were absolutely true 100,000 years ago.

In the 21<sup>st</sup> century, for a very large part of the world, those stories no longer serve our needs, and certainly do not allow us to live up to our immense potential. On the contrary - it is those very stories, and the resulting cultural assumptions that are the foundation of so many of our decision-making systems, that are at the root of our failure to create the world so many of us sense is possible.

### **The Mathematic Effects of Our Assumptions**

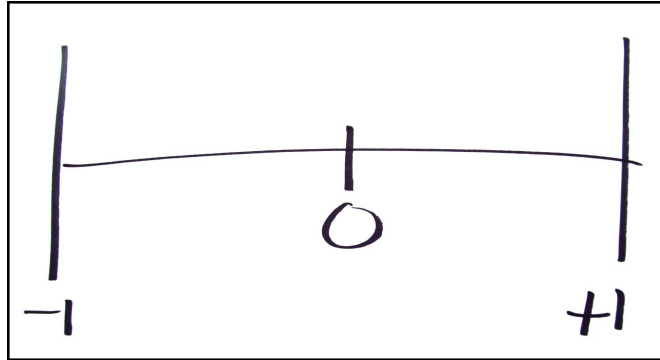
The result of our scarcity-driven assumptions is most easily described with an example not from history but from grade school math.

In grade school, we learn that  $-1+1=0$ . Eliminating a negative does not bring us to a positive state - it simply gets us to zero.

*\* So many studies have proven that a wallet left on the street will be returned to its owner that a Google search for the term “Psychology Wallet Experiment” yields almost 300,000 results.*

*\*\* For a similar story, see Sam Walter Foss’s poem *The Cow Path* in the END NOTES.*

**Draft**



*(DRAFT Note - hand-drawn graphics will be replaced in the final document.)*

That is what we are doing when we make plans to react to what is wrong, or to respond to demand, or to prevent bad things from happening in the future. We are aiming not at a “good” situation, but at a “less bad” situation.

Sometimes reactivity is absolutely necessary. Often it is the spark that leads to a movement for change. Solving problems and reacting to what is wrong is often a critical step along the road to accomplishing what is possible.

The problem arises when we see that reactive goal as an end unto itself - ending racism, ending poverty, slowing or reversing global warming. Because, as the math shows us, reactivity cannot move us forward. At best, reactivity can bring us to stasis - the point where the problem is no longer a problem.

When our biggest, hairiest, most audacious goal is to get to stasis (zero), the work to achieve that goal all lies in the negative end of the spectrum - the reactive end. As we’ll see below, that alone is a recipe for bringing out the worst in us.

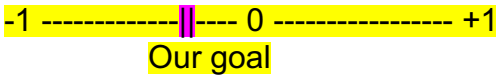
In reality, though, when organizations and governments are creating practical plans for their work, more often than not they begin with the assumption that even zero is too high to reach.

“It’s not realistic for us to gamble on our ability to create new markets. But our shareholders would do cartwheels if we garnered 50% of the existing market in the next 2 years.”

“We’ll never end poverty (or racism, or global warming, or terrorism, or drug abuse). But we could hold our heads high if we reduced hunger by 50% in the next 10 years.”

**Draft**

NOTE: GRAPHIC will SHOW these on the math line



So the reality for a large number of organizations across all sectors is that their biggest dreams for the future aren't even aiming at zero. Working to inch towards things no longer being a problem, these organizations' most noble dreams are to make things less bad, inside their organizations and/or out there in the world.

No wonder it always feels like we are crawling forward and getting nowhere!

### **Aiming at “Less Bad” Brings Out the Worst in Us**

As if it wasn't bad enough that reactive approaches can only achieve less negative (vs. positive) results, the cause-and-effect of living in a culture of reactivity creates a cascade of dysfunctional conditions throughout organizations, businesses and communities around the world.

That is because we humans are not at our best when we are reacting. We knee-jerk, fail to think things through, operate out of fear. Neuroscientists watch different sections of the brain light up when we are being reactive than when we are being creative \*, those fight-or-flight chemicals produce their own causes and effects.

