The Process Enneagram©
Processes from
The Leadership Dance
Part 1

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He is the creator of the Process Enneagram®, the only known tool that helps people to solve complex problems, make the connections with the other people they'll need to do the work and releases the emotional energy and commitment to do the work quickly and well, all at the same time!

_The key is in the application of this powerful tool to open up their conversations, to learn and to grow._

“The use of the Process Enneagram seems to be the missing link between complexity theory and practical application.” ¹

To help to broaden the understanding of these ideas, Knowles has written many papers and articles as well as The Leadership Dance, Pathways to Extraordinary Organizational Effectiveness, ISBN 0-9721204-0-8 and Partnering For Safety and Business Excellence, ISBN 978-0-9721204-1-8.

This essay addresses the fact that people are self-organizing all the time, and provides insights and tools as to how leaders can purposefully engage with this powerful force to improve the effectiveness of their organizations.

Defining the Processes

In this chapter, we explore new ways of understanding how organizations function, and how we can be more effective. By abstracting what we've learned from the crisis examples, we gain new insights about the underlying patterns and processes of living and working together in organizations. The patterns and processes are revealed using a new tool called the Process Enneagram. In using this tool, the choice to live and work in a different way opens up for us.

Using the Process Enneagram to Understand Organizations as Living Systems

The patterns and processes of the Process Enneagram introduced here are grounded in our experiences of organizational life. They emerge quickly in times of crisis. Understanding them will help us to have deeper insights into the way organizations function. We can think of organizations as living systems where all the parts are connected, constantly interacting and adapting to changes in their environment in ways that maintain their identity and sustainability.

All organizations are complex systems where the people are constantly changing as they interact with each other and their environment. Properties emerge from the non-linear, dynamical processes taking place among the people and their environment. We can't predict what these emergent properties will be, merely by knowing all the parts. These properties emerge from the complex patterns and processes that run in the organization. All the organizations that I know about constantly use some mixture of patterns and processes characteristic of living systems. The healthiest organizations are centered in self-organizing processes. There is, however, also a need for operational management and strategic leadership as well.

We begin the development of the Process Enneagram by looking at the organization from nine different perspectives. I have found this to be a useful and illuminating way to look at organizations. These are the same perspectives I found so useful when talking about the crises in the previous chapter. The attributes of these perspectives are easily seen and felt when we step into any organization, whether a family, a store, a business, a not-for-profit group, a church or a school. We all use some of these, almost automatically, as we step in the front door.

From each of these nine perspectives, we can ask unique, penetrating questions about the people and their organization.

Point 0 (Identity): Who are they? What is their Identity? What is their history, individually and collectively? (As the first cycle is completed, this point becomes point 9.)
Point 1 (Intention): What are they trying to do? What are their Intentions? What is the future potential?

Point 2 (Issues): What are the problems and issues facing them? What are their dilemmas, paradoxes and questions?

Point 3 (Relationship): What are their Relationships like? How are they connected to others they need in the system? What is the quality of these connections? Are there too many or too few of them?

Point 4 (Principles and Standards): What are their Principles and Standards of behavior? What are their ground rules, really? What are the undiscussable behaviors that go on, over and over?

Point 5 (Work): What is their Work? On what are they physically working?

Point 6 (Information): Do the people know what’s going on? How do they create and handle Information?

Point 7 (Learning): Are they learning anything? What are their Learning processes? What is the future potential?

Point 8 (Structure and Context): How are they organized? What is their Structure? Where does the energy come from that makes things happen in their organization? Is their hierarchy deep or flat? What’s happening in the larger environment, in which they’re living and trying to thrive? Who are their competitors and what are they doing? What is the Context or surrounding environment in which they are living and working?

Point 9 (Their New Identity): As they have moved through these questions, how has their Identity changed? Have they expanded and grown? What new things do they now know? What new skills do they now have?

