In the foregoing chapters, I have presented a view of imaginization with practice in mind. Now, it's time to address the theoretical base.

In the following pages, I provide a reflective essay on the key ideas shaping the approach. It includes a discussion of the role played by images and metaphors in the social construction of reality and provides a more detailed discussion of the principles of imaginization as a mode of personal empowerment and an approach to change.
SOME PHILOSOPHICAL BACKGROUND

As the twentieth century has progressed, increasing attention has been devoted to understanding how language, images, and ideas shape social reality and our understanding of the world at large. Interest in this notion can be traced back to ancient Greece, but it’s only in the last 80 or 90 years that the view has achieved real prominence.

It is difficult to put a finger on the turning point. The whole ferment in science and philosophy toward the end of the nineteenth century played a major part. Growing interest in electricity, electromagnetism, and the discovery of the subatomic world in science was paralleled in the humanities by the discovery of the unconscious and a growing interest in phenomenology. The everyday world, while concrete, real, and ordered on the surface, seemed to be underpinned by more complex structures and forces beyond the reach of traditional explanations.

Reality was not what it seemed to be!

The new insights were also mirrored in the world of art as strictly representational forms gave way to impressionism, cubism, and searches for the hidden structure of things. The work of Picasso stands as the most obvious example.

The ferment and change underpinning these developments shook the roots of knowledge and spun off in many directions. For example, in science, the stable worldview of Newton gave way to the relativity of Einstein, with the relativity of the physical universe becoming mirrored in a relativity of knowledge as scientists like Werner Heisenberg (1958) and Niels Bohr (1958a, 1958b) showed how even the most scientifically controlled experiments are shaped by the assumptions and views of the scientists involved. If one studied light as a particle, it revealed itself as a particle. If one studied light as a wave, it revealed itself as a wave. As Thomas Kuhn (1970) later formulated the idea, it seemed that the mind-set or “paradigm” of the scientist played a powerful role in shaping the nature of scientific knowledge. In the nineteenth century, science was seen as providing a foundation for generating objective knowledge. But, as the twentieth has progressed, it has become clear that science, despite all the claims for objectivity, is just produc-
ing a form of socially constructed knowledge and that scientific "truths" are only "true" under accompanying sets of assumptions.

Similar ideas have emerged in the humanities. Take, for example, the relationship between language and reality. The early view, expressed in Wittgenstein's (1922) "picture theory" of language, was that reality gives us language: that our words, images, and ideas are reflections of the world "out there." The newer view reverses this, suggesting that words, images, and ideas are not neutral reflections of reality. They are the means through which we make our reality. This perspective, found in the work of the later Wittgenstein (1958) and philosophers like Derrida (1978), Gadamer (1975, 1976), and Rorty (1979, 1985), emphasizes that there are no sharp distinctions between subjective and objective worlds and that language and reality are part of an integrated life-world in and through which humans and their realities are coproduced. For example, in his later work, Wittgenstein emphasized how language and action are interwoven, creating a kind of "language game" through which people engage, understand, and experience their reality, shaping their world through the constructs, actions, and processes embedded in the game itself. In his view, we live our language as part of a broader activity or "form of life." Or, as Heidegger has put it, it seems that "language speaks us as much as we speak language."

The focus on language as a means of revealing how humans construct and make reality has proved very insightful, because, as philosophers like Jacques Derrida have shown, its use illustrates the complex yet fragile and tentative webs of meaning on which so much social practice is based.

Take, for example, the process through which we use language to construct meaning. Words, at face value, are clear and precise. They depict an image, idea, and agreed meaning. But is the process this simple? As Derrida (1978) and his interpreters have shown (e.g., Cooper 1989), language in the form of written and social text is never self-evident. Meanings and actions are always mediated by external contexts and points of reference. Black only acquires significance in relation to the concept and meaning of white, just as day takes form in relation to night. To grasp and understand even the simplest meanings,
it seems that we have to draw on all kinds of implicit knowledge and engage in complex acts of social construction and interpretation that are tentative, paradoxical, and always in danger of breaking down. The worlds in which we live, it seems, are truly extensions of ourselves and the forms of life through which we experience and engage them.