Through cause-and-effect, then, decision-making frameworks aimed at reactive ends actually create the conditions for us to suspect the worst in each other, which leads to our hunkering down and building fortresses, which leads to our believing we must go it alone, which negates all the resources we have together - reinforcing the assumption that resources are scarce.

All of which leads to admonitions like, “It's all very well and good to dream the big dream, but get real. And even if it were possible, where do you think the money will come from?”

And the cycle continues.

*\* Many people assume that the opposite of reactive is proactive. In reality, what we define as “proactive” is simply a preventative form of reactivity - getting “out in front of” the problem. Random House's Dictionary.com defines “proactive” as “serving to prepare for, intervene in, or control an expected occurrence or situation, especially a negative or difficult one; anticipatory” - reacting to the present by making sure that bad things don't happen in the future.*

*In our R&D work in Creating the Future's living laboratory, we have therefore realized that the opposite of reactive is actually **creative** - which also happens to be an anagram of **reactive**.*

**Draft**

But it doesn't have to be that way.

We can aim at end results beyond zero. We can create favorable conditions that will lead to that success. We can root our work in the assumption that together we have everything we need, and that by bringing out the best in each other, there is nothing we cannot accomplish.

### **Real World Examples**

What would it make possible if instead of moving reactively to “end global warming, we instead aimed at the results we DO want - a world where people are living in harmony with all beings and with our planet, mutually sustaining each other. (Tell the truth - did you smile at those words? Or did your “get real” gene kick in?).

If that were the +1 goal, our math line might look like this:

**Graphic** will show all actions listed below, between -1 and +1 re: climate change. It will also show the results of those actions - negativity, argument, resistance.

Given that climate change is a problem to be solved, you see some examples of problem-solving actions and issues in the -1 “eliminate the negative” end of the spectrum. Those are the cause-and-effect preconditions for getting to zero - stopping the warming.

In that -1 area, we also see some of what happens when reactivity is our lens. We argue about the definition of the problem is, the extent of the problem, the cause / who is to blame, the science and so on. We take sides, and then we prop up those sides with scientists and political officials and industry leaders. We hope and pray we will get to zero, and we despair under the weight of living in that negative place.

Now let's look at the pre-conditions for creating a world where we all live together in harmony with our planet and all the other beings with whom we share this tiny bauble.

People would need to agree that the earth is worth nurturing.

Before that could happen, people would need to have experience with the natural world - being outdoors in natural environments.

Once they care about the planet, people would need to find ways to nurture and heal the planet.

Before they can nurture and heal the earth, people would need to understand basic physical science.

For that to happen, we would need an education system that is great at teaching basic physical science

People would need to value each other and all the other beings on this planet.

Before that could happen, they would need to get to know each other.

**Draft**

And they would need to focus on the things we all have in common with other people vs. focusing on our differences.

People and industries would need cost-effective methods for conserving resources and using more sustainable processes.

Before that could happen, some of those processes would need to be developed.

Before that could happen, there would need to be investment capital for that R&D.

And so on.

In the next chapter of this white paper ([to be notified when that is posted, register at this blog post](#)) we will share a framework for creating the critical path that turns those big dreams into reality.

For now, the most important thing to notice is the difference in the emotional response evoked by actions on each side of zero. Those responses explain everything about the tension and anxiety on both sides of the climate change argument. More importantly, they explain why, no matter how seemingly reasonable the proposal, we can't seem to move forward to protect our planet.

The same math example can be used to explain the difference between ending racism vs. creating a world where all people are valued for their humanity - the "content of their character."

It can be used to show the difference between actions to fix our education system vs. actions to create a world where every person has what he/she needs to thrive.

Our success at accomplishing anything beyond incremental progress will depend entirely on where we aim.

### **Moving Forward**

The cycles of reactivity, scarcity and mistrust create a self-fulfilling prophecy of struggle.

The good news is that despite the dominant story we have told ourselves over our 100,000 history on this planet, humanity has been on a steady march towards living well, individually and collectively.

