

Subversive Creativity in an Aspirational Organization: How Burning Man Actualizes Behaving in a Loving Way

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The Burning Man Project organization and the execution of the Burning Man event are presented as exemplars illustrating the actualization of behaving in a loving way. Burning Man is characterized as an aspirational organization that has created a set of 10 Burning Man Principles that reflect the values of the community of Burning Man as well serving as a guide to organizational decision-making. The 10 Principles are examined from the perspective of behaving in a loving way. The paper concludes with theoretical framework illustrations and qualitative data examples from Burning Man participants and events.

Keywords: aspirational organization, subversive creativity, burning man

INTRODUCTION

I: What if you gave a party and no one came? You would have to conclude that perhaps your party theme did not appeal to people or it did not work. In addition, your organization that “threw the party” would fail.

II: In contrast, what if you gave a party, and the party theme was a version of “behaving in a loving way”, and then this happened?

- 1) People came to your first party and continue to come for 35 years, with no end date in sight.
- 2) Your party has an annual attendance of 75,000 people, with that number being capped at 75,000 by the federal government in the form of the Bureau of Land Management (because the event is held on public lands and is serviced by a single two-lane road). In addition, there are at least 75,000 to 150,000 more people who want to come every year, but cannot obtain a ticket.
- 3) Your party spawns and maintains an international cultural movement that spans 100+ countries and 7 continents.
- 4) Your party is seen as one of the Top Ten “Bucket List” targets in the world ... and
- 5) Your party is famous for showing how people can form a successful community based on expressed values and purpose that becomes an enactment of “*people behaving in a loving way*”.

This is the Burning Man story.

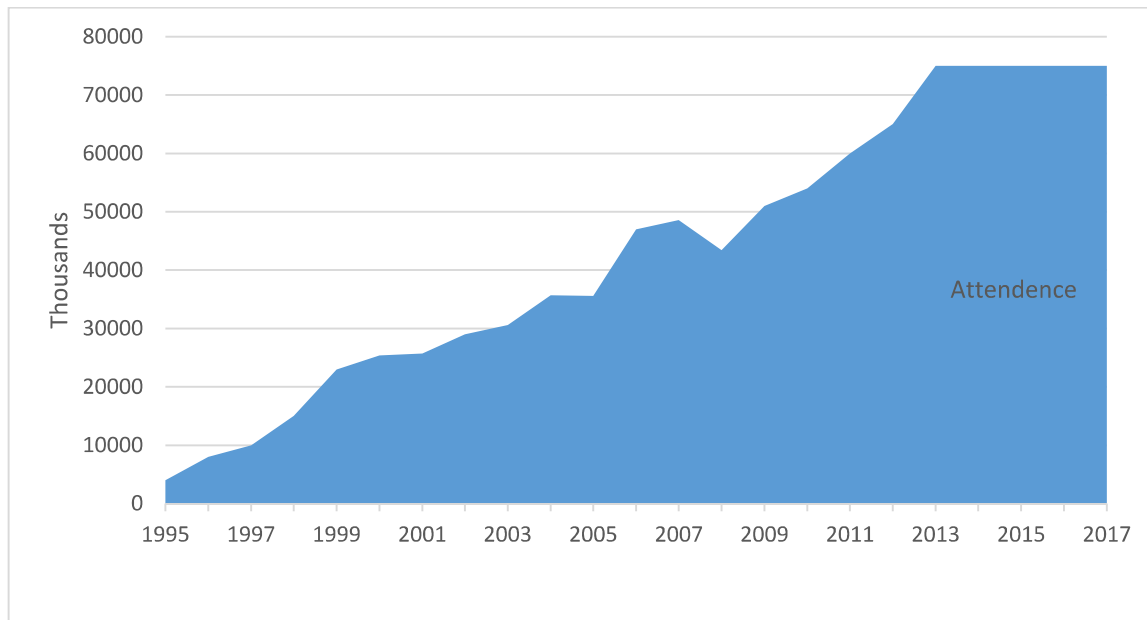
The authors feel that Burning Man’s success can be viewed as a form of subversive creativity, creating an annual event that actualizes behaving in a loving way. Most organizations start with resources such as capital and people, and then hope to attain success by adding additional capital and additional people over time. Success in this arena is measured quantitatively.

In contrast, Burning Man started with a vision of a way in which humans could interact with one another in a loving way. The first events were on a beach in San Francisco, and then the event was moved to the Black Rock Desert 110 miles north of Reno, Nevada. The early years of Burning Man were about preservation of the values of Burning Man, and success was measured qualitatively as per event participants successfully aligning with those values. Organizational growth and quantitative success measures were of a secondary focus.

The view of the founders was that if the event survived, it would be because the values espoused by Burning Man would survive. An examination of these values follows in this paper. An example of this was the adoption, from the very beginning, that the event was to be characterized by de-commodification. No sponsors were allowed, no t-shirts were sold, no beer vending, and even no signage. If the event was to survive, it would be because the Burning Man values, such as de-commodification, survived. Had the values failed to take root, then the event would have ended and the founders would have moved on to other pursuits.

Despite the fact there was no event advertising, no commercial ties and no marketing program, Burning Man has not only survived, it has flourished (see Figure 1 illustrating Burning Man population growth).

**FIGURE 1
BURNING MAN ATTENDANCE**



The authors view this outcome as an application of subversive creativity as a strategy of organizational success. Like the theme of the baseball movie *Field of Dreams*, the strategy was --- “build it and they will come”.

In the early days Burning Man was described as “the internet come to life” (Sterling, 1996) and “Disneyland turned inside out” (Doherty, 2004). In our view, Burning Man survived and continues to survive because: 1) it is an aspirational organization, 2) that aspiration centers on a set of values (the 10 Principles of Burning Man), 3) those 10 values embody and actualize the general theme of behaving in a

loving way, and 4) that Burning Man continues to thrive 35 years later because it has never abandoned its organization values and the Burning Man culture that it has created. This paper will tell this Burning Man story from the perspective of behaving in a loving way, citing organizational components and qualitative data.

METHODS

Our methods are a combination of discourse and narrative analysis of data collected via auto-ethnographic participant observation and reflection. We take an ethno-narrative approach (Hansen, 2006; Hockett, 2005), which entails ethnographic and narrative methods that take on a particular sensitivity to the live ‘context of construction’ from which the discourse and narrative data emerged. Since the context may not be explicitly evident, we rely on ethnographically-informed tacit understanding (Polanyi, 1967) of the context from which the text comes in presenting the meaning of what the discourse presented ‘here’ means ‘back there’ in the live setting where it is produced and enacted.

The lead author was on the organizing and event management team for the Burning Man festival (the Burning Man Senior Staff) for 18 years. He served in several capacities in that time, including helping to build the ‘Black Rock Rangers’ the Burning Man’s internal safety and security service. He served in the role of Law Enforcement and Agency Liaison (LEAL) as the liaison between the Burning Man festival and several local and federal authorities, including the Bureau of Land Management administration, Bureau of Land Management law enforcement, Nevada State and local law enforcement agencies, the Nevada Highway Patrol, and health and safety boards. He worked with these groups to assist in getting the proper permits to hold the event as well as building quality relationships that facilitate event management and event survival.

The two authors have a combined 30 years of Burning Man direct experience. Their participation in the event is the basis of the auto-ethnography methodology utilized in this paper. The authors have worked closely with and interviewed Larry Harvey, the founder of the event, as well as all of the members of the Burning Man Founders group.

BURNING MAN IS AN ASPIRATIONAL ORGANIZATION

Burning Man is an imperfect organization, just as all of us are imperfect as individuals. Yet, all of us, hopefully, have found some degree of unconditional love in our lives. This happens when we are embraced as complete beings (for an example of how to actualize this concept, see the Burning Man Principle of Radical Inclusion), with all of our positive attributes and human flaws fully intact. Enveloped in a shroud of overall acceptance, we then have the opportunity to be our true selves striving to be the best functioning human beings we can be --- despite the realities of our imperfections. William Shakespeare speaks on the attributes of unconditional love in Sonnet 116:

“Love is not love which alters when it alteration finds. Or bends with the remover to remove. Oh no! It is an ever-fixed mark that looks on tempests and is never shaken.”

Individuals who strive in this fashion to express unconditional love are often said to have character; character accompanied by determination yields labels like integrity and emotional resilience. However, organizations are too complex, too dynamic, have too many differing internal constituencies, and are immersed in too many environmentally derived phenomena to be said as having a characteristic with the definitional parameters of individual character. Nonetheless, organizations can attempt to show a form of character by being aspirational, striving to be their best, despite their flaws and their inherent incapacity to meet all of the needs of their many publics and target audiences, both internal and external to the organization. Burning Man is such an aspirational organization.

Burning Man’s aspirational drive manifests in many ways, but all of those ways reflect the concept expressed by the Western Academy of Management --- “behaving in a loving way”. The creation and

then the implementation intentions surrounding the 10 Principles of Burning Man is probably the best overall example of those aspirational traits. The 10 Principles of Burning Man, with “behaving in a loving way” examples attached to each, will be described in the next section of this paper.

While an organizational and culturally-based values framework, such as the one adopted and implemented by Burning Man, can set an aspirational standard worth emulating, it should be kept in mind that organizations are complex entities that can operate at different levels and in different realms simultaneously. For example, Belmi and Pfeffer (2015) warn that organizational contexts can overtake and even weaken the norm of reciprocity. While the authors believe that loving behavior exchanges are processed at the individual level, Belmi and Pfeffer (2015, p.36) warn, “The norm of reciprocity may be weaker in organizational contexts in part because such settings elicit more contextual rather than personal attributions and more calculative and future-oriented decision frames”. The point here is that an organizationally generated loving behavior exchange system, such as Burning Man’s 10 Principles, has to be managed and nurtured just like any other organizational dynamic program. While it is true that loving behavior exchanges are examples of purposeful behavior, the exchanges are not necessarily automatic.

BURNING MAN AND THE 10 CULTURAL PRINCIPLES OF BURNING MAN

The Burning Man event has become world famous. The event has a history spanning over 35 years, and has grown to a significant size. Over 75,000 Burners (what members of the Burning Man community call themselves) participated in the 2019 event (the 2020 event has been moved to 2021). The BurningMan.org website (2019) defines the noun Burner as “A citizen of the worldview that is Burning Man. May be encountered anywhere.” This paper describes behaving in a loving way exchanges as aspects of that worldview, as organizing principles of the culture of the Burning Man community, and as organizational practices and behavioral guidelines in the Burning Man organization.

The event occurs in a temporary city called Black Rock City, a city built from scratch every year in the Black Rock Desert in Northern Nevada. Burning Man includes an amazing number of visually spectacular sights, and generates spontaneous energy and transformative experiences like no other place or event in the world. Given the variety and uniqueness of the behaviors generated in the event site in the Black Rock Desert, the event could be seen to be chaotic to the casual observer. A naïve view might hold that the Burning Man organizing entity, now called the Burning Man Project, is also chaotic and perhaps even poorly organized. However, nothing could be further from the truth, for the Burning Man Project is actually one of the more purposeful organizations one could hope to encounter.

Purposeful, in a Burning Man sense, is a combination of processes of cultural creation, managerial effectiveness in an extremely turbulent environment, and, finally, cultural maintenance combined with ongoing threats to organizational survival. The topic specifically addressed in this paper is the manner in which Burning Man has taken the general concept of behaving in a loving way, and crafted the expression of those loving behavioral exchanges into a cultural phenomenon based in the organization that spawned it.

The Burning Man Project, steered by 10 unique Guiding Principles (see below) distilled from the Burning Man culture, produces aspects of community and shared experience that yield the requisite energy for transformation of self, all the while immersed in a unique cultural environment.

The culture of Burning Man has been institutionalized, as much as anything could ever be institutionalized at Burning Man, by the adoption of 10 culturally derived and behaviorally guiding Principles. In the sections below, the wording of each Principle from the Burning Man website, will be in regular type. The authors then add, in italics, under each Principle, how that Principle manifests “behaving in a loving way”. The 10 Principles are:

- **Radical Inclusion:** Anyone may be a part of Burning Man. We welcome and respect the stranger. No prerequisites exist for participation in our community. *Radical Inclusion reflects an unconditional love of the stranger. Radical Inclusion is actualized when an individual becomes a Burner.*

- **Gift-giving:** Burning Man is devoted to acts of gift giving. The value of a gift is unconditional. Gifting does not contemplate a return or an exchange for something of equal value. *Gift-giving with an expectation of receiving something in return can range from bartering to bargaining to contractual agreements. Burners transact not with conditional gift-giving (which really is not gift-giving), but with unconditional behavior in a loving way.*
- **Decommodification:** In order to preserve the spirit of gift-giving, our community seeks to create social environments that are unmediated by commercial sponsorships, transactions, or advertising. We stand ready to protect our culture from such exploitation. We resist the substitution of consumption for participatory experience. *Since behaving in a loving way is the “coin of the realm” at Burning Man, exchanges between Burners are not characterized or measured in commodification terms.*
- **Radical Self-reliance:** Burning Man encourages the individual to discover, exercise and rely on his or her inner resources. *One of the gifts that can be bestowed in a loving way is the gift of independence coupled with mutually beneficial interdependencies. Managerial hierarchies are of secondary importance at Burning Man, and transactions between people (using Transactional Analysis terminology) are Adult-to-Adult exchanges.*
- **Radical Self-expression:** Radical self-expression arises from the unique gifts of the individual. No one other than the individual or a collaborating group can determine its content. It is offered as a gift to others. In this spirit, the giver should respect the rights and liberties of the recipient. *Burning Man creates an unparalleled environment in terms of producing transformative experiences. However, each individual’s transformative experience is that person’s individual affair, and there are no organizational dictates or any “event designer” derived parameters put on a Burner’s experiences. The lead author once asked Burning Man founder Larry Harvey the following question, “Okay, so tell me. What is the meaning of burning the Man?” His reply was, “Burning the Man? Well it means everything. And it means nothing. The meaning that exists, to the extent it exists, is found inside you.”*
- **Communal Effort:** Our community values creative cooperation and collaboration. We strive to produce, promote and protect social networks, public spaces, works of art, and methods of communication that support such interaction. *The lead author was once giving an interview at the event to a reporter from a European newspaper. His question to me, which I found challenging to answer in the moment, was this, “Pick one word, one word only, that best describes Burning Man”. I think he was expecting “fire” or “desert” or, interviewing the event’s law enforcement liaison, “chaos”. I thought for a minute, and then offered my answer as “community”. If you can grasp the value, power, and loving way inherent in a true community of kindred spirits, then you can also grasp the essence of Burning Man.*
- **Civic Responsibility:** We value civil society. Community members who organize events should assume responsibility for public welfare and endeavor to communicate civic responsibilities to participants. They must also assume responsibility for conducting events in accordance with local, state and federal laws. *Behaving in a loving way involves more than just person-to-person exchanges. It also involves public welfare, community safety and well-being, and complying with the laws of the land.*
- **Leaving No Trace:** Our community respects the environment. We are committed to leaving no physical trace of our activities wherever we gather. We clean up after ourselves and endeavor, whenever possible, to leave such places in a better state than when we found them. *Behaving in a loving way also includes love for and protection of the environment. For an example of this, see the Leave No Trace example that follows.*
- **Participation:** Our community is committed to a radically participatory ethic. We believe that transformative change, whether in the individual or in society, can occur only through the medium of deeply personal participation. We achieve being through doing. Everyone is invited to work. Everyone is invited to play. We make the world real through actions that

open the heart. *“We make the world real through actions that open the heart”*. *Is there a better way to describe how one goes about behaving in a loving way?*

- **Immediacy:** Immediate experience is, in many ways, the most important touchstone of value in our culture. We seek to overcome barriers that stand between us and a recognition of our inner selves, the reality of those around us, participation in society, and contact with a natural world exceeding human powers. No idea can substitute for this experience. *What sets Burning Man apart? Immediacy of experience, in a realm of creative Radical Self-expression, sits on a foundation of Radical Inclusion.* ← Note: from this point forward, when one of the 10 principles is referenced in this paper **the reference will be in bold type.**

Larry Harvey, the founder of Burning Man, did not compose his model for an experiment in temporary society as an essay, and then attempt to publish that essay. Rather, Mr. Harvey, serving as a visionary, was acting as a sounding board and a source of clarification, and thus gave his synthesis of the 10 Principles that reflect the Burning Man ethos and culture to the Burning Man community. They, in turn, by the thousands, turned and continue to turn those ideas into a living entity, actualized by a vibrant and intensely interactive community of like minds and like spirits; thus forging the foundation of a new cultural entity. That cultural entity, now known simply as Burning Man, has not only transformed the annual trek to the Black Rock Desert into a “must see” event but also into a worldwide movement:

“We (Burning Man) are no longer staging an event; we’re coordinating a global community” (Harvey, 2000)

In the 2006 summer edition of the Burning Man Newsletter entitled *All the News that’s Fit to Burn*, Larry Harvey (2006) addresses the continuing evolution of Burning Man’s cultural outreach:

“Every year thousands of people return from the desert and ask themselves how they might take what they have learned from Burning Man and apply it to the realm of daily life. Increasingly, they are surrounded by communities of other Burners—people like themselves, who are accustomed to cooperating and collaborating with one another, not merely competing. These are folks who know that there are certain values that depend on one’s immediate experience—essential spiritual values—that should never be commodified.”

If the 10 Principles are examined in total and in combination, as they function to produce the unique Burning Man experience, an inescapable conclusion emerges. Burning Man is not a “drop in”, casual experience. It is an intense, immersive experience that has the power to transform those who participate. This point brings into focus the reason to assess Burning Man as a lens through which to examine concepts such as behaving in a loving way. Living the Burning Man culture as a Burner and actualizing the Burning Man ethos, whether in a dust storm on the desert or in a cubicle in an office in San Francisco, boils down to experiencing what Weick (2007) calls “moments that matter”. Behaving in a loving way is one of those moments that matter.

The Burning Man principle of **Leave No Trace** will now be used as an example of how the aspirations of the Burning Man organization manifest in the community of Burning Man and the infrastructure of Black Rock City as part of a positive feedback loop of behaving in a loving way. The concepts of **Communal Effort**, **Radical Self-reliance** and **Participation** also come into focus in this example.

THE LEAVE NO TRACE EXAMPLE

Yes, when 75,000 plus people gather in one enclosed location in the barren desert for one week, trash happens. However, the citizens of Black Rock City do not leave a wake of trash and debris in their wake as they live in and then eventually pass through the Black Rock Desert. It should be noted that the

Burning Man organization employs a Matter Out Of Place (MOOP) system to track the areas where messes occur. Examples of MOOP Maps from several years of the Burning Man event can be found on the website burningman.org (See Figure 2).

FIGURE 2
THE 2010 MOOP MAP



This system has produced a data intensive study over the years that indicates the following groups tend to be a primary source of trash creation: 1) Burning Man “newbies” (first time attendees), 2) those who have not yet understood and embraced the 10 Principles, 3) those who have yet become part of the Burning Man community, and 4) those who have not yet adopted and internally integrated the alternative identity of Burner as part of their collection of operative individual identities.

Given this potential problem, what do Burners, the citizens of Black Rock City, do about the principle of **Leave No Trace**? The answer is that they bring the character inherent in the identity of Burner to life; they do their best. It is heartwarming and reassuring to watch a Burning Man camping group or even a larger collection of people called a Burning Man village, as they leave the Burning Man event and depart for their lives outside of their week in the Black Rock Desert. They are leaving the immersive and transformational experiences of the desert playa for the Default World where they live the other 51 weeks of the year. What do they do that is so heartwarming and reassuring? They clean up after themselves.

Burning Man purposefully places no trashcans in the city and the event has no provisions for citywide garbage collection. Instead, Burning Man relies on event participants to follow the **Leave No Trace** principle. Here is what you observe as this strategy plays out. As thousands upon thousands leave Black Rock City, they make a concerted effort to clean up the area where scores and even hundreds of them have lived for a week. Their goal is to leave barren sand absent of all possible debris, as if they had never been there at all. Many camps, after cleaning up their own areas, then check out the camp areas adjacent to their camp, also cleaning up for them if necessary to make sure that the surrounding camps have left no trace as well. The MOOP maps created each year not only show the location of the MOOP problem areas, but also the name of the camp or village that created the MOOP (see Figure 2).

The authors of this paper have had a tradition that they engaged in for over a decade. It was our habit to visit the site on Sunday morning where the Burning Man figure burned so spectacularly the Saturday night before. At this location, one sees a large mound of ashes, some simmering areas of coals still burning, and around the Man burn site, the debris left by the 60,000 to 70,000 thousand who gathered and reveled there the night before. What you can also observe on Sunday morning is hundreds of Burners walking the area with trash bags picking up empty water bottles and cans; many also carry a small metal tin, as you would buy with mints or breathe fresheners. One after another, you see them bend down to the ground, pick up a cigarette butt (a Matter Out Of Place MOOP example) and then place it in the tin.

Watching so many people doing this so unselfishly unfailingly enriches our Sunday mornings at Burning Man.

This heartwarming set of behaviors is nothing less than the individualization of the **Leave No Trace** Burning Man principle as Burner individuals are acting out this particular aspirational aspect of the Burning Man organization. The authors view this behavior as an example of event **Participation** and **Radical Self-reliance** by Burning Man participants as they appreciate the Burning Man event, the thousands of Burning Man volunteers and workers who put the event together, and perhaps even honoring the Bureau of Land Management for enabling the use of the site. This is a natural act for Burners as they behave in a loving way to the environment and the event itself. The authors see these behaviors as behaving in a loving way as a form of gratitude.

NEUROSCIENCE AND GRATITUDE

If gratitude expression and reception have potential to be used an organizational resource and an act of behaving in a loving way, it is helpful to understand how this mechanism works. A primary explanation is found in the concept of the norm of reciprocity, the topic covered in the next section. However, in addition, recent brain research conducted by neuroscientists has determined that the brain reacts to gratitude (as an act of behaving in a loving way) as a trigger for certain types of brain responses, and that many of these reactions have a positive impact (Achor, 2013; *Forbes*, 2014; Korb, 2015).

