

Reflections

The SoL Journal
on Knowledge, Learning, and Change



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Putting Theory into Action: The Evolution and Practice of Structural Dynamics

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David Kantor
with Deborah Wallace

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Putting Theory into Action: The Evolution and Practice of Structural Dynamics

David Kantor with Deborah Wallace;
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This article gives a unique glimpse into both the development and the application of a key body of work by one of today's most important organizational theorists and practitioners. In Part One, David Kantor explains the evolution of his theory of Structural Dynamics, a model of how communication works—or doesn't work—in human systems. He also details how what he calls "communicative competency" can lead to more effective conversations—a key to creating healthy family and organizational systems. In Part Two, Sarah Hill and Tony Melville describe the application of Structural Dynamics to a client situation. These two complementary perspectives provide a window into the profound possibilities offered by translating Kantor's theory into practice.

Learning to Learn: Knowledge As a System of Questions

Michael Ballé, Jacques Chaize, and Daniel Jones

What is it about the Toyota Production System (TPS) that has allowed Toyota to achieve high levels of performance over time, despite occasional setbacks? The authors have found that instead of being a system of *best practices*, the TPS is a system of *interconnected questions*. As such, in TPS, knowledge does not involve applying a cookie-cutter method to get a desired result but rather posing the right questions to ultimately improve the system as a whole. The authors examine Toyota's five-step cycle for problem finding, framing, and solving. They show that as employees develop their problem-finding capabilities and problem-solving skills, they individually and then collectively enhance the organization's judgment in the long run.

Is Your Town in Transition?

Jessica Stites

Over the past decade, more than 1,000 municipalities in 43 countries have chosen to define themselves as "Transition Towns." Frustrated by the slow pace of change in response to challenges such as peak oil, climate change, and economic instability, people in these places have undertaken grassroots initiatives to build the resilience of their communities to survive sudden shortfalls of necessities such as food, oil, water, or money. These preparations take many forms, some infrastructural—such as establishing solar energy programs—and others interpersonal—like creating groups that encourage people to help each other in times of need. At its core, the Transition Movement seeks to build the "social technologies" required to achieve long-term sustainability.

The Triple Focus: Rethinking Mainstream Education

Daniel Goleman and Peter Senge

In *The Triple Focus: A New Approach to Education*, Peter Senge and Daniel Goleman examine the cognitive and emotional tools that young children need to navigate and thrive in today's environment. The authors identify three skill sets essential for navigating this world of increasing distractions and decreasing face-to-face communications: focusing on self, tuning in to other people, and understanding the larger world and how systems interact. This excerpt focuses on the third skill set and makes a strong case for capitalizing on the connections and synergies between Social and Emotional Learning (SEL) and systems thinking. The notion of transforming and replacing the traditional pedagogy that anchors our current curriculum with systems-based learning has already taken hold with impressive results that have surprised even the authors.

EXECUTIVE DIGEST 14.1

Reflections on the 2014 SoL Global Forum

Gitte Larsen and Vicky Schubert

On May 21–23, 2014, 450 participants from around the world gathered in Paris, France, to take part in the SoL Global Forum: “Investing in Emerging Futures: New Players, New Games—Welcoming Metamorphosis.” Organized by SoL France, the event invited change leaders and organizational leaders to explore an urgent question together: “How can we facilitate and

accelerate the metamorphosis of our organizations, firms, and society?” In this two-part article, Gitte Larsen, a newcomer to the Global SoL community, and Vicky Schubert, a long-time SoL contributor, share highlights from—and personal reflections on—the event. Their insightful commentary paints a picture of a community of people who are making the internal shifts necessary to lead profound changes in all those external systems that connect us.

Putting Theory into Action

The Evolution and Practice of Structural Dynamics

DAVID KANTOR WITH DEBORAH WALLACE; SARAH HILL AND TONY MELVILLE

This article gives a unique glimpse into both the development and the application of a key body of work by one of today's most important organizational theorists and practitioners. In Part One, David Kantor explains the evolution of his theory of Structural Dynamics, a model of how communication works—or doesn't work—in human systems. He also details how what he calls "communicative competency" can lead to more effective conversations—a key to creating healthy family and organizational systems. In Part Two, Sarah Hill and Tony Melville describe the application of Structural Dynamics to a client situation. These two complementary perspectives provide a window into the profound possibilities offered by translating Kantor's theory into practice.

