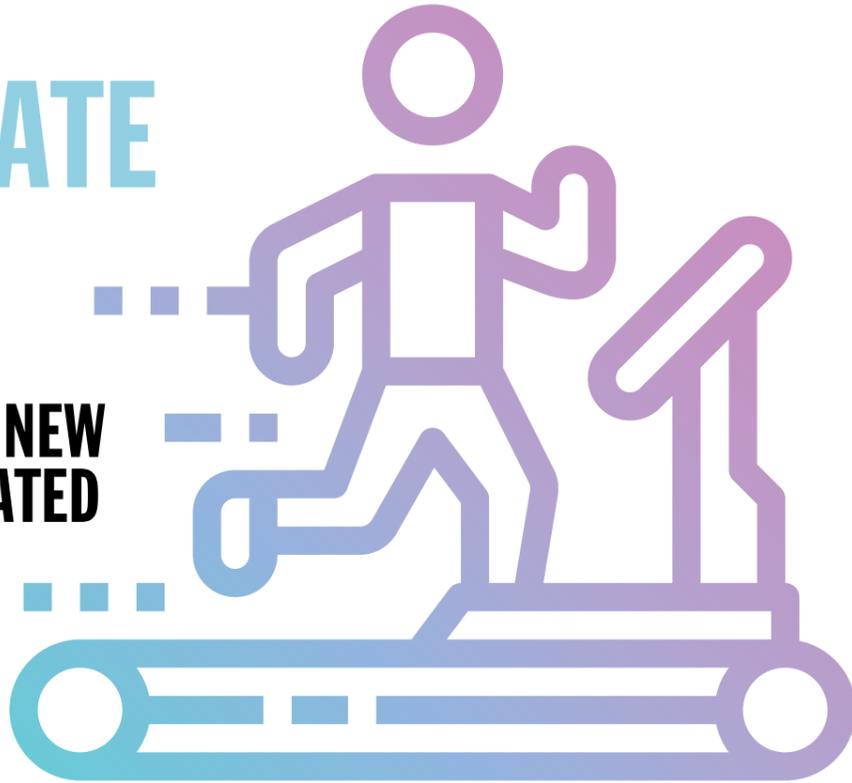


DELIBERATE FITNESS

ORGANISATIONAL FITNESS FOR THE NEW ERA OF COORDINATED ACTION



REMEMBER AN AMBITIOUS TIME, A PERIOD OF SUBSTANTIAL OR LIFE-CHANGING ACTIVITY, GROWTH, OR CHANGE. IT WAS LIKELY MONTHS IN THE MAKING AND COULD'VE LASTED A FEW YEARS THAT TOOK YOU TO A NEW LEVEL OF PERFORMANCE, ABILITY, OR ACCOMPLISHMENT. YOU GREW PROUD OF YOURSELF AND PERHAPS EVOLVED INTO SOMEONE THAT OTHERS ADMIRER.

DO YOU HAVE THAT TIME IN MIND?

WORDS BY DREW KNOWLES & JOHN PATTERSON

Think about the environment giving rise to that level of performance. Reflect on the whole ecosystem. Think about your age and the places that come to mind. What was happening locally or in the world, and what new technologies were evolving? Think about the people involved/supporting you. Consider the home, buildings, or structures where this happened. What were the stories that inspired you? What standards, rewards, or consequences kept you on track?

During these times, we grew fit for a level of performance previously unavailable (or unimaginable) and we didn't evolve to new levels of greatness without the help of many people. Who were they and what happened in the shadow of their companionship or feedback? What combination of circumstances amplified our natural ability to accelerate our fitness and competence? What environment were we in to accomplish this metamorphosis? What happened to our evolution after leaving it?

Was finding this environment intentional or accidental? Perhaps it was a synergy of forces and circumstances leading to a result much more significant than any of its contributors could have predicted. Maybe our environment is the tool we've overlooked.

For many tech giants (and most companies), there's a looming problem: attempting to coordinate the action of hundreds, thousands, or tens-of-thousands of employees trying to keep up with the evolution of tech itself. While we can hardly keep up with the

software updates on our computers/smartphones, the race is on to produce a dizzying array of new software, intelligent products, and services. Those first to market (or first in mind) lead the way. Second or third place means a loss of millions/billions.

To keep up, many managers continue to reshuffle the deck chairs on the Titanic; changing the configuration of teams, processes, and systems while trying to choke out any inefficiencies. Must [gasp]. Go. Faster!

Throughout history, this acceleration has seen three eras of the management-organisation shuffle. Organisation as machine – this imagery from the industrial revolutions casts a long shadow over the way we still think about management. Then the mid-twentieth century saw a period of remarkable growth in theories of management where statistical insights about efficiency formed the basis of the field that would subsequently be known as operations management. More recently, the new reality of managing specialised knowledge challenged what organisations knew; when all the knowledge in an organisation walks out the door each evening, a different managerial contract than the command-and-control mindset has given way to a more participative coaching role.

What is the next era of coordinated action? Two opposing views shape our ideas about the future and how people will choose to live in tomorrow's world. The prophet warns of doom (our prosperity will lead us to ruin!), the wizard invents new technologies (innovate, so everyone wins!) - and they're both correct. Technologies will

continue to speed our projects, initiatives, and results. Can we keep up? Is it possible to speed up transactions while reducing personal hardship/struggle? The evolution of tech will continue so we must accelerate our ability to coordinate action without overloading or overwhelming our biological limits. But how?