Recent reporting of this phenomenon comes from the book *The Upward Spiral: Using Neuroscience to Reverse the Course of Depression* by Alex Korb (2015). Korb's work is an attempt to reverse or counter the downward spiral nature of depression. He observes that many feelings associated with negative feelings, such as feeling unappreciated or unnoticed, activate neural circuitry including the dorsomedial prefrontal cortex, the amygdala, the insula, and the nucleus accumbens. Asking "What am I grateful for?", the expression of gratitude, or the receipt of gratitude activates this same circuitry in the brain. For example, Korb (2015) states that gratitude boosts the neurotransmitter dopamine, just as does the antidepressant Wellbutrin. Gratitude also boosts the neurotransmitter serotonin just as Prozac does. The simple acts associated with expressing or receiving gratitude causes a person to focus on positive aspects of their existence; this, in turn, increases serotonin production in the anterior cingulate cortex.

The expression and receipt of gratitude and appreciation are left to the ability to execute these acts in organizations that are imperfect and by human beings who are also imperfect. In other words, gratitude-based loving behavior exchanges are rarely executed optimally in the manner of their design or intent. Rather, they work out as best as can be hoped given the complexities and challenges inherent in human exchanges. Gratitude exchanges can be handled less than optimally, and they may not produce concrete and immediate results. However, this imperfection in delivery or exchange does not really matter because just the process of attempting gratitude triggers the neurological response (Korb, 2015; Achor, 2013).

The authors offer the case of giving and receiving hugs as a parallel example. Hugs are difficult to assess in terms of their effectiveness as per their intent, and the results are difficult to measure, especially in real time. A person giving a hug may ask themselves questions like "Did I move too quickly?", "Am I holding on too long?", "Am I not holding on long enough?", "Too tight?", "Not tight enough?", etc. etc. Despite all of these questions, hugs are given and hugs are received, with all the uncertainties and imperfections in execution intact. Few would want to abandon the act of hugging because of the possibility of a less than perfect hug. Hugs work because the very act of giving a hug, or receiving a hug, triggers neurological responses. The possibly faulty execution of a hug is vastly overshadowed by the intent behind it. The authors believe that the same concept applies to acts of behaving in a loving way. It is the seeking behaviors that are valuable, not necessarily the finding.

Achor (2013) also says that the very act of practicing gratitude can train a human brain to be positive. The assertion is that practicing gratitude exchanges prompts the brain to fall into patterns scanning the world for the positive, and not the negative. A November 2014 science-based article in *Forbes* states that gratitude can improve mental health, enhance physical health, boost self-esteem, and increase a person's capacity for empathy. To the degree that these assertions by Achor and *Forbes* are true, why wouldn't this

same phenomenon be expected to work in one-on-one relationships, for a cohesive and connected team, or even for an organization itself? If a sense of “positiveness” has the potential to emerge and even accumulate in relationships, then gratitude and behaving in a loving way can function as a mechanism to enhance such an accumulation. The authors do not presume to explain the power of behaving in a loving way solely on the basis of neurological phenomena (e.g., see the norm of reciprocity section that follows). However, it is informative to see that there is neurological evidence in support of the social processes and cultural evidence as to the benefits of behaving in a loving way as well.

THE NORM OF RECIPROCITY

The giving and receiving of the gift of behaving in a loving way involves patterns of exchange between the parties. Therefore, it is useful to look such exchanges through the lens of the norm of reciprocity. Gouldner (1960) was one of the first scholars to examine the concept of the norm of reciprocity; he begins his influential essay by quoting Cicero --- “There is no duty more indispensable than that of returning a kindness (1960, p.161). Cialdini (2001) labels reciprocity as the rule of reciprocation. “The rule says that we should try to repay, in kind, what another person has provided us” (2001, p.20). Cialdini goes on to state that “all human societies subscribe to the rule”. Becker (1986) also views reciprocity as a fundamental and universal human virtue. Gouldner (1960) illustrates how it is possible to hypothesize the norm of reciprocity as universal:

“Specifically, I suggest that a norm of reciprocity, in its universal form, makes two interrelated, minimal demands: 1) people should help those who have helped them, and 2) people should not injure those who have helped them.” (1960, p.171)

Becker (1986) adds a level of texture to the concept:

“Reciprocity fixes the outline of our non-voluntary social obligations – the obligations we acquire in the course of social life, but acquire without regard to our invitation, consent, or acceptance. Leading examples include some of our obligations to our families, to future generations, and to obey the law.” (1986, p. 3)

This argument is virtue-based, and is essentially a reflection of a question of character. A person with character, a person with a sense of integrity, and a person with a “cultural mandate” of sorts --- feels driven to reflect virtue in their behavior. Thus, they reciprocate, following their own intrinsic interpretation of the norm of reciprocity, not because of a duty or an obligation, but rather simply as part of their personal set of values. This point is important to consider in the case of the Burning Man set of behaving in a loving way behaviors, because the norm of reciprocity can be viewed as a key phenomenon that explains such behavior at the Burning Man event.

The Burning Man principles of **Radical Inclusion** and **Radical Self-expression** remove the normal societal extrinsic provisions that define appropriate behavior. People at Burning Man feel free to engage in their own internally derived set of behavioral predispositions, and do not feel compelled to follow environmentally sourced criteria leading to extrinsic rewards or punishments. Therefore, to the extent that behaving in a loving way actions manifest at Burning Man, they are acts of free choice behaviors made by autonomous individuals, and not acts of compliance.

The Burning Man concept of unconditional **Gifting** parallels this framework as well. Becker (1986, p.3) asserts that reciprocity “is not directly about obligations, rights, duties, interests, preferences, values, or social welfare”. The citizens of Black Rock City engage in burning Man’s practice of unconditional giving because they have become part of the Burning Man **Communal Effort** and adopted the identity or alterity of Burner. For them it is just the right thing for a Burner to do. In this sense the Burner, albeit acting as a free, autonomous individual, is not acting as an individual rogue agent; rather he/she is acting in character. This character is, in turn, part of the tapestry of the culture, values and 10 principles of

Burning Man. Thus does the culture generated by the 10 Principles at Burning Man not only reflect upon itself, it also defines, fuels and reinforces itself. Behaving in a loving way needs no rules, no definitions of reciprocal acts, and no justification for its existence. The utility of behaving in a loving way is the fact that it exists.

Nor does reciprocity have to be delivered “in kind” in order to be considered a reciprocal act (Gouldner, 1960; Becker, 1986). It can also manifest in elaborate indirect exchanges; such exchanges do not have to be in kind at all. The case example in this paper, describing how Burners clean up the event as an act of gratitude for the organizers putting on the event, is an example of a community’s global set of behaviors (leaving no trace/cleaning up efforts), guided by a Burning Man principle (**Leave No Trace**), acted out by thousands of people over a period of several weeks. “We owe a return for all of the good we receive, not merely the good we accept” (Becker, 1986, p.4).

Finally, the authors believe that reciprocity must be purposeful to be sincere. Reciprocity is a well-defined activity, not a collection of random events.

ORGANIZATIONS AS CULTURAL ENTITIES

The values and purpose of Burning Man, as reflected in the creation and actualization of the 10 Principles, highlights the fact that Burning Man is a cultural entity. The concept of organizational culture has been in the management literature for several decades (Lewin, Lippitt & White, 1939). It can be seen as originating from the concepts “group norms” and “climate”. Group norms are the informal rules that often have a powerful and consistent influence on group members’ behavior (Hackman, 1976). Organizational climate is defined explicitly as “set of characteristics that describe an organization and that (a) distinguish the organization from other organizations, (b) are relatively enduring over time, and (c) influence the behavior of people in the organization” (Forehand & Gilmer, 1964, p. 362).

There are about as many definitions of culture in the management and organization literature as there are research streams dedicated to the topic. Thus, a generally accepted definition of organizational culture is hard to find. For this paper, Schein’s 1990 classic definition of organizational culture has been adopted. Culture is defined as “(a) a pattern of basic assumptions, (b) invented, discovered, or developed by a given group, (c) as it learns to cope with its problems of external adaptation and internal integration, (d) that has worked well enough to be considered valid and, therefore (e) is to be taught to new members as the (f) correct way to perceive, think, and feel in relation to those problems” (Schein, 1990:, p.111). Since organizational culture plays an important role in channeling the behaviors of organizational member’s behavior, it is useful to examine Burning Man’s evolved culture as a healthy culture that has allowed the organization to exist for over three decades while its members have flourished as they have engaged in transformative learning and personal change as a function of their Burning Man experiences.

Following Schein’s criteria, it is possible to observe relative to Burning Man: a) that there is a pattern of basic assumptions (the 10 Principles of Burning Man), b) that these principles have been invented and adopted within the Burning Man community as event participants evolve from the role of event observer to the identity and alterity of Burner, c) that this evolved culture has facilitated Burning Man’s external and internal adaptations, d) that this has worked well enough to be considered valid by both internal and external publics for over 35 years, e) that this is taught to new Burners (called “newbies” or “virgins”), and, f) that a correct way to perceive, think, feel and behave is in place (as per the 10 Principles). Nor has this been an accidental process. In 1985 and subsequent years, a choice was made by Larry Harvey and a number of his friends to set aside traditional organizational culture, and to create a new and innovative culture in the Black Rock Desert of Nevada. As Hockett (2005, p.75) points out --- “Burning Man provides a ritualistic means by which participants can liminally, reflexively, and critically create ‘distance’ from their ‘normal’ sociocultural existence.”

QUALITATIVE DATA EXAMPLES OF BEHAVING IN A LOVING WAY AT BURNING MAN

A challenge for the creation of a perspective on the power of behaving in a loving way is the realization that expression of loving behavioral exchanges is ultimately experienced at an individual level. The challenge therefore becomes one of deciphering a collection of individual experiences into patterns supportive of the assertions made relative to the power of behaving in a loving manner in general, as well as how these exchanges manifest at the Burning Man event every year. The stories, personal expressions and narratives listed below are offered in support of this effort.

The authors have been engaged in the Burning Man event as participant/observers for over 18 years. Numerous notes and journals were made during this period as the first phase of data collection. After observing participants for years, the researchers brought video and audio recording devices to Burning Man for a period of two years. Participants were systematically screened and interviewed via videotape recordings. The interviewed participants were asked to reflect on their experiences and time spent at Burning Man. The qualitative examples listed below are gleaned from these first-hand observations over the years, taped interviews, and some additional resources.

- 1) *The temples at Burning Man as temples of the act of behaving in a loving way.* One of the most moving art installations each year at Burning Man is the Temple. While the Burning Man figure burns on Saturday in front of a raucous and noisy crowd, the Temple burns on Sunday night, often in complete and reverent silence, surrounded by thousands. Each year the temple has a different name, but its significance in the expression of behaving in a loving way is the same. This space is the soul of the festival where participants commemorate significant milestones in their lives. For example, a picture of a pet is taped to the wall of the temple, and next to the picture, someone writes, "Thanks for all your love for all those years." Next to a faded picture of a young man circa 1960, someone writes, "Dad, you gave me so much. Only now after you have left me do I see the value of what you taught me." These commemorative installations in the temple can be sad or joyful. Either way, they are evidence that the person making the statement(s) has been profoundly moved. People move through and around the temple in respectful silence, speaking only in whispers. Boxes of tissues are placed throughout the structure for the absorption of tears. When the authors asked temple participants how they felt in the temple space, they almost universally expressed their gratitude to the temple builders for gifting them this experience. These statements are often accompanied by tears.
- 2) *The temple builders' expression of behaving in a loving way.* When the authors have interviewed the temple builders over the years, one of our consistent questions has been "Why do you do this?" The answers are consistent, and reflect loving way behaviors. One young man travelled in 2014 from Ireland just to help to build the temple. He explained that he had undergone a transformative experience at Burning Man in 2012, and "I just had to come back and repay to this community for what this community has given to me. Since the temple is the place with the most emotion, I felt it was the best place to repay my debt." Another temple builder answered a question as to what he expected people to do in his temple once it was built. He responded, "I have no expectations for what people do here". He followed that by saying that "My intent is to create a space here where people feel safe enough to look within themselves. I feel lucky to be able to do this for Burning Man, and I feel blessed that people use it in ways they find meaningful".
- 3) *Those who build Burning Man: The Department of Public Works (DPW).* Immediately after the 2015 event a blog appeared at www.insomniac.com that described the feelings of the workers who actually build, tear down and finish the cleanup of Black Rock City. Denman-Underhill (2015) labelled the DPW as "the dedicated soldiers of Black Rock City". It is informative to hear some of the viewpoints of these temporary workers (the DPW is not a year-round job) as to why they do what they do for Burning Man through the lens of behaving in a loving way. DPW workers describe "putting their lives on hold" to work at

Burning Man. Says a heavy machinery crew member --- “It’s about doing what is right. It’s about feeling like you are doing what you are supposed to do. You get to work with people who not only appreciate what you do, but as an operator, are inspired and want to help them create their vision. It’s very fulfilling”. This gentleman goes on to begin to answer the “Why?” question as well --- “At your normal job back home, people don’t care. You are there to just do what you do. Here, you play an integral part, and the artists really appreciate that you are helping them. You create something great out here, and you can’t really put a price on that.” Another quote from a different DPW worker ---“Once you start working, it’s not the event that keeps you here. It’s the people who you work with, especially before and after the event. The event becomes the least significant part of your experience out here”. This statement shows how loving way behavior exchange dynamics are processed at an individual level. It also illustrates how appreciation exchanges create and reinforce quality in relationship behaviors.

- 4) *Scene observed during Burning Man 2002, illustrating the Burning Man principles of unconditional and spontaneous gifting, immediacy, radical self-expression, radical inclusion and leave no trace:* A middle-aged woman is walking by herself down Venus Avenue. It is late afternoon on a hot day. The woman is evidently new to being topless and has the start of mild sunburn. She looks a little tired, and she is probably thirsty, maybe without even realizing it. She wears only a tutu and a pair of sandals. Suddenly, she spins around as, without warning, she is approached by what appears to be a pirate ship (The 2002 Burning Man event had a nautical art theme). The vehicle approaching consists of a cascading stack of couches on top of what appears to be the remains of the bottom half of a VW microbus. The ‘pirate ship’ hull is adorned with a couple of colorful masts, a skull and crossbones pirate flag with the Burning Man symbol in the middle, and a noisy collection of enthusiastic individuals who have chosen to participate at Burning Man 2002 as marauding pirates. As the faux pirate ship pulls up next to the young woman, one of the costumed pirates leaps to his feet, waves a comical wooden sword, and launches into an impassioned speech that begins with “Avast, ye maties ...”. The shipboard multi-cast performance, directed to the woman as an audience of one, ends with the pirate ship pulling away, but not before one of the pirates hands the woman a frozen orange Popsicle. She removes the wrapper of the Popsicle, puts it in the waistband of her tutu lest it hit the ground, and then proceeds down the road obviously relishing her refreshing, spontaneously tendered and unexpected gift. After a dozen steps or so, she pauses attempting to wipe the broad smile off her face. Deciding it is a futile task, she licks her Popsicle, grinning ear to ear all the while.
- 5) *How gifting is elevated when it is done without expectations of the gratitude of exchange.* The following story is an excerpt from HuffingtonPost.com excerpted from a September 2015 article that focused on criticizing those who would criticize Burning Man event for creeping commercialism. In that article, Souwine (2015) relates this experience --- “On the day of the burn, I headed out on my bike to give a message to a friend. Coated with a week of dust, my creaky bike started to give out half way, the chain had fallen off and I couldn’t fix it. But I would not be deterred! So I found a random camp of people I didn’t know and asked if I could borrow a bike. They said sure, and off I went. I came back 30 minutes later, message delivered. In the time I was gone, someone in the camp had taken the time to fix my bike. And I wasn’t even surprised. Because that is the culture of Burning Man.”
- 6) *The examples given here is in the form of an edited narrative, given by a woman who had been to Burning Man 10 years in a row. She is responding to the question --- “What can you share about your experiences at Burning Man? Her narrative follows:*
 - a) People use the temple in a variety of ways, some come to meditate, some come to decorate and some come to mark significant milestones in their lives; births, marriages, divorce, getting or losing a job or the death of a loved one. These commemorations come in the form of photographs, art, cartoons and writings, both

sacred and profane. In 2013, someone made hundreds of colorful origami cranes to decorate a corner of the temple. I saw this act as a gift to the temple builders and to Burning Man fellow participants. In the somber space of the temple, they provided a spot of joy to soothe the soul.

