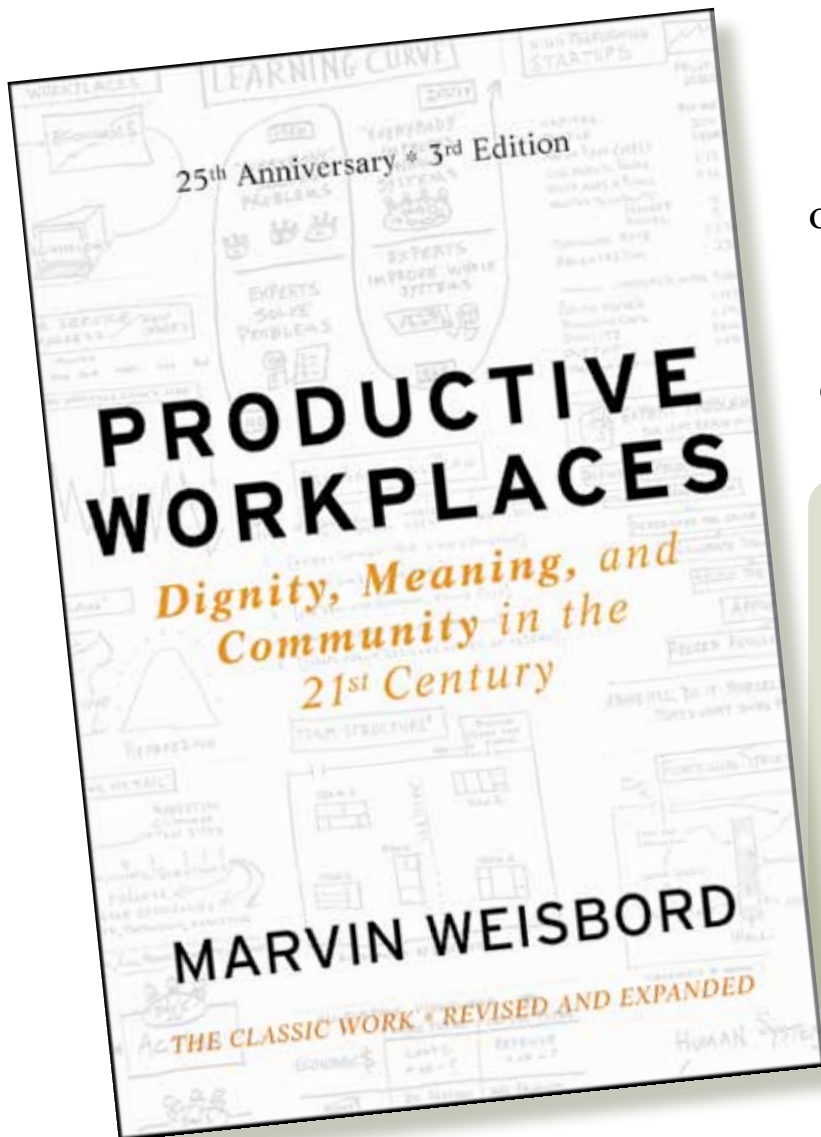


OSR at Seattle University presents...

Productive Workplaces with  
Marvin Weisbord:  
25 Years and 10 OD Myths Later



Come spend a morning interacting with Marv Weisbord on the 25th anniversary edition of *Productive Workplaces* and the 10 myths of organizational change that he no longer believes

**WHEN:** Wednesday, January 25  
8:30 am – 12:00 pm;  
followed by a book  
signing.

**WHERE:** Student Center Room 160  
Seattle University

**COST:** \$100 (includes new  
edition of *Productive  
Workplaces*) or  
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From CHAPTER 1

## A Mythology of Organizational Change

*“Mythology - The body of stories associated with a culture, institution or person.”* - The Visual Thesaurus

I start this 25th Anniversary edition with 10 stories I no longer believe. I got them during 50 years of managing and consulting in businesses, medical schools, social agencies, and communities. For each story, I propose an alternative. Myths evolve from what you choose to believe. You then act as if they are true. For many years I have been meeting with students in Seattle University's Organization Systems Renewal master's program (formerly at Antioch/Seattle), and in Benedictine University's doctoral program in organization development (OD). They have backgrounds in sales, marketing, criminal justice, health care, finance, manufacturing, education, computer science, and engineering. Nearly all seek OD training because they want something more from their work. Over the years I have brought up the “myths” presented here; and several students have rewarded me with their stories for this anniversary edition.