This may seem like a complicated way of looking at organizations, but it is actually a process that we all use unconsciously, at least in part. To make the point, let’s use the points of the Process Enneagram to compare two large stores I use. One is a large, mass merchandiser with a national chain of stores. From the company’s name, I know who they are and that they are trying to sell modestly priced clothing and home furnishings. This is their Identity at point 0 and Intention at point 1. One of the Issues (point 2) I see when I step in the door is the clutter in the aisles that makes it difficult to get around the store. Their behavior towards each other and me is not particularly courteous or considerate. They complain about their Company, so I conclude that they
don’t have much value for their Relationships with each other, with me their customer, or with their employer. The poor relationships show up at point 3, and the lack of values supporting good customer relations shows up at point 4. Their physical Work (point 5) is to sell a lot of merchandise. Whenever I ask help to find something, I get vague answers like “It’s over there somewhere,” so I must go on a search for what I need. From this, I conclude that the clerks don’t know much about what’s going on. They are limited in the amount of Information they have, or maybe they just don’t care. This shows up at point 6. I also conclude that there isn’t much Learning going on here about the business or about ways to improve it since nothing seems to change from one visit to the next. This lack of Learning shows up at point 7. Finally, I also conclude that their Structure (point 8) must be organized in a rigid hierarchy because that’s the only way that they can keep things organized, even a little bit. In my experience of organizations behaving like this, most of the employees do as little as possible. I don’t feel very good in a place like this, so I try not to go there to shop. Their Context (point 8) is one where there are other stores nearby, so I prefer to shop in those stores.

When I go into a large store of a different company with a national chain of stores, however, the picture is quite different. I know from their name who they are and that they are trying to sell stuff for helping me to keep up my home. This is their Identity and Intention, which show up at points 0 and 1. They have some things in the aisles, but seem to have them well ordered and the housekeeping is quite good. The aisles are more open and easy to move through. They have tried to address the issue of inventory supply much better than the store in the first example; this shows up at point 2. Their behavior towards each other and me is helpful and courteous; they are interested in me, the customer. From this, I conclude that they have good working relationships and value the way they treat each other and their customers. These are their Relationships (point 3) and their Principles and Standards (point 4). Their physical Work is to sell stuff, like the first store. This shows up at point 5. Information (point 6) seems to flow freely because the clerks know the answers to my questions. When I take something back, they talk with me and seem to try to learn how to serve me better and have a more successful business. This Learning shows up at point 7. I conclude that to do the work they are doing and to behave in the way I see them behaving, they must be organized in teams and their Structure must be fairly flat. These observations show up at point 8. I feel vitality in this store and like to shop there. In considering their Context, their competitive environment, I know that the price of the stock for the second Company has gone up while the first one has entered into bankruptcy. I expect that there is a relationship between these observations made at the local level and the things going on at the national level. This is a simple example of the kind of more or less unconscious analyses we all can and do make in a matter of seconds, at least in part, whenever we see and experience an organization.
With these nine perspectives arranged around the circle, their interconnectedness becomes quite clear (Figure 1). This Figure illustrates the “webbiness” of so much that’s going on.

The Web of connections is like a nervous system with each perspective informing all the others. As in a nervous system, some of the connections are stronger than others, and the connections need to function in specific sequences. We can’t walk, for example, if our nerves fire in the wrong sequence.

The way that we usually see things happening in organizations, like in the preceding store examples, shows up around the circumference of the circle in Figure 1. These are visible things we see in the physical world.

In order to develop a deeper understanding of what’s happening in organizations, however, we need to look into the inner patterns and processes. In the next sections, the command and control patterns and processes and the living systems patterns and processes are explored.

**Command and Control Mode: The “Machine” Paradigm**

Most leaders and managers desire reliability, stability, predictability and control in their organizations. These are great for machines, but people and organizations are not machines. We all want these attributes in an airplane, computer or car, but in organizations they can cause serious problems.

The intense desire by many managers for reliability, stability, predictability and control often leads them to try to use excessive control over their organization in order to achieve these results. This leads to many undesirable and unintended consequences.

Over the last year or so, I’ve had a chance to talk with some TEC Groups (The Executive Connection). I ran a brief survey in 5 groups from around the USA to see what they thought about these things. Out of twenty-nine CEOs, twenty-eight strongly desired these features. They all felt their employees were not contributing their best. Twenty-eight saw high stress-related problems in their organizations, fourteen had high turnover, twenty-two faced serious resistance to change in their organizations, and
twenty-eight of them were unsatisfied with their overall business performance. Yet all of them reported that they were working very hard to improve their results. In their personal lives, sixteen reported that they were not happy with the balance between work and family.

Let us now look at these inner patterns and processes. Many times, the leaders in the organization are vague and unclear about who they really are, (Identity) and what they're trying to do (Intention). Normally, they don't engage the organization in conversations about such things, so when they announce a new initiative, no matter how good and well thought-out, lots of issues are raised. This is illustrated in Step 1 in Figure 2. People at the top see all the questions and issues that people raise about the changes as resistance to change.

Typically, they hurry to move on. They will probably dictate a Structural solution, like a new organizational structure (as in re-engineering) or new rules and procedures. This is illustrated as Step 2 in Figure 2. Then the new Work is imposed, in the belief that this is the answer to the problems. This is illustrated as Step 3 in Figure 2. Those who actually do the physical Work under the imposed Structure try to make sense of what's going on, and become stuck in all the unresolved Issues. This is illustrated as Step 4 in Figure 2.

As the organization's leaders push harder so that they can accomplish their goals, the people doing the work push back just as hard as they struggle to make sense of what's happening and why. Around and around this triangular pattern we go. Principles and Standards, Information, Relationships and Learning simply aren't discussed. This creates enormous incoherence and waste in the organization and is a source of much of the stress that people experience.

The “Living Systems” Paradigm

In Chapter 1, we looked at the story of saving the amines business. You'll remember that we decided to do the work in a very unusual way. We worked with our R&D and Plant people, as well as the instrument vendor, to design the project. Everyone from the
mechanics and operators to the top plant management was deeply involved in weekly project meetings in the control room of the existing operation. We did not run a parallel process and we made the needed changes during the scheduled, annual maintenance shutdown. This was about a $50 million/year sales business so these decisions were not inconsequential.

The project was done working out of the living systems paradigm. The net result of working this way was a project costing only about $3 million and we were able to do it in only 10 months. The process started up without incident and ran at full capacity, producing top quality product in only 4 days. We set a new standard for the whole Company in retrofit projects like this, cutting both the cost and the time in half.

As we explore using the living systems paradigm, two patterns and processes will be developed. The first concerns self-organizing patterns and processes, while the other concerns the way that the actual work takes place.

In looking at the pattern in Figure 3, we will now look at the inner patterns and processes at points 0, 3 and 6 which are concerned with Identity, Relationship and Information respectively. These are the central elements of Self-Organization.

As we did the amines instrument conversion project, everyone in the project was clear about our Identity. We shared all the Information at least weekly and, as we worked together, listened, and talked, trust and interdependence built. Our Relationships became healthier and stronger. Anyone could go to whomever they wanted to get the Information they needed. This was a very deep process. Working in this way improved everything we did, both during the conversion and afterwards. Used consciously together, these are the patterns and processes for developing self-organization.

This process of self-organization goes on continuously in organizations. It is a process that has a timeless quality; it can be seen as operating outside of our normal view of linear time. It applies to everything we do, now and into the future. One of the first things a leader can do to open up his or her organization is to share Information, to help
people get clear on their Identity and to help set the environment so that healthy Relationships can develop. When these processes improve they have a positive impact in all future work.

To have our work processes go well we need to begin with a clear, compelling question that relates to the specific work that we wish to do. This question is developed by the people involved and must be compelling in order for us to have the interest and energy to take on the work effectively. For the amines business example, the question was: “How do we make an effective, low cost conversion from pneumatic to distributive control systems?” The scope of the beginning question can vary enormously. It can be very narrow, like “How do I type a report?” or broader like “How do we improve the customer service in our business?” or very broad like “How do we change the entire nature of our business?”

The elements highlighted in Figure 4 all relate to how specific work gets done. For example, if I discover that I need to join two boards (Identity) and I decide to use a nail to join them (my Intention), I must hold the hammer and nail properly (Principles and Standards). I must decide where to put it, and how to hold the work (Issues and Tensions). Then I have to decide how to set up the work place (Structure) and actually drive the nail (Work). Hopefully, I get better at driving nails and building things (Learning). If I write a few notes, I’ll have some Information that will help me as I go forward. I’m in a process of Learning and growth.

The questions that the people in the organization address as they consider the nine attributes all relate to the opening question, and so this opening question must be important and compelling to them.

All the elements of effective work processes are fractal in nature; that is, they display repeating patterns that are similar at many levels of scale, can be used at any level of
scale, and show up throughout the organizations in similar but not identical ways. In my own experience, I’ve used these patterns and processes to consider questions of my own personal development, for mentoring, for developing my leadership team, for operating a whole plant and for working in the community. We are using them now as we develop the leadership team for the City of Niagara Falls, NY.

When we in the organization are engaged in conversations about Identity and Intentions, we all get clear on what we’re about together. This shows up as Step 1 in Figure 4. The double arrows show that, as we move around the Process Enneagram, our intentions at the base level become part of our Identity at the next, upper level. This indicates we’re growing and learning. We then agree to work together in new ways (Principles and Standards: the organization’s ground rules). This shows up as Step 2 in Figure 4. We can then take on the Issues in a way that deals with them much more effectively. We can move away from an “either/or” debate and explore “both/and” possibilities. This shows up as Step 3 in Figure 4. The Principles and Standards can be seen as analogous to homeostatic processes for a living organization. These homeostatic processes maintain the stable way in which the people in the organization agree to engage each other. I see them like the simple rules that underlie complex behavior in chaotic systems.

In many organizations, management imposes these rules. Typically, in mature organizations, the rules have grown and evolved over the years in such a way that practically no one knows where they all came from or why they were developed in the first place. Such things are usually undiscussed. The fact that they are undiscussed is often undiscussable. Yet these rules exert a powerful influence on the way people in the organization work together. These hidden, powerful forces play a major role in management’s efforts to maintain stability, reliability, predictability and control. They often are in conflict with the overt things management is saying about how they want things to be in the organization, so we have incoherence and stress. This mode of operation blocks any real chance for learning and growth.

When people in an organization realize that they need and want to change, then together they must address these undiscussables and develop new Principles and Standards (new homeostatic processes). These must be put into place so the new behavior can be maintained in order to reach the new Intention. The new simple rules should be developed by the people themselves in conversation with, but not imposed by, management. In this process, Relationships strengthen. This is difficult work, so everyone must help each other through the process.

As people work together on the Issues, using the new Principles and Standards they’ve developed, a profound shift in Relationships occurs. Trust and interdependence begin to build as everyone learns to keep their word and commitments, to be willing and able to
help each other, to do what they say they will do, to be there when they’re needed, and
to be dependable and reliable. This shows up at Step 4 in Figure 4.

One of the key things we agree to in our Principles and Standards is to share
Information abundantly. This actual sharing of Information shows up in Step 5 in Figure
4. When the Information flows and the necessary work is done on our Identity,
Intentions, Principles and Standards and Issues, people spontaneously self-organize
around the needed Work. This shows up at Step 6 in Figure 4.

With this preparation, everyone can do the Work much more effectively and efficiently.
This shows up at Step 7 of Figure 4. When we reflect on and review our Work, we Learn
and find better ways to do things.

New potential and possibilities for the future open up. This shows up as Step 8 in Figure

The process by which we do the tasks before us in moving through the 1, 4, 2, 8, 5, 7, 1
sequence takes place in the here and now. This is the specific work before us that we
need to accomplish for the organization to succeed. As we use the Process Enneagram
in this way, our work tends to be of a local nature. Our tasks may be quite specific to a
particular location and time or they may be of a more global nature in their potential
impact. Most of the time, we do our work with only a small number of people, whether
we’re down deep in an organization or at the top. Most of my work with the Process
Enneagram has been with small to medium sized groups. These have ranged from men
working to make concrete bridge beams in Kansas City, to the top team of a large steel
company in Australia, to the partners of a local accounting firm, to the Mayor and her
leadership team in Niagara Falls, NY. In all these cases, the Process Enneagram work
unfolds in similar ways with the people they are working most closely with. This is true
regardless of whether the potential impact of the work of the group is quite local or quite
broad. These patterns and processes apply to all levels of work, and are useful to
everyone in the organization. The living systems patterns and processes are running all
the time in organizations, whether people in the organizations recognize it or not. They
are running in healthy as well as dying organizations. They are running in caring as well
as brutal organizations, all the time.

I mentioned earlier that the Process Enneagram should begin with a compelling
question of importance to the group and organization. The Process Enneagram does
not have much impact with very loose groups of people who do not have important
issues in common. Teams and groups of people, like those I mentioned in the preceding
paragraph, have many issues that are important to them. As people work closely with
each other, they will have important issues that they share and on which they will want
to work.
We can see what happens in a command and control organization when it is confronted with a crisis like those described in the stories in Chapter 1. We can visualize the command and control process, connecting the pattern of points 2, 8 and 5, as running on top of a set of multilayered processes which look something like a layer cake. The deeper, self-organizing processes are often invisible to those at the top. This may be what I’ve heard some people call “the shadow organization.” It’s where the grapevines are running. It takes place in the little groups that form deep in the organization where people are trying to find refuge, to make sense of what’s going on and do the work that needs to be done. Unfortunately, in many organizations, the command and control process has been pushed so far that many people become cynical, resulting in a shutdown of people’s energy and creativity. Even so, the living systems processes are running, but they are weaker and more dysfunctional.

In an emergency, so many things happen so fast that management can no longer control the flow of events. Usually the command and control process is stripped away from the top of the layer cake, and the deeper, living systems patterns and processes emerge spontaneously. This profoundly influences the way people work together; they become much more focused and productive. In a real emergency, everyone knows who they are—we’re flat on our backs (Identity at point 0), and what they need to do—get up and running again (Intention at point 1). The need to get up and running transcends their differences and people pull together in ways that no one imagined possible (Principles and Standards at point 4).

Everyone plows into all the issues facing him or her (Issues at point 2). Trust and interdependence build quickly (Relationship at point 3). Since all the information about the situation is visible (Information at point 6), people spontaneously self-organize (Structure and Context at point 8), do the work (Work at point 5), learn how to do it
better (Learning at point 7) and keep going until the emergency is over (the new Identity at point 9). Everyone feels really good about how the work was done and how everyone came together, but as the flow of the events of the crisis slow down, management reasserts itself and the organization goes back to the old command and control paradigm.

If we can learn how to stay in the living systems processes, we don’t have to go back to the old way. The shift away from command and control systems into living systems is illustrated in Figure 5.

With living systems patterns and processes, we can achieve superior results and people will feel better at the same time. We can have it all. These processes open up the flow of energy and creativity. The system (the people and the processes in the organization) becomes more coherent. Figure 6 shows the combined patterns of all 9 parts for both the processes of Self-Organization and for doing the Work. This is called the Process Enneagram; it describes the processes for living systems.

As we look at these figures, other important patterns emerge and inform us about what’s happening in our organizations. These patterns are summarized in Figure 7 which shows the Self-Organizing Leadership processes that lead to coherence in the central column. It also shows the necessary balance between, and the interplay with, operational management processes on the left side and the strategic leadership processes on the right side. These patterns and processes are all within the Web. The Web is a way of seeing organizations as a whole. In the unity of the Web, we can see all the multiplicity of the leadership processes.

In this book, the term operational management speaks to working with specific things and events whether they are happening now or in the future. Strategic leadership relates to working on future possibilities. When I decide to work on one of the many possibilities and select one or two, I move from strategic leadership process into operational management and implementation. For example, when I’m playing around with the idea of traveling to new places, that would be strategic leadership. When I
decide on a particular trip and begin the detailed planning, I’ve moved into operational management.

In actual practice, strategic and operational distinctions become blurred because of their endless interaction in the constantly changing world in which we live. Complexity theory teaches us that the old ways of strategic planning break down because of these complex interactions. Operational management, that is, working with things and events to make sure that things get done, and operational leadership, stepping out and taking the initiative to get things done (just get up, get going and do it) are intertwined. In this book, it’s best to keep both these ideas in mind because operational work requires that both of them happen.

The Leadership Dance

In the complexity in which we live and work, it is necessary to constantly use both operational management and strategic leadership processes in dynamic balance with the central Self-Organizing Leadership processes for the organization to be coherent and to function well. In the center column of Figure 7 is the pattern for Self-Organization, Work and the Process Enneagram. If we overuse either the operational management or the strategic leadership processes, however, or fail to connect the self-organizing processes to real work of importance to the organization, we begin to create problems and drive the organization into incoherence.
Incoherence, caused by command and control or imposed processes, usually emerges around the Issues. It happens when what the management is saying doesn’t make sense to those doing the Work. Incoherence in strategic leadership processes occurs when the leaders are restrictive, closed and exclusive. It shows up around Learning when the new Principles and Standards the leaders are preaching don’t make sense to the people actually living in the system and trying to do the Work. The failure to connect self-organizing processes to work important to the organization leads to an excessive amount of time being spent going ever more deeply into the esoteric aspects of Identity, Relationship and Information. People take their eye off what the organization needs to do, so the work of the organization starts to degrade.

In these situations, the espoused values and principles of behavior the leaders preach, and those actually in use—the invisible undiscussables—are in deep conflict. This is the Management Trap as Chris Argyris describes it in his book, *Flawed Advice and the Management Trap*. The defective practices described above show up in what he calls Model I organizations, and they are filled with all the problems and incoherence he describes.

Some of the characteristics of Model I organizations identified by Argyris are:

- management issues injunctions (the basic guidelines);
- they define goals and try to achieve them;
- they try to maximize winning and minimize losing;
- they want to minimize the generation or expression of negative feelings; and
- they want to be rational, objective and intellectual, suppressing feelings.

The managers in the organization seek to:

- design and manage the environment unilaterally;
- own and control the task;
- unilaterally protect themselves;
- unilaterally protect others from being hurt; and
- control others and prevent being controlled by them.

This results in managers running the risk of being seen as defensive and willing to have relationships with others colored by mistrust and rigidity; and having an organization where long-term learning and effectiveness are reduced.

Many managers move into defensive routines where:

- they craft messages that contain ambiguities and/or inconsistencies;
- they act as if the messages are not inconsistent;
• they make ambiguity and inconsistency in the message undiscussable; and
• they make the undiscussability undiscussable.

So, as a result:

• it’s impossible for the people in the organization to deal effectively with any subject; and
• the people feel it’s unrealistic or dangerous to confront these patterns and do much about them…

… so many people become cynical.

A dynamic, healthy balance of the Strategic Leadership and Operational Management patterns and processes, centered on the Self-Organizing Leadership patterns and processes, needs to be our goal. The use of this dynamic, healthy interplay of these processes is what I’ve called the Leadership Dance.

The use of the Process Enneagram, as discussed here, is an effective way for the organization to become coherent. We begin to be more like what Argyris would describe as Model II organizations, where the espoused theory and the theories-in-use are more nearly the same. Model II organizations are characterized by having:

• valid information, informed choice, internal commitment, public testing of theories-in-use;
• clarity and the invitation to confront views and emotions, learning through confronting assumptions;
• respect;
• help and support;
• honesty—public verification; and
• integrity—the courage to invite the testing of ideas.

In order for the systems in our organizations to be healthy and vibrant, they must be centered in the Self-Organizing Leadership processes while simultaneously using the operational management and strategic leadership processes as the dynamic situations demand. In this way of leading, the organization is alive, vibrant and far from equilibrium with energy and creativity bubbling forth. Moving among Self-Organizing, Operational and Strategic modes of leadership is a dance. As our conditions and environmental context keep changing, the balance keeps shifting; it’s the Leadership Dance. This places a demand on the leaders and all the other people in the organization to be more conscious and to pay careful attention to what’s happening around them, both inside and outside the organization. Effective leaders engage the people in the organization to
address the challenges they face, so this is not a case of dancing around the serious issues they face. Highly effective leaders know the Leadership Dance.