Part I: Structural Dynamics Theory

DAVID KANTOR WITH DEBORAH WALLACE



David Kantor



Deborah Wallace

DEBORAH WALLACE: You were trained and worked for many years as a psychologist and clinical researcher. How did you get into the field of organizational consulting?

DAVID KANTOR: It happened over a number of years, and there were several key events that led to my interest in it. The first was in 1965 at a gathering of the pioneers of the new theory and practice of family systems therapy. Scores of iconoclasts from

psychiatry and psychology were at that gathering. I was fascinated with the leap from individual to family systems therapy, where the emphasis was on systems rather than on individuals.

It was also around that time that I established the Boston Family Institute,* which was a family systems training organization. Interestingly, not only therapists wanted to learn this new technology but also consultants. It was the consultants' interest that led me to explore the idea that, from a structural perspective, organizational teams were little different from families. Chris Argyris had just read my book *Inside the Family*, which is an exploration of family organization and behavior, and made the observation that the book was not only about families but also about organizations. That observation clinched the deal for me, and I knew I was on to something.

I was fascinated with the leap from individual to family systems therapy, where the emphasis was on systems rather than on individuals.

* Kantor later founded the Family Institute of Cambridge and the Kantor Family Institute.

The Nature of Structure

KANTOR: In 1990, I was invited to take part in monthly meetings with Chris Argyris, Peter Senge, Don Schön, Ed Schein, and others to discuss our different takes on the nature of structure in human systems. Shortly after that meeting, in

In high-stakes situations and crises, people tend to become one of three hero types: Fixer, Protector, or Survivor.

1991, Diana Smith and I led a group of organizational consultants in a year-long seminar that featured her version of Chris Argyris's Action Science theory and my evolving theory of Structural Dynamics, which focuses on how face-to-face communication works—and does not work—in human systems (see “Tools for Understanding Hidden Dynamics”).

In 2000, I was introduced to Mark Fuller, chairman and president of Monitor Group, a strategy consulting firm. Diana Smith was an internal consultant at Monitor at that time, and with her help, Mark developed a keen interest in my work and invited me to join the firm as both an internal consultant and a thought leader. My task was to create products and models that applied the theory of Structural Dynamics to organizational issues, in particular leadership and team development.

WALLACE: Please describe the high-stakes, low-stakes phenomenon and how it applies to leadership and organizations.

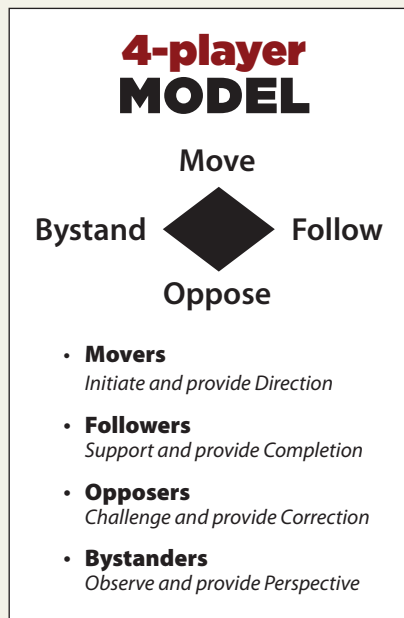
KANTOR: I first saw this phenomenon in 1970 during my research on families. Trained observers moved in with 21 families and interviewed them in their own homes. They probed and analyzed everything from the locks on the doors to the way family members dealt with crises. We set up tape recorders in every room of the households and taped every verbal utterance, 24 hours a day, over a 30-day period. In analyzing that data, I recognized that the parents in these families, the couples, had distinct communication patterns when they were under great pressure or in “high-stakes” situations.

That study led to a second important piece of research: a study of 21 couples who had come to me in crisis for couples' therapy. They agreed to let me tape record their sessions for a period of six to twelve months. That research led to another important concept—that in high-stakes situations and crises, people tend to become one of three hero types: Fixer, Protector, or Survivor (see “Heroic Modes”).