Perhaps my description of the myths I encountered will help you put your own in perspective. Rather than save all my advice until later, I offer you “Alternative Myths” to whet your appetite for the chapters that follow.

**#1 - The Sustainable Change Myth** - Sustainable change is an oxymoron. For years I believed I had a responsibility to “build in” follow-up mechanisms with organizations. These were intended to reinforce new leader behavior, solidify learning, make collaborative problem-solving instinctive, and promote a new culture as a “way of life.” Half the organizations I consulted with in the 70's and 80's no longer exist. No organization lasts, no matter how dazzling your “interventions.” Of the 30 companies that became the modern Dow Jones Industrial Average in 1928, only General Electric remains. If you invest your life force in sustaining change, the only thing you are likely to sustain is a bruised ego and impaired idealism.

**Alternate Myth** - I recommend seeing if you can sustain new practices from one meeting to the next. Organizations change one meeting at a time. The goal of

all projects ought to be giving *these* people, in *this room*, at *this moment*, opportunities they never had before. Keep doing this, and *you* will be sustainable, no matter what happens after the meeting.

**#2 - The Training-Will-Fix-It Myth** - In the 1970's I believed with many of my colleagues that training everybody transforms organizations. We trained tens of thousands to supervise, manage, appraise, cooperate, set goals, give feedback, and participate. Training was intended to help people change the way their companies operated. Indeed, many people transformed their relationships with spouses, children and co-workers. Their companies—a tangled maze of policy, procedure, programs, controls, and technologies—went on doing whatever they did before. Individuals get enormous benefits from training. Organizations should offer all they can afford. Do not mistake training for organizational change.

**Alternate Myth** - Everybody already has skills and knowledge they cannot use at work. They are blocked by job descriptions, their place in the pecking order, the location of their desks, the size of their turf, restricted information, and limited influence over working conditions. These structural issues cannot be altered through skills and awareness training. People improve organizations using what they already know to influence policies, procedures, systems and structures. People motivate themselves doing projects that have consequences for the whole.

**#3 - The Profit-Is-Everything Myth** - If making money were a rational motivator, than everybody would do participative work redesign and Future Searches. That's where the big gains lie. For many executives the bottom line is power and control. For many executives, the perceived risks and uncertainty of broad involvement outweigh the evidence of significant financial benefits.

**Alternate Myth** - An organization builds infinitely more economic strength empowering people to cooperate in keeping costs down and productivity up. Indeed, some firms embrace a “triple bottom line” that includes social capital and benefits to society. They invest a percentage of profits in developing their people and supporting their communities. Which strategy attracts you? Watch yourself around people whose stated motivation is money alone. Nearly always they are the same people whose control needs are so great they cannot do what creates value in the long run.

**#4 - The Fortune 500 Myth** - The Fortune 500's ought to be good places for organizational innovation. Consultants love claiming them as clients. Indeed, in the 1970's and 80's they were good to me and my colleagues. They paid well, changed fast, and needed lots of help. They were great places to practice the consulting art.

Over time, many of us came to realize Fortune 500's were among the least auspicious places for OD. I suggest three reasons. First, good OD requires continuity in leadership. Our projects rarely outlasted the managers who sponsored them. Second, good OD seeks systems integration. Even visionary executives are stuck with one department running technology, another cost control, a third personnel. Third, that many cannot achieve greater integration stems from the "faster, shorter, cheaper" virus infecting public companies.

**Alternate Myth** - It's hard to make long term improvements in firms that (a) are publicly traded, (b) pay quarterly dividends, and (c) churn executives at the top. If the quarterly dividend comes in a few cents below some analyst's prediction, the stock price goes down. Billie Alban, who wrote the foreword to this book, once asked a multi-national CEO what he would do with a magic wand. "I would buy back the company's stock," he said without hesitation, "so I could invest for the long term and not have to dance each quarter to Wall Street's pipes!" This is not to say you can't do good OD in such firms. Only be aware that you are building for today, not for the ages.

It's no coincidence that I did my most impactful strategic conferences with Berrett-Koehler Publishers, Haworth, IKEA, Resources for Human Development, and Whole Foods Market (Weisbord & Janoff, 2010). What had they in common? All had decades of continuity at the top and all save Whole Foods, which went public in 1992 but paid no dividends until 2003, were private firms.

**#5 - The Learning Organization Myth** - Organizations don't learn. *People* learn. Organizations have Alzheimer's. They have a hard time retaining experience. Concepts like "learning how to learn" make engaging workshops with little long term systemic impact. Kurt Lewin's priceless idea was not just learning by doing, but also "doing by learning." He saw workplaces as laboratories for collaborative "action research," a practice of systematic inquiry, on which I built a career. Inquiry may have been a way of life for consultants, but not the clients. It is hard to institutionalize new norms amidst the turbulence. Norms—the unwritten rules of behavior—follow the leader. If organizations learned, Chrysler and Daimler-Benz might not have merged while People Express Airlines, Bethlehem Steel, Digital Equipment, and Scott Paper would still be leaders instead of no more. If organizations learned, those who lived through Vietnam would not have taken on Iraq.

**Alternate Myth** - I believe an organization's memory is no longer than the tenures of those in charge. I have spent years helping managers build great learning

organizations that their successors took apart in months. I never met a new manager who said, "This place runs like a Swiss watch. I think I'll leave it alone." They all set out to improve what they inherit, even if they make things worse. My advice is to put away your illusions if you work in a place you cannot control. Today is the future. You cannot flatten pyramids for the ages or "build in" honest communication. Do your best to help people learn today with no expectations for next year.

**#6 - The Layoff Myth** - Wall Street loves layoffs. Costs go down, and the stock's price goes up. Alas, the fix turns out worse than the problem. Rensis Likert (1960) called layoffs "liquidating human assets"—trading skills, experience, future capability, and competitive advantage for short-term cash. In earlier editions of this book I made a strong case against layoffs. When I started on this edition, during the worst recession since the 1930's, I reconciled myself to the ugly idea that secure employment, like fossil fuels, had no future. I prepared to backpedal on my naive idealism.

My mood changed when I read a *Newsweek* cover story by Stanford professor Jeffrey Pfeffer (2010). He noted that every airline save one laid off people after 9/11/01. The outlier was Southwest, the largest U.S. Domestic carrier with a market value greater than all its competitors combined. It had never in its history opted for an involuntary layoff. (It's co-founder, the legendary Herb Kelleher, led the company for 37 years, enabling it to avoid Wall Street madness.) Pfeffer cited study after study to bolster the case that layoffs incur hidden costs, hurt people, undermine the future, injure a company's reputation, diminish its capacity to act, and reduce shareholder returns over time. "Layoffs are mostly bad for companies, harmful for the economy, and devastating for employees" he concluded. My father, who controlled his business, made it a policy for 35 good years and bad never to lay anybody off. You can see where I get my bias.

**Alternate Myth** - If I were in a cost crunch today, I would involve everybody in rethinking markets, products, services, and systems. I would push for across-the-board pay cuts to keep everyone employed. In this scenario, nobody loses jobs, health care, and homes nor ends up on welfare. All tighten their belts until the turnaround. Then my company gains market share, increases profits, restores pay cuts, pays bonuses, and is the hub of a vibrant business community. Imagine a society built on that myth.

**#7 - The "Hard Data" Myth** - Pfeffer mobilizes persuasive data in his case against layoffs. I detect little impact on businesses. I began compiling positive statistics when I noticed a 40% jump in productivity by my own multi-skilled teams in the 1960's. Anybody who

ever tried to influence skeptics with hard data knows how futile it is. If managers were rational, all companies would have employees designing their own work. Such involvement has been known for decades to produce gains of 20 to 40 per cent in higher output and lower costs. Why “prove” that yet again here? I do it to reassure myself and other believers that we are not crazy. You can test this proposition by involving people and measuring the results. That’s an experiment that skeptics, locked into self-fulfilling prophecies, are loath to do.

**Alternate Myth** - There is a “shadow” side to the data myth. That is the fact you can assemble statistics to prove whatever you please, e.g. scientific studies for and against what you eat, how you heat your house, and the toothbrush you use. Pollsters frame political questions to get the answers they seek. “Do you believe taxes are too high?” Resounding yes. “Would you support a tax cut if it meant poorer education for your children and more potholes on your street?” No, no, no. In the end, which data you choose to believe becomes an act of faith.

**#8 - The Diagnosis Myth** - Many organizations employ experts to diagnose problems and prescribe changes. Diagnosis means finding gaps between what is and what should be. There are economic fixes, technological fixes, and people fixes aimed at every human failing. Here’s a short diagnosis of the diagnosis myth by one who wrote an organizational diagnosis textbook still in use (Weisbord, 1978). The first law of diagnosis is what you look for is what you find. The second law is that there are more categories for things you can find than stars in the galaxy. Costs are always too high, systems are always failing, and few people behave the way they should. Those who seek to remedy these situations by imposing programs invented elsewhere are sure to stir up resistance. The cure worsens the disease.

**Alternate Myth** - Diagnosis is a trap for the unwary. While the problems you turn up may be real, fixing them may not make an organization better. If you want people to collaborate while they compete for bonuses, forget it. If you expect creativity in a hierarchy with seven levels of management, forget it. A diagnostic model—e.g. what categories will yield the best results with the least effort—is backed only by the values of people applying it.

Labeling people “change resisters” or “in denial” is sure to evoke the behavior it predicts. Interestingly, when people work together to fix economic and technological problems, they often change their attitudes and relationships. If you seek to fix all diagnosable shortcomings before people can do good work, they never will. The only proven strategy is involving people in their own diagnosis and action planning.

**#9 - The Technology-Saves-Time Myth** - Human ingenuity is limitless. Creativity abounds. Inspiration may strike in an instant. Time, like old man river, just keeps rolling. It’s the world’s least renewable resource. The shadow side of technology is that it fragments time. The more “labor-saving” technology you have the harder you work. PDA’s go to supermarkets, restaurants, the golf course, and the beach. I have an IN BOX of emails daily, each calling for me to answer now, look at pictures, read a document, make a new friend, visit a web site, or endorse a book that I have no time to read. “People sit in meetings,” noted an ex-partner of mine who is a corporate OD director, “reading and sending messages on their BlackBerries and laptops. During breaks they attack their cell phones. Facebook. LinkedIn. Twittering. Texting. The meetings become secondary. They are merely the place to gather as everyone becomes more and more adept at juggling priorities at a frenetic pace” (Dupre, 2010).

**Alternate Myth** - You cannot make a meeting longer without borrowing from something else. Many of us run from one fruitless meeting to another, month after month, when three solid days with those who matter most to our work could simplify everything. The only way to check the validity of what I say is to try a three day meeting instead of a new computer app when you want an implementable strategic plan. Discover how to do it shorter, faster, and cheaper without cutting corners or driving everybody crazy.

**#10 - The Meetings-Are-A-Waste Myth** - The first thing I learned when I started consulting was the endemic cynicism people dump on meetings. Q: “What’s the best way to avoid working?” A: “Call a meeting!” In truth, many meetings do waste your time. Meetings couldn’t care less how you use them. All major change projects proceed via the reviled, maligned, and unavoidable meetings that everyone loves to hate.

**Alternate Myth** - Meetings are the best shot you will ever have at making an organization better. Meetings, that is, of the right kind. I’m advocating purposeful meetings, interactive meetings, meetings that matter, meetings where people solve problems and influence decisions. Whether you hold them live or on-line, you will be interacting with others for all your days in the workplace. My last bit of advice, like my first bit, is to make every encounter worth the time you put in. I’ll close with a short commercial. If you want to run productive meetings, check out *Don’t Just Do Something, Stand There!* (Weisbord and Janoff, 2007).