



### McDonald's and The Law of Evolutionary Potential

An article in the March 8, 1998, edition of *The Wall Street Journal* spoke of problems besetting the Land of Golden Arches. According to the author, Holman W. Jenkins, Jr., "McDonald's seems to have fallen into the hell that traps many of the best companies at some point in their lives. Having established a dominant position under a previous generation, it is bedeviled by a reverence for the old formulas, while its leadership takes weak steps and then denies all problems."

Jenkins concludes by saying, "McDonald's dropped the ball by trying to make the same old formula appeal to everyone. Long ago it could have used its vast credibility to develop new approaches. Only courage and imagination were lacking. These are qualities perhaps it will find only by going outside Oak Brook" (McDonald's headquarters).

McDonald's, like many other pioneering and innovative organizations, is now the victim of its own success. It is a living example of what cultural anthropologist Elman Service has described as "the law of evolutionary potential." (*Origins of the State and Civilization*, W.W. Norton & Co., 1975)

Successful adaptation to one's environment creates equilibrium with the environment and an increasing inability to change in response to new environmental conditions. The potential for further advance decreases in proportion to adaptive success and maturity. More adaptation equals less adaptability. An organization or culture does not "fall"; rather, it is by-passed by a younger culture that is able to benefit from the latest techniques and "skip" over earlier developmental stages experienced by the older culture.

Newer organizations, less committed to conventional solutions, less invested in the established, have greater potential for experimentation and change, while the successfully evolving center eventually pays the "penalty of taking the lead." The leader is by-passed and superceded by a later, more effective challenger.

This is more likely to occur when a central bureaucracy is involved, especially one that is theocratic in nature and heavily dependent on tradition, ceremony and ritual.

As a 21st century leader, is your church or organization vulnerable to becoming a victim of the "law of evolutionary potential?"

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