



The Soul of Organisations

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CAPLOR HORIZONS RIPPLE PAPERS

...creating ripples of change



Learning differently

Thinking differently

Acting differently

The Soul of Organisations

Summary

"Quiet the mind and the soul will speak" Buddha

*"There is something more, the soul: I think that this encourages our courtesy and care and our minds;
and mercy and identity" Maya Angelou*

"It is only when one sees oneself via one's soul that one experiences beauty" Leanna Burns

This paper is inspired by the work of Deepak Chopra, including his timeless classic called *"The Soul of Leadership"* (2010). This small book resonates very much with the Caplor Horizons' view of leadership and is, in so many ways, relevant to our endeavours. We highly recommend this reflective and thought-provoking book.

We are particularly focusing on the soul of organisations. What does that mean? Soul is often considered alongside organisational culture. The difference, as Charles Handy explains, is that: "if culture is about the way we do things around here, soul is much more about the why we do things around here".

After this summary, we will first discuss Chopra's core ideas about the soul of leadership. We ask you, as leaders, whether you have yet found your own soul and then we go on to ask whether you have found your organisation's soul and how has this been challenged, including by the global pandemic. We set out our views about why soul matters. Finally, we help leaders and their teams to connect with the natural world in order to uncover, feel, articulate and live their organisation's soul. Articulating something as fundamental and holistic as *soul* is not easy. Soul lies at the deepest level of an organisation's culture, beliefs and values. However, it is more than this: it is a fundamental sense of energy and purpose, and it is the organisation's sense of itself as a whole in the many worlds that it inhabits. It is a hidden essence, but it is visible too in the analytical, emotional and instinctive practices of the people in the organisation. It also, as Chopra says, requires a deep sense of 'awareness'.

Many issues we face have an impact on our sense of connection: for instance, developments within organisations where we work or major international considerations such as the environmental crisis. In particular, in Covid times many people reported feeling disconnected, not only from their pre-Covid lives, but also from the very souls of their organisations. As they engaged in personal struggles for family, jobs, health and continuity, their sense of loss and confusion often produced a sense of identity loss and loss of meaning as they struggled to keep their organisations alive during such an unprecedented crisis. In short, many people in organisations felt lost and lonely compared to previously. The Covid situation continues to unfold in different ways around the world. In China many of the most severe restrictions

continued after other countries lifted measures. The long-term impacts of this are difficult to discern. Sometimes, despite our best endeavours, soul was hidden from our view.

The pandemic has shaken many organisations and destabilised the energy and heart that constituted their pre-pandemic sense of self and purpose – their soul. It accelerated a trend towards digital working. Whilst for some the changes were minimal, many people across the world have experienced a more permanent shift to online or hybrid working. Working from home, apart from our colleagues, can sometimes feel isolating, despite the connectivity offered by Zoom, Teams or other communications platforms that enable people to connect with video, audio, phone and chat. Without those critical informal interactions that happen over breaks, lunch, after work, soul can easily be lost, or hidden from view. Some organisations focused heavily on keeping soul alive, but for others this challenge was one too many at that time.

In this paper we urge leaders to reconnect now with the soul of their organisations. The digital age requires us to learn differently, think differently and act differently. The manifestation of this in so many organisations has been transformed by the impact of the pandemic. Ask yourselves, what was the energy that inspired the founding of your organisation? What is the energy that can connect us now that we meet online so much more frequently. How can we make more time to connect with people in person if that is possible? What are the drivers that will sustain you, and bring you meaning, when you have less in person time together? Can you find this meaning once again in the post-pandemic world? Or is there a new meaning you feel now that we have emerged?

When individuals lose touch with their sense of soul we often do one of a number of things: we retreat from the fast paced world, we commune with nature (for example, climb a mountain, hike in the woods, spot birds, swim in a lake or ocean, meditate or do yoga). Can we do the same now for our organisations? How will we now find ways to reconnect with our organisation's soul? All of the activities in the natural world listed above and many more invite us in our teams to reconnect with each other through our soul, and find once more the energy and deeper purpose that connect us and drive us to join together and act as one.