In 100,000 years we went from hunter gatherers to Facebook friends. In 500 years, we went from warring European nation states to a European Union. In 50 years we went from African Americans being beaten and killed for trying to vote to an African American president.

**Draft**

It may not feel like it sometimes, but the good news is that by pretty much every indicator, life just keeps getting better, in spite of a culture that suggests that shouldn't happen.

The better news is that sometimes, humanity makes huge leaps forward, not in reaction to something bad, but in seeking something amazing.

The even better news is that we can change our culture, to reflect the conditions that have created those huge leaps forward. We can create repeatable processes that can become habits which then become culture. We can absolutely be the future we want to see, and we humans do it all the time. \*

And that, too, can become a self-fulfilling prophecy. Because "self-fulfilling prophecy" is just another way of saying "cause-and-effect."

What it will take is changing the assumptions at the core of the decisions and actions each of us participates in every day.

And here's the best news of all:

Because our assumptions are the answers to questions we don't even realize we're asking, changing those assumptions is as simple as changing those questions.

*\* Examples abound. Mothers Against Drunk Driving changed the culture in one generation. The Gay Marriage movement is doing the same thing. Western culture no longer blames disease on demons; instead we wash our hands. The list is long. We change our culture all the time, and that creates our future.*

**Draft**

## **Part II - Change the Questions, Change the World!**

Nelson Mandela. Mahatma Gandhi. Martin Luther King.

We think only special people can help humanity achieve its potential, reaching for what's possible, bringing out the best in us, finding resources to make it happen.

We believe that because, to date, it has taken a special kind of person to buck our human Culture of Can't and walk a path of a completely different set of assumptions. Martin Luther King famously said, "I am not going to allow anybody to pull me so low as to use the very methods that perpetuated evil throughout our civilization." With the culture stacked against people who believe the future can be very different from our past, how many of us have the internal strength to publicly and confidently march to that different drummer, every hour of every day?

If we want to reach for humanity's potential, it will require leveling the playing field, to ensure that average people have the same chance of success in their own work as the fearless few who have led the charges we all celebrate.

And that will require that we all have consistent and repeatable ways to build more effective assumptions into our day-to-day work and lives.

### **Change the Questions, Change the World!**

The questions that guide our work at Creating the Future are the questions that translate the three core assumptions into action.

- 1) What do we want life to be like, and what will it take to create that? (Assumptions about what is possible)
- 2) Who else cares about this? What could we accomplish together? And what will it take for that to happen? (Assumptions about other people)
- 3) What resources do we have together that we don't have on our own? What do we have that we are willing to share? And what will it take for that to happen?(Assumptions about resources)

### **What do we want life to be like? And what will it take to create that?**

#### **(End Results: Assumptions about what is possible)**

One of the most famous speeches of all time is Martin Luther King's "I Have a Dream" speech. And while King's list of dreams is clearly the answer to the first half of this question, it is his answer to the second half of this question that provides the roadmap to what is possible.

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What do we want life to be like?

“I have a dream that my four little children will one day live in a nation where they will not be judged by the color of their skin but by the content of their character.”

And what will it take to create that?

This is our hope, and this is the faith that I go back to the South with.

With this faith, we will be able to hew out of the mountain of despair a stone of hope. With this faith, we will be able to transform the jangling discords of our nation into a beautiful symphony of brotherhood. With this faith, we will be able to work together, to pray together, to struggle together, to go to jail together, to stand up for freedom together, knowing that we will be free one day.

What Dr. King was instinctively naming were the cause-and-effect conditions that would lead to the dream coming true. What will it take? It will take hope, brotherhood, working together, praying together, struggling together, going to jail together, standing up for freedom together. <http://www.americanrhetoric.com/speeches/mlkhaveadream.htm>

And when we think of the civil rights movement, those are precisely the images we remember - people of all races standing together, going to jail together, praying together.

That simple question about end results - *What do we want life to be like, and what will that take?* - can be used to reframe the types of questions we all hear in our day-to-day workplaces. The energy that comes from that reframing alone can change entire conversations, opening the door to changing everything.

