



Persons of Tomorrow: Expressing our 21st century Competencies



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As a Member of the International Futures Forum myself, I have worked with Graham and Maureen for over ten years. The IFF (see www.internationalfuturesforum.com) takes the view that we live in a complex and interconnected world that we cannot either completely understand or control. This means that we have to navigate uncertainty; here the authors suggest how we can go about it using a dynamic set of personal and professional skills. See my review of the book under Futures Studies.

In a famous essay in 1980, *The World of Tomorrow and the Person of Tomorrow*, the psychologist Carl Rogers, an American who had worked with groups all over the world, surveyed a rapidly changing landscape at home and abroad and contemplated the futureⁱ. As the upheavals of the 1960s played out in diverse ways and diverse settings, Rogers was not the only one to sense a dramatic shift in the culture and the struggling emergence of a new world. While others feared the loosening of cultural constraint and actively worked to suppress the freedom and confusion that ensued, Rogers chose to see this as a creative moment, a moment of growth and possibility. He heard people reaching for new ways of responding to the challenges of the times that were not merely new applications of old solutions but new ways of being. What, he wondered, would the world of tomorrow look like? What kinds of challenges would it pose to humanity? What kinds of capacities would the crises and opportunities of the future require of us and help us to develop? What, in other words, might we expect of 'persons of tomorrow'?

The world turned upside down that Rogers envisaged has indeed come to pass. The world of tomorrow is with us today. It is a confusing, complex, fast-changing and radically interconnected place. The forces of suppression and denial are as active as they were in Rogers' day, but now play out against a backdrop narrative of economic, social and even planetary decline.

So it is more vital than ever that the persons of tomorrow in our midst and in ourselves are now encouraged, supported and developed. Rogers' thirty-year-old question has assumed a new urgency. How can we develop persons of tomorrow, expressing 21st-century competencies?

Culture and Competence

We need to start from an awareness of the pattern of cultural assumptions we make about competence and personal development generally today. Because they now lie so deep in the culture, these assumptions can often go unseen.

What counts as 'competence' is culturally determined. What works in one culture fails in another. Cultures and cultural stories provide templates for what it is to be successful in a particular society, to be accomplished, to live a successful life. Rogers was right to see the competencies of persons of tomorrow coming to prominence in parallel with the emergence of a 'world of tomorrow'.

So we will find it difficult to discover and nurture 21st-century competencies if we remain in thrall to the cultural story about competence that dominates today. That story suggests, among other things, that competence:

- is a 'thing'; a quality of the individual
- can be taught or trained to different levels by following an appropriate curriculum
- can be tested, measured and graded in the abstract
- will ultimately win an economic return both for the competent individual and his or her organisation or nation

This used to be a predominantly Western story. But, carried by powerful institutions and incentives – not to mention the meta-system of global capitalism – it has now become prevalent across the globe.

It has certainly enabled a mastery of specialist competencies to date that has been hugely impressive and is to be admired. But it has become all but impossible within this context to recognise or develop the additional 21st-century competencies we now need to thrive in the world we have created.

Three shifts in the culture are therefore critical in our view. The first is to recognise, as the OECD did in a recent five-year study of "key competencies for the 21st century", that today we must understand competence not as abstract achievement but as "the ability to meet important challenges in life in a complex world".ⁱⁱ

It follows that you cannot measure or assess 21st-century competencies in the abstract. You can only see them as a whole and in action. They can be demonstrated in, and inferred from, successful performance in complex situations in the real world. They cannot be tested and graded by written examination.

The second shift is equally fundamental. In the operating conditions of the 21st century it is impossible to be competent alone. Competence is a function of culture, which is a function of relationship. This is not only a plea for attention to teamwork, collaboration and other competencies relating to an individual's performance in group settings. It is a deeper acknowledgement that we create our own lives in a pattern of relationship with other lives, and always have done.ⁱⁱⁱ

Technical competence can be mastered alone. But its application foregrounds relationship – the context of human systems and cultures within which that competence needs to be exercised. The growing interest in qualities like empathy, compassion and emotional intelligence speaks to this dawning recognition in today's hyper-connected world. Just like those qualities, 21st-century competencies cannot be observed or exercised except in relationship with other people.