Tools for Understanding Hidden Dynamics

Structural Dynamics is a theory of how face-to-face communication works—and does not work—in human systems. David Kantor developed the model more than 35 years ago through an empirical study of family communication, and it has evolved and expanded over time to apply to families, couples, teams, and whole organizations.

The Four-Player Model is the core concept of Structural Dynamics and holds that in all interactions between people, there are only four possible “speech acts”—*move*, *follow*, *oppose*, and *bystand*. Many communication problems occur when individuals become “stuck” in one of the four speech acts or roles—something that undermines group learning and effective decision-making.



Communicative competency—understanding the structure of face-to-face communications in human systems—is key to making sound decisions and creating sustainable results.



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Additional observations of high-level teams in organizations led to the conclusion that these heroic types also apply in organizations. Leaders of high-level teams in organizations are constantly under pressure, not unlike the couples in crisis I studied in my research. Leaders live much of the time in high-stakes decision making, which affects a lot of people in their organizations.

The Importance of Model-Making

WALLACE: In your book *Reading the Room*, you say that leaders have to have models of their own if they're going to be successful. Why is this so important?

KANTOR: Leaders, whether in families or organizations, play a crucial part in the lives of their constituents. If they don't have a model of their own that articulates and guides what they do, they are essentially operating in the dark and very likely making the same mistakes over and over again.

WALLACE: How does this kind of model play out in real life?

Heroic Modes

A Heroic Mode is the internal prototype for how we behave when we are most needed, especially in times of crisis. We each have a dominant Heroic Mode that determines how we cope with anxiety in extreme situations and that dictates what we do to make ourselves and others feel safe in the world.

The Fixer: All Fixers have an indomitable will that drives them to overcome whatever gets in the way of their mission or their message—be it an enemy, rivals, or even cultural norms—but it is physical power that allows fixers to win.

The Survivor: The Survivor can endure no matter the circumstances. Whereas the Fixer relies on physical power as the source of her strength, the survivor relies more on mental power to survive.

The Protector: Protectors are guardians and caretakers of the sick, the poor, the politically disadvantaged, the ecology/environment, and relationships. Protectors tend to speak the language of feeling and emotion fluently, particularly when they are focused on their missions and causes.

KANTOR: There is a strong link between a leader's preferred role and the leadership model he or she develops and displays. Thus, a leader whose profile is mover and opposer, that is, someone who initiates and challenges, will build these behaviors into his or her model. Someone whose profile is bystander will develop a different model.

I think leaders in the future will see the necessity of having their own models to prevent them from getting into trouble.

Many leaders simply will not spend the time to develop their own models. I appreciate the rationale but don't accept the conclusion that it shouldn't be done. I think leaders in the future will see the necessity of having their own models to prevent them from getting into trouble and will understand the benefit of having their own models rather than relying on the models of consultants and executive coaches.

WALLACE: Do consultants need certain prerequisite skills to be able to support today's leaders?

KANTOR: A resounding yes! In my opinion, no matter what their practice model, any consultant working with leaders or their teams would benefit from an understanding of how Structural Dynamics equips them to move toward the goal of communicative competency. To develop these skills, consultants must understand their own behavioral profiles and their possibilities and limitations. Structural Dynamics has a detailed practice model for helping consultants develop these capacities.

Communicative Competency

WALLACE: What is communicative competency and why is it so important?

KANTOR: Communicative competency means that each member of the team can "read the room"—that is, diagnose an ongoing dysfunctional

sequence and recognize the precise "vocal act" that is missing. For example, a team is stuck because no one is stepping forward to move the conversation. But each individual is responsible for recognizing the "stuckness" and either making a move or calling upon someone whose repertoire better enables him or her do so. The assumption is that when all members of the team are capable of communicative competency, collective intelligence—which is group intelligence greater than the intelligence of any of its individual parts—will occur.

WALLACE: What is the relationship between the Four-Player Model and communicative competency?

KANTOR: In any effective face-to-face interaction, all four vocal acts need to be present. A "move" sets forth a direction, a "follow" validates and completes, an "oppose" challenges and corrects, and a "bystand" provides a perspective on the overall interaction and attempts to reconcile competing acts. What is so noticeable about stuck interactions is that they do not have a balance of these vocal acts. They usually display dominance in one or two particular modes at the expense of the others. A team that possesses communicative competency can recognize and correct imbalances.