All these ideas have been enormously influential, laying the basis for a general social-constructionist view that, whatever the characteristics of the “objective” world, they are always known and experienced subjectively. Humans play an active role in constructing, making, and enacting their realities (Berger and Luckmann 1966; Gadamer 1975, 1976; Gergen 1982, 1985; Weick 1979). But this view itself raises fascinating paradoxes, for, while humans can in principle be seen as active agents in perceiving, constructing, and acting on their worlds, they do so in circumstances that are not of their own choosing. For example, as philosophers like Michel Foucault (1973, 1980) have shown, there are all kinds of power relations embedded in the language, routines, and discourses that shape everyday life. People’s views of reality are influenced by conscious and unconscious social constructions associated with language, history, class, culture, and gender experience. Often, these exert a decisive impact, locking people into a feeling that they are hemmed in by deterministic forces over which they have no control. As a result, despite our ability to enact or make our world, existing social constructions of reality often become difficult to break, with people becoming no more than passive “voices,” reflecting and “speaking” their social contexts.

These paradoxes have brought the social-constructionist movement to an interesting point in its development, which can fork in at least two ways. One path leads to the view that, whether they know it or not, humans have the potential to make and transform themselves and their world through individual and collective enactments that can “real-ize” new images, ideas, and worldviews. The other leads to the conclusion that, while this may be true in principle, the deep structure of power relations lends the world a resilient logic of its own. While the former encourages people to see and grasp the liberating potential of new individual and collective enactments, the latter tends to dwell on the idea that, to change the
social constructions that shape our world, one has to begin by addressing underlying power relations.

IMAGINIZATION AND THE SOCIAL CONSTRUCTION OF REALITY

Imagination, as an approach to understanding social reality and as an approach to change, belongs to the social-constructionist school of thought and follows the former path. It is underpinned by the idea that human awareness and knowledge have an unfolding transformative potential and that the images and ideas people hold of themselves and their world have a fundamental impact on how their realities unfold. Like those writers who emphasize how the social construction of reality is embedded in deeper power relations, I too believe that we act on a stage shaped by deeply ingrained assumptions and discourses, where certain groups and individuals have much greater power than others to shape the infrastructure of what we do. Knowledge of these deeper power relations can be instructive. But the image that we live in a world shaped by forces over which we have little control is generally overwhelming. It tends to create complacency and feelings of futility.

Hence, in my work, I try to strike an intermediate and positive stance. Along with educators like Paolo Freire (1970), who emphasize the liberating potential of human consciousness, I believe that people do make and shape their world and have the ability to do so anew. As the “power theorists” suggest, people often get trapped by the cultural beliefs and social practices through which they make their reality “real.” They frequently lose sight of the ideas, attitudes, assumptions, and other social constructions that are ultimately shaping the structure and experience of their daily realities. But, despite this, they always have the potential to break into new modes of consciousness and understanding. This, I believe, can be a fundamental source of individual and social change and is the premise on which my approach to imaginization builds. I believe that change, though often difficult, begins with individuals; that, if people want to change their world, they have to start with themselves; and that individual change becomes
social change when a critical mass of people begin to push in the same direction.

The basic perspective is captured in the so-called "hundredth monkey syndrome," related by Lyall Watson (1979). As the story goes, when sweet potatoes were introduced as a new food for monkeys living on an island off Japan, they got a poor reception. The potatoes were dropped in the sand and, while tasty inside, were unpleasant to eat. Then, one day, one of the monkeys was observed washing the potatoes before eating them. Gradually, the process caught on. Each day, increasing numbers began to wash their potatoes. Then, when a critical point was reached (the symbolic hundredth monkey), all the monkeys, including those on neighboring islands, engaged in the potato-washing procedure. Social change in human societies often has the same quality. When resonant ideas or new practices "catch on," whole fields of action can be transformed.

Imaginization, as an approach to change, seeks to mobilize the potential for understanding and transformation that rests within each and every one of us. It seeks to challenge taken-for-granted ways of thinking and, in the process, open and broaden our ability to act in new ways. While stressing the art of the possible, and of finding means of helping people to discover and shape themselves and their realities in new ways, it is sensitive to the realities of power. But it does not allow those "realities" to create a sense of immobility. Hence, throughout this book, I have tried to show how it's possible to increase individual and collective consciousness of how our realities are constructed and how we can tap our individual and collective imaginations as a source of change. While I have focused on applying the basic ideas to the field of organization and management, which is my sphere of professional interest, I believe that the basic philosophy can be applied to most aspects of daily life.

THE IMPORTANCE OF IMAGES AND METAPHORS

In terms of specific background, my interest in this social-constructionist approach to change originated in a study conducted with Gibson Burrell on how different worldviews shape
how we understand organization and management (Burrell and Morgan 1979). One of the main insights emerging from this work was that social scientists, like people in everyday life, tend to get trapped by their perspectives and assumptions. As a result, they construct, understand, and interpret the social world in partial ways, creating interesting sets of insights but obliterating others as ways of seeing become ways of not seeing. It was the old story of whether light is a “wave” or a “particle.” Pursuing the insights, I became interested in exploring how different theoretical perspectives could be used to broaden fields of study and to help people generate deeper understandings of the issues addressed.

