

What Makes Self Management Stick?

Lesson: Decentralized Organizations in Context — Why Now?

This week, we begin our exploration of decentralized organizations. In this week's introductory video, we

- Consider why decentralized organizations have been slow to take off given that successful pioneering companies such as WL Gore have existed for decades. What complex system's changes are emerging to encourage decentralization?
- Review Laloux's book *Reinventing Organizations* that elevated the visibility of self-management. These ideas catalyzed many startups to test "Teal" methods and promoted many legacy organizations to pursue transformation.
- Explore how the urgent shift to remote work during the past few years influenced thinking about and approaches to self-management.

Read, Watch, Listen

After viewing the video embedded above, please review the following resources.

- [Working Without a Boss: Lattice Organization With Direct Person-to-Person Communication](#), WL Gore (2016)
- [The Imperative for Adaptive Organizations: Is Self-Management a Viable Model?](#)
- [Download The Imperative for Adaptive Organizations: Is Self-Management a Viable Model?](#), MJ Kaplan (2019)
- [The Zappos Holocracy Experiment](#), Ethan Bernstein & John Bunch (2016)
- [Reinventing Organizations](#), Frederic Laloux (2014)Note — I assume that you are somewhat familiar with Laloux's work. For this reason, I suggest you choose any of these resources to revisit overview of "Teal" organizations. In regard to the Insights, Laloux made 130 short videos on 8 topics related to "Teal" and self-management (5 - 15 min. each). I recommend choosing 1 or 2 videos to watch that pique your interest.

- [Modern Management](#), Frederic Laloux at the Conscious Capitalism CEO Summit (2018)
- [Insights for the Journey: 130 Insights on 8 Topics](#), Frederic Laloux (2023)
- [Reinventing Organizations](#), a summary by Ulrich Gernt from [Change Factory](#)
- [The Journey To Where We Are Today](#), Chris Peake (2019)
- [An Everyone Culture: Becoming a Deliberately Developmental Organization](#), Robert Kegan & Lisa Lahey (2016)
- [Organize for Complexity](#), Niels Pflaeging (2014)
- [Thinking in Systems](#), Donella H. Meadows (2008)

1.1 Case Study: Response to WL Gore

There are 8 questions at the end of the Gore Case Study. Choose at least one question to respond to in a brief, blog-style reflection. At the beginning of your response, share the question you are addressing so we have context for your response. This activity requires Peer Feedback, which you can post in this forum by replying directly to your classmate's original response.

Be sure to review the Rubric for this assignment before posting.

Case Study Prompts

- What are the main differences between Gore Company's organizational structure and other predominant approaches (as you know them)?
- What might have been the main challenges the Gore Company faced in upholding its original organization structure throughout the years?
- How does the process of becoming a "leader" at Gore Company compare to the process at other companies that you know of?
- What might be the challenges in handling the cases of any associates who express discontent at Gore Company? For example, how could the company respond when a person thinks that they should be chosen as leader, but isn't? What are some of the challenges in addressing a situation where one associate never seems to contribute, and other associates complain about that?
- Do you agree with Gary Hamel and Bill Breen that the lattice organization at Gore Company is a "democratic" form of innovation process?

- Do you think that the organizational practices at Gore would change drastically if the company were to be listed on the stock exchange? Why do you think they would or would not change?
- Which elements in Gore's model are compelling to you? Explain. Which elements of the Gore model are least compelling to you? Explain.
- Can you guess the famous management theorist who inspired Bill Gore? Hint: His major work was published shortly after the establishment of Gore Company.

Response

I've been in Southern California all week for some machine training at the Orange Coast Community College. It is beautiful here and the food is fantastic (so far). Succulents galore and the morning sun just perks me right up. This experience was made possible by the Hearst foundation and the management ethos of my team of science support staff at Trinity. We are each autonomous decision makers that share what we are up to and (generally) seek advice before acting. The process to end up here was: pitch to Hearst, they say yes, i schedule the grant initiatives (one of which is training in SoCal), and do it all in a shared document that all involved can see and comment on. Our small work cohort functions similarly to the Gore Company and flat organizations studied by Laloux. I honestly don't think I can go back to hierarchical pyramid structure. It's totally bogus.

Choosing a question or two to reflect on has been the most challenging part of this assignment. I'll start with:

Do you agree with Gary Hamel and Bill Breen that the lattice organization at Gore Company is a “democratic” form of innovation process?

On my walk back from the OCC, and in between succulent ogling, it occurred to me that outside of work, most of us exist in a decentralized - flat manner. We made decisions based on our core values, societal rules, while seeking advice, and with substantial risk and repercussions. It seems to work pretty well. I would believe a statistical correlation between freer countries and increased techno-social advancements. So, yes, the lattice organization feels like democratic innovation process. An extension of our non-work ways of being. Work in that environment provides space for people to be themselves and frees up energy to innovate and flow. To bring their unique views, lived experiences, and ways of doing to the company, brewing a stew of dramatically more ideas and options to explore. In the hierarchical management structure (feudal lord structure) we are fixated

on supporting one person's vision and scope. Way more limiting and far less adaptability.