Articulating culture is normally the deepest sense an organisation has about itself; indeed, we recommend use of various resources that we use and have developed such as the 'Six Senses' approach, the 'Competing Values Culture Assessment' framework and the 'Cultural Web' tool.

However, by stepping back, practical collective reflection, or meditation about our sense of who we are – our soul – we are challenging leaders to reflect even more profoundly than they might normally do when considering culture alone. Organisational soul is essential to knowing who we are and why we are here.

In a busy, demanding, often hurtful world we need to reflect and take time, to take a break from being caught up so much in our heads, to heal and to connect internally and with others. As Caroline Myss says: *the soul always knows what to do to heal itself; the challenge is to silence the mind*".

Leadership is not simply for the few!

“There is no enemy outside our soul and the real enemies live inside us: anger, ego, greed and hate”

Buddha

Soul...

An *‘emotional and intellectual energy’* (Oxford English Dictionary)

The *‘essence, animating principle, or actuating cause, a ‘moving spirit’* (Merriam Webster dictionary)

An *‘underlying universal sense of consciousness’* (Chopra. 2010)

The first important message in Chopra’s book *The Soul of Leadership* is that becoming a leader is not simply for the few. He argues that leadership is the most important decision that everybody can make. It is a decision ‘to step out of the darkness and into the light’. Chopra urges us to find our own greatness and to act upon it. A leader, he says, is the ‘symbolic soul’ of a group. Thus, he suggests, we can find leadership enacted everywhere, and the leadership that arises from ordinary lives is the leadership that is now needed to fill the chronic ‘leadership vacuum’ of modern society.

Chopra imagines a world in which ‘countless leaders can rise to the highest levels of greatness’. For him, this vision is not about the glorification of the few, it is a greatness that enables the potential for greatness to unfold in others.

Chopra’s idea echoes the thoughts of Charles Handy, a management guru who has been very helpful to Caplor Horizons throughout our journey. Handy often says:

“The greatest gift you can give anyone is to water a golden seed; help identify in someone what they are good at, plant that in them and cultivate their talents so the golden seed will grow and flourish, then go on to succeed.”

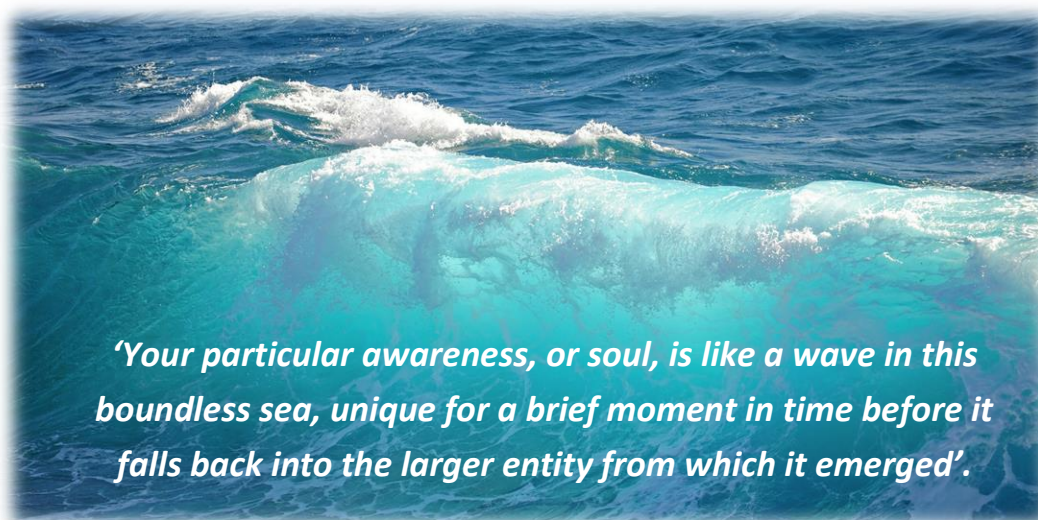
Chopra’s book was written against the backdrop of turbulent times. He was writing in 2010 at the time of the Arab Spring and the struggles by people across the globe to overthrow dictatorial regimes that had long oppressed many in the name of leadership. Since then, and at the time of updating this paper we are living in a world in which a deepening environmental crisis is having profound impacts on people from food security concerns to mental and emotional health; where a war against Ukraine in Europe has had major international ramifications, and where many abusive regimes across the globe where people still cannot live and speak freely.

Chopra challenges the abusive use of power associated with traditional definitions of leadership, but champions as an alternative a form of leadership founded on vision, creativity, a sense of unity and sustainability, and shared power:

“on a planet challenged on every side with ecological deterioration, everything you achieve must be sustainable, which means supported by awareness.”

Awareness is a leitmotif for Chopra. This awareness leads to a sense of responsibility for those around us and for our planet. For Chopra, *awareness* is 'unlimited' and 'the birthplace of possibility'. Old ways of living on this planet have reached their limits, Chopra reminds us in his book. True leadership must now draw on and from the *soul* in order to understand what needs to be accomplished and how best to develop the leadership that is required by those around us on our journey.

Chopra's sense of *soul* has a beauty that is often neglected in traditional leadership texts. He describes soul as an *underlying universal sense of consciousness*:



Chopra's 'roadmap' for understanding our soul as leaders and the soul of our organisations is far from formulaic and requires deep reflection, and in our view an immersion in nature in order to find it. His acronym of *LEADER* depicts important facets of a form of leadership that is often overlooked or misunderstood. Each of these letters hints at how leaders can find their *soul*.

L Chopra's first letter 'L' is for **look and listen** with your senses, mind, heart and soul. Chopra offers tips for finding what he calls our 'soul profile' – our unique contribution and purpose.

E is for **emotional bonding**. Chopra goes beyond describing 'emotional intelligence' to remind us of the need for 'spiritual intelligence' which he associates with 'love, compassion, joy and inner peace'.

A is **awareness**, a synonym for consciousness. Chopra seeks to connect us as leaders to the infinite, vast and untapped understanding that falls beyond the thinking mind. For Chopra, leadership is also about evoking this sense of 'consciousness' in a group through centred-ness, self-motivation, coherence, intuition, creativity, inspiration and transcendence.

D reminds us that leadership is about **doing**, and also more reflective and aware decision making.

E

represents **empowerment**.

Chopra challenges the assumption that power corrupts provided that we move away from ego to focus on the transpersonal power that goes beyond the personal.

R

means **responsibility** – for our thinking and actions, for others and for society.

Responsibility has been much neglected in mainstream leadership texts but Chopra places responsibility at the heart of leadership.

Understanding the soul of the organisation

Articulating something as fundamental and holistic as *soul* is not easy. Soul lies at the deepest level of an organisation's culture, beliefs and values, but it is more than this. It is a fundamental sense of purpose, and it is the organisation's sense of itself as a whole in the many worlds it inhabits. It is a hidden essence, but it is also visible in the working, thinking, feeling, knowing and practices of the people in the organisation. It also, as Chopra says, requires a deep sense of 'awareness'. For us, if our organisational purpose connects with a higher purpose such as working for sustainable change, social justice, and the sustainability of our planet it will also resonate with our partners.

The *soul* of an organisation, if deeply felt, will inevitably resonate with the people inside it as well as with its clients, partners, friends and even rivals – all of whom connect with it in multiple different ways. When the *soul* is strong enough, this resonance will enable people to understand the organisation's passions, purposes, beliefs, values and its sense of itself as a whole and its contribution to the wider world, even beyond the words it uses to describe itself.

A process that can be used to uncover or (re-)discover an organisation's 'Soul'

Soul is found at the deepest level of our culture. It is very deeply embedded, and as such can be hard to articulate. There are a number of activities that we can undertake in our organisations in order to enable soul to emerge and be better understood internally and by our partners. At Caplor Horizons, for example, we often ask groups to engage in visualising, drawing rich pictures, or using metaphors to describe our organisations where words feel too one dimensional and limiting. We also lead cultural analysis work using our Culture Tree (described elsewhere in our paper that on Culture and Change), a model that enables a deep understanding of how the symbols and behaviours that we see in our organisations are a reflection of our organisational values and soul.