Lasting Impact

WALLACE: What aspect of your work do you think has had the greatest impact?

KANTOR: The theory that emerged from my 1970 *in situ* family study and the subsequent research on high-stakes behavior in couples and then in organizations all strengthened my understanding of Structural Dynamics. The emerging nature of this theory and increasing evidence of its widespread applicability in different systems has been a major source of satisfaction. Concepts like the Four-Player Model have caught the attention of many organizational consultants around the world, and that has been an obvious source of satisfaction.

But I think the biggest impact and the greatest source of satisfaction is yet to come. I am currently undertaking a research project with Kathryn Stanley of the Massachusetts School of Professional Psychology and Gillien Todd of the Harvard Negotiation Project. The project sets out to test the ability of a Structural Dynamics intervention to effect measurable change in organizational teams.

Two features of the research could make a significant impact on all future consulting. First, the research attempts to meet rigorous scientific standards by having an experimental group that receives the designed “treatment” (the experimental variable) and two control groups, one that is introduced to the language of Structural Dynamics but goes no further and a second that receives no treatment at all.

The second unique feature is how we measure change by measuring vocal acts. Vocal acts, which are units of speech, form sequences that eventually become repetitive patterns, some of which are functional and some of which are dysfunctional. We identify the dysfunctional sequences and then apply our metrics to quantify the change in the structure of a communication pattern—that is, the shift from dysfunctional to functional sequences. In later stages of this research, we intend to link such changes to the bottom-line goals of key decision makers in organizations. We also plan to measure how individuals in the study teams expand their repertoires.

WALLACE: What else is in store for the future?



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When all members of the team are capable of communicative competency, collective intelligence will occur.

KANTOR: I see the Kantor Institute doing more groundbreaking work. I see three paths converging—research, training, and instrument development—all aligned toward making measurable change that is sustainable. When the paths converge—in my lifetime or beyond—Structural Dynamics will have changed the fundamental nature of human systems consulting and intervention. ■

ABOUT THE AUTHORS

David Kantor is the founder of the Kantor Institute. Over the past 50 years, he has brought his unique model and counseling expertise to families, couples, organizations, leaders, and interventionists. During his career, David has trained more than a thousand systems interventionists and has written dozens of articles and several books. <http://kantorinstitute.com>

Deborah Wallace is contributing editor of *Reflections* and principal of BrinkPoint Consulting. dwallace@brinkpointconsulting.com

Janice Molloy also contributed to this article. janice@solonline.org

Part 2: Structural Dynamics in Action

SARAH HILL AND TONY MELVILLE



Sarah Hill



Tony Melville

David Kantor's theory of Structural Dynamics provides the foundation for the interventionist work that we do in many different organizations and communities in both the public sector and corporate settings. Underpinning our approach to applying David's theory is the belief that leaders need to stop just leading change and first think carefully about how and what they want to change. Structural Dynamics interventions focus on working with behaviors in order to change the prevailing culture and enable transformational

change. It is this kind of fundamental change that has the potential to liberate individuals or organizations from stuck patterns of behavior that can hold them back from realizing their aspirations.

Structural Dynamics interventions focus on working with behaviors in order to change the prevailing culture and enable transformational change.

Perturbing the System

Our experience from one of these interventions demonstrates how Structural Dynamics works with some of the challenges presented to interventionists and their clients:

We were mid-way through a day working with a group of 35 senior leaders in an organization. They had come together to discuss business risks and, in particular, a mounting financial crisis. Hundreds of years of experience were gathered in the room, along with specialists from every conceivable field. The CEO's hope? That by unlocking participants' collective wisdom, the group could put itself in the best possible position to tackle the challenges ahead.

However, this is not what we were seeing as the day unfolded. The CEO was struck by the circular superficiality of the conversation and was frustrated by a repetitive pattern of behavior that she had observed elsewhere in the organization

It was not uncommon for meetings of this group to become stuck, paralyzed forums, but somehow this one was different. Prompted by the sheer frustration of not knowing what was going on, the CEO became uncharacteristically blunt. She said: "As senior leaders, I think you are the single biggest risk to this organization because we are unable to effectively work together, interact with one another, or reach decisions together."

