![Edgewalkers — Judi Neal. People and Organizations that Take Risks, Build Bridges, and Break New Ground](logo)

Judi Neal
Tyson Center for Faith and Spirituality in the Workplace
Sam M. Walton College of Business
University of Arkansas.

Edgewalker Organizations

> Here's to the crazy ones. The misfits. The rebels. The trouble-makers. The round heads in the square holes. The ones who see things differently. They're not fond of rules, and they have no respect for the status-quo. You can quote them, disagree with them, glorify, or vilify them. But the only thing you can't do is ignore them. Because they change things. They push the human race forward. And while some may see them as the crazy ones, we see genius. Because the people who are crazy enough to think they can change the world, are the ones who do.
> (Jack Kerouac, On the Road. - Also used by Apple in one of their ads)

An Edgewalker Organization is an organization that seeks to be on the leading edge, is curious about what is emerging just over the horizon, supports creativity and innovation, and nurtures the human spirit. The organization develops collective methods of knowing the future. It encourages risk-taking. The leaders understand how to use vision, imagery and inspiration to paint a picture of a desired future. Employees are imaginative, empowered, and know how to create what has never been created before.

1

The Edgewalker Organization has great diversity in its leaders and employees. Differences are valued to a much greater degree than in a traditional organization, simply because Edgewalkers are curious and always wanting to learn about other people's worldviews.

There are five different orientations that people can take in an organization, and these affect the extent to which the organization can truly be on the leading edge. These five orientations are as follows:

(1) Edgewalkers

(2) Flamekeepers

(3) Hearthtenders

(4) Placeholders

(5) Guardians

Each of these will be defined, and then we will look at the implications for organizational culture and performance. These orientations are based on two factors: (1) *Relationship to Time*, and (2) *Relationship to Change.* The *Relationship to Time* factor is a continuum between focus on the past and focus on the future. The *Relationship to Change* factor is a continuum between being closed to change and being open to change.

INSERT FIGURE 1 HERE

Edgewalkers

Edgewalkers are people who walk between worlds and have the ability to build bridges between different worldviews. They have a strong spiritual life and are also very grounded and effective in the everyday material world. Edgewalkers are much more oriented towards the future than the past to the degree that they can sometimes run

roughshod over tradition and can close their ears to what has worked in the past. They are also high on the change continuum, with a basic philosophy of, "If it ain't broke, fix it anyway."

They are restless and always seeking newness and change. For this reason they can sometimes be difficult to manage, especially for a traditional manager. The Edgewalker may be more focused on his or her creative ideas than on what is most needed in the organization.

A company called Yankee Gas had an interesting approach to valuing its Edgewalkers. They asked their leaders to identify the people in their work units who were "radicals and rebels" and invited these people to be a part of a group that could provide advice and guidance to the organizational leadership. Most organizations tend to suppress people who have radical or unusual ideas, but this forward thinking and creative organization actually valued and listened to people who would normally be on the fringe.

Flamekeepers

Flamekeepers are those people who keep the original vision and values of the organization alive. They are like the Olympic torchbearer, keeping the flame lit at all costs; or like the keeper of the flame in a temple: one who keeps the sacred candles lit morning, noon, and night.

The Strategic Programs Division of Xerox in Rochester, New York, was the first organization to create the first truly green "zero to landfill" copying machine, the Document Center 265DC. The organization went through a massive six-year cultural change to support the development of a whole new series of products. In order to support their larger vision of a culture that focused on people first, they created the Council of

Wisdom Keepers. A nominating committee selected sixteen people, two from each of the eight functional groups.

The role of the Wisdom Keepers was to walk around taking the temperature of the cultural change program, to serve as ombudsmen, to cut red tape when necessary, and to catch anything significant that might be falling through the cracks. Some of their official responsibilities included the following (Ott, R., Kelly, C. and Hotchkiss, M. 1997 p. 235):

1. To support the Company with wisdom previously gained, in both engineering and human dimensions.
2. To hold both people and the vision of the products to the highest ideals and standards.
3. To advocate the well-being and quality of life of all Company employees.
4. To convene from time to time as they see fit to bring issues of importance to the attention of the appropriate people.

Flamekeepers are focused on what is best about the past and on preserving the core values of the organization. At the same time, they are open to change and are willing to look at how the organization can build on what has been developed in the past. They may not be your biggest innovators, but once they see how a new product, service, or strategy fits with the core values and is in alignment with the vision of the founders, they will be the biggest supporters of change.

Hearthtenders

Hearthtenders are the people who get the day-to-day work of the organization done. They are the ones who keep the home fires burning when the Edgewalkers are out scouting new territory. They keep things running smoothly and are committed to a sense of family in the organization, and to creating a "home away from home" atmosphere in the organization. Hearthtenders are the ones who remember people's birthdays and who

enjoy the organizational-milestone celebrations. They are the ones who think of creative ways to celebrate accomplishments and to bring people together.

They enjoy working on continuous improvement and, if given half the chance, will have creative ideas about how to improve the workflow in their areas or better serve customers.

Hearthtenders are in the middle of the model in Figure 1. In time orientation, they tend to be focused on the present, and they are moderately open to change. These people are generally satisfied with their jobs and with the organization, and are happy to keep things the way they are unless someone has an idea on how to make their work more streamlined and less stressful.

Janice Tarasevich is a hearthtender manager at Sennheiser USA. Janice's department takes orders and works with the sales department to make sure that customers get what they have ordered in a timely manner. She wanted her team members to better understand the whole sales process so she sent her staff members out in the field with sales reps and to trade shows. This allowed them to develop better relationships with people that they normally only interact with on the phone. Her focus is on efficiency and positive relationships.

Hearthtenders serve a very important function in the organization by providing stability and by keeping systems running smoothly. Depending on the climate and culture of the organization, Hearthtenders could move into any of the other quadrants. If you are trying to create an organization that is more values-driven and more innovative, you will want to actively find ways to help Hearthtenders become more future-oriented, thus moving them into the Edgewalker orientation, or more past-oriented, thus moving them into the Flamekeeper orientation. Often Hearthtenders are Edgewalkers or Flamekeepers in disguise and can be encouraged to be more change-oriented if they are listened to, supported, encouraged and rewarded.

Placeholders

In contrast to Edgewalkers, who tend to be rare, just about every organization has Placeholders. Tom Brown (2006) defines Placeholders as the people who are holding back organizational progress and innovation. There are the people who see boundaries instead of possibilities, who are focused on the past instead of the future, who use up resources instead of looking at renewal, and who value doing over dreaming. They are the ones who want to employ as few people as possible in contrast to the leaders who engage all of humankind and look for ways to grow the enterprise.

Placeholders are primarily motivated by fear and ego. They are risk-averse because they are afraid of losing whatever they have. They feel like they can't afford to fail, and so they get frozen in place, fighting mightily to keep things the way they are. They will give lip service to change, but they will follow any words of support with statements such as:

- You have to show me where the money will come from.
- Let's put a committee together, and I want a report in three months.
- Where else has this been done?
- How can you prove that we'll be successful?
- Corporate will never go for it (or Human Resources, or Management, or the union, or someone else who can be the bad guy).

Placeholders do have a tremendous amount of organizational memory, and perhaps even some wisdom. A Placeholder is, in many ways, like a pessimistic, angry, cynical Flamekeeper. Probably at one time they deeply believed in the vision and values of the organization and perhaps had their faith and ideals trampled on one too many times. So they retreat into their protective shells and long for the past. And they try to block any new initiatives that move them even further from their idealized past.

It takes a tremendous amount of work, a high level of interpersonal skills, and spiritual intelligence to deal with Placeholders. If you are trying to create more of an Edgewalker culture in your organization, you are likely to create even more fear in Placeholders

unless you find a way to deal directly with their motives for being naysayers. From a spiritual perspective, it's important to remember that there is good in every person, and if you are in a change-agent role, you want to find a way to unleash that goodness in your Placeholders.

Programs that increase self-awareness, that focus on values, and that help people to rediscover their inherent sense of service and higher purpose can be very successful for those at lower levels in the organization. One-on-one coaching, whether it is with a professional coach or with a competent boss, can also help Placeholders to be more open to change, particularly if they can be shown that they will have some influence on the new direction.

But if your top leaders are Placeholders, your organization is essentially stuck in the mud. Edgewalkers and Flamekeepers will eventually leave out of frustration, and you will be left with people who keep the machinery running but who have forgotten the higher purpose and mission of the organization.

Guardians

There are people in organizations who tend to be future-oriented, but unlike Edgewalkers, they have fear and foreboding about what might happen next. They *have a strong sense* of protectiveness and a predilection for preventing problems. In my early work on Edgewalkers, I called them "Doomsayers." The Merriam-Webster Online Dictionary (2006) defines a Doomsayer as "one given to forebodings and predictions of impending calamity." Even more than Placeholders, they can be a tremendous drag on organizational energy if they are strongly fear-based. These folks are not just "the glass is half empty" folks, they are the "glass is broken, the water is going to stain everything, and I'm probably going to bleed to death" folks. They are very concerned about the future, but they always predict the worst possible calamity and then spend their time preparing for doomsday. Or else, in their fear, they just get paralyzed and helpless. At healthier levels,

they are the ones who can see what might go wrong and can gently alert the right people to make changes that will keep the team or organization moving ahead.

Typically Guardians get pretty marginalized in organizations because leaders don't like to hear potential bad news, and they can be seen as complainers. They tend to gravitate towards jobs like safety, environmental engineering, cost accounting, auditing, and other jobs that by their nature focus on what is wrong. The goal of these kinds of jobs is to prevent serious problems from happening and to quickly handle a crisis if they do. Many people in these professions handle the prevention work and the crisis work in a calm and professional manner.

Some Guardians, however, are prone to drama as a way of alerting people to the things they see that others don't see. They get themselves into a vicious cycle. When they see a potential problem emerging, they do whatever they can to get the attention of people who can do something about it. Often this includes using strong emotion to express their concern. Guardians also use exaggeration to get their point across. Because so many things seem like a crisis to them and because they tend to exaggerate and blow things out of proportion, they may become like the little boy who cried, "Wolf." Co-workers can become immune to their cries of alarm, and then, when there is a real emergency, no one believes them.

Like Placeholders, Guardians are change averse. But their resistance to change is based on a belief that the future holds danger. Their theory about the world is that it is not a safe place, and you have to protect yourself at all costs from bad things happening. And as Jack Gibb said, our theories create our reality. (Gibb, J. 1978) So if the least little thing goes wrong, they are able to say, "See, I told you." They tend to ignore all the things that go right most of the time, and if you point that out to them they say, "Well, we've been lucky so far, but just you wait."

Guardians are very difficult to change. However, if you are creating an Edgewalker Organization, you will have to find a way to deal with them because their negative and

fearful energy can be so contagious. Do anything you can do to help them develop a more positive relationship with the future. They are already future-oriented, but it is a fear-based orientation. If you can help the Guardian to understand how he or she creates his or her own reality, you have gone a long way towards transformation. Once they can begin to accept that there may be other *ways* to think about the future, you are on your way towards moving Guardians to either the Hearthtender quadrant or even the Edgewalker quadrant.

Appreciative Inquiry is a wonderful process for beginning to open up the consciousness of the Guardian. They often find it very difficult to shift their thinking in this way, but it is possible. When I offer workshops, I often build in a one-hour or two-hour vision quest in nature as part of the process. This kind of experience can also be very helpful to the Guardian. Nature is a gentle teacher about the future.

Basic Guidelines for Organizations

Here are some actions you can take to begin to create more of an Edgewalker Culture in your organization:

1. Assess your organization in comparison to others in your industry. Are you on the leading edge, in the middle of the pack, or a laggard in terms of innovation, creativity, and risk-taking?
2. Decide as a management team if you would like to be more on the leading edge than you currently are.
3. Evaluate your current mix of Edgewalkers, Flamekeepers, Hearthtenders, Placeholders and Guardians. Does this need to change in order to meet your strategic and cultural objectives?
4. Identify and benchmark Edgewalker organizations. Visit them and talk to leaders and front line workers. Find out what makes the organization tick. Discuss what you learned with your management team and make decisions about actions you can implement.

5. Study the organizations that have received the International Spirit at Work Award. Attend the annual International Spirit at Work Awards conference to learn from the CEOs and executives of the organizations that have received the award.*

6. Explore training programs, hiring practices, reward practices, and other human resource systems to see what can be done to shift people with Placeholder and Doomsayer orientations to Hearthtender, Flamekeeper, and Edgewalker orientations.

7. Don't forget that nature is our best teacher. Plan a vision quest for your top team, then schedule one for everyone else in the organization.

----

* Details about the International Spirit at Work Award and case studies about the honorees are on the Association for Spirit at Work website at http://www.spiritatwork.org.

Look For the Gifts

I remember a cartoon from years ago that pictured a little boy delightedly shoveling out a stall full of manure. When someone asked him why he was so happy about his shoveling, he replied, "With all this dung in here, there's got to be a pony somewhere!"

Sometimes being an Edgewalker can feel like you are up to your neck in horse manure. Being an Edgewalker is a hard path to walk, but it has many rewards. It is always exciting to break new ground and explore new frontiers. And you meet so many interesting people on the way! You are never bored, and no one would ever accuse you of being boring. But more than anything else, you have the opportunity to make a positive difference in the world.

If you are trying to create an Edgewalker Organization, it is helpful to understand the different orientations that people have towards time and towards change. And like the little boy in the stall, it is valuable to look for the gift in each of these orientations. When

you focus on people's strengths, and what they bring to the organization, what you focus on will grow.

"What the caterpillar calls the end of the world, the master calls a butterfly". (Richard Bach)

References

Brown, T. 2006: *Anatomy of Fire* (Lexington, KY: Management General), e-book retrieved from http://www.anatomyoffire.com, 4/23/06, chapter 2, p. 3.

Gibb, J. 1978: *Trust: A New View of Personal and Organizational Development* (Los Angeles, CA: Guild of Tutors Press, 1978).

Merriam-Webster Online Dictionary *2006:* retrieved from http://www.m-w.com/cgi-bin/dictionary?va=doomsayer on 4/23/06.

Ott, R., Kelly, C. and Hotchkiss, M. 1997: LAKES: A journey of heroes. Webster, NY: Xerox Corporation and Living Systems, p. 235.