At this time of reconnecting with each other in today's world that has been so greatly influenced, in terms of working practices, by the pandemic, we may feel we are struggling to find our sense of place with online working: how can we find ways to connect, to find the irreplaceable warmth of being together, learning together, and experiencing each other's energy and unique contributions? We recommend people meet whenever they can in person, even if this is less than before. And then, when together, to make the most of the precious time together to connect. When working online, we recommend people keep exploring different ways to nurture relationships, such as: organising so that conversations have depth (e.g., use of

interactive tools and break out rooms to enable small groups to have more intimate discussions),; and ensuring that space is made to meaningfully check in with each other. It is time to find once more the greater whole and the energy and purpose that makes us unique and enables us to understand the soul of our organisation.

Conclusions

“The soul would have no rainbow if the eye had no tears” American Indian Proverb

All organisations are work in progress. Organisations progress along a path – sometimes mindfully, or sometimes without paying much attention to their journeys. Strategies may sometimes be planned, sometimes opportunistic or sometimes emergent (as discussed in our paper *The Essentials of Strategy*) However they are shaped, all strategies are influenced by what individuals and teams face; when things are hard, as they are for so many organisations, then this can be a time for finding a way forward, for finding the rainbows that will heal. Deeper level transformation can be found by connecting with an organisation’s soul.

The core purpose of an organisation is usually strong and clear at the start, often articulated and envisioned by a founder or the group of people involved at the beginning. However, this purpose, its motivations and its aspirations may weaken over time, sometimes signalling the need to re-energise the culture and the leadership, or at other times pointing to the need to embark on a ‘second curve’ before the organisation moves towards extinction.

In our paper on *The Essentials of Learning* we discuss Otto Scharmer and his colleagues’ idea of *presencing*. Presencing is about connecting with the source of one’s best future possibility and bringing this possibility into the present. Presencing requires leaders to find a deep connection with their authentic self, purpose, and Work. The idea resonates strongly with Chopra’s notion of awareness or consciousness in pursuit of *soul*.

For us, a useful first step towards articulating *soul* is to uncover the essence of who we are now as we have described above. The next step, we believe, is to articulate our best future as Scharmer suggests.

Finally, by understanding our fundamental sense of *soul*, organisations can find a way to bring this ‘best future’ into the present. As a place to start this exercise, if you can take your teams together out into the natural world with all its joys and inspiration and use that inspiration to find the essence of what is joyful and essential in your organisation and what lies at the soul of your organisation right now. If this is not possible, find ways to bring joy and smiles to organisational life as a means of finding purpose, healing and strengthening relationships. As an African Proverb: *“a good smile shows how happy the soul is.”*

Caplor Horizons – Background

Established in 2014, Caplor Horizons is an independent charity. We work with other charities and responsible businesses and now have over 50 Advisors. These are outstanding people that bring specialist knowledge and experience. They contribute their time on a voluntary basis, or at reduced rates, so that Caplor Horizons can provide high quality and distinctive services at an accessible cost.

Working locally, nationally and internationally, we help other organisations think differently about themselves and the new horizons that they face. We support them in strengthening their leadership, renewing their strategy and improving their influence.

We want to encourage and assist a new generation of organisations that are committed to making a positive and lasting impact. We believe that if we are to achieve real, sustainable change, we need to inspire and enable people to learn differently, think differently and act differently.

Our vision is: *A world where leaders deliver a sustainable future for all*

Our purpose is: *To be courageous, compassionate and creative in facilitating transformational change*

Our values are:

- **Courage** – We are courageous change makers committed to challenging assumptions, taking risks and having difficult conversations
- **Compassion** – We are open, understanding and heartfelt, encouraging the nourishment of our whole selves and others
- **Creativity** – We learn, think and act differently, and are innovative and resilient in an ever-changing world

Our beliefs are:

- Through diversity we ignite dynamic innovation
- Collaboration helps achieve greater impact
- Everyone matters
- We are all leaders in our individual and collective ways – we are all change makers!
- Learning is more effective if it is fun, engaging and creative
- Building on people's strengths creates greater resilience

Our strategic goals:

- Goal 1: Transforming Leadership
- Goal 2: Strengthening Resilience
- Goal 3: Increasing Collaboration

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