The room was silent. We sensed acknowledgment, agreement, confusion, and denial in the group, but no one said a word. The CEO's comments were increasingly filled with moral judgment as she blamed the group for the stuck patterns in their interactions. She had not yet fully realized that what was happening could be described in the language of Structural Dynamics, a language that is morally neutral in its perspective, or that an intervention could change the nature of the discourse. She was making an intervention that she hoped would perturb the system, but she was also exhibiting a type of self-righteous behavior.

Seeing the Structural Story

Moving beyond the CEO's *moral story* of what was taking place in the room that day, we could see the *structural story*. We were witnessing a group that had gone into a spiral of "moves," a situation in which each member of the group was attempting to reconcile the interaction from his or her perspective. Group members had a strong and stuck pattern of random moving. There was no effective opposition ("oppose"), and no members of the group expressed support for any particular stance ("follow"). The speed with which the moves emerged left anyone who might have been able to provide perspective ("bystand") reeling in their wake. It was an example of the very behavior that was causing chaos and frustrating any kind of change in the organization. But, as with the Structural Dynamics of any conversation, we knew it was possible to change it by identifying the particular stuck pattern of behavior for the group and then outlining what had to happen to change that pattern.

In the weeks that followed, we worked with the CEO to try to interrupt—or "release"—the pattern of behavior that was preventing the group from being able to achieve anything meaningful. We focused on trying to change the discourse so that there was clear and effective opposition and sufficient "following" for an action to be completed, and to make space for people to provide their individual perspectives on what was happening within that forum.

Achieving Fleeting Success

This intervention was initially successful. We saw a behavioral change that the group welcomed and that they could see the benefits of. However, our well-intentioned and well-executed intervention had triggered each team member's "invisible reality"^{*}—or set of hidden assumptions—and as a result, we saw the old pattern of behavior return and intensify.

The group appeared to flounder, and members increasingly looked to the CEO to tell them what to do. At this point, we all knew that we hadn't yet reached the subterranean levels of the organization, which is where we needed to be. There was a great deal more drilling to do.

As we watched the repetitive behavior, we began to wonder whether the covert opposition we saw in the organization, now replicated in this group, was intentional and part of multiple and hugely complex individual, group, and systemic invisible realities that extended from the shop floor to the

The CEO's comments were increasingly filled with moral judgment as she blamed the group for the stuck patterns in their interactions.



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* Kantor, D. (Forthcoming). *On Becoming an Interventionist: A Noble and Dangerous Profession*. Meredith Winter Press. Kantor, D., and S. Hill. (August 2014). "The Perils of Working with Invisible Reality: The Practitioners' Greatest Challenge," *Training Journal*.

board room. Had the behavior been set in motion by the established culture to ensure that sustainable change would never be possible?

It is not unusual for an organization to find a way to maintain the status quo. The status quo is comfortable and known, unlike change, which for many of us is synonymous with discomfort and uncertainty. If we assumed that the organizational culture was one that said, “No matter what you do, there will be no change here. We will maintain the status quo and do whatever it takes to guard against all threats from outsiders,” much of the behavior we were experiencing began to make sense.

Had the behavior been set in motion by the established culture to ensure that sustainable change would never be possible?

Members of the group were randomly throwing out move after move as a covert way of opposing any kind of change. In fact, they had developed an astonishing ability to ward off any threat to the status quo with their obstructive patterns of conversation that prevented any change from being achieved. This was mirrored across the organization, which had become so efficient at managing the flow of information to the highest levels that the reality of what was really going on was almost completely hidden from view. When the CEO unilaterally set a course of action, which had so often been the case, senior leaders did what was necessary to give the appearance of change taking place, but in reality they were doing what they could to protect the status quo in their own spheres of influence.

Impact of Transient Leadership

This way of doing things had existed for decades, and it had been set in place precisely to deal with the transient nature of leadership and requirements for change. We had both seen this kind of behavior elsewhere. Policing, for example, was

also notorious for transience. Many police officers are repeatedly posted from one role to another throughout their careers, which means that leadership structures are constantly changing. What police officers are charged with delivering is also continually changing. New governments predictably bring with them a wealth of measures and initiatives designed to solve the problems of the ones that preceded them. This makes for a complex and overwhelming degree of change in which only one aspect is certain—it is perpetual.