- b) There are many groups of volunteers that make Black Rock City work. The overwhelming majority of volunteers, most of whom work with little or no pay, are participants at previous year's events who saw there were opportunities to give back to the Burning Man community. The most recognizable volunteers on the playa are those that wear uniforms (the Black Rock Rangers and Emergency Medical Services), those that wear similar costumes (the Lamplighters) and those who man specific sites (Lost and Found, the volunteers at the Department of Mutant Vehicles (DMV at Burning Man), and the ice stations: Antarctica, Ice Nine and Ice³. These volunteers are all intrinsically motivated, grateful to have an opportunity to serve in important roles that enhance the quality of the day-to-day lives of the participants.
- c) Black Rock City is based on a circle and has circular and radial streets (see Figure 2). Many participants gather into groups called camps. Some are theme camps, where individuals gather to create the experience they want at Burning Man. They share construction and chores at the camp and some give gifts to other participants at their camp or out in the city or on the playa. In 2014, one camp gave away massive numbers of tutus to Burners to allow them to participate in a Tutu Tuesday celebration. This is also a manifestation of the principle of **Radical Inclusion** which welcomes and celebrates strangers. At the same camp, they were giving away grilled cheese sandwiches and Dos Equis beer, very welcome in the warm late morning in the desert. The next camp over was providing body painting services to Burners. I had a beautiful floral arrangement painted on my bald head.
- d) Burning Man's principle of Decommodification helps preserve the spirit of gifting. You cannot buy a commemorative t-shirt or anything else at Burning Man, but someone may design a t-shirt or piece of jewelry and you might be lucky enough to be in the right place at the right time and be gifted with an item which commemorates that year's festival. This also speaks to the principles of **Participation** (there are no observers) and **Immediacy** which speaks to the role spontaneity plays in the Burner's involvement and enjoyment of the festival experience. Swag you can score includes; jewelry (bracelets and necklaces), yoga classes, henna body art, a pancake breakfast, beer and soft drinks or a little black dress for the cocktail party on Thursday afternoon. I have always found the unexpected gift at Burning Man to be the one that is the most joyful to receive.
- e) Five years ago, I observed a ceremony wherein the Black Rock Rangers showed respect to the law enforcement agencies that cover the event by purchasing a memorial plaque commemorating the service of a deputy sheriff who died during the past year. He had worked the event for several years. A copy of the plaque was given to the man's widow, and the other plaque was to be burned when the temple burned. A silent procession of dozens of law enforcement and Black Rock Ranger vehicles drove across the desert playa to the temple on Sunday morning to place the plaque. The physical placement was done jointly by the head of the Bureau of Land Management and Burning Man's Ranger Director. This was an expression of behaving in a loving way, but I also felt it was an example of **Radical Inclusion** at its best with the Black Rock rangers radically including law enforcement.

CONCLUSION

The **Leave No Trace** example is concrete evidence of the unleashing of positive feedback loops. The Burning Man organization has aspirations for a **Leave No Trace** event. They unconditionally **Gift** the Burning Man event to its participants. We know the gift is unconditional because it comes with no expectations from the giver. Each person in Black Rock City, due to **Radical Inclusion**, is welcomed without preconditions. Then, thanks to **Radical Self-expression**, each person is free to find and ascribe personalized and individualized meaning to his or her Burning Man experience. The result is transformational learning for many participants, an **Unconditionally Gifted** experiences are received. Once this becomes internalized, once this is expressed as an identity of Burner, and once it becomes a source of intrinsic motivation --- then it becomes part of the behavioral repertoire of the recipient.

Sociologist Barry Schwartz (1967) writing about “the social psychology of the gift”, states that “gift exchange (should be) discussed in terms of its relevance for the development and maintenance of identity” (1967, p.1). Knowing how this social psychological process works, it is therefore not surprising to see the positive behaving in a loving way feedback loop manifest as thousands of Burners reciprocate Burning Man’s gift to them by cleaning up after themselves, including hundreds of people assiduously picking up cigarette butts.

Such **Civic Responsibility** is not normal organizational behavior. However, it becomes the “new normal” for those who actualize the power behaving in a loving way --- behaviors sourced in purposeful organizational culture and fueled by grateful recipients engaging in processes inherent in following the norm of reciprocity. Becker (1986, p. 137) speaks about this in the context of the lack of a need for scorekeeping in relationships characterized by unconditional urges of reciprocity:

“One of the bothersome aspects of the predisposition to reciprocate is the fact that it requires people to keep score. That sort of thing might be appropriate at arm’s length, but it is not the sort of thing friends and family and lovers do. Or at least, not what they *should* do (Becker’s emphasis). In fact, it is the sort of thing we stop doing when we make friends, or fall in love.”

Burning Man, based on the concepts of **Radical Inclusion** and **Immediacy**, really has no place for concepts such as differentiated status. At Burning Man, the philosophy is that differential status is not assumed; nor is obsession with status tolerated. Engaged in **Communal Effort** as equals, and fueled by **Civic Responsibility**, **Gifting** is done without the expectations attendant to reciprocity as exchange. Attempts are not made to align with quid pro quo exchanges, achieve status enhancement or engage in power acquisition behaviors. Thus, **Gifting** at Burning Man has purity in purpose and benevolence in execution. This has allowed Burning Man to elevate the concept of behaving in a loving way into a cultural principle and an organizational mainstay.

The authors believe that the processes inherent in behaving in a loving way, as exemplified here as occurring in Burning Man’s sense of community, values and purpose, can apply to a dynamic in any organization. A community of kindred spirits, guided by a set of cultural principles and fueled by the power of behaving in a loving way, can manifest not only elevated support of organizational purpose, but also enhanced personal experiences for organizational members in the process of doing so. Of such is the power of behaving in a loving way.

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