Third, 21st-century competencies are qualities of persons as a whole. Becoming a person of tomorrow is not like assembling the parts of a machine. It is difficult to be compassionate, for example, without at the same time showing a capacity for

empathy, humility and other qualities. Thus the expression of 21st-century competencies will fly in the face of a dominant culture that suggests competencies can be distinguished one from another, developed in isolation, and mastered one stage at a time. We suggest instead that these competencies are innate capacities in any human system (individual or collective): they simply require the right enabling conditions, settings, life experiences and so on to be called forth and developed through practice.

Beyond the Limitations of 20th-Century Competence

We are not intending to decry the value of what we might call '20th-century competencies'. The advances we have made and the structures of education, socialisation, professional training and accreditation we have put in place to replicate them at scale have been spectacular. We are not suggesting that the 21st-century surgeon, for example, or any other professional, manager or specialist, can dispense with a thorough technical grounding.

What we are saying is that such competencies are no longer sufficient. Once we move from situations that are complicated – such as nuclear engineering – to those that are complex – such as coping with the aftermath of the tsunami that hit the Fukushima nuclear plant in Japan – another level of competence is required.

Simply extrapolating our 20th-century competence, and the culture that honours it, into more complex areas is unlikely to be effective, may be actively counter-productive, and closes off the opportunity to develop the 21st-century competencies we all already possess (to some degree).

Complex problems involving other human beings have no simple answers. They call for judgement, experience, empathy, personal investment, even wisdom – the capacities of whole persons.

In our researches we have found that people who are thriving in the contemporary world, who give us the sense of having it all together and being able to act effectively and with good spirit in challenging circumstances, have some identifiable characteristics in common, even though they are all manifestly themselves – unique and original. They are the people already among us who inhabit the complex and messy problems of the 21st century in a more expansive way than their colleagues.

They do not reduce such problems to the scale of the tools available to them, or hide behind those tools when they know they are partial and inadequate. They dance at the edge all the time between 'doing the right thing' according to standard procedure and really doing the right thing in the moment, in specific cases, with the individuals involved at the time.

This is a risky position to take in today's culture. But there is always a sneaking admiration for such people from their more conventional colleagues. These people seem to find it easy – natural in fact – to take a larger, broader, more holistic, more generous, more all-encompassing, altogether bigger view of any circumstance. They have enough identity and value security to be flexible in their actions and responses to encounters with the world while maintaining a reliable ethical stance. They relate to other people in ways that welcome and honour the dignity and possibilities of otherness. They chafe against short-term fixes and 'good enough' responses. They energise others with their vision, their aspiration and their hope.

What is it about such people that enables them to be this way in the face of today's challenges? We do not believe the qualities they display are exceptional. They are innate human capacities that we all possess but which some have managed to develop and express better than others.

Sadly most of us have been brought up and taught to be 'competent' in a dominant culture that has neither appreciated, encouraged nor valued their expression. But for others, the setting they have found themselves in, or the developmental path of their life experience, has put them in circumstances where these 21st-century competencies have been evoked. Some have undertaken dedicated training to enhance their natural capacity.

Psychological Literacy and Cultural Leadership

It appears to us that the 'threshold competence', without which the awakening and development of the other 21st-century competencies is very difficult, if not impossible, is something we call 'psychological literacy'. Essentially it involves a capacity to read one's own psychological response to challenge and to become master of that response rather than its victim.

Challenge, overwhelm and confusion are frequent operating conditions in today's world and the default psychological defence in these circumstances is denial. It is an automatic response, protective of the psyche and its need for stability. But denial is not a learning stance – and unless we can get beyond it the deeper resources we all possess are never called into play. Hence the fundamental importance of the so-called 'double task': to be able to act and reflect on one's actions *at the same time*. At the level of recognising denial and actively trying on other psychological responses for size, we call this 'psychological literacy'.