This transient nature of leadership made it understandable, perhaps even reasonable, that the organization we were working with might see the instigation of obstructive behaviors as one means of protecting itself from the next passing phase or leader. But what was happening here had reached extreme proportions. The organization was now so proficient at protecting the dominant practice model that no matter what changes were made, or where any innovation or pushback came from, the existing system found ways to exert its control to ensure it prevailed. This was nothing short of complete paralysis borne out of a desire to stop all change, regardless of whether or not it was necessary for survival.

Working with Invisible Structures

To stand any chance of effectively identifying and working with invisible structures of this kind, interventionists and leaders need to:

1. **Be creative, resilient, and courageous** as they build their own practice model, which requires that they be knowingly in command of their own story and the invisible realities it creates in themselves and those they serve.
2. **Work with others** to plumb the depths of identity-forming stories that can be the source of so many invisible realities.
3. **Purposefully design and facilitate interventions** that jolt an individual, team, or organization into a position where the possibility for change finally opens up. In the midst of a perturbation, the environment can be visibly



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and palpably awash with anxiety. However, this anxiety also creates the potential to transform dysfunctional behaviors into an endless source of positive energy to draw upon in service of the organization.

Our work throughout the organization continued for some time, with many people demonstrating great personal courage as they began to integrate Structural Dynamics practices into their work. However, the CEO left the organization sooner than anticipated and was replaced by a new CEO who has a different agenda and approach. As a result, our work with the organization has been put on hold during this transition period. While many individuals have been able to positively affect decision making within their spheres of influence, the systemic change efforts have stalled.

The organization was now so proficient at protecting the dominant practice model that no matter what changes were made, the existing system found ways to exert its control.

The current situation at this organization highlights the importance of not only the leader's role in change but also the impact of unforeseen circumstances. We are hopeful that teams within the organization will continue to benefit from applying the practices of Structural Dynamics to improve the work together. ■

ABOUT THE AUTHORS

Sarah Hill is a director of the Kantor Institute and Dialogix Ltd, which is the global provider of all Kantor Institute-certified training programs. She is at the forefront of developing and applying Structural Dynamics concepts through training, development, and whole system intervention. sarah.hill@dialogix.co.uk

Tony Melville is a director of the Kantor Institute and Dialogix Ltd. He has extensive experience leading large organizations at a strategic and policy level, including working with national governments. Tony has led innovative change programs across these complex systems and uses this experience to design and facilitate Structural Dynamics interventions. tony.melville@dialogix.co.uk

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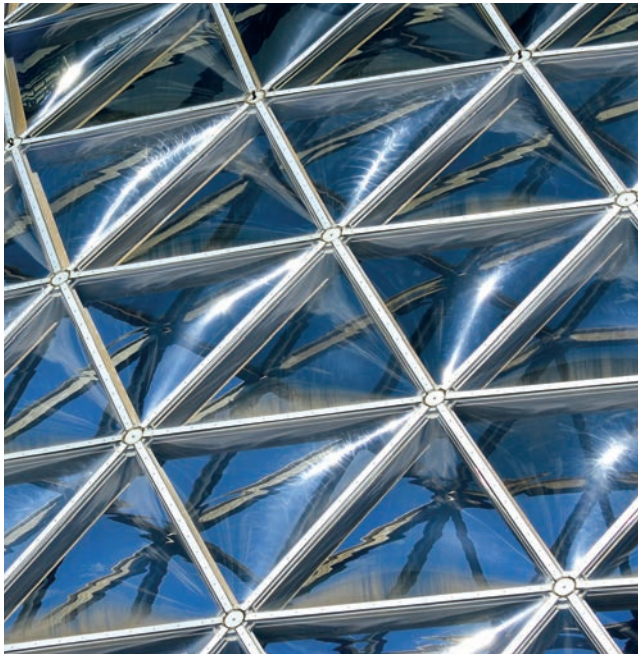
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EDITORIAL TEAM

Managing Editor
Janice Molloy

Contributing Editor
Deborah Wallace

Publisher
Frank Schneider



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reflections@solonline.org
Reflections: The SoL Journal
PO Box 425005
Cambridge, MA 02142-0001

+1.617.300.9530 (phone)
+1.617.812.1257 (fax)

E-mail: reflections@solonline.org
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