Turning the Pyramid Upside Down

By Dr. Marilyn Jacobson

Insights by Bill Fox

Meeting the future will soon make what was done yesterday ancient history.

— Dr. Marilyn Jacobson (1936–2020)

Dr. Marilyn Jacobson (1936-2020)

Marilyn Jacobson and I met in 2013 after a publicist asked me to write a review of her new book, Turning the Pyramid Upside Down.

I was so captivated by her book that I read through it in one sitting and was on the phone the next day to arrange an interview.

Sadly, Marilyn passed away on March 28, 2020. I was moved to go back and read her book and interview. I rediscovered a bold and brilliant leader who has great wisdom to share with us for today's world.
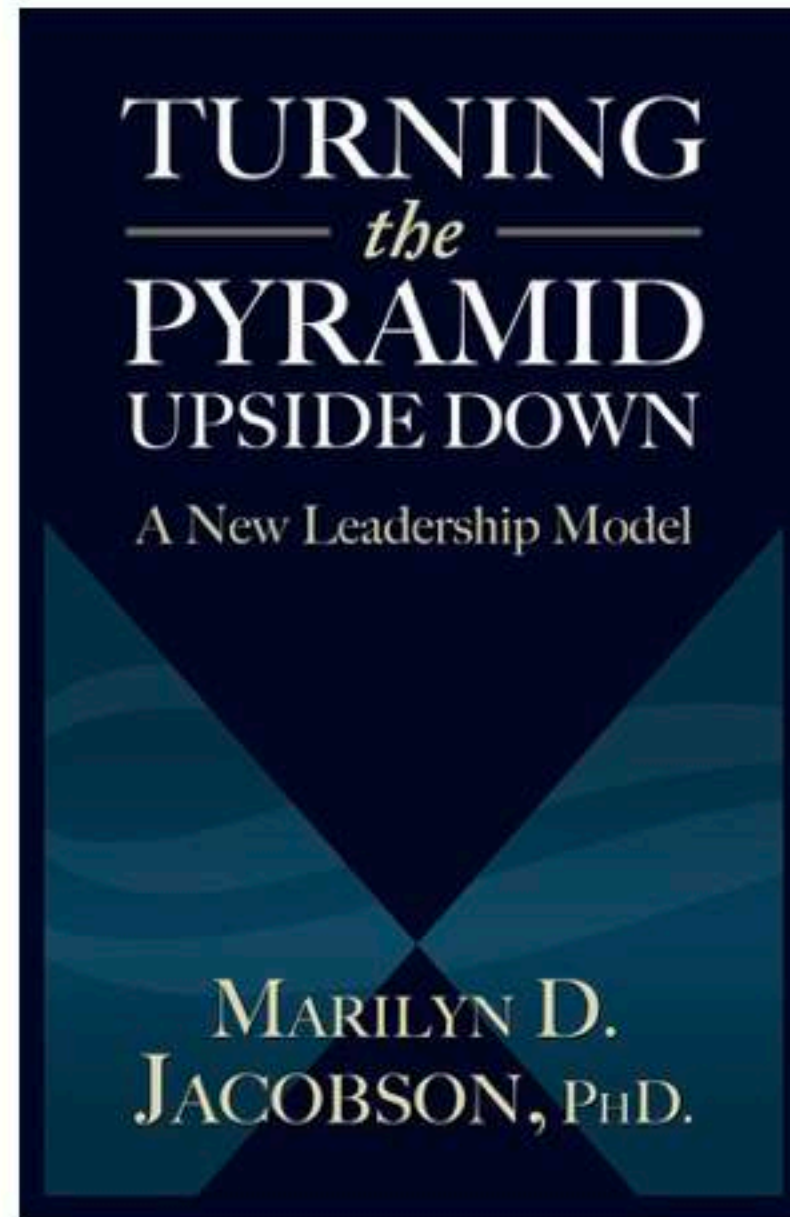
What follows are the 13 most important ideas I captured from reading her book in 2013.

May you find inspiration, boldness, and courage to lead from the life and words of this amazing woman.

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A tribute to Dr. Marilyn Jacobson

TURNING
the
PYRAMID
UPSIDE DOWN

A New Leadership Model

MARILYN D.
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13 FORWARD-THINKING INSIGHTS

1. For a new reality in a new century, a different kind of leadership is required.

2. The magnitude of leadership change needed defies any possibility that it be incremental.

3. What is the most useful definition of leadership?

4. Self-leaders look like thought leaders, always learning and open to opportunities.

5. I never had so much power until I started giving it away.

6. The first and most significant and necessary step is to engage people.

7. Engage people in the pursuit of the organization's strategic goals.

8. Since the watchword for the future is newness, altering context and environment is the priority.

9. How to get greater initiative, deeper expertise, better decisions, and increased flexibility.

10. Assess power in a new way.

11. Give authentic empowerment.

12. How to add synchronicity into the organization's vocabulary.

13. Best practices are a past-oriented mindset. Look forward.

Leaders must partner and collaborate with their employees.

For a new reality in a new century, a different kind of leadership is required.

Leaders must partner and collaborate with their employees to respond to escalating complexities and inspire new thinking and discovery of fresh ideas. The continuous pressure for innovation and new technologies means involving others at all levels within the organization. Employees cannot simply be instruments to achieve leaders' goals; they must be allowed and even encouraged to participate in the decision-making and be fully engaged in the achievement of organizational goals.

A tribute to Dr. Marilyn Jacobson

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The idea of turning the pyramid upside down may seem a bit radical because to be competitive in the new global economy, the magnitude of leadership change necessary defies any possibility that it be incremental. Escalating complexity due to such factors as technology and globalization, along with the continuing need to make the numbers while becoming ever more innovative, requires a kind of organization capable of extraordinarily high levels of purpose, commitment, and synchronicity.

Leadership is simply a process of influence.

FORWARD-THINKING INSIGHT #3

What is the most useful definition of leadership?

There are a seemingly endless number of definitions and descriptions of leadership— largely as a result of the vast number of people who have researched and written on the subject (and their equally vast and differing viewpoints). All of these descriptions have some merit. However, in focusing on the idea of self-leadership, perhaps the most useful definition of leadership is simply a process of influence.

Self–leaders require data and intelligence.

FORWARD-THINKING INSIGHT #4

Self–leaders look like thought leaders, always learning and open to opportunities.

Self–leaders require feeding, not from 24–hour kitchens provided by some organizations to keep people sequestered, but from data and intelligence regarding the industry, the environment, and what competitors are doing. They seek access to material and people who will share information and industry know–how. They are beginning to look like thought leaders, always learning and open to opportunities to contribute at a higher level.

I never had so much power until I started giving it away.

FORWARD-THINKING INSIGHT #5

I never had so much power until I started giving it away.

Giving up power by empowering others is a hurdle for some who equate leadership with "being on top." Advancement to the C-Suite connotes both title and role. While turning the pyramid upside down is a major paradigm change, one current leader said, "I never had so much power until I started giving it away."
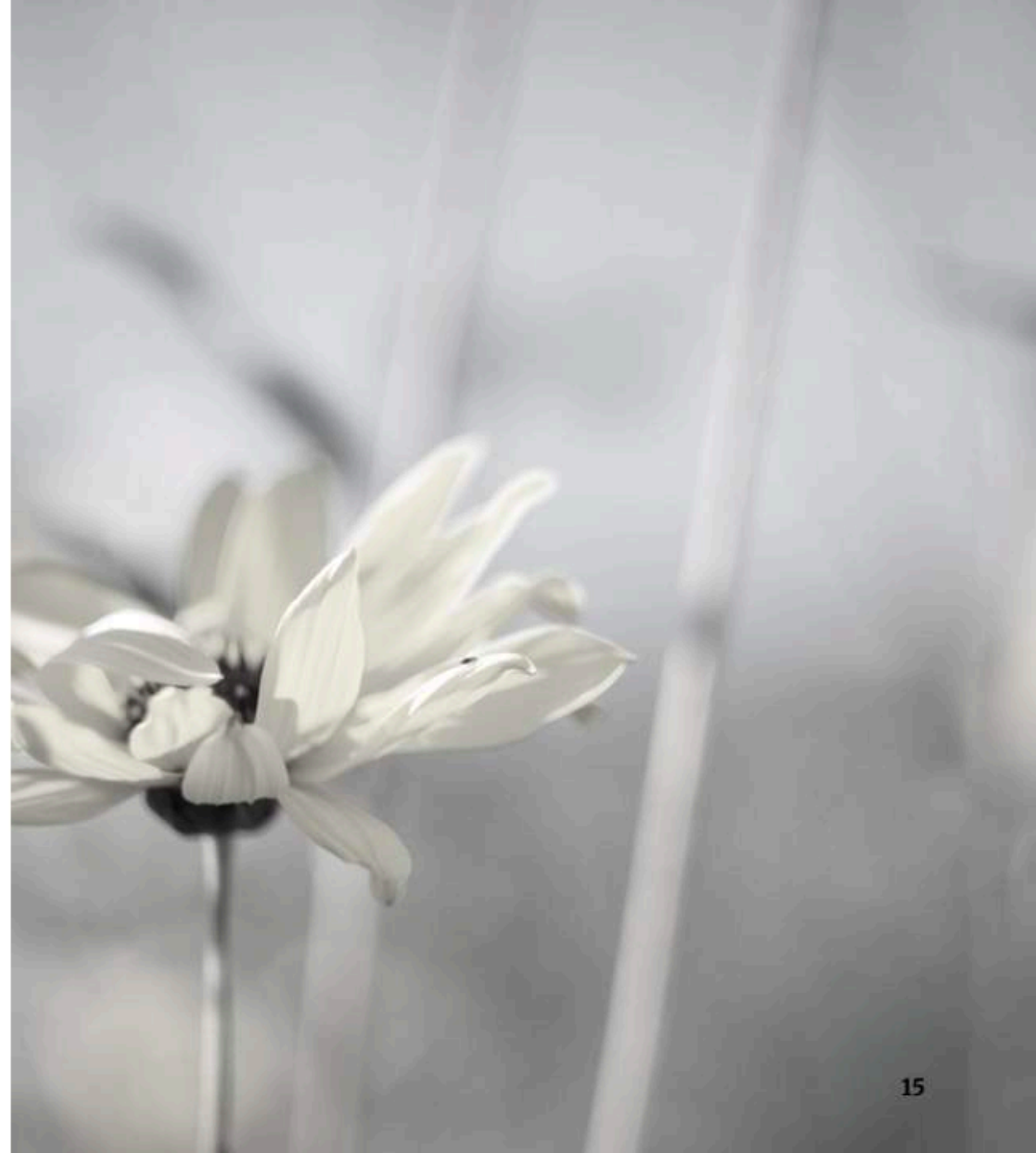
People — the only sustainable competitive advantage.

The first and most significant and necessary step is to engage people.

The stories in the book reveal the best of leadership today. Those interviewed provide the pathway to the future because they have identified the constraints in the current environment and responded effectively. As they seek to position their organizations for an unpredictable world, they will reap advantages from what they have learned, but they will encounter other serious and unanticipated hurdles. What follows is a design for assisting organizations through a transition to the future by maximizing the only sustainable competitive advantage—people.

A tribute to Dr. Marilyn Jacobson

Hierarchies alienate instead of engaging those who seek to collaborate and contribute.

FORWARD-THINKING INSIGHT #7

Engage people in the pursuit of the organization's strategic goals.

Command and control structures perpetuate the obsession to achieve immediate number-related objectives while at the same time sabotaging innovation. The constant quest for position and power in a hierarchical structure leaves the most important and knowledgeable people out of the dialogue. Furthermore, it alienates instead of engaging those who seek to collaborate and contribute.

Creativity increases as an organization gets flatter.

Since the watchword for the future is newness, altering context and environment is the priority.

Structure influences how organizations create cultures and related workspace designs that either foster or inhibit collaboration and the exchange of ideas. Tackling structure and culture is the first consideration for an organization that seeks to step up to the demands of global competition, mind-boggling change, and the perpetual need for innovation. While turning the pyramid upside down may appear dramatic, drastic, and difficult, the evidence is strong that creativity increases as an organization gets flatter. The need to take risks and find optimal, sometimes unconventional, solutions is enhanced.
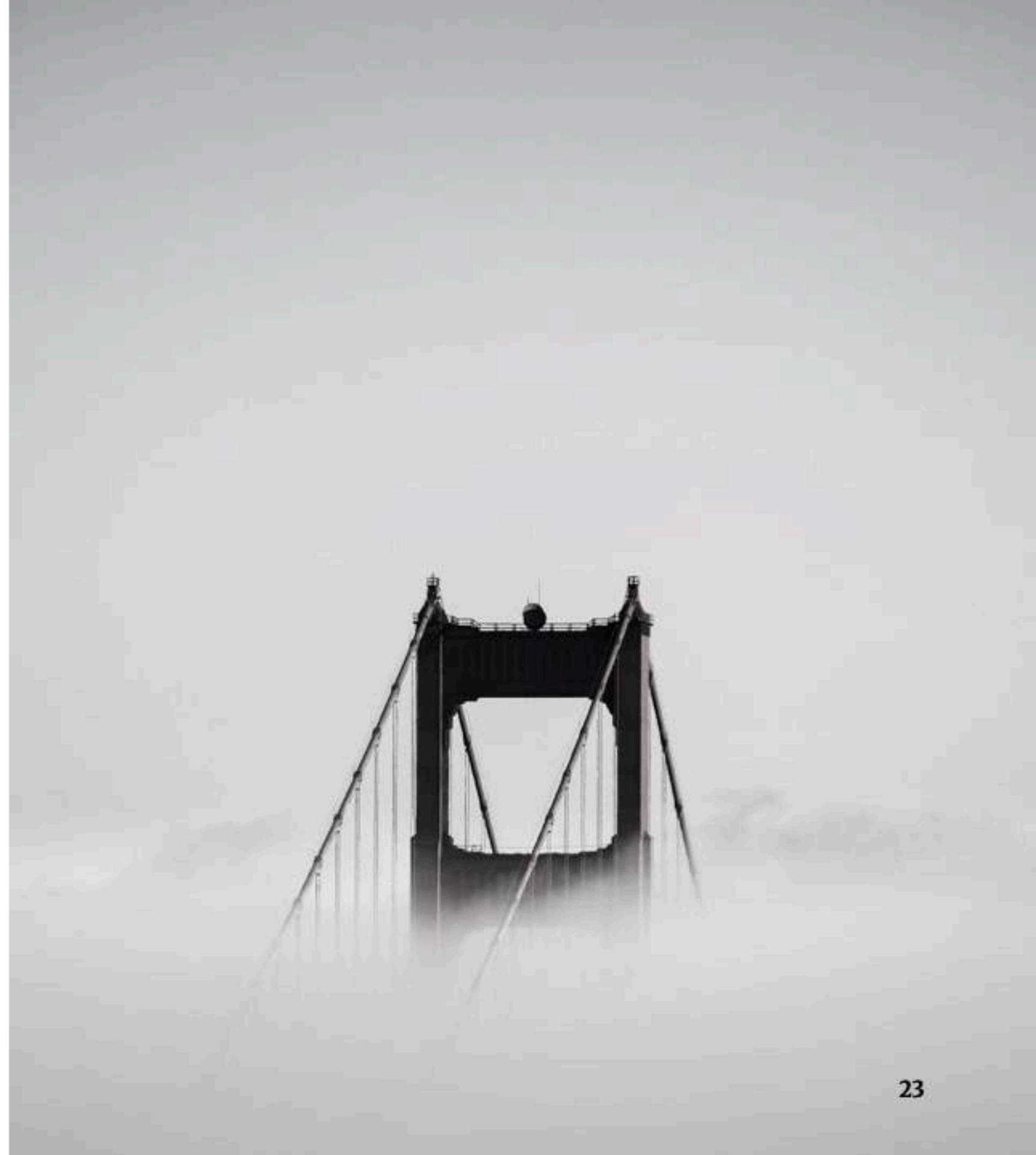
When you dismantle the pyramid, you drain much of the poison out of an organization.

How to get greater initiative, deeper expertise, better decisions, and increased flexibility.

Gary Hamel, a prominent business author, says that "when you dismantle the pyramid, you drain much of the poison out of an organization."

Partnering, building relationships, finding synergies, inspiring innovation, creativity, and bold thinking.

FORWARD-THINKING INSIGHT #10

Assess power in a new way.

Not as position power, not authority over others, not by determining the mission/vision and setting objectives for others, but instead partnering, building relationships, finding synergies, inspiring innovation, creativity, and bold thinking.

A tribute to Dr. Marilyn Jacobson

Simply treating employees well isn't empowering them.

FORWARD-THINKING INSIGHT #11

Give authentic empowerment.

Simply treating employees well isn't empowering them. The danger of highly centralized, hierarchical organizations treating their employees well is motivational but not necessarily empowering to the employees individually. Executives' words imply "you're empowered," while their actions say you're empowered as long as you get approval first.

Synchronicity occurs with high levels of engagement and alignment across the organization.

How to add synchronicity into the organization's vocabulary.

It is the result of high levels of engagement and alignment across the organization, and it will make a difference.

Meeting the future will soon make what was done yesterday ancient history.

Best practices are a past-oriented mindset. Look forward.

Move from a past-oriented mindset that refers to best practices: When agility is a primary asset, looking forward is the only correct direction. Meeting the future will soon make what was done yesterday ancient history.

A tribute to Dr. Marilyn Jacobson

"I say it has to be done rapidly, and it has to be bold!"

— Marilyn Jacobson in an interview with Bill Fox, 2013

About Bill Fox

Bill Fox is reimagining minds, leadership, and workplaces from the inside out to grow forward-thinking leaders and workplaces of the future — today. He is the author of *The Future of the Workplace* and the upcoming book *LeaderONE*.

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