This same facility also relates to culture and the dynamics of groups. The dominant culture today is hardly conducive to, and in many cases actively resists, the qualities and capacities of the person of tomorrow. These capacities imply a culture of their own – more open, receptive, enabling. But if we are to be able to operate at the level of cultural change, we must first be able to see the culture we are in. This is another version of the double task – to be able to act and reflect on the cultural implications of one's actions at the same time. Persons of tomorrow and the culture of tomorrow will grow in parallel, through what we call 'cultural leadership'.

At an individual level acting as a person of tomorrow in many settings will be seen as counter-cultural. Like the football player who stops to tend an injured colleague while the opposition play on and score. Or the teacher who encourages his pupils to ask better questions rather than parrot the required answers. Or the politician who asks her officials to organise a learning journey for her to get a better feel for a messy situation rather than give her a set of statistics to silence the opposition. These are all small acts of cultural leadership, eroding the dominant culture and demonstrating the possibility of working from different assumptions.

These examples are deliberately low-risk and personal: individuals committing small acts of creative transgression against the norm, choosing in those moments to privilege other values than those typically favoured by the dominant culture. But it is only a matter of degree that separates these acts from more intentional cultural leadership, interventions deliberately taken – in public – to shift the culture.^{1v}

It is a dangerous role. Established cultures fight back. Rules, especially unwritten ones, are not there to be broken. It is a particular tragedy to see so little willingness to stretch those boundaries in the realm of political leadership. There we find exceptional figures like Nelson Mandela, Vaclav Havel and Aung San Suu Kyi, ready to stand for a more expansive culture and lead a people towards their vision. They outflank their opponents by playing a bigger game, one that resonates with our better selves. But for the most part those we place in positions of political leadership neglect the potential to use that platform for cultural leadership. They insist on playing the game at a lower level of development and aspiration, reinforcing a dominant culture that keeps our higher potentials in check.

Even if not cut out for cultural leadership on that scale, at the very least the person of tomorrow must have a high degree of cultural literacy: an ability to read and sense a culture, or a group, and to understand how far it might be willing to move. That literacy may help to identify a suitable existing culture in which to grow. Or it will help to develop such a culture through thoughtful, considered acts of creative transgression. And if practised at a large enough scale or for high enough stakes, it will catalyse the evolution of the culture as a whole.

Recognising the 21st-Century Competencies in Practice

We have seen some highly impressive chief executives in action. Yet what that has made us realise is that we have also seen the same 21st-century qualities they display more frequently in others we have worked with at all levels in organisations: head teachers, public service directors, nursing managers, middle-ranking officials and countless others. These are people with enough authority in their roles to try something different, but not so much as to be afraid to do so.

It is tempting to offer up a number of prominent and well-known examples. The truth is they are few and far between. And high-profile cultural leaders will inevitably be viewed with ambivalence as they seek to play out on a public stage the impossible balancing act of being hospice worker for the dying culture and midwife for the new. They cannot help but disappoint one side or the other some of the time.

But it seems to us that one world figure in recent years has been playing out before us the ups and downs, the struggles and the paradoxes, of being a person of tomorrow in today's world. He is US President, Barack Obama.

It is a risk on many levels to call him out in this way. It may put off some readers as being too political. Also, like so many before him, Obama may fall from grace. If he is anything like the rest of us, he surely has feet of clay – and these will be exposed at some point, apparently making laughable any claim to 21st-century capacities.

That is the fatal flaw in many books that rely on prominent contemporary examples – like the companies in Jim Collins' *Good to Great* that became not so great after publication.^v But in the end, as our own small act of cultural leadership, we believe we must recognise 21st-century competencies wherever they show up, especially in such a public figure as Obama.

As evidence, think back to January 2011 and the shooting of Congresswoman Gabrielle Giffords at a 'meet the people' event in a supermarket car park in Tucson. The attack, in which six people died and Giffords was seriously injured, shocked America. Some saw it as the inevitable outcome of a politics become intolerant and 'uncivil'. The Republican politician Sarah Palin, then widely seen as contemplating a Presidential bid herself, was vilified for having shown Giffords caught in the crosshairs of a rifle sight as a campaign 'target'. She attempted to address the damage with a speech mourning the dead, but vigorously defending free speech and forthright debate as key American virtues.

It fell to Obama in his public role to address the memorial service for the dead. With the eyes of the world, and of a shattered local community watching, how would he respond? It was a test of competence at a high level, way beyond politics. Visibly emotional, yet steadfast, he addressed the service as a cultural leader. He ministered to a cultural wound. He remembered the dead – personally, individually, as if they had each been his neighbour. He praised those who had acted swiftly and selflessly to limit the slaughter – moving the audience to whooping like a campaign rally.

And he used the occasion, this opening in the culture, to call on everyone to reflect on how we live our own lives: to "expand our moral imaginations", "sharpen our instincts for empathy" and remember that "what matters is not wealth, or status, or power, or fame – but rather, how well we have loved".

It is a simple message. Not original by any means. Palin had played with some of the same sentiment. But her intent was clearly political. Obama was operating at another level, and calling on our better selves to join him there. It was evocative – a conscious rising to the occasion, calling forth resources in his audience by authentically demonstrating them himself.

This is setting the bar high. But we can see in this performance some of the common characteristics we have observed in many others in more humdrum, less public, settings. There is a cultural fluency evident in Obama's playing back and forth across domains of family, preacher and politician, local friend and national leader. That is perhaps associated in his case with being – like so many 21st-century persons – the

product of a hybrid culture himself. We see an emotional maturity, a lack of fear in dealing with powerful emotions and naming them in public. And a humility in his identification with everyman that would sound false in many others.

This public address was a master class in 21st-century competencies, and widely recognised as such. As one of the hard-bitten CBS news commentators who was present put it: "I was sitting there and I realised, 'This guy might be a great man.' I had forgotten about that".

Start Where You Are

Our culture will shift and the 21st-century competencies will be developed only through practice. You cannot learn to play the cello by reading a book. And whilst books of advice can help, you will not get fit unless you go through the process of exercise. The 21st-century competencies are like that. So the real challenge for all of us is to begin to develop our capacity as persons of tomorrow wherever we are, working with whomever we are working with, in whatever setting we find ourselves in today.

Naturally there are places, programmes, support networks, specific courses and the like that may well have a role to play. That would be like going to the gym. But better still if you can incorporate this 'exercise' into your normal day-to-day working life. In the end, individual and setting must evolve and develop together. It is a harder road, but we believe ultimately more fulfilling and more impactful, if we are able to bring our 21st-century selves to work and grow a new culture around us whilst we are there.

We all have it in us to become persons of tomorrow, to rise above denial, and to take on the challenges of today's powerful times.

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ⁱ Rogers, C. R. (1980). *A Way of Being*. Boston: Houghton Mifflin

ⁱⁱ OECD (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development) Directorate for Education, Employment, Labour and Social Affairs Education Committee, Governing Board of the CERi (2002) *Definition and selection of competencies (DeSeCo)*. Materials can be viewed at <http://www.deseco.admin.ch>

ⁱⁱⁱ The term 'persons of tomorrow' is partly chosen because it recognises Rogers's earlier insight that becoming a 'person' is itself an achievement, locating one's individual self as inevitably in relationship with others.

^{iv} Omer, A (2005) 'The Spacious Center: Leadership and the Transformation of Culture', *Shift* March-May 2005. In our understanding of cultural leadership we draw heavily on the work of our IFF colleague Aftab Omer of Meridian University, California and in particular his notion of 'creative transgression' as central to shifting a culture.

^v Collins, J (2001). *Good to Great*. New York: Harper Business. Collins cleverly made a virtue out of this with his subsequent volume, *How the Mighty Fall*.