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<b>Reactive Questions</b>	<b>Creative Questions</b>
What are our customers' needs (i.e. problems), and how will we supply those needs (i.e. solve those problems)?	What is the ultimate result our customers want? What would it take to create that result? (And what might our role be in that?)
What problems are stopping us, and how can we get past them / prevent them?	What do we want the ultimate result of our work to be? For whom? What would it take to accomplish that?
What are the issues facing our community, and how will we address them? (Or) What are the root causes of the problems in our community, and how will we finally stop them?	What do we want our community to look like? What would it take for our community to be that?
What are our competitors doing, and how can we out-run them?	What do we want the ultimate result of our work to be? For whom? What would it take to accomplish that?
What is our budget, and how much can we realistically afford to do?	What do we want the ultimate result of our work to be? For whom? What would it take to accomplish that?
What are our current processes, and how can we improve them?	What do we want the ultimate result of our work to be? For whom? What would it take to accomplish that?
What is the data telling us about our current work, and what can we do to improve?	What do we want the ultimate result of our work to be? For whom? What would we need to know in order to accomplish that?

Asking questions that encourage us to list and then react to problems (i.e. solve them) brings out the worst in us - uncertainty, fear, frustration, divisiveness, blame.

We see that in the example of the climate change discussion, where the primary questions have been, "What is causing the problem? Whose fault is it? How do we fix it?" with responses that have provoked anger and condemnation on all sides, getting us no closer to the world we want.

Asking questions that encourage us to name our dreams and then create the path to those dreams inspires and brings out the creative best in us.

Imagine how the climate change discussion might shift if we began to ask the questions that will create the future: *What do we want life to be like? And what would it take for that to be our reality?*

**Draft**

**Who else cares about this? What could we accomplish together? And what will it take for that to happen?**

**(Means to the Ends: Assumptions about each other)**

Steve Jobs did not give the world the iPhone all by himself. Henry Ford did not single-handedly mechanize the assembly line. Gregory Goodwin Pincus didn't invent oral contraceptives on his own.

And When Dr. King listed what it would take to succeed in the I Have a Dream speech, that single paragraph contains the words "together" five times.

We all stand on the shoulders of giants. By asking the question "*Who else cares about this? And what would it take for us to accomplish this together?*" we can bring out the giant in everyone we encounter.

"If you want to go fast, go alone. If you want to go far, go together."  
~ African proverb

The "*Who else cares about this?*" question is at the heart of the community benefit sector's current push for Collective Impact as a means to accomplishing community-wide goals. But that question is also at the heart of every accomplishment by any group, ever.

One of our favorite examples is the story of the AIDS coalition in the Canadian community of Guelph. Here are their answers to these questions - and what happened as a result:

**What is the community we want?**

We dream of a time and place where everyone is free to live healthy, vital lives.

**What will it take for that to be reality?**

There would need to be acceptance vs. stigma for people with HIV/AIDS. For that to happen, people in our community would need compassion, which comes from knowing each other.

**Who else cares about this?**

Groups who work with seniors - a segment of the population where a range of cultural issues conspire to put seniors increasingly at risk for the disease.

**What could we accomplish together?**

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That last question led to the AIDS coalition forming a team of volunteers who show up en masse at events where seniors will also be volunteering - theater groups, church groups, the senior center. Working side by side together, they strike up conversations, and presto - they are simultaneously accomplishing the mission, raising awareness of the risk, and generating compassion by getting to know each other.

**What resources do we have together that we don't have on our own? What do we have that we are willing to share? And what will it take for that to happen?**

**(Means to the Ends: Assumptions about resources)**

Movements for change in the 20<sup>th</sup> and 21<sup>st</sup> centuries have not been rich people's movements; on the contrary, the battle cry against the 99% in recent years would have been easily recognized in virtually all social change movements over the past 200 years.

These movements were not successful because someone with a lot of money made it so or because one individual group won a grant. They were not successful because one group trounced all their competitors, winning all the profits as their prize.

