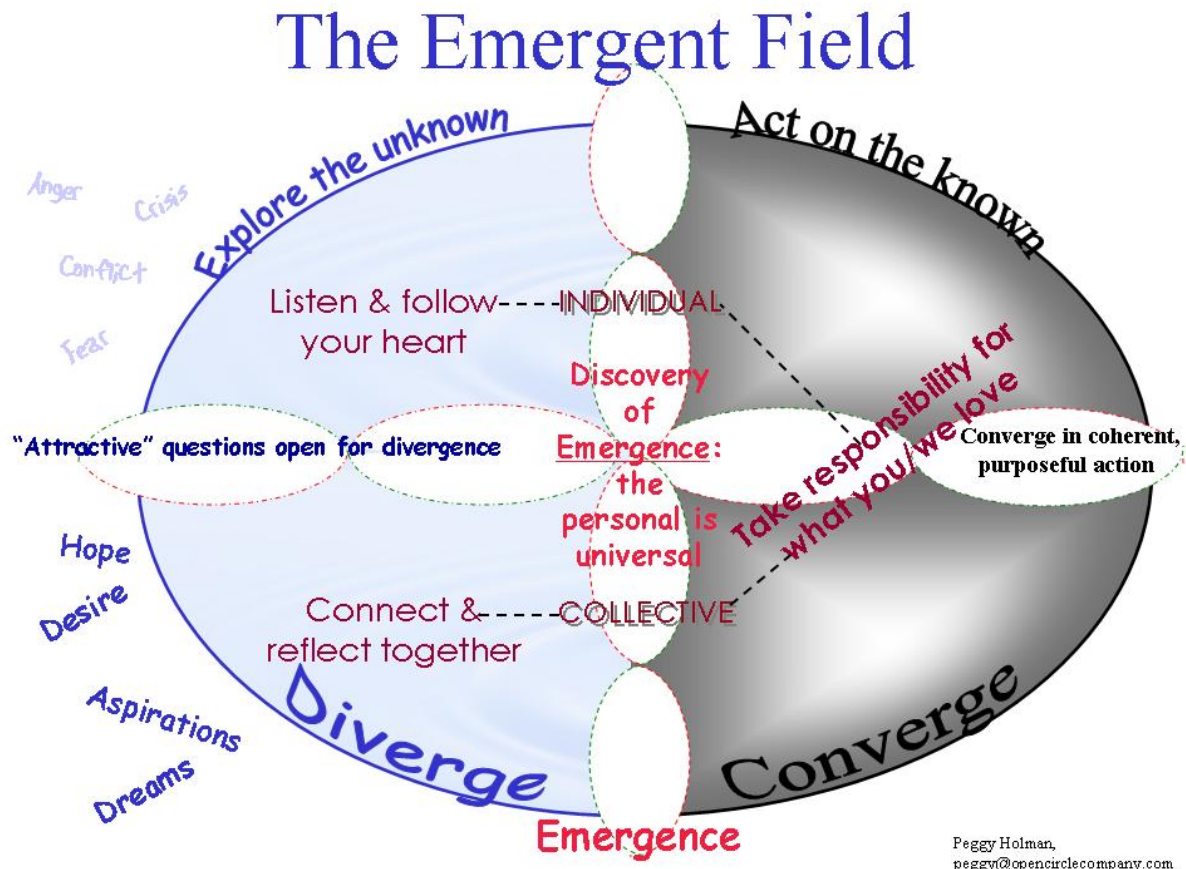


# The Dynamics of Emergence

*I have now shared the model that follows with graduate students in the midst of a conflict with their institute, business people at a multinational corporation, members of the Israeli school system, teachers in Ramallah, and Executive MBA students and faculty in Colombia. With each of these very different audiences, it seems to provide a perspective that makes that oh-so-unnerving step into chaos just a wee bit easier.*

The model:



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When people feel the need for change, it is generally because they are experiencing a “disturbance,” such as fear, conflict, crisis as well as hope, aspiration, or desire.

While stepping into disturbances may feel like a crazy act of asking for time spent in chaos, in truth it is the gateway to creativity. To find something new requires time in the unknown, in mystery. That said, the “space” is not limitless; rather it is bounded by a powerful question – a theme that focuses, always expressed in terms of possibilities (not problems). This question acts as the attractor, something that people coming care about enough to show up for the work.

