The Corporate Quest: Attaining New Levels

by Randall Benson

Introduction

Healing the wasteland has been the aim of quests since the beginning of oral tradition. On the quest, pathfinders seek a source of new vitality that will transform a condition of misfortune into a state of renewal. The effect of the successful quest is that the entity shakes off decline and emerges to a higher order. The "Quest Effect" is the essence of the quest, the power of breakthrough and renewal (Benson 2009). The archetypal quest is a pattern that repeats itself in myths and legends such as Gilgamesh, the Quest for the Holy Grail, and Jason and the Argonauts. The same quest pattern also describes real-life adventures such as the Lewis and Clark Expedition, Shackleton's quest for Antarctic survival and the Apollo Space Program. Situations may be different and paths are unique, but the underlying pattern of the quest remains remarkably constant. The quest is more than a metaphor; it effectively portrays the path of transformation and renewal in human endeavors. The author's experience, in over ten years of industry application, suggests that the archetypal quest is the prime pattern for transformation and renewal in modern organizations.

The archetypal quest framework was decoded almost sixty years by Joseph Campbell and described in his first book, *The Hero with a Thousand Faces* (Campbell, 1949). Like many ideas from unrelated disciplines, it has taken several decades for the concepts of the quest to find their way into business organizations. Application of the quest model in business organizations has also been hindered by arcane language and

mythical imagery; that is now being addressed (Benson 2009). Moreover, when viewed from the lens of myth, the quest seems, at best, an interesting metaphor for a search. It is therefore understandable that business leaders have overlooked the quest as a potentially powerful framework for transformation and renewal.

However, the quest is much more than a metaphor; it is, in fact, the prime pattern for breaking through from one level of organizational development to the next. It is a universal, prime pattern of transformation that has traditionally been encoded in myth. Since the beginning of the oral tradition, great quests were retold because they recounted peak experiences: critical junctures in the evolution of societies in every era. The quest is the story of transformation and renewal. Pathfinders in every story of the quest follow the same pattern. They launch a journey of exploration and discovery and cross the threshold from the everyday world into uncharted territory. There, through a spiral process of ever more challenging trials, they develop the capability to pass the ultimate test and achieve the supreme prize, a source of new vitality. If they can harness the power of the prize and master its application, they will return home to share their discovery and renew their world. This same process of renewal plays out in modern organizations.

Of course, organizations renew themselves without any awareness of the quest model (even though the quest will be evident in retrospect). Yet leaders who understand and can apply the quest model will have a markedly higher likelihood of successfully guiding their organizations through breakthrough, transformation and renewal. The author has observed that when leaders use the quest model, they gain a greater understanding

of the transformation process, are more likely to attend to the critical success factors, and will accelerate breakthrough in their organizations. Without knowledge of the quest model, many transformation efforts are haphazard and become dead ends, what Ervin Laszlo calls "bifurcations" (Laszlo 1996). However, by applying the quest model, leaders can help their organizations consistently break through to new levels.

Home Base

Every quest begins at home base. Home base is the existing level of development and it constitutes the business-as-usual, common world of the organization. Ralph Stacy defines of home base as what is commonly known or agreed upon within the organization (Stacey, 1996). Figure 1 shows that beyond a threshold lies uncharted or undiscovered territory – an essential aspect of the quest. Far beyond home base is territory that cannot be comprehended or accessed from the current perspective of home base; it is essentially chaos and would threaten disintegration of the quest.

While the bounds of home base place limits on the organization, home base is also the container of current vitality and prosperity. Investment in current structures must be protected and cash cows must be nourished. Particularly in mature organizations, reasonable leaders are highly sensitive to risk, not wanting to put the status quo in jeopardy. However, this emphasis on safety creates strong attraction to home base, creating an obstacle to successful launch of a quest.

For the leader, denying the call to quest and sticking to business as usual is an organizational death trap. Traditional change-management approaches – the ones not necessitating a quest – work within home base but will not reliably
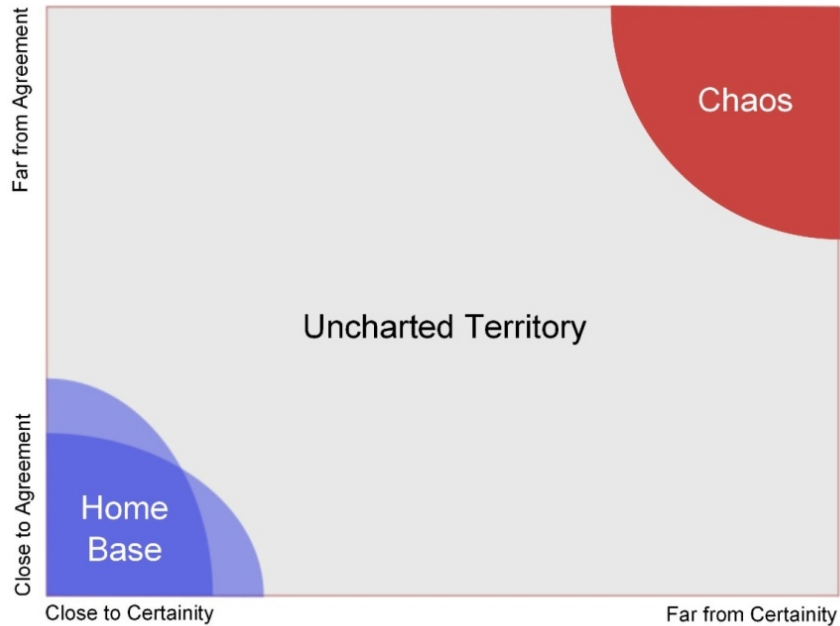
Figure 1: Home Base and Uncharted Territory (adapted from Ralph Stacy, 1996)

create breakthroughs. Figure 2 shows how level change involves jumping to a higher-order capability curve. When change management is designed to maintain and improve existing systems, within the existing level of development, the organization can miss the window of opportunity to jump to a new level. Without forays into uncharted territory, organizations will inevitably become stuck at their current level and fail to make the jump. Research into corporate lifecycles tells us that, once stuck, organizations will not remain stable but inexorably stagnate and decline (Adizes, 1988, 1999). They simply slide down the back side of the curve. When leaders become stuck at home base, and quests fail to launch, they put their organizations in peril.

Uncharted Territory

The quest is about exploration and application. Uncharted territory is essential to the quest. Stories of great quests and real-life experience tell us that the key to

accessing the next level cannot be found at home base. Experiencing uncharted territory is the key. Jordan Peterson reminds us that changing levels involves contact with novel and unexpected experiences. These experiences both rare and unwelcome at home base were the desire for stability and equilibrium predominates. Breakthroughs have been exhausted at home base, but potential breakthroughs abound in uncharted territory. Therefore, the job of pathfinders must be to leave home base, cross the threshold into uncharted territory, and explore.

In organizations, uncharted territory is often not physical space but conceptual space. Pathfinders in organizations, explore uncharted territory by challenging long-held assumptions, exploring outside the organization and the industry, making metaphorical leaps, gathering new knowledge, and imagining disruptive innovations. They use field trials, creating evermore-elegant trials that delve deeper into promising areas. Whether
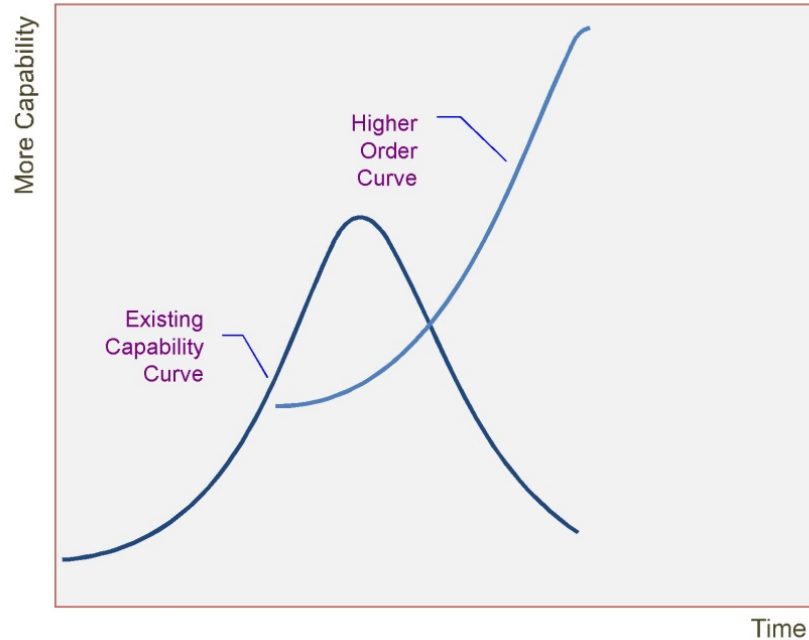
Figure 2: Accessing New Levels

the territory of the quest is ideas or geography, new territory must be explored before breakthroughs will access higher levels. The quest is essentially a spiral process of exploration and application.

Lines of Development

Figure 3 illustrates how organizations are capable of progressing along any number of lines of development. For example, a business could develop along lines of customer experience, business processes, change leadership, innovation, products and services, cultures of accountability, individual goal achievement, environmental stewardship and so on. When organizations launch quests, they are attempting to break through to the next level on a particular line of development. Organizations change chosen lines of development from one quest to the next. They can also support multiple quests on multiple developmental lines simultaneously. For example, a company could

use the quest model to pursue breakthroughs in customer service and cultures of innovation at the same time. Leaders attempt to discern the lines that offer the best opportunity for breakthrough.

Discernment is not easy. Often the distinction between developmental lines is blurred from the perspective of the current level. Moreover, developmental lines may become intertwined. The territory beyond home base is either uncertain or entirely unknown. At the time of the quest, where the lines lead will not be clear; there is no map of the territory. Like Lewis and Clark, pathfinders will have to find their way.

New Levels

From an Integral perspective, the quest model describes the process of breaking through to a new level of development. The new level will be more complex, wider and richer than the previous level while, at the same time, all the capabili-
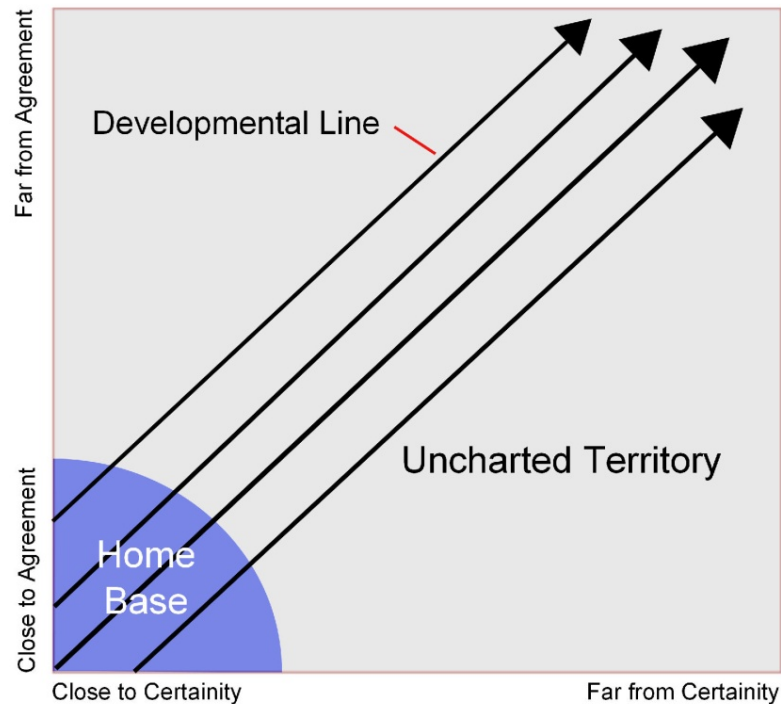
Figure 3: Multiple Lines of Development

ties of the previous levels remain accessible. The additional complexity would be overwhelming were it not for higher-order meta-systems that organize and manage the complexity at lower levels, similar to the way a molecule organizes the atoms or a social group organizes individuals (Laszlo, 1996). For example, after a hospital emergency department achieved an exceptionally short length of stay, they still provided the same care functions, just under a higher-order system of accelerated patient flow. Figure 4 shows a developmental line expanding outward from home base. In practice, numerous development lines can emerge.

When an organization achieves new levels, it also pushes the boundaries that define home base outward. Its universe has expanded. All the capabilities of the previous levels are still available, but it has additional capabilities that give it new vitality. As the organization achieves new levels, home base grows. Paradoxically, uncharted territory also expands at new levels, because chaos is pushed back.