All these movements were built upon a base of shared resources - people sharing what they have and who they are. In our haste to build strong organizations (under the false assumption that strong organizations are a prerequisite for creating change \*), that drive for individual organizational capacity is actually jeopardizing our chances for success. Because successful change happens when we share our toys.

Again, let's compare and reframe some of the most common questions organizations ask about resources and organizational strength.

Reactive Questions	Creative Questions
How will you differentiate yourself from your competition?	What are you all good at? What pieces of that could you share?
Why should someone shop with you and not your competition?	What do you have that you don't use all the time, that others might share?
Why should someone donate to you and not the other groups?	What staff might you share? What equipment might you share?
	What resources do others have in your community, that they might share?
	What knowledge could you share together, that would advance your whole field?

*\* After 10 years of seeking research, we can find no data proving either correlation or causality in the relationship between organizational strength and creating strong communities. If you have such data, please share it with us!*



In our own community development work, we have seen a large established organization offer its volunteer manager and its pool of volunteers to a smaller organization in the same field. We have seen organizations in low income areas offer their copy machine to the community - a much needed commodity indeed. We have seen an organization that worked with babies receive a huge shipment of diapers, and immediately turn around to the other children's organizations in town, to see if they needed any of those diapers.

We saw the same thing happen with the domestic violence organization and the coalition for the homeless in Bucks County, sharing not just vehicles but their social media infrastructure - those coveted eyeballs and hearts and minds.

This is not just a "community organization" thing. The story of Swanson Foods sharing their manufacturing knowledge with the start-up Amy's Kitchen reminds us that our image of siloed businesses, keeping everything close to the vest, is not the whole story. If it were the whole story, there would be no industry coalitions and associations - the kinds of groups that exist entirely because businesses thrive when they share knowledge and resources.

Sharing our resources is possible, simply because it is not impossible.

And it all begins when the answer to "*What will it take to accomplish our dream?*" is not an answer at all, but the question: "*What resources do we have together that we don't have on our own?*"

### **Turning the 3 Questions into a repeatable framework, to consistently bring out the best in people and situations**

In the next chapter to this white paper ([to be notified when that is posted, register at this blog post](#)), we will share the framework that has been put to the test by Creating the Future's fellows around the world since 2009.

The framework incorporates the questions and assumptions into a very human process, working with causality to bring out the best in people and the situations we all encounter. The two basic parts to the framework are as follows:

- 1) Meet people where they are with compassion and gratitude
- 2) Create favorable conditions for positive results to unfold

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### **Part III: What you'll notice**

The results from using frameworks that are intentionally crafted to bring out the best in people and situations are so consistently positive that even those of us leading Creating the Future's research and development lab sit back sometimes in wonder. After all, just because we are the ones who developed these approaches doesn't mean we are not still creatures of 100,000 years of programming!

The most obvious results our fellows and their colleagues experience is that change doesn't have to happen slowly and incrementally - it can happen quickly and dramatically.

People don't have to "form, storm and norm" in order to perform - they can become a cohort with common vision and deep commitment quickly and joyfully.

And that change doesn't have to be hard; it can be embraced, relished - fun!

By changing the questions we ask, and the order in which we ask them, we can create the very best conditions for ourselves and others to step into our potential for what is possible.

And now the best news of all: You now have this power, in the very next conversation you encounter, to bring out the best in yourself, in those around you, and the situation itself - all by asking a different question.

We look forward to hearing what happens when you give it a try. Because at Creating the Future, our mission is change the questions embedded in the day-to-day work of individuals and organizations, so that everyone, everywhere naturally brings out the best in each other and in our world.

And that shift starts with you!

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**Chapter 2 - the Catalytic Thinking Framework - is being penned right now.**

**In that chapter, we will describe a  
consistent, intentional, repeatable framework  
to ensure that  
the questions at the basis of all decision-making  
by everyone, everywhere,  
is bringing out the best in people and situations.**

**To be notified when that chapter is posted,**

**[click here.](#)**

**Thank you!**

**Draft**

## End Notes

These pages will include references and literature review.

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