Thus, the work begins with an invitation into exploring the unknown together. The greater the diversity of the participants, the more likely the divergence of that exploration. The wider the divergence, the more likely something new will surface. Inviting people to follow what has heart and meaning, to take responsibility for what they love, often brings out the unexpected in people. It is a remarkable invitation for each person to look within, to truly ask

themselves what is important to them. It takes each of us into our own place of mystery. When that invitation comes in a form in which the collective is gathered together (e.g., processes such as Open Space, World Café, Appreciative Inquiry, Dialogue), through their reflections, people often experience a new sense of connection to each other and the whole.

Through attractive questions, participant explored what calls them from many, many angles. Remarkably, the same conversations begin to show up in many places. These are the threads of emergence. We begin to recognize these threads because they resonate so clearly with many people. Reflection among the whole group often makes these emergent threads even more visible.

For example, in a recent OS on work-life balance, the same themes surfaced many times in the closing circle: take responsibility for oneself; the power to say no. Participants experienced these ideas more than intellectually; they sensed them physically, in their heart and in their gut. We discussed the visceral sense that signals emergence because it is experienced at all levels (e.g., head, heart, body and spirit) and by many people.

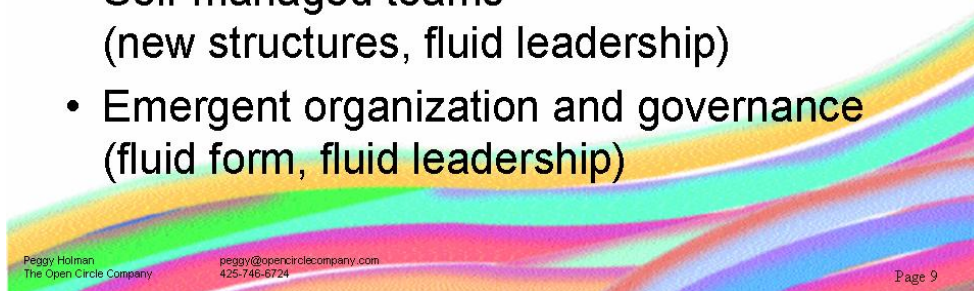
This place of emergence is the magic that we feel when a gathering is at its best. I believe it is because we discover that is what most deeply personal, what means most to us as an individual is also most universal. In that discovery, we begin to experience our connection to the “whole.” This feeling of connection fills us with excitement and energy that stirs us into action. This is the ground of spirit.

As new ideas, insights, leaders, and forms emerge, action is often swift and effective. How could this not occur when personal and collective meaning and ideas for action are in harmony? We are in convergence, where the resonant areas that emerged from our divergent exploration coalesce. There is no need to “enroll” others; we’ve enrolled ourselves through our direct experience. There is no need for consensus; we have all internalized the threads that connect us, providing responsible boundaries for action. Parenthetically, this frequently extends to those who didn’t attend the event, who somehow “catch” the spirit of the experience from those who were there.

Understanding this pattern – that stepping into the unknown of divergence, while it may seem chaotic, when bounded by a compelling question, leads to emergence – may provide some confidence to a sponsor who is fearful of losing control or that things will get out of hand. It is a predictable pattern that we have all experienced in the open space of life. It is also a chance to experience a new form of organization in a “learning laboratory” of sorts.

## Evolution of Emergence

- Emergent ideas and relationships  
(new connections)
- Special projects  
(temporary structures and leaders)
- Self-managed teams  
(new structures, fluid leadership)
- Emergent organization and governance  
(fluid form, fluid leadership)



As people experience processes of different sizes or diversity or length, over time, what typically emerges evolves. Even in short, fairly homogenous events, there is the possibility of new ideas and relationships, new connections. The likelihood of this increases with time and diversity. With more time, generally two days, projects are likely to surface, complete with temporary teams and leaders. As the experience is internalized, self-managed teams, with leaders shifting according to the needs of the group may come into being. With frequent use, an organization may even begin to function with both leadership and form emerging to fit the context.

As embracing emergence becomes the conscious way of working, disturbances often begin as butterfly conversations in the hallways. Eventually they make it into the marketplace of ideas, with an invitation by someone(s) taking responsibility to convene a session and invite whoever cares about the issue to address it on behalf of the whole.