The quest does not push the boundary of home base outward from within. It pulls the boundary outward from without. To do this, pathfinders must cross the threshold into uncharted territory and conduct their exploration there, away from home base. It is their exploration and discoveries in uncharted territory that eventually expand the boundaries of home base.

The act of breaking away from home base to quest in unexplored territory is essential for two reasons. First, uncharted territory is full of novelty and novelty is the seed of breakthrough. Home base – what is known and agreed upon – simply lacks sufficient novelty to
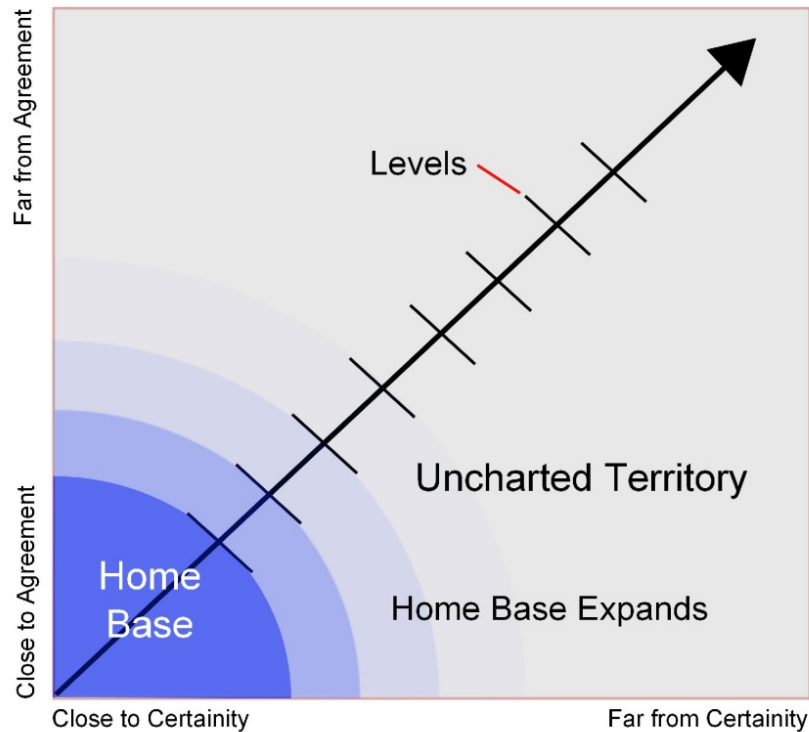
Figure 4: Levels of Development

support breakthrough. The opportunity for breakthrough is vastly greater in uncharted territory. Second, the quests begins with state changes (temporary experiences of higher levels resulting from field trials) and, as the pathfinders develop their capabilities, they ultimately attain a permanent change in level. This is the breakthrough. When pathfinders bring their prize back to home base, it will propel transformation and renewal.

As the word implies, breakthrough is a rapid jump. Jumping to a new level is not the result of incremental improvement within the current level, but a discontinuous jump to a higher-order curve. Figure 5 shows the process of jumping to a higher-order curve and shows where the quest is appropriate. During the quest, pathfinders must abandon the existing curve in a race to achieve a higher-order curve and then bring the rest of the organization over to the new curve. The quest is the process of jumping to a higher-order curve, or new level.

