

Organizations don't evolve, they cope

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I've been part of a rather long list of conversations about the next evolution of arts organizations. I'm not blaming anyone but myself, as I love those conversations. And I'm as frustrated as anyone at the current struggles of the field. The board-governed, professionally managed, mixed-diet (earned and contributed), high-fixed-cost nonprofit organization seems increasingly ill-equipped for its changing environment. It seems a creature of a previous ecosystem. It seems in need of evolution. Yet, therein lies the problem. These conversations tend to circle around metaphors from the natural world (as demonstrated above)...focusing on ecosystems, environmental changes, and delayed evolution. But I'm coming to realize that we're playing a bit fast and loose with the metaphors. We're calling on existing organizations to evolve to the new environment, as living organisms evolve to theirs. Only, individual organisms *don't* evolve. They only cope.

Individual organisms are stuck with whatever bundle of traits, abilities, internal systems, and sensory structures they were dealt at birth. They don't evolve during their lifetime. Their *species* evolves over generations as the natural systems around them select whichever mutation (or lack of mutation) lives to reproduce. Evolution isn't individual and responsive, it's multi-generational and selective.

So, we can tell a nonprofit corporate organization to evolve just as effectively as we can tell a fish to grow opposable thumbs. Its traits and tendencies were inherited at birth. It can adjust its tendencies, it can retrain its reflexes, but it's still

a nonprofit corporate organization, even if it can do new tricks.

Of course, a nonprofit and a fish are slightly different. I'll grant you that. An organization is a bundle of people, things, processes, and traditions, bound by contracts and covenants, and restricted in its operation by laws, codes, and norms. A fish is, well, a fish. But while the people, things, and processes can be rearranged, the underlying structures and relationships that determine fundamental behavior remain the same.

It might help to remember that the professional cultural nonprofit organization was, itself, an evolutionary species once, selected to thrive and reproduce by civic and social institutions (the mutation was ideal for an increasingly rich, primordial funding ooze of foundations, governments, and individual wealth in the 1960s, '80s, and '90s).

But now, that primordial ooze has dried up or attached itself to other species in other pools. And professional nonprofit arts organizations are stuck with the same deck they were dealt when they were founded.

I'm not suggesting we should abandon all professional nonprofits, and generate mutations in their stead (although, a few mutations might be worth a shot). I'm just suggesting we should stop screaming at individual organizations to evolve. They can't.

Existing organizations can cope. They can adjust on the margins. They can eat a bit less and produce a bit more if they move more elegantly. And many can thrive with their old systems in the new world if they're nimble and resourceful and environmentally lucky. As there's a next generation, we can take care that they're constructed for the new reality, rather than aligned with the old.

And somewhere in there, the *system* will evolve, as systems do, toward the benefit or detriment of the critters already in the pond.