

Part One

AWARENESS

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Chapter 1

The Hurricane and the Earthquake

Warm waters stir the winds and fuel their fury. The storm groans, strengthens, and lumbers westward. Its path is true, though imprecise, and it lands where it will with all watching and waiting anxiously. Some may take shelter elsewhere. Others may risk it all by staying put. The storm may bring only rain and tempestuous gusts of wind. But it also could bring the beast, breaking even the most prepared.

Then we turn our eyes eastward and watch as the next one forms, builds, and heads right for us. But maybe it will hit someone else this time.

Tectonic plates strain in tension, ever struggling to move—even an inch. But they do move—relentlessly. On occasion they will make themselves known in the form of misaligned homes or growling tremblers. Yet we never see them coming in rage. In moments the plates yield, consuming everything in liquefied soil. The impact is overwhelming, but even when its anger subsides, the tension remains—straining until the next breakthrough. And we may never see it coming.

To many organizations, change comes like hurricane season. Everyone knows it's coming. It's the same every year. The only thing we don't know is "Who will it hit this time?" Every storm that strikes does

damage; but in most cases communities bounce back relatively quickly. Only in rare instances do we get a storm so powerful that when combined with certain other factors, it makes a permanent change in how a city or coastline appears.

With individual change initiatives, where we treat change as a discrete, manageable event, we get the same kind of result: It's different for a little while, but we always try to go back to the way things were before (intentionally or unintentionally). Sticking with the status quo is human nature. Venturing out from business as usual is risky and uncomfortable.

To other organizations, change comes like the earthquake. We may never see it coming but have this nagging feeling that it is. The constant tension at the fault line gives us tremors every so often, hinting that there is more to come, so we prepare.

Some organizations opt to place themselves under intentional stress. In this environment, change is constant and often unmanageable, yet we are constantly aware of it. An example of intentional stress is where systems are designed to operate just-in-time to continuously meet changing customer demand. This enables us to learn and improve on a daily basis. We become learning organizations. Then, when the "Big One" comes, we have conditioned and equipped ourselves through growing our capacity to adapt. The disaster causes a disruptive breakthrough that permanently changes the way we do things, and we can never go back to the way things were before.

It feels odd using these natural disasters as metaphors for change, since we typically want things better after a change, and both hurricanes and earthquakes only seem to destroy. Is there a "better" approach to change? Do we want organizations to be stressed only during the change season, then relax for a few months before it starts again? Or would we rather have learning organizations that improve continuously, triggering on demand those innovative breakthroughs that permanently change the character and substance of the organization?

In 2005 we witnessed the "perfect storm" in New Orleans and its surrounding communities, with a combination of hurricane winds and levee failures. The devastation along the Gulf Coast of the United States was massive. It was also a year of tsunamis abroad and a huge earthquake in Pakistan. Many other natural and economic disasters

have made their presence known in the intervening years. Our hearts certainly go out to the victims. We would honor them, and serve our organizations well by letting these disasters remind us of the ongoing lessons they teach us about our need to build the capacity to change, adapt, and learn.

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