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The Quest Process

In most instances, organizations attain new levels naturally, without any understanding of the quest model. Understanding and applying the quest model simply accelerates the transformation, improves the likelihood of success, and makes it easier to repeat the process during the next transformation. Natural, unguided evolution results mostly in
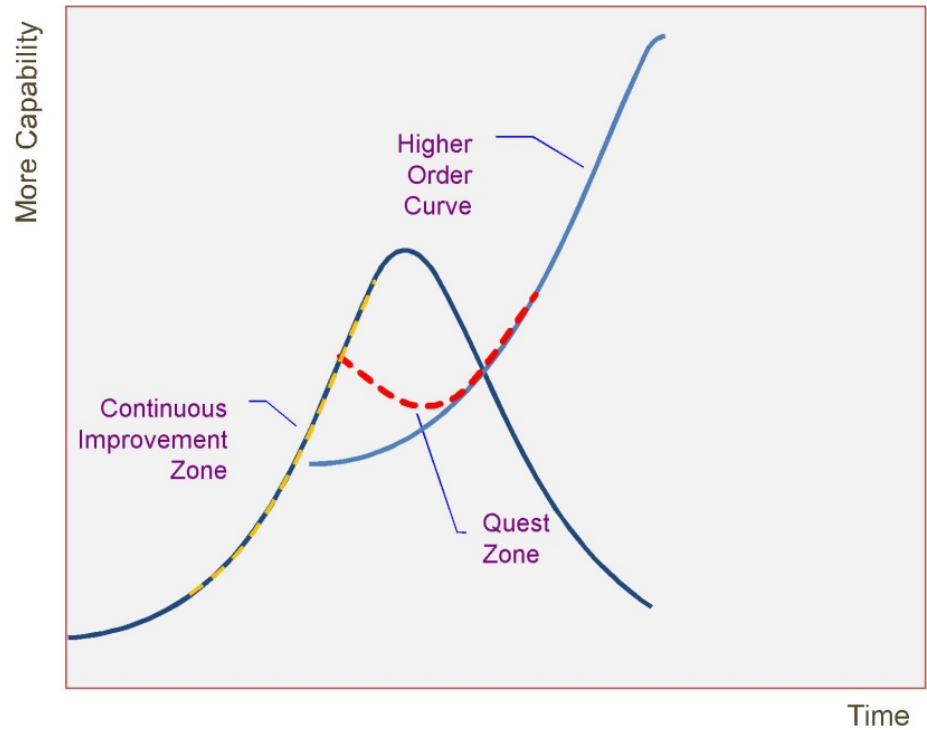
Figure 5: Using the quest to Jump curves and change level

easier to repeat the process during the next transformation. Natural, unguided evolution results mostly in dead ends (bifurcations) that do not result in breakthrough. Leaders can avoid dead ends if they guide the evolution, using a systematic model like the corporate quest. In organizations, guided evolution succeeds more often than natural evolution.

The corporate quest progresses through four phases: Launch, Exploration, Breakthrough and Renewal. These phases are parallel to the archetypal quest. Figure 6 shows the four phases in a quadrant. Launch and Exploration form the outbound, exploratory side of the quest quadrant. Breakthrough and Renewal are the return, application side. The quest quadrant is divided horizontally by the threshold between home base and uncharted territory. Launch and Renewal take place at home base while Exploration and Breakthrough happen in

uncharted territory. Taken together, these phases and divisions form the landscape of the quest.

Overlaid on the landscape is the line representing the path of the quest. It represents one cycle of a developmental spiral, a movement from one level to the next. As the quest progresses from phase to phase, milestones mark progress. These are shown in figure 7. These milestones are not absolute. Every pathfinder team will not encounter every milestone, the order may be slightly different, and some milestones may be repeated, but the underlying pattern will be clear in virtually every quest.

The landscape and the path form a conceptual map of the quest. The map helps pathfinders mark their progress, anticipate actions, and move forward toward the next milestone. A guide who knows the quest model can show the way to new pathfinders. While the map is
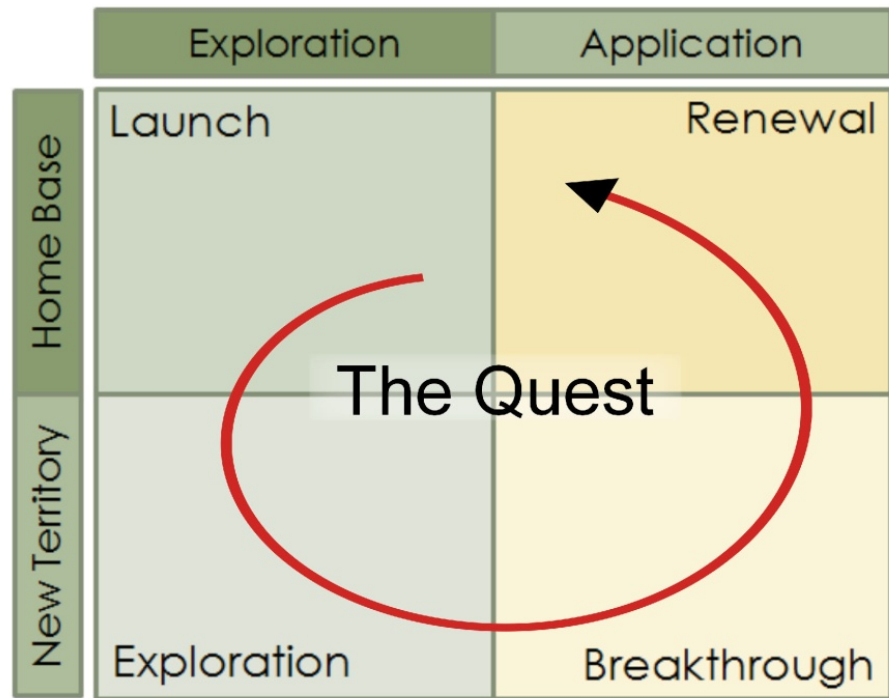
Figure 6: Quest Phases

not the territory, it is a useful pattern for all quests. Pathfinders will chart their unique path through new territory.

Employee Driven Innovation

The quest is a highly emergent process that relies on employees (front-line and management) to assume the role of pathfinder. They explore new areas, discover new ideas and apply those ideas via employee-designed field trials. As facilitated by the author, the quest approach relies heavily on employee-driven innovation to achieve breakthroughs. Employees have consistently out-performed external subject-matter experts. People who have previously been disengaged from their work and even alienated from the organization often step up to make momentous contributions. Participating employees often tap new levels of passion, creativity and imagination while engaged in a quest. Participants rou-

tinely report that they feel a difference; the quest feels both exciting and important. Many have reported that participating in the corporate quest was the high point of their career.

Leading scientists, including microbiologist Charles Pasternak and clinical psychologist Jordan Peterson, have documented our attraction to the quest. Peterson, in *Maps of Meaning*, describes the neuropsychology of human brains as wired for the quest (Peterson, 1999). Pasternak, in his landmark book, *Quest*, argues that we possess an innate and intense "propensity to quest" that is unique to humans and that explains the industry of human culture (Pasternak, 2004). Many people who work in organizations have little means to fulfill their propensity to quest at work and so their imagination and creativity become inactive. As a result, their engagement in the work of the organization diminishes.
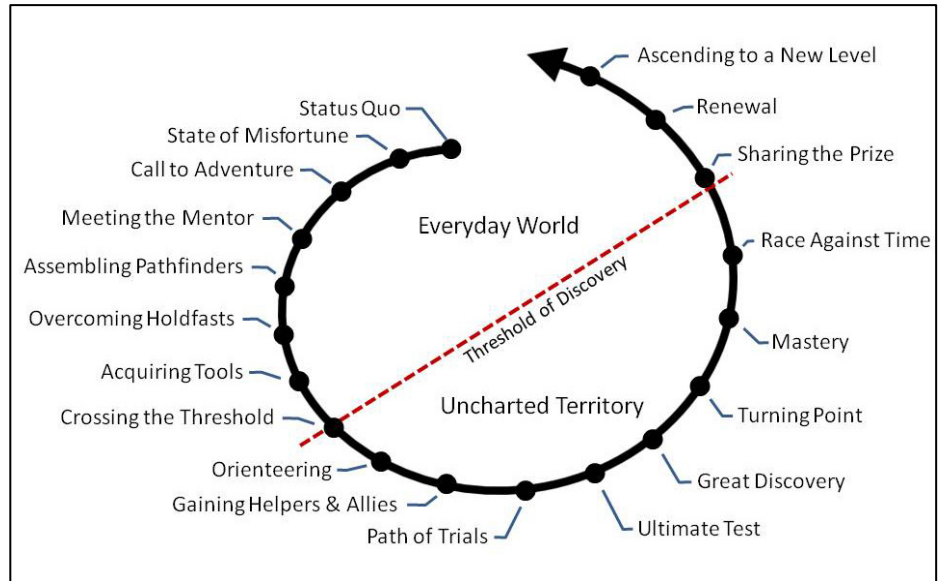
Figure 7: The Quest Cycle

Fortunately, many will rekindle their creative brilliance when engaged on the quest. The corporate quest provides a means of expression for a more fundamental propensity to quest and thereby re-engages passion, creativity and imagination that was previously inactive. As a direct result, participants create the innovations that drive breakthrough. If the quest can tap the creative brilliance of the organization, outside subject-matter experts will no longer be needed to drive innovation and breakthrough. Moreover, when participants are engaged, they are also motivated to actively promote the spread of their innovations widely within the organization.

