



Illustration by Daniel Torres

FAST PACK 1999

For the second year in a row, we invited some of the smartest people we know to consider four of the toughest questions around. FAST COMPANY celebrates its third anniversary with the ultimate business round table.

THE PLACE

Sundance, Utah
THE EVENT The FAST COMPANY Advance, a celebration of FAST COMPANY's third anniversary

THE GATHERING A round table of 45 of the best brains in the new world of work—a two-day conversation among change agents from some of the world's biggest and best-known companies; leaders from young, fast-growing companies; business thinkers and educators from the United States and South America; activists from the world of politics and public policy; economists and anthropologists, strategists and physicians

THE RULES No canned speeches. No overhead slides. And check your ego at the door.

THE TOPICS Four themes that cut across the world of work: What does it mean to be a brand today? How do you create a successful startup—or restart an old company? What do companies owe to their countries? And what are some of the abiding human issues that underlie the new world of work?

THE RECORD We taped the entire two-day conversation. Here we present an edited selection of comments made by 14 of the participants—provocative insights and useful practices drawn from the table talk at Sundance. If you'd like to keep the conversation going, add your comments to the Fast Pack round table on the FAST COMPANY Web site (www.fastcompany.com/fc/advance).

The Really Big Picture

[KAREN STEPHENSON] As an anthropologist, I hang out not only in corporate jungles, but also in real jungles. About 20 years ago, I found myself in a situation that taught me a lot about the laws of human interaction. I was in Guatemala, cutting my way into the rain forest with four other people. We were in a jeep on back roads, living off the land, when we got held up by a gang of renegade soldiers. There were seven of them and they told us to get out of the jeep and line up. I got a machine gun shoved in my ribs. I instantly knew that we were in the kind of situation that you read about: People disappear and are never heard from again, then years later, someone stumbles over some bones.

As the soldiers started taking our stuff out of the jeep, one of the people in our group, a man named Fred, began talking to the leader in a casual way. And when the soldiers had finished removing our things, Fred actually began putting them all back. He was very subtle about it: He kept talking to the leader, telling jokes, asking for directions—until he'd put everything back. And then there was a moment that I'll never forget. It was the moment of life or death, and everybody knew it: Either the leader was going to let us go, or he was going to kill us. At that moment, he kind of gave a shrug, took a few small items from us and a couple of our machetes, and then sent us on our way.

I understood then that, while I spoke the language of that country, I didn't speak the culture. Fred spoke the culture. He knew how to use the culture to turn the situation around. Years later, when I thought back to that moment in Guatemala, it occurred to me that there are underlying patterns of interaction between humans. I have degrees in chemistry and in physics; and in those sciences we know that there are underlying patterns in how atoms and molecules behave. As I've studied organizations, I've come to conclude that when you see people networking, schmoozing, or fighting, you're seeing underlying patterns that are just as deeply embedded in human principles as is anything in physics or in chemistry. Yet these patterns don't show up in the organizational charts that people draw at work—they're encoded in the relationships of trust that allow us to work together.

For most companies, the problem is that these relationships are invisible—and the knowledge embedded in them is also invisible. As such, it can't be tapped. In most big companies, innovation is accidentally discovered, and just as often, innovation is accidentally lost. There are no mechanisms to reveal the relationships of trust. To compete today, you have to be innovating continuously, which means that you have to be able to see the relationships of trust inside the organization.

Once you can visualize tacit knowledge, you can do something with it. You find repeating patterns of interaction—hot spots—that define networks of trust and reciprocity. Once you find those hot spots, you know where to find people who are innovating. The next question is, How do you scale trust? Here's the big challenge: Technology without people won't work. People without technology won't scale. Particularly in virtual networks, where you are working with people you've never met, you have to find a way to create trust and to scale it across the network.

Another question is, How do we create networks of trust that allow for diversity? As an anthropologist, I've learned that, primordially, trust is formed around the campfire. Trust is all about homogeneity: You look like me, you dress like me, you talk like me—I can trust you. But today, if I'm going to learn something new, I've got to trust people who are different from me—and that means diversity. Not diversity for reasons of political correctness, but for reasons of innovation. The challenge today is to build networks of diversity that fuel innovation, even when our primordial instincts tell us otherwise.

[KAREN STEPHENSON] It may seem simplistic, but I sort people into three categories: the strong, the meek, and the weak. The weak will mimic the strong, because they're good at managing upward. When you're managing an organization, that mimicry can make it hard to distinguish between the strong and the weak. But the way to tell the difference is to look at whom each serves. The strong serve the meek. The meek serve the institution—they're the people who willingly do the work. And the weak serve only themselves. The meek fear the weak, because the weak are bullies. The strong have compassion for the weak and either try to get them on board or, if that fails, get them out of the organization. And the strong know that they need to serve the meek, because the meek truly run organizations—and serving them communicates trust.

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The Round Table