My working definition of an emergent organization offers an answer to the oft asked but rarely answered question about change or transformation: “change to what?” What it is that we wish to become? This is my answer:

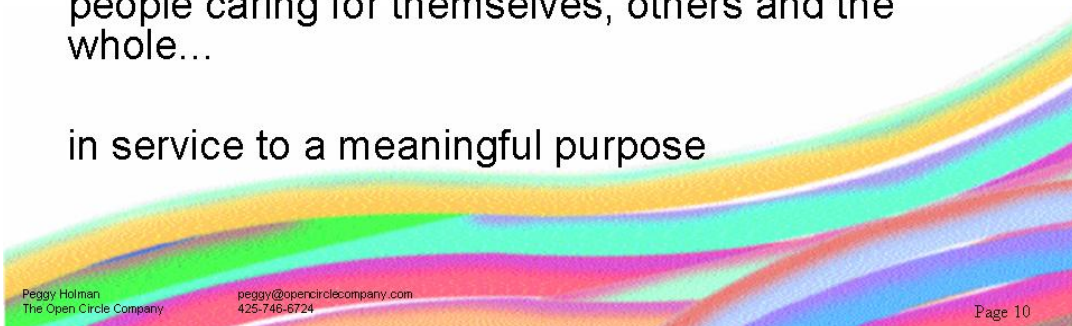
# Change to what?

A system that consistently achieves what is most important to it, individually and collectively by...

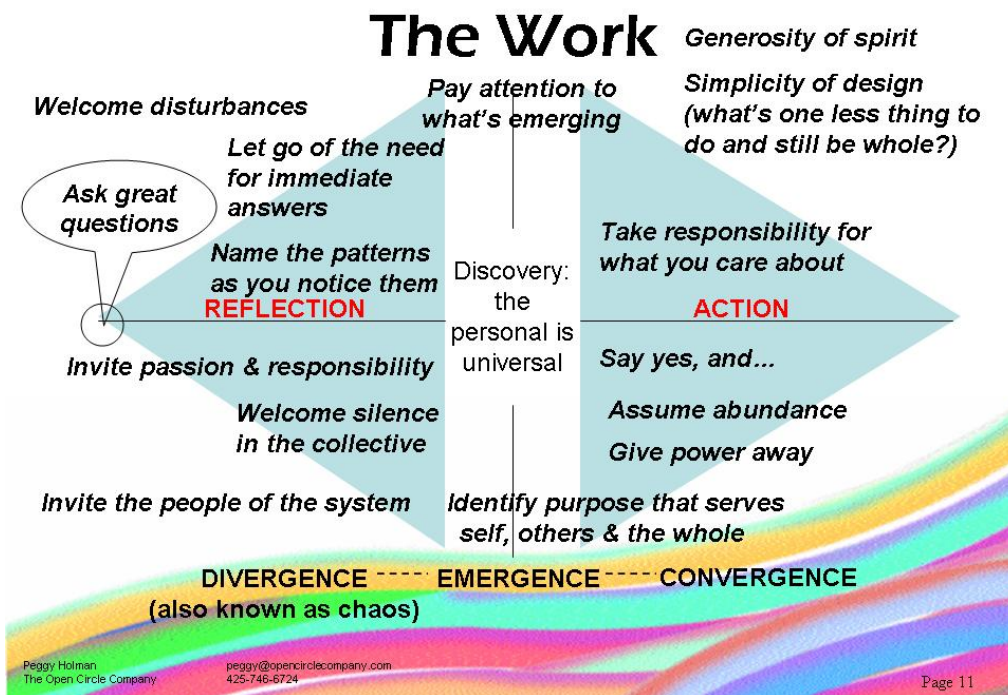
continually increasing its capacity for emergence through...

people caring for themselves, others and the whole...

in service to a meaningful purpose



If this is the work, what, in addition to opening lots of space, grows this capacity for emergence? My answer needs refining to what is most essential. Here's what I know of the territory:



As I narrow these ideas to what is most essential, I know it begins with welcoming disturbances, asking powerful questions, inviting people who care, including diversity – particularly the unlikely participants, and inviting people to take responsibility for what they love. I think the rest of the practices mentioned reinforce and nurture the capacity for emergence.

And that, so far, is my story.

Peggy Holman

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