States and Levels

Integral Theory characterizes states as transitory peak experiences are not equivalent to a lasting shift to a higher level (or stage) (Wilber 2007). Traditional transformation programs have been more directed at achieving state change

than level change. In the typical scenario, outside experts, equipped with a proven-path, programmatic process, encourage the organization to follow the process to achieve higher performance. While performance often jumps temporarily (state change), it quickly reverts back, close to previous normals, when the experts depart. When experts drive change, insiders often fail to develop sufficient capability to sustain a level change.

While the ultimate goal of the quest is achieving a new level, it does seek temporary state change as the quest unfolds. Through a spiral process of ever more ambitious trials, participants build increasing capability until they are able to sustain those states. The successful quest converts temporary states into permanent new levels. That is the breakthrough and the prize of the quest.

Touching All the Bases

The quest is rarely successful if it focuses only on systems and processes, or only on culture change, or only on strengthening leadership. Insurmountable barriers predictably crop up in the other areas. For example, a care-management breakthrough at a hospital corporation was blocked by business-as-usual leadership. In another example, a culture of civility blocked pathfinders from pressing for needed operational changes in an insurance company. The AQAL grid, as shown in Figure 8, is an effective tool for making sure that a quest touches all bases. Chances of a successful quest improve when leaders consider the barriers and opportunities in each of the AQAL quadrants.

Individual Interior: Personal Experience

Facilitating individual awareness of the quest is essential. Many of the ideas of the quest appear, on the surface, to be contrary to popular beliefs about how organizations change. For example, quest may seem excessively risky and yet it is *not* questing that leads to stagnation and decline. As mentioned previously, the quest activates personal passion, energy, creativity, imagination that will be essential to sustain the quest and foster employee-driven innovations. Individual awareness of the quest model increases changes for success in all other quadrants

Individual Exterior: Individual Activity

The stories of heroes tell us that there is much room for individual action on the quest. The quest model depends on pathfinders developing and applying new skills, model depends on pathfinders developing and applying new skills, making individual contributions and applying their imagination and creativity to challenging problems. In one case, an emergency-room physician personally risked the consequences of breaking hospital rules to test a new quick-care model on six patients. His bold actions lead to a fundamental breakthrough in emergency care. His leadership in the moment paved the way. Individual agency and accountability are hallmarks of the quest.

The quest also depends on leadership. Quest leaders opt for adventure over safety. They call the organization to that adventure. Leadership also involves protecting and nurturing the quest process even when it appears to conflict with current norms. Quest leadership is more role-based than positional. Anyone can sound the call, lead a quest, or lead within the quest team. In one case, two nurse managers with little positional authority led a quest that transformed end-of-life care in the United States. When individuals chose to lead, it opens the door to personal and organizational transformation and renewal.

While the quest needs leadership, it also builds leaders. Like the nascent heroes of myth, inexperienced leaders who become pathfinders will face real challenges, build new capabilities and occasionally assume the leadership role within the team. They will also stretch themselves by delving into new and unfamiliar areas, contacting people outside their organization, and communicating with people at all levels within their organization. Frequently, pathfinders move into permanent leadership roles after their quest is complete.

	Interior	Exterior
Individual	**Personal Experience** Perceptions & Awareness Beliefs Thoughts & Self-Talk Evaluations Feelings Energy Creativity ———————— *Conscious* *Subconscious* *Creative Subconscious*	**Individual Activity** Individual Actions Exhibited Skills Behavior Decisions Leadership
Collective	**Shared Experience** Culture Relationships Business DNA ———————— *Collective Unconscious*	**Collective Activity** Social Interactions Group Actions Processes Human Industry

Figure 8: AQAL Grid for Business (adapted from Wilber, 2007; Tice, 2009)

Interior Collective: Shared Experience

Quests are defined by obstacles, barriers and unexpected events. Overcoming these difficulties is the work of the quest. Overcoming obstacles creates a culture of accountability, as opposed to a culture of victimhood. Victims cannot complete their quest. As pointed out in *The Oz Principle* (Hickman, Smith & Connors, 2004), a culture of accountability exists when people ask themselves "what else can I do to rise above by my circumstances and achieve the results I desire" in spite of the obstacles. The quest encourages a culture where people expect obstacles and expect to overcome them. It is also a culture where people put more energy into achieving results than explaining why they fell short. The culture that supports the quest is vastly more heroic than the culture that simply reinforces the stability and equilibrium of the status quo.

