

People & Strategy

The Professional Journal of HRPS

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Being Purposeful in Turbulent Environments

By Joseph McCann and John W. Selsky

It is extremely challenging to sustain high levels of performance, either personal or organizational, when the pace and disruptiveness of change is relentless. Our past research reported in a 2009 People & Strategy article and other subsequent work confirmed, however, that some individuals and organizations — indeed, entire business ecosystems like global supply chains and innovation networks — are doing very well (AMA/HRI, 2006; McCann, Selsky & Lee, 2007, 2009). While many reel from turbulent change, others view such dynamic conditions as an opportunity — a source of competitive advantage.

A 2004 *Human Resource Planning* article, followed by the 2009 *People & Strategy* article, reported the evolution of our thinking about these challenges. What we have since discovered is that mastering turbulence requires highly developed capabilities for sustaining adaptive capacity. It is about working smarter, not just harder (Sull, 2009).

We do not have all the answers, but we have identified and explored five of these capabilities in our 2012 book, “Mastering Turbulence: The Essential Capabilities of Agile & Resilient Individuals, Teams & Organizations.” Given HRPS’s longstanding interest in this topic, we are pleased to again have *People & Strategy* as a forum for our newest thinking. All the more so, given the topic of this special issue of the journal, because the foundational capability among the five is what we call *Being Purposeful* or *Purposefulness*.

Making the Case for Agility and Resiliency

In our 2009 study, we suggested that adaptive capacity has two critical dimensions: agility and resiliency. *Agility* is the capacity for moving quickly, flexibly and decisively in anticipating, initiating, and taking advantage of opportunities and avoiding the negative consequences of change. *Resiliency* is the capacity for resisting, absorbing and responding, even reinventing if required, in response to disruptions that are not or cannot be avoided (McCann et al., 2009).

We found that greater agility and resiliency are both strongly associated with higher performance in terms of competitiveness and profitability. While there is a strong correlation between measures of agility and resiliency, they are nonetheless very different

concepts. We also noted that agility and resiliency have been explored separately in the management literature, but rarely together. This has been a serious lapse because overfocusing on one or the other, not balancing attention across both, will be less effective and even potentially damaging. For this reason, we now refer to them together as “AR” — two sides of the adaptive capacity coin.

Working Across Four Levels

Our 2009 *People & Strategy* article concluded by stressing the need to develop both agility and resiliency in a balanced way across four intervention levels: individual, team, organization and business ecosystem. Why four levels? Mainly because turbulence is contagious. Focusing development efforts just at an organization level risks ignoring some of the other major impacts of turbulence. It is impossible to sustain high performance when individuals and teams are also struggling. Paying attention to individuals and the teams in which they function is equally important because “the boundaries between the personal and the global are breaking down” (Eckersley, 2008). Indeed, as Tom Friedman of “The World Is Flat” fame reminds us, a defining characteristic of today’s world is that individuals, not just nations and corporations, are active players at a global level (Friedman, 2005). He could be a solo terrorist plotting havoc in London or a Bangladeshi farmer linked to a global commodity market via a cheap cellphone.

This intimate linkage between the personal and the global plays out at work, at home and in communities. At an *individual* level, people feel the effects of turbulence when the number and variety of events they have to deal with become so mind-numbing that they

become stressed and anxious. Health suffers, psychological burnout becomes the norm and dissociative behaviors (the “flight” side of the fight-flight response) prevail. The record low levels of employee engagement now being reported by many organizations are a clear indicator.

Teams are the basic structural unit for getting things done in most organizations today. But teams are only as good as the individuals within them. Individual performance contributes to organization performance, but individual effort is most often leveraged in team-based projects and other collaborative work efforts. The effects of turbulence are felt at the team level when economic distress forces cutbacks, destroying skilled technical work teams in places like Detroit auto factories. Under-resourced and stressed teams are a reality in many organizations, and they get disrupted as members enter and exit more frequently.

At an *organization level*, we see the effects of turbulence when profits suffer, innovation seizes up, companies fail and valuable networks of suppliers collapse.

Turbulence is manifest at a broader *business ecosystem* level. Every company is part of multiple larger sets of organizations and groups linked through shared interests, goals or geography (Iansiti & Levien, 2004). An ecosystem may be a global supply chain, innovation network, financial system, industry or a community network that a firm operates in geographically. Learning to work at this “higher” level is important because a firm’s relationships with other players pose risks that must be managed strategically. The interdependencies among members of those larger systems are the transmitters of change and disruption into the firm. Collaborative initiatives are often called for at the ecosystem level. ➤

The adaptive challenge for a company is complex. It has to manage turbulence *down*, *across* and *up*. *Down* for its individuals and teams, *across* all its operations and functions, and *up* in its relationships with other organizations and groups in its ecosystems. Only when what we call “High AR” is developed and sustained at all of these levels can it begin to master turbulence.

Five Essential Capabilities

Since our 2009 research, we have tried to identify the specific attributes or operational qualities of High AR individuals, teams, organizations and ecosystems. We also pondered whether it was even plausible to consider that those capabilities might extend across all four levels. We now believe we have some answers.