FITNESS ISN'T ALWAYS FUN

Thinking back to that ambitious time of performance, we were an aspect of a whole ecosystem where other people, ideas, narratives, structures, and standards shaped us because of the environment. Our fitness/competence bloomed in a field plowed by those who designed an environment to teach us how to get better. They developed our fitness to thrive in that environment, and our growing fitness created new opportunities. We increased our effectiveness/efficiency becoming fit to do more with less effort.

Are we fit for the evolution of tech? No. Developing our fitness will be the difference between surviving it and thriving in it. Most tech giants are newly attempting to coordinate the action of large teams to move at the speed of technology. Agile software development is an example of a viable approach under which requirements and solutions evolve through the collaborative effort of self-organising and cross-functional teams and their customer/end user. The ability to guide these collaborations first requires the fitness to recognise the long shadow of previous management eras and secondly involves the construction of environments to develop our fitness to transact effectively; to get along, coexist, cooperate, and view ourselves as an aspect of whole systems, not separate distinct and independent parts.

Now more than ever, we need to develop the fitness to solve a problem some technologies further compound: the ability to communicate well with one another in reciprocal exchange, play nice, and see life from another's point of view.

Many would rather do anything other than work on their fitness; we instead take a pill, apply a quick fix, or dismiss the issue altogether. We'd rather not reveal our confusion, fear, or incompetence. We'd rather hide behind technology than, ugh, talk to someone. Technology, hardware/software, is speeding up; human-ware isn't. While the prophet and the wizard battle for the throne, let's address our deliberate fitness (vs accidental) for the evolution of technology.

In biological terms, fitness is an organism's ability to survive, reproduce, and thrive in a specific environment or condition. Fitness

is the quality of being suitable to fulfill a particular role, task, or transaction. We each have varying degrees of fitness for specific tasks or roles. Our organisations are fit for their historical outcomes and accomplishments, while many die when caught off guard by changing technologies and markets (they stop being fit). Our fitness is not merely a product of our longevity, confidence, or belief in our ability, but that through practice, we've developed our fitness to thrive in a particular role, task, or transaction—in the environment where it occurs. Through deliberate practice, we develop our fitness.

In the book, *Talent is Overrated* by Geoff Colvin, the work of psychologist Anders Ericsson is summarised. Deliberate practice as characterised by five essential and necessary elements:

- Designed specifically to improve performance
- Repeated a lot
- Feedback is continuously available
- Highly demanding mentally
- Not much fun

Deliberate practice isn't a case of taking a few practice swings or fiddling around in a self-managed endeavor to improve. Instead, it is designed by someone qualified, an expert who can teach us how to get better. It involves repeated practice so we can perform flawlessly in the heat of competition. It includes systematic ways to separate our opinions from our results so we can do the specific things that will generate good outcomes. This type of practice is intense and cannot be sustained for long. It's not much fun - which is why most don't do it. It's seeking out the difficult and/or painful things we don't do well and then getting to work on improving them.

By now we can see that the environment of our earlier metamorphosis included most, if not all, of these elements. It often wasn't fun, but our fitness grew to match the environment built by someone(s) who knew how to improve our performance, offer qualified feedback, and press us to grow. How do we develop our fitness for this new era of coordinated action and cooperation? How might we practice our ability to transact with competence?

We are always transacting. To transact is to exchange. We engage in the activity of exchange all day long, whether we realise it or not. Think about it for a moment. From arising each morning until we retire at night, we're mostly in a dialog or activity of exchange with other human beings. Starting

at home coordinating the family activities for the day, as we move into the work day, and through the routines of everyday life, our existence is one big set of activities dominated by invitations, offers, requests, assertions, etc. We engage in exchange after exchange in order to satisfy our needs/wants. Who is going to do what, when, where, and how in the daily coordination of work/action—this is the activity of life, and all of it rests on a fundamental give and take with others. We exist as reciprocal beings. It's so fundamental to who we are that it's hardly noticeable until we experience a breakdown in the transaction itself; at these times we feel as if the natural laws of exchange have been violated (our moods instantly alert us to unfairness, trickery, cons, etc.). We are creatures of exchange through and through. American psychologist Jerome Bruner contributed volumes to the understanding of this phenomenon. He asserts that how we think and act, and how we have thought and acted from a very early (pre-linguistic) age, is fundamentally directed through our need for help and reciprocal exchange. We are transactional beings - those who transact powerfully, thrive.

In the absence of our fitness to transact with competence, our efforts devolve into old habits of activity. We tend to see ourselves as able to project our will onto objects, others, and whole settings. We tend to assume (naïvely) that we can force these others to obey our command, and in some cases, our requests devolve into demands, coercion, or outright combat. We may also tend to see ourselves as mere pawns of a more extensive system; unable to change or influence them to satisfy our aims.

What environments must we build to develop our fitness or the fitness of our organisations?

BUILD THE ENVIRONMENT TO GET FIT

We can develop our fitness to thrive in the evolving tech environment, and with our growing fitness will come new opportunities. We can increase our effectiveness/efficiency. We can grow fit to do more with less effort (and cease overwhelming our ecosystem, biology, or mind). Knowing is doing and fitness is practice. We can practice building environments that develop our fitness to transact, coexist, and cooperate and we can invite and influence others to participate - in fact, we must.

In the next article, we'll be exploring how to build and invite others to participate in a type of environment for deliberate fitness. We call them consequential environments or consequential transactions. In our application and research, we show that people thrive in them.

Drew Knowles has over 20 years experience in the field of human performance and behaviour. His current company www.InfluenceEcology.com is the leading business education in Transactional Competence™, teaching the fundamentals of human exchange and influence to ambitious business professionals all over the world. Prior to this he coached many CEOs and Execs of some of NZ's largest companies on dealing with stress and their mental performance, writing a 3-year series of M2 articles on this topic. For previous articles go to www.drewknowles.com