Exterior Collective: Collective Activity

Much of the quest takes place in this quadrant. Contrary to stories of solitary heroes, the quest is largely a collective effort. Teams explore new territory, engage in trials, discover breakthroughs, and master the new way. Entire organizations may apply the results of the quest, adopting and spreading the new
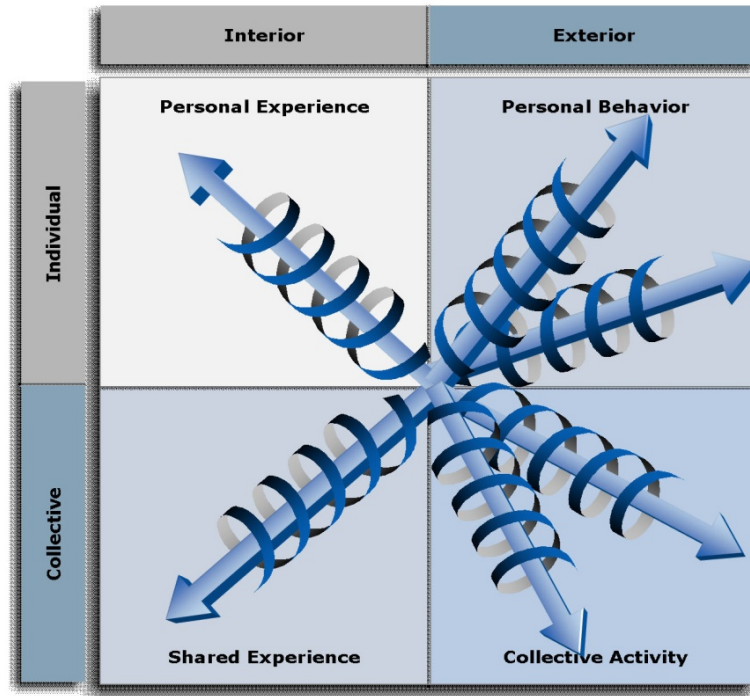
Figure 9: Never Ending Quest Opportunities (adapted from Wilber, 2007)

ways and leveraging breakthrough to the organization's advantage. People interact, take action, create together, and share the benefits. This is the substance of exploration and application.

The quest archetype and the corporate quest approach both contain a pattern of activities that lead the pathfinder through their quest. With the quest, spiraling up to new levels can be greatly accelerated and the risk of dead ends significantly reduced. Without a pattern to follow, transformation efforts can be haphazard.

Never-ending Quest

Clare Graves pointed out that the quest is never ending (Graves & Cowan, 2005). At the completion of every successful quest, at each new stage or level, one simply finds a new set of problems to be solved – a new call to adventure. So it is with the corporate quest. At

each successful turn of the cycle, the organization will take its rightful place at a new level and enjoy renewal. But the period of stability may be shorter than anticipated. Soon fresh rifts in the status quo will call leaders to a new quest and the opportunity to attain new levels. As Figure 9 shows, there are many lines and many levels that await exploration and breakthrough. The cycle of renewal is never ending and the opportunity for development is unlimited. When leaders master the quest, they can apply it anew at every cycle of development.

Conclusion

The quest is an archetypal pattern for transformation and renewal. The corporate quest, based on that archetype, is a systematic approach for moving to a higher-order level of development in organizations. It is not simply a meta-

phor, but an observable, repeating pattern in real-life transformation. The quest model accelerates transformation and reduces the risk of dead ends. Much of the quest takes place not at home base, but in uncharted territory, where breakthrough opportunities are plentiful. Because people have a powerful innate propensity to quest, corporate quest activate passion, creativity and imagination in participants. The corporate quest appears to be consistent with a wide range of Integral concepts and should be particularly useful to the "Integrally Aware" leader.

Randall Benson has guided organizations through transformation and complex change for over 25 years. He is the principle consultant of Benson Consulting and author of *The Quest Effect*®. He developed the corporate quest, an approach to breakthrough, transformation and renewal that is based on repeating cycles of discovery and application. Randall has guided leaders in manufacturing, service, government and healthcare in their application of the corporate quest. He is also a frequent speaker, seminar presenter, and workshop facilitator. His work has been referenced in over 60 news articles and media spots. He lives in the San Juan Islands in Washington State.

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