

## What If Our Basic Model of Organizations Won't Fly?



Daniel Quinn wrote a book entitled *Ishmael: an Adventure of Mind and Spirit* (1995). The novel uses a form of Socratic dialogue to deconstruct the notion of human supremacy—that humans are the end product, the pinnacle of biological evolution. In the book, Quinn asserts that modern civilization is merely "enacting" a myth of supremacy.

In the book, Quinn creates a dialogue between his central character, a gorilla that has the ability to communicate telepathically, and a nameless man who connected with the gorilla through a newspaper ad. The dialogue is in the form of an allegory about the fundamental laws of the universe (or of Nature) and what happens if you violate those laws.

The basic premise of the allegory is that there are some natural laws that you just can't break. If you try to ignore them or act like they aren't true, you are breaking them just the same. And there are predictable consequences for that oversight or incorrect assumption. They told the story in terms of how the early members of our culture tried to achieve flight. The experimenter had build a bicycle-type flying contraption with wings and jumped off a high cliff to begin his "flight."

As the flight begins, all is well. The would-be aviator is pedaling away and his pseudo-wings are flapping like mad. He's "flying." What he does not realize is that he is breaking the laws of gravity and is in free-fall toward the earth. From his point of view, however, it looks like the contraption is working. He's congratulating himself on his genius.

When he begins to descend, he believes that the key to his success is to pedal harder. So he does. The fact is, however, that no matter how hard he pedals, he cannot change the laws of nature that are at play. Sooner or later he will end up on the canyon floor in a shambles.

But our pilot has a delusion. He thinks that he will be successful. Even when he sees the wreckage of other contraptions strewn around the canyon floor, he does not make the connection to his own fate.

What if this allegory applied to the way we create and operate organizations? What if we have violated some fundamental laws in the creation of culture, in our leadership styles, or in how we structure entities? Here are some questions to contemplate:

- Have we built organizational contraptions that we pushed off the cliff and pedaled hard for the last two centuries?
- What if, over the last two centuries, our organizational contraptions were merely in the early stages of the flight?
- What if we were pedaling away under the delusion that we were flying when, in fact, we were in free-fall and the accelerating rate of thirty-two feet per second per second toward the canyon floor?

We may have broken some of the fundamental laws of nature by how we structure, create culture in, and lead organizations. All of it seemed to work in the early stages of flight. Ultimately, however, sooner or later, if what we are doing is not consistent with the laws, that inconsistency will catch up and we will hit the canyon floor.

Then what?