Which elements in Gore's model are compelling to you? Explain.

I've been somewhat fixated on going flat or Teal in the makerspace that I supervise for awhile and, as I read and learn more about decentralized flat management systems I feel like I'm grasping the importance of the clearly defined decision making framework discussed in the Gore Company article. My mental model was:

1. Establish group values
2. Create an open, visible, and accessible communication platform
3. Implement a form of Laloux's advice process and then set it in motion

I'm starting to see the importance of a more defined, but open to change, framework for acting and behaving in a way that fits the community values.

Which elements of the Gore model are least compelling to you? Explain.

These flat management structures feel like the paradigm of the future. Diversity of ideas, the freedom to pursue, and the accelerating advancement of global communication will lead to more creative and efficient businesses. And in a way, that can be a problem. A well run product business is better at selling and producing more products. Gore needs to sell, produce product (and waste), and deliver to consumers with increased efficiency and creativity to remain competitive. Going public and maximizing share value would prioritize growth, which equals even more product. What is the benefit to society? More Gore-Tex jackets, pants and gloves. More forever chemicals (PFAS poly-fluoroalkyl substances). It would be interesting to see how they navigate the current PFAS debate.

1.2 Reflection: What Makes Self-Management Stick?

To Do — After watching the [weekly video and reviewing Laloux's framing on management](#), respond to the prompts below in blog format [2 hrs]

Write in blog form, why do you think self-management sticks in some organizations and not others? Does Laloux's framing provide insights? What lessons do these differences

offer for you as a leader? Offer feedback or insights in response to at least one peer's comments.

Response

I flew back home from Long Beach yesterday. Away from sunny delight and into cloudy Texas winter. Plenty of pre-boarding people watching on display to highlight human complexity in action. People of every type mazing through and around each other. Relying on open information, and an occasional query, to navigate a fairly complex system. Respecting and trusting each enough to plop into a flying tin can to travel cross country at a ridiculous clip. When driving, I like to compare travel techniques at my disposal. Dependent upon an assumption of reasonable fitness, navigation ability and use of roads. San Antonio to Austin (84 miles): Drive: 1.5 hrs, Bicycle: 5 hrs, Run: 15 hrs, Hike: 30 hrs

Ways of travel that are reliant on me and my ability. When I let go and enter a complex arrangement (air travel) my rate of relocation goes up exponentially. I can be in a whole new world in hours.

Reading the compiled insights of Frederick Laloux while immersing in a complex environment gives me hope that Teal organizational practices can be introduced and implemented successfully into our traditional hierarchical business world. In fact, to deal with modern complexity, businesses will most likely have to adopt some variation of it. Our society's rate of change will be too great for hierarchical systems to comprehend and manage in the near future.

In between people watching, I jumped into Octavia Butler's Parable of the Sower. Written 30 years ago to imagine where we could be now. It feels close. I'm Captivated by her proclamation:

All that you touch

You Change.

All that you Change

Changes you.

The only lasting truth

Is Change.

God

Is Change.

Acknowledgement and willingness to embrace change by the hierarchical business leaders will be one of the key indicators of a company's ability to successfully transition to Teal. All of Laloux's successful case studies had a singular visionary leader at the top that moved with intentionality to support and nurture a distributed leadership model. The transition from top down to flat, has to come from the top down. The leader must seed control, provide space for individual expression and be patient. They must be willing to fail and learn regularly. They must support an ecosystem model that is in equilibrium with change. This is not an insubstantial hurdle. Modern business and economic students are exposed to, train for, and study the opposite. Business strategies that are clearly defined and focused on continual now growth. They leave schools emitting red hot energy of individualized glory. Modern manifest destiny. Work hard, gain enough knowledge and skill, and network until they reach the top. Show what you know through quarterly stake growth org charts and get paid.

Success stories from the flat side will prompt more attempts by contemporary leaders. Their ability to switch will be tempered by their true adaptation of TEAL practices. Laloux's failure examples showcased false leadership buy-in. Leaders create a flat structure in name only but the working model is still hierarchical. Or leaders, stakeholders, and boards lose patience and retake the reins when hit with turbulence. TEAL requires substantial commitment and trust in the process by all involved.

Laloux states that successful TEAL leaders are: "Creating a container in the organization that allows us to grow into our wholeness, and into all of who we are..." As an employee/ work participant this novel. This is a change. This requires trust. Modern workers are in and have only known systems of mistrust. Human resources is the smiley faced cover the ass of the company department that we have all dealt with. Trust will take time, openness, and failures. Time that leaders may not be willing to expend.

How can I incorporate Laloux's insights into my daily work life? I supervise 8 student works in an Academic Makerspace. We support 4-8 classes, all of our stem labs, alumni relations, and 200 or so students per semester. We safely train, build, and mentor in a complex and evolving academic ecosystem. Perfect TEAL candidate right? I think so too. The plan for this semester is to begin. Begin with patience and a clear understanding of our community's values. Plant the seed, so that we can fill the container with our

wholeness and express our unique ways of doing and creating. Long term, my hope is that the students take these experiences and apply them to their career arcs. Experiences that are the inverse of the business as usual paradigm.