We have found five capabilities so far that support high levels of both agility and resiliency. High AR individuals, teams,

organizations and ecosystems are: *Purposeful*, *Aware*, *Action-oriented*, *Resourceful*, and *Networked*. *Being Purposeful* is foundational and at the core of High AR, so it receives the most attention in this article. The other four are briefly recognized and their respective roles noted. Table 1 outlines the full model of how these capabilities are expressed across the four levels. We suggest reading this table horizontally, moving from the individual to the team, organization and ecosystem levels to appreciate the different ways that the capability is expressed across levels.

Being Purposeful

We define purposefulness as “thought and supportive action based on a clear sense of purpose and grounded in a positive self-identity and core set of values and beliefs ...” (McCann & Selsky, 2012, p.55). This capability can be applied to teams, organizations and even ecosystems as well as individuals, as we illustrate below.

Purposefulness is perhaps most associated with extremely challenging, even life-threatening, situations that require tremendous resiliency. This can be an event that derails a professional career or that destroys a skyscraper in a terrorist act, as investment firm Sandler-O’Neil experienced on Sept. 11, 2001 (Freeman, Hirschhorn & Maltz, 2004). Purpose can stabilize and sustain focus, attention and behavior while responses take shape and recovery occurs. Purpose may even have to serve as the basis on which a transformed life, organization or industry is built when a previous one fails. The U.S. auto industry during the Great Financial Crisis is a vivid example.

Purpose expressed through clear values and beliefs also supports *agility* by providing a stable reference point for decision making in the midst of turbulence. When uncertainty and complexity prove almost debilitating, a well-understood, operationally expressed and widely shared sense of purpose provides a powerful vantage point for acting quickly

TABLE 1: AR CAPABILITIES ACROSS LEVELS

Level/Capacity	Individual	Team	Organization	Ecosystem
Purposeful Hold positive, “well” identities grounded in core values and beliefs about who they are and want to be	Positive self-concept with a physically and psychologically healthy presence capable of sustaining them in highly ambiguous, stressful work situations	Shared values and beliefs support collaborative performance with no one compromised in psychological and physical fitness to limit team performance	Vivid, frequently communicated and manifested shared values/beliefs within a compelling vision and sustainable concept of the organization within society	Shared beliefs that their collaborative efforts yield valued economic and social contributions, supporting a sense of legitimacy, purpose and meaning
Aware Aware of the larger environment, actively scan and engage in sense-making to form action hypotheses	Active learners with a curiosity about the larger world, open to change and able to make sense and act in ambiguous environments	Well-developed information gathering, filtering, sharing and decision-making processes support collective sense-making	Formalized and fully supported strategic knowledge management (KM) roles and processes linked to key decision makers	Widely shared information and support for specialized sense-making, and interpretation functions
Action-oriented Forward-leaning and open to change, with appropriate tools for quick movement, whether proactively or reactively, alone or collaboratively	Confident and competent in taking the initiative, acting or reacting as necessary, to gain advantage, avoid collisions or minimize setbacks	Shared problem solving, decision making and implementation skills, empowered by key decision makers to act and react quickly	Engaged in strategic boundary management to create, sustain or destroy barriers to action using a broad, array of strategies, tools, and processes	Shared appreciation of a situation and a developed capacity for broad-based collaborative action for sustained impact
Resourceful Creative and innovative in the use of resources with the capacity and skills to attract, deploy and redeploy resources	Entrepreneurial in securing resources, talent and support required to meet a goal, despite setbacks	Well-developed practices and processes that bring out the best thinking and innovative ideas from team members and team supporters	Creative and innovative in how it develops and uses scarce or valuable resources — financial, physical and human	Highly developed processes for attracting, mobilizing and sharing resources from within or outside the group
Networked Built and sustained valued relationships for leveraging opportunity or support when overwhelmed, eliminating the ones posing excessive risks	Positive, active relationships maintained within the immediate family, work group, and community to sustain a sense of connectedness and meaning	Supportive relationships among its own members and other parts of the organization and tightly integrated into the core functioning of the organization	Actively managed relationship networks supported across the organization and with external organizations and groups important to its performance	Collectively maintained and supported relationships, even governing units to manage member relationships, with active linkages to other ecosystems for shared responses

McCann & Selsky, 2012

and taking advantage of opportunities. Purpose provides a basis for critical judgments and sound decisions grounded in the core values and beliefs, so that the ultimate ends are clear and agreed. Debate can then center on the means, or *how* to move forward. Southwest Airlines' early mission statement — to be a “price competitive, commuter and short-haul airline using close-in airports” — is a classic example of clear purpose. It enabled the company's fabled means — “to involve customers and employees in the product and the process, making it a fun, profitable, and quality experience” — to be leveraged for competitive advantage (Putnam, 2009).

Our take on purposefulness follows from such well-known management authors as Peter Senge (1990, 2010), Jim Collins and Jerry Porras (2002), and Stephen Covey (2004). For many of us, the contribution of Victor Frankl is central. In “Man's Search for Meaning” (1959), Frankl made the case for a core sense of purpose as the foundation for surviving the harshest of all conditions, Nazi concentration camps.

Other authors have viewed purpose more as an objective state. Without referencing Frankl, Peter Senge (1990, p. 148) observes: “Real vision cannot be understood in isolation from the idea of purpose. By purpose, I mean an individual's sense of why he is alive.” Similarly, Collins and Porras (2002) stress the fundamental importance of a “core ideology,” consisting of core values and core purpose, and an envisioned future as essential for a positive self-identity. