

# The Marshall Model of Organisational Evolution

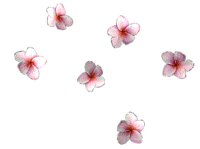
(Dreyfus for the Organisation)

How Mindset is the Key to Improved Effectiveness  
in Technology Organisations

by

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In the course of my work in the Rightshifting space, I have discovered some insights which have helped me think about the relative effectiveness of technology organisations. This paper is my attempt to share some of these insights, in the hope that others may find them of some use also.

## the utility of the marshall model

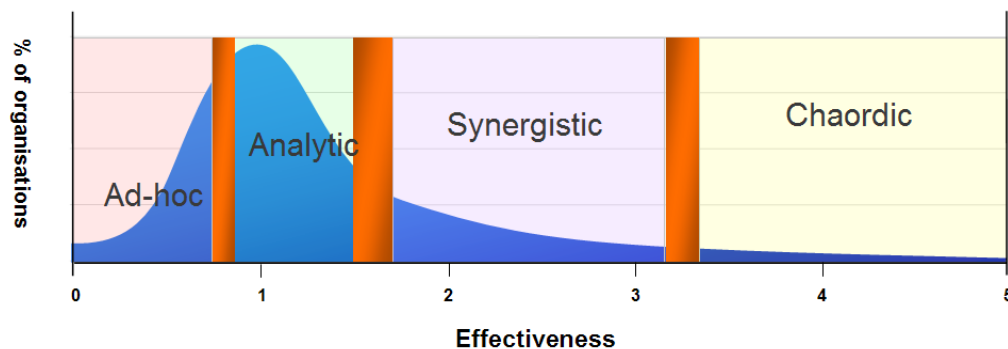
Models have value in as much as they can serve a purpose. The **Marshall Model of Organisational Evolution**, described below, serves a number of related purposes:

*Models have value in as much as they serve a purpose.*

- Providing a vocabulary and shared mental model through which people involved in improvement can better talk together about what's happening, and what needs doing.
- Helping organisations see where they are on their improvement journey, and thereby better chose a suitable set of next steps.
- Reducing the risks associated with organisational change by describing the nature and scope of the challenge.
- Providing organisational change agents with a context within which to choose appropriate strategies, methods and tools.
- Helping reduce the time taken to overcome organisational homeostasis and thereby preserving the momentum of change at major decision points (e.g. the transition zones between mindsets).

## background

The Marshall Model has evolved from the **Four Mindsets of Rightshifting**, see chart:



This chart shows the four basic mindsets which prevail within organisations at given levels of effectiveness, along with the three “transition zones” (shown in red) where each of these mindsets overlap. The basic premise of Rightshifting is that organisations can improve their



effectiveness incrementally (and with little turbulence / disruption), until such time as they approach a transition zone. At these transition zones, major upheaval – in the form of a shift of mindset – is required to proceed further to the right i.e. to continue to improve the effectiveness of the organisation.

**Note on the chart:**

Please note that the width of the zones (both for mindsets and for the transition zones) are nominal, and do not attempt to represent specific ranges of effectiveness. Likewise, the horizontal position of each transition zone is indicative rather than absolute.

**a brief characterisation of the four mindsets**

The Rightshifting Hypothesis: The prevailing mindset of an organisation comprehensively determines how effective it is, and moreover, how effective it can hope to become. The following section briefly describes each of the four mindsets of rightshifting:

*The prevailing mindset of an organisation comprehensively determines how effective it is, and moreover, how effective it can hope to become.*

**Ad-hoc**

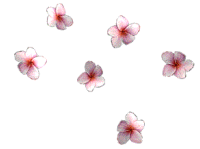
Ad-hoc organisations are characterised by a belief that there is little practical value in paying attention to the way things get done, and therefore few attempts are made to define how the work works, or to give any attention to improving the way regular tasks are done, over time. The Ad-hoc mindset says that if there’s work to be done, just get on and do it – don’t think about how it’s to be done, or how it may have been done last time.

**Analytic**

Analytic organisations exemplify, to a large extent, the principles of Scientific Management a.k.a. Taylorism – as described by Frederick Winslow Taylor in the early twentieth century. Typical characteristics of Analytical organisation include a Theory-X posture toward staff, a mechanistic view of organisational structure, for example, functional silos, local optimisation and a management focus on e.g. costs and ‘efficiencies’. Middle-managers are seen as owners of the way the work works, channelling executive intent, allocating work and reporting on progress, within a command-and-control style regime. The Analytic mindset recognises that the way work is done has some bearing on costs and the quality of the results. I have taken the term from the work of Ackoff. Some folks, including Tom Burns, have used the synonym “Mechanistic”.

**Synergistic**

Sometimes also referred-to as “Holistic”. Synergistic organisations exemplify, to some extent, the principles of the Lean movement. Typical



characteristics include a Theory-Y orientation (respect for people), an organic, emergent, complex-adaptive-system view of organisational structure, and an organisation-wide focus on learning, flow of value, and effectiveness. Middle-managers are respected for their experience and domain knowledge, coaching the workforce in e.g. building self-organising teams, and systemic improvement efforts. The Synergistic mindset realises that individual tasks within a organisation are co-dependent on each other, and only have relevance in getting some larger end-to-end purpose accomplished.

### **Chaordic**

The Chaordic mindset believes that being too organised, structured, ordered and regimented often means being too slow to respond effectively to new opportunities and threats. Like a modern Jet fighter, too unstable aerodynamically to fly without the aid of its on-board computers, or sailing a yacht, where maximum speed is to be found in sailing as close to the wind as possible without collapsing the sails, a chaordic organisation will attempt to operate balanced at the knife-edge of maximum effectiveness, on the optimal cusp between orderly working and chaotic collapse.

### **“dreyfus for the organisation”**

The **Dreyfus Model of Skills Development** postulates that when individuals acquire a skill through external instruction, they normally pass through e.g. six stages. This model, first proposed by [Stuart Dreyfus](#) and [Hubert Dreyfus](#) in 1980<sup>[1]</sup> proposes that the six stages of skill acquisition are: Novice, Advanced Beginner, Competent, Proficient, Expert and Proficient Expert.

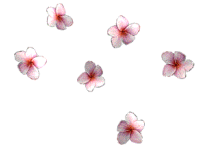
*The Marshall model is like a “Dreyfus Model” for technology organisations.*

### **the marshall model**

Drawing on the fields of organisational psychology and business change, the **Marshall Model of Organisational Evolution** is a model of how organisations progress through various mindsets, a.k.a. world-views, and how each mindset contributes to and constrains the organisation’s level of capability and effectiveness. Bob Marshall proposed the model in 2009 as a contribution to the ongoing discussions of the UK Rightshifting Network group on LinkedIn, and has been actively evolving it since then.

### **the seven stages of the marshall model**

The model postulates that as organisations become more effective (at e.g. attaining their business goals, or even pursuing their purpose), they generally pass through seven stages. These seven stages are, in order from left to right (see earlier chart: The Four Stages of Rightshifting): Ad-hoc, Novice Analytical, Competent Analytical, Early Synergistic, Mature Synergistic, Early Chaordic and Proficient Chaordic.



In the Ad-hoc organisation, typically, chaos reigns. In the Novice Analytical organisation people follow rules that are context-free, and feel no responsibility for anything other than following those rules. Competence (effectiveness) develops when the number of such rules becomes excessive, such that organising principles need to be discovered or learned. The Synergistic organisation is characterized by a realisation of the relevance of the whole (i.e. Systems Thinking). Finally, the Chaordic organisation uses collective intuition in decision making and develops its own rules to address situations as they emerge and evolve.

The seven stages of the Marshall Model of Organisational Evolution (with transition zones shown **in red**) are:

*The seven stages of the Marshall model.*

**1. Ad-hoc**

- making it up as they go along
- repeatedly solving the same or similar problems
- unconscious incompetence

**2. Novice Analytical**

- rigid adherence to rules
- little or no discretionary judgement
- potential to fall back to ad-hoc thinking
- unconscious incompetence

**3. Competent Analytical**

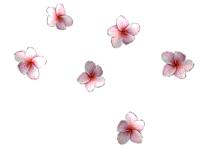
- situational perception still unwittingly focussed on local optima
- all areas of the business are treated separately and given equal encouragement to improve
- results across the organisation and through time vary widely in terms of quality and predictability
- unconscious incompetence

**4. Early Synergistic**

- coping with complexity (multiple concurrent stakeholders, needs)
- action now partially seen as part of longer-term systemic goals
- conscious, deliberate consideration of the organisation as a system
- potential for reversion to Analytical thinking
- reduction in variability of results
- conscious incompetence

**5. Mature Synergistic**

- holistic view of situations, rather than fractured and faceted
- awareness of constraints, system throughput and capabilities
- appreciation for what is truly valuable (to customers, other stakeholders)
- can distinguish between common and special causes of variation



- streamlined decision-making, often evidence-based
- uses maxims for guidance; meaning of maxims may vary according to context
- results routinely fully acceptable
- conscious competence

#### **6. Early Chaordic**

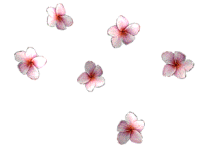
- no longer reliant on rules, guidelines, maxims
- intuitive grasp of situations, based on deep tacit understanding
- driven by vision of what is possible
- can integrate new idea, approaches, technologies with ease
- conscious competence

#### **7. Proficient Chaordic**

- knowledge of the evidence base and underlying knowledge in entirety
- can teach chaordic mindset to new starters, partners in the extended supply chain
- can use the knowledge interlinked with other knowledge
- excellence achieved with relative ease
- intuitively responds to unusual situations
- results regularly delight and surprise
- unconscious or reflective competence

Organisational progression along the axis of “effectiveness” is thus viewed as a punctuated series of transitions from an adhocracy, through a rigid adherence to rules, and on to an intuitive mode of operation that relies heavily on deep tacit understanding with similarities to [Donald Schön's](#) “knowing-in-action”.

The utility of the concept of organisational evolution lies in helping e.g. change agents better understand how to assist their organisations in “moving to the right” (a.k.a. Rightshifting; becoming ever more effective).



## references

[Dreyfus Model of Skills Acquisition](#)  
[Systems Thinking](#) - [Russell L Ackoff](#), [Peter Senge](#), [Peter Checkland](#)  
[Core Group Theory](#) - [Art Kleiner](#)  
[Viable Systems Model](#) - [Stafford Beer](#)  
[Learning Organisations](#) - [Peter Senge](#)  
[Intervention Theory](#), [Action Science](#), etc. - [Chris Argyris](#)  
[Synergetics](#) - [Buckminster Fuller](#)  
[System of Profound Knowledge](#) - [W E Deming](#)  
["Wholeness and the Implicate Order"](#) - [David Bohm](#)  
["Organisation and Social Order"](#) - [Tom Burns](#)  
[Chaordic organisations](#) - [Dee Hock](#)



## about the author

My name's Bob Marshall and I've been a specialist in the transformation of organisational performance – particularly in the software development and business technology arenas – for the past twenty years or more.

I became a Rightshifter in the first place because of the egregious waste of time, money, effort and – above all – human potential that I have seen time and again in organisations trying to develop software-intensive systems, products and services.

So many people have such a poor time at work, frustrated and unfulfilled every day, in the majority of left-shifted organisations out there.

Bob Marshall is CEO and Chief Coach at Falling Blossoms ([www.fallingblossoms.com](http://www.fallingblossoms.com)), creator of both the Javelin™ and FlowChain™ product development methods, and a leading practitioner in the field of *Rightshifting* organisational effectiveness.

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