This eventually led to further investigation of how social scientists working in the field of organization and management construct their theories and perspectives (Morgan 1980, 1983a) and to the role played by images and metaphors in shaping domains of study and in the social construction of reality. As I explored, I came to realize, along with other theorists, that metaphor is not just a literary or linguistic device for embellishing or decorating discourse. It’s a primal means through which we forge our relationships with the world (see, for example, Brown 1977; Lakoff and Johnson 1980; Morgan 1980, 1983a, 1983b; Ortony 1979; Schön 1963, 1979; White 1978). Metaphor has a formative impact on language, on the construction and embellishment of meaning, and on the development of theory and knowledge of all kinds.

To illustrate, consider a young child who catches his first sight of the moon and says “balloon” or who, on seeing a tiger at the zoo, says “meow.” The child is engaging in metaphor whereby familiar elements of experience (the balloon and cat) are used to understand the unfamiliar (the moon and tiger). This process, it seems, lies at the root of how meaning is forged: from the development of language to how we think and develop formal knowledge.

Language develops as concepts associated with one domain of meaning are extended metaphorically to another. To illustrate, consider the history of the word organization. It stems from the ancient Greek word organon, meaning a tool or instrument: “something with which one works.” Gradually, the use of organon was extended metaphorically to describe musical
instruments, surgical instruments, and body organs of animals and plants—hence the English words *organ, organize, and organization*. To *organize* came to mean putting connected "organs" into a systematic form, and the word *organization*, a collection of organs used to perform other ends. The idea of describing a group of people as "an organization" became popular in the wake of the Industrial Revolution and acquired mechanical overtones. Organizations, like machines, came to be viewed as instruments that could be rationally designed and managed, so that their human and technical "organs" behaved in a rational, predictable way.

The same process can be observed in the development of everyday knowledge and in scientific theory. Knowledge emerges and develops as a domain of extended metaphor. For Newton, the world was seen as a kind of celestial machine. Einstein's breakthrough on relativity came through imagining what it would be like to "ride on a light wave." The images thus created allowed reality to be seen in new ways and to be studied in detail through more reductive (metonymical) processes whereby the implications of the guiding image are elaborated in detail (Morgan 1983a, 1983b; White 1978).

Unfortunately, the key role played by metaphor in helping us to understand our world has become obscured. As the word *reality* signifies, people have come to believe that they are living in a domain of meaning that seems much more real and concrete than it actually is. The same is true in science. Scientific knowledge is often seen as searching for, and offering, "the Truth." If we take a close look at the process, however, we find that science is just offering an interesting and useful metaphorical perspective, an interesting and useful way of seeing and thinking about the world! This may allow one to act on the world and to produce predictable results, as in scientific experiments, but the broad context of interpretation and meaning is ultimately grounded in the linguistic and other socially constructed frameworks within which the experiments and knowledge are set.

This is a controversial and unpopular view in the scientific community because it undermines the idea that science should involve the generation of some kind of literal truth (e.g., Pinder and Bourgeois 1982; Tsoukas 1991). Indeed, metaphorical knowl-
edge is often distinguished from "literal knowledge." Metaphor is seen as belonging to the realm of creative imagination. The "literal" is seen as something that is real and true, as something that has an unambiguous empirical correspondence. Yet, if we examine the very concept of literal, we find that it is itself a metaphor. The word plays on the image of a letter or letters and is connected with the notions of literate and literature. The connection would no doubt be much clearer if the word were spelled letteral! By evoking the idea of a "literal truth," scientists are in effect creating the idea that there is a nonmetaphorical realm of knowledge. But it's no more than a metaphorical idea, one through which we try to create the notion that our understanding of reality is a little more "real" than it actually may be.

All this may seem to be playing with words. But, at a deeper level, it concerns basic issues relating to the nature of knowledge. In the early eighteenth century, the Irish philosopher George Berkeley (1910a, 1910b) noted that objectivity belongs as much to the realm of the observer as to that of the object observed. This point is central to the issues being discussed here.

Knowledge as objective or literal truth places too much emphasis on the object of knowledge and not enough on the paradigms, perspectives, assumptions, language games, and frames of reference of the observer. The challenge before us now is to achieve a better balance, by recognizing that all knowledge is the product of an interpretive process. To achieve this, we need fresh metaphors for thinking about the process through which knowledge is generated. Instead of placing emphasis on the need for "solid," "literal," "foundational," "objective Truth," we need more dynamic modes of understanding that show how knowledge results from some kind of implicit or explicit "conversation," "dialogue," "engagement," or interaction between the interests of people and the world in which they live (Bernstein 1983; Checkland 1981; Checkland and Scholes 1990; Gergen 1982; Morgan 1983a; Rorty 1979, 1985). Instead of seeing knowledge as an objective, known "thing," we need to see it as a capacity and potential that can be developed in the "knower"—hence my interest in imaginization as a process through which, metaphorically, we "read" and "write" the world of organization and management.
Imaginization, as a way of knowing and as a way of acting, seeks to advance the power of the “everyday knower” and the power of the “everyday writer” of social life!

IMAGES OF ORGANIZATION

My first attempt at exploring this process was presented in my book *Images of Organization* (1986), where I demonstrated the metaphorical basis of organization theory and showed how different perspectives could generate different insights. In essence, the book explored a series of “what if...?” questions: *What if* we think about organizations as machines? *What if* we think about them as organisms?

... as brains?
... as cultures?
... as political systems?
... as psychic prisons?
... as flux and transformation?
... as instruments of domination?

As I developed the implications of each perspective, I showed how they created complementary and competing insights, each of which possesses inherent strengths and limitations. For example, while a “machine view” of organization focuses on organization as the relationship between structures, roles, and technology, the “culture view” shows how organization rests in shared meanings. The psychic prison metaphor shows how structures and shared meanings can become conscious and unconscious traps. The political perspective shows how these characteristics are often shaped by clashes of interest and power plays—and so on. I showed how all the different perspectives could be used to “read” the nature and significance of different aspects of organizational life as well as how the injunctions or implications of each metaphor offered specific ideas for the design and management of organizations in practice. Though the book restricted itself to using eight broad metaphorical frameworks to illustrate its message, it developed the idea that organization ultimately rests in ways of thinking and acting and that, in principle, there are no limits to number of images and metaphors that can be used to enrich this process.
My aim in all this was to show how managers and others interested in the world of organization can become more effective in understanding and shaping the realities with which they have to deal. Throughout, I was at pains to avoid asserting the supremacy of any given metaphor or theoretical perspective, because I wanted to encourage “the reader” to realize that there is no one theory, metaphor, synthesis, or perspective that is going to provide all the answers. Hence, in using the book, one is left with many insights about the nature of organization but with no single theory saying that “this is the best way of seeing or thinking about organization.” Instead of trying to offer an authoritative statement on “the way organizations are,” it throws the problem of interpretation right back onto each and every one of us—on “the knowers” rather than “the known.” Or, as I put it in earlier chapters of this book, it obliges and encourages us to become “our own theorists,” forging our own understandings and interpretations of the situations we face.

This is what distinguishes Images of Organization from the majority of books on organization and management. Most of these offer a specific theory for understanding and managing organizations or try to develop an integrated framework that highlights certain dimensions over others. They reduce our understanding of organization to a particular way of seeing. My approach, on the other hand, was to suggest that, because any particular way of seeing is limited (including the one being advocated!), the challenge is to become skilled in the “art of seeing,” in the art of “understanding,” in the art of “interpreting” and “reading” the situations we face.

In many respects, the approach fits what is known as a postmodern approach to understanding organizational life. The postmodernist movement has grown in strength and significance over the last few decades, suggesting that the search for universal, authoritative, “true” explanations of social reality are always problematic and incomplete because they end up elevating the priority of a particular perspective while downplaying others. As it is sometimes put, “the presence” of the ideas and insights highlighted by a particular theory or perspective always creates “an absence”: the insights, ideas, and perspectives that are pushed from view. This creates a problem for anyone who wishes to interpret and explain something,
particularly in science and the humanities, where explanations are expected to carry some weight and authority.

For the most part, postmodernism has only resulted in critiques of modes of writing and social processes that elevate one view over another: to disrupt what is typically viewed as "normal" and self-evident so that the problematic nature of "normality" becomes clear. This critical stance has done much to help us understand how biases and blind spots can accompany and sometimes dominate ways of seeing and how all "explanations" are only forms of rhetoric that seek to persuade people to join or accept a particular point of view (see, for example, Berman 1988; Calas and Smircich 1988; Cooper 1989; Cooper and Burrell 1988; Harvey 1989; Linestad and Grafton-Small 1992; Martin 1990; Reed and Hughes 1992).

But, in my view, there is another way in which the postmodern perspective can be developed: by recognizing that, because partiality, incompleteness, and distortion are ever present in explanations of how we see and understand the world, perhaps we need to develop ways of theorizing and explaining the world that explicitly recognize and deal with the distorting nature of knowledge.

My approach to understanding organization and management discussed in Images of Organization began to address this task. It is continued in the current book in my general attempt to develop the process of imaginization, as a mode of theorizing and an approach to social change that seeks to help people mobilize highly relativistic, open-ended, evolving interpretive frameworks for guiding understanding and action. The aim is to help people develop ways of seeing, thinking, and theorizing that can improve their ability to understand and manage the highly relativistic, paradoxical, and changing character of the world with which they have to deal.

The old mechanistic worldview, on which so much organization and management theory—and, indeed, science—has been based, encouraged a search for fixed theories and linear methods and techniques of understanding and practice. The postmodern worldview, which, of interest, is paralleled in aspects of the new science emphasizing the chaotic, paradoxical, and transient nature of order and disorder (see, for example, the work of writers like Gleick 1987; Hampden-Turner
1990; Jantsch 1980; Nonaka 1988; Prigogine and Stengers 1984; Quinn 1990; Smith and Berg 1987), requires an approach that allows the theory and practice of organization and management to acquire a more fluid form.

This is precisely what my approach to imaginization sets out to achieve. It develops the implications of the basic methodology offered in *Images of Organization* to create a relativistic, self-organizing approach to management and management theory capable of contributing to the challenges of the Einsteinian world in which we now find ourselves.

**IMAGINIZATION AS THE ART OF CREATIVE MANAGEMENT**

In terms of specifics, the current book starts where *Images* left off, inviting you to become your own theorist, using images and metaphors to engage in a continuous construction and deconstruction of meaning in your encounters with everyday reality. It offers a highly personalized method for understanding organizations using the metaphor of reading and writing organizational life as its dominant frame. Like *Images*, it treats organizational reality as a kind of “living text” that is simultaneously “written” and “read.” Some of the chapters (especially 5 to 8) pay particular attention to illustrating “reading in practice,” developing the themes introduced in *Images* and showing how innovative “readings” can lay the basis for innovative “writing.” Others, especially Chapters 2 to 4 and 9 to 12, give specific attention to ways in which we can “author” or “write” new organizational realities through a range of processes that mobilize imaginative ways of thinking and acting. The whole book demonstrates the “become your own author-reader-theorist” theme in practice and pursues the no-limits-to-metaphor principle. It shows how traditional concepts of organization can be radically transformed through imaginative processes whereby new images and metaphors are used to create evocative and energizing patterns of shared meaning. It invites us to unleash our powers of creative thought, interpretation, and insight to broaden the possibilities for creative action.
In terms of specific practice, the process of imaginization illustrated in these chapters builds on a number of key principles. These are addressed below under three headings:

1. the interconnection between "reading" and "writing,"
2. how images can be used as "mirrors" and "windows," and
3. imaginization as personal empowerment.

The Interconnection Between "Reading" and "Writing"

At various points in this book, I have used the ideas of "reading" and "writing" as metaphors for capturing the challenge of interpreting and shaping organizational life. As noted above, this builds on the underlying metaphor of reality as a kind of living text.

At first glance, the image seems far-fetched. But, if one thinks about it, the language, images, ideas, and actions through which we write daily life parallel how a book uses words to fix and communicate meaning. Readers, whether of books or life, in turn create their own meaning; in effect, they add their own authoring to the text. In this way, the whole of life can be seen as a living "real time" process of simultaneous reading and writing, producing evolving and diverse patterns of meaning.

This metaphorical frame has provided the basis for a hermeneutic school of social theory specializing in the art of interpretation (see, for example, Boland 1989; Gadamer 1975, 1976; Hollinger 1985; Rorty 1979, 1985; Shotter 1990; Turner 1983). It recognizes that, as readers and authors of our everyday realities, we all have limited horizons, shaped by the values, assumptions, worldviews, interests, and perspectives that we possess as individuals and as members of social groups. Hence our readings and subsequent authorings tend to be partial and one sided, committing us to live realities reflecting all kinds of conscious and unconscious social constructions associated with class, gender, culture, and the daily context in which we live. The hermeneutic perspective focuses on understanding the never-ending circle of relations underlying this social construction of reality.
Appendix A: The Theory Behind the Practice

My theory of reading and writing organizational life builds on these core ideas, but in a loose way. My primary aim has been to develop the metaphor as a method for exploring the multidimensional nature of organizations, showing how the horizons generated by different metaphors can be used to create new insights and action possibilities. Richard Boland (1989) has provided an outstanding critique of my approach from this point of view. At its simplest, the approach involves developing a “diagnostic reading” and “story line,” using different metaphors as frames for highlighting and ordering different aspects of the reality with which we are dealing. For illustrations, turn to the readings produced in relation to Teleserve (Chapter 5, Exhibits 5.1, 5.2), Network (Chapter 6, Exhibits 6.1, 6.3), and Stereotype (Chapter 7, Exhibits 7.1, 7.2). They illustrate how I try to remain open to multiple and evolving interpretations of a situation, picking up key cues and signals as I go along, to develop a “story line” that evaluates and integrates the various insights into an overall understanding of the situation. The evolving story lines in the above cases are reflected in the progressive development of the “readings,” often captured through new images or metaphors of the moment that helped to make sense of the overall situation.

For example, in Teleserve (Chapter 5), my diagnostic reading developed from the multiple dimensions illustrated in Exhibit 5.1, to the interconnection between the political, cultural, and domination metaphors highlighted in Exhibit 5.2, to the story line that “we’re engaged in a game of ‘political football.’”

For any given situation, it’s always possible to generate multiple authentic readings and story lines, because readings are just orderings of reality and are always shaped by the horizon of the reader and the interests to be served (Gadamer 1975, 1976; Habermas 1972). The analysis and story lines that emerge are really forms of rhetoric through which the “author-reader” produces an understanding that serves the interests and agenda that he or she brings to the situation at hand.

For example, the readings that I produced in the interventions discussed in Chapters 5 to 7 were shaped by my use of the framework developed in Images of Organization as an analytical tool and by my ability (or inability) to detect the nuances with which I was dealing. And the story lines that I eventually
produced were influenced by the nature of the assignments and the interventionist role that I was being asked to play. For example, as I discuss at the very end of the Teleserve case (Chapter 5), the nature and outcome of this intervention would probably have been very different if the assignment had been shaped from “labor” or “gender” perspectives. These would have created different horizons, leading to different readings and to “story lines” and action strategies with different interests and aims in mind—hence the emphasis that I have placed throughout the text on how the process of imaginization can serve different and, indeed, competing interests. It depends on the perspective or horizon from which it is used!

This view on the essential relativity of imaginization links back to the point made earlier regarding “foundational” versus “conversational” approaches to knowledge. A foundational view leads one to look for authoritative, “this is the way it is!” interpretations of a situation. Imaginization, on the other hand, builds around the paradox that any given situation may have multiple dimensions and multiple meanings, which acquire significance in the context of interpretation. None of these is necessarily absolute or “true.” The challenge is to recognize that as interpreters and constructors of reality we face many options and that, just like scientists studying light as waves or particles, we can’t study all dimensions at the same time. Our challenge is to dialogue and converse with the situations with which we are involved, to “real-ize” meaningful knowledge, knowledge that will allow us to be edified or to act in a personally significant way. That doesn’t necessarily satisfy those who are looking for an absolute meaning or “truth” in a situation. But it does capture what seems to be the nature of the human condition: that, as humans, we can only ever acquire limited, partial, personally significant ways of knowing the world.

Viewed in this way, we are encouraged to see the “reading” and knowledge generation process in terms of what Donald Schön (1983) has described as “reflective practice,” as the product of a craft shaped by assumptions and perspectives of all kinds. Imaginization is a form of “reflective practice” encouraging us to become skilled interpreters of the situations with which we have to deal. It encourages us to develop our skills of framing and reframing, so that we can learn to see the same
situation in different ways, so that we can remain open and flexible to multiple meanings, so that we can generate new insights and become comfortable with the paradox that the same situation can mean many things at the same time. It encourages us to become reflective, creative, and expansive in understanding the situations with which we have to deal. A reflective practitioner is someone who is aware of how implicit images, ideas, theories, frames, metaphors, and ideas guide and shape his or her practice and how they can be used to create new possibilities.

In this context, and in terms of my own reflective practice, it is appropriate to recognize that the concept of imaginization is itself a metaphor and, as such, has inherent strengths and limitations. In fusing the concepts of imagination and organization, it seeks to open the process of organizing to an expansive, creative mode of thinking, as opposed to the reductive mode that has dominated the development of mechanistic thought. It highlights and stresses creative possibility. But, at the same time, as critics may rush to point out, it can gloss and downplay the importance of existing power relations, a point addressed in the following pages, and may underestimate some of the deep structural rigidities in patterns of both thought and action. It thus suffers the fate of all metaphors, and indeed of all paradigms, concepts, and modes of understanding, in that it elevates the importance of certain aspects of reality over others.

In this regard, in presenting my approach to imaginization, I have tended to emphasize how new images can help to create new realities, perhaps at the expense of underestimating how new actions can also be used to create new realms of meaning. This is one of the limitations of the particular horizon that I have brought to the writing of this book. Chapter 12 stands as an exception, but much more could be said on the issue.

Images Can Provide “Mirrors” and “Windows”

At one level, the process of imaginization is about the art of framing and reframing (Schön 1963, 1979; Watzlawick, Weakland, and Fisch 1974). It uses images, metaphors, readings,
and story lines to cast situations in new perspective and open possibilities for creative action. But there's another dimension to the process, involving a theory about the relationship between a system's sense of identity and its ability to change. More specifically, imaginization builds on the principle that people and organizations tend to get trapped by the images that they hold of themselves and that genuine change requires an ability to see and challenge these self-images in some way. The previous chapters have demonstrated the process, showing how images and metaphors can be used as "mirrors" through which people and groups can see themselves and their situations in fresh light, creating an opportunity for reflection and change.

I like to talk about the process as one involving "mirrors" and "windows." If one can look in the mirror and see oneself in a new way, the mirror can become a "window," because it allows one to see the rest of the world with a fresh perspective. Or, in terms of the imagery introduced earlier, it opens new "horizons," creating opportunities for new actions.

Hence, in the Teleserve case (Chapter 5), I used the image of "political football" to help the human resource management team see themselves in a new light so that they could reflect on the need for a new direction. In Network (Chapter 6) and Nursing Services (Chapter 8), I used the method of getting staff to describe the current organization and its problems through animal imagery so that they could see and express their problems and situations in an unconventional way. In Chapters 2 to 4, I tried to create similar leverage on the way we think about management styles, organization structures, and approaches to change.

The aim throughout is to disrupt normal ways of seeing so that people can ask constructive questions about what they are seeing and what they should do. I find the use of metaphor particularly powerful in this activity, because it creates distance and space from conventional ways of thinking: space in which people can feel free to think and act creatively. This is vital in trying to unlock new understandings or a new sense of identity, because one cannot create the new in terms of the old.

Several aspects of the process through which I generate and use metaphorical imagery seem particularly important in this regard.
1. Metaphor always involves a sense of paradox and the absurd, because, as illustrated in Exhibit A.1, it invites the users to think about themselves or their situations in ways that are patently false.

The "injunction of the metaphor" is to:

See the fox-like aspects of the manager: his cunning, guile, craftiness, smooth image.

But:

Ignore that he doesn't have a black pointed nose, fur, four legs, or tail!

EXHIBIT A.1 The Nature of Metaphor

"My manager is a fox."
"I'm a strategic termite."
"We're a spider-plant organization."
"We're playing political football."
"We're on the Yellow Brick Road."
Metaphor works by playing on a pattern of similarity and
difference. Its user seeks to evoke the similarities while
downplaying the differences. It involves the generation of
a "constructive falsehood" that helps to break the bounds
of normal discourse. This plays a crucial role in creating
space for change.

2. Metaphor requires its users to find and create meaning. They
have to find the similarities between the manager and the fox,
to find the relevance of the spider plant, to find the precise way
in which an image can create relevant insights. This helps to
create distance and space from conventional understandings
and also helps to create ownership of the insights. There is
nothing self-evident in the meaning of metaphor; meaning has
to be created by those involved. Meaning is thus immediate
and personal, not distant or abstract.

3. Metaphors only have an impact when they "ring true," "hit
a chord," and "resonate" around fundamental insights. One
cannot force a metaphor to work, because the process soon
becomes an empty ritual where everyone realizes there is
little substance. The process thus has a self-regulating qual-
ity; there has to be a resonance and authenticity to create
energy and involvement. When different people generate
different metaphors that have a great deal in common (for
example, Charlotte's spiders or the dandelion seeds and
supernova in Network, Chapter 6), one knows that one is
dealing with highly resonant insights.

4. Metaphors that are generated by the participants in a change
project are often more powerful than those generated from
outside, because they are directly owned and have immedi-
ate meaning. The facilitator of a process can, however, play
a powerful role in finding resonant metaphors for capturing
insights that others may not see or for recovering and syn-
thesizing key insights that have gotten lost from view. In
either case, resonance is key. The metaphor must energize
and "take hold."

5. When metaphors are introduced from the outside, it's cru-
cial that people be encouraged to find and elaborate mean-
ing for themselves. When the implications of a metaphor are
laid out in detail, its evocative power is often lost. Metaphors invite a conversational style where meaning and significance emerge through dialogue; resonant meaning cannot be imposed, it has to be evoked.

6. The tentative nature of metaphorical insights means that they cannot be taken too seriously or made too concrete. This has the advantage of helping to create open modes of understanding that have a capacity to self-organize and evolve as one goes along.

When used with these principles in mind, metaphorical images can provide powerful tools for helping people look at themselves and their situations in new ways and, as a result, see and act in the world somewhat differently. The process operates by creating a tension between existing and potential understandings, creating space for the new to emerge. As I have illustrated in several chapters, however, new images do not result in new actions, unless there is an appropriate degree of shared understanding and a will to act on the insights thus generated.

This, I believe, defines an important frontier for development. People writing on the theory of change (e.g., Argyris and Schön 1974; Watzlawick et al. 1974) have made important distinctions between superficial change where the context remains invariant (called single-loop learning or first order change) and change where the context is also transformed (called double-loop learning or second order change). This has important implications for the practice of imaginization, because it highlights how one may be able to generate hundreds of new insights without substantial impact. The challenge of imaginization is to create insights that allow one to reframe contexts substantially rather than superficially. It's the old problem of rearranging the deck chairs on the Titanic! Superficially, one can create the impression of making a lot of changes; but, at base level, nothing of significance may have really changed.

This issue brings us back to the point made earlier about the role of imaginization in transforming horizons. Horizons define contexts. The challenge of imaginization is to help people see and understand the horizons that shape their context, to
appreciate their limits, and to open up other horizons when necessary. Or, to change the metaphor, again, the challenge is to open new windows on the world, to create new ways of seeing that can lay the basis for new ways of acting.

Imaginization as Personal Empowerment

Large-scale transformation and change tend to occur when developments acquire the critical mass represented by the "hundredth monkey." But the process usually begins at a more modest level, with individuals or small groups of people taking the initiative.

This, I believe, is where imaginization has to begin.

Imaginization starts with ourselves and, in its broadest sense, invites us to assume our personal power in rethinking and reshaping the world around us. Against the background of the rigidities and resilience of old organizational structures and mind-sets, and the immense social problems that the universe now faces, this may seem like a call to spit into the wind. But, if modern theories of chaos and self-organization have anything to say, a lot of spitting can make a difference. It's a question of critical mass.

We have all probably experienced situations where individuals or groups have tried to imaginize and act on a new reality only to find the process reversed by those exercising power over their lives. We have all probably experienced situations where the gulfs and divides between rival stakeholders are so deep that those involved would rather continue occupying entrenched battle lines than find a shared way forward. We have all read stories of successful individuals, communities, and organizations that suffer dramatic reversals in fortune, perhaps being more or less eliminated overnight as the result of uncontrollable changes in the world economy. These are some of the harsh, all-too-real aspects of the socioeconomic context with which we have to deal. They point to what is happening in the infrastructure of the "Titanic," and at times it may seem overwhelming.

Yet, if we dwell on the enormity of the problems, our powerlessness soon becomes a self-fulfilling prophesy. For everyone,
at every level, can see themselves as being hemmed in by processes and situations over which they feel they have no control. Employees often feel constrained by the perspectives, biases, and interests of their managers. The managers, in turn, feel constrained by “the culture” of the organization and the expectations that they feel their managers are imposing. These more senior managers, in turn, feel hemmed in by the dictates of HQ, stock analysts reports, and general corporate policy. Even the chief executive or chairman of the board can point to her powerlessness as she sees forces of global change buffeting and reshaping the economic context with which she has to deal. If we pursue the logic of this kind of thinking, we quickly find that no one seems to have any real power to do anything of any real significance.

But we do!

And that’s why I bring the core challenge of imaginization right down to the issue of personal empowerment.

There are, no doubt, deep structures of power shaping the structure and logic of the global economy. We are, no doubt, caught up in all kinds of sedimented patterns of culture, ideology, and social practice that inhibit capacities for change. The power of macro global forces do encourage a sense of inevitability and powerlessness when it comes to having a significant impact on our world. Indeed, even the leaders of major countries sometimes feel that they have no power to shape things and have no option but to swim with the prevailing tide.

That’s why we have to bring it all back down to the level of the individual and individual capacities for change—for change is an individual affair! Individuals can form groups, and groups can become social movements. But the process begins and ends with the commitments and actions of individuals. Certainly, it makes a big difference if one is the head of a large corporation as opposed to the average man or woman in the street. But it is the individual involved who has to move.

That’s why I present imaginization as an attitude of mind that encourages people to become their own personal theorists, playing an active role in “writing” the realities that they would like to realize. I believe that our innate imaginizing capacities can serve us well in tackling some of the major social and organizational problems of the current time. We are reaching
the end of a line of development associated with the mechanistic thinking of the industrial age and are in need of an alternative. We need new metaphors that can help us remake ourselves, our society, and our relations with planet Earth.

In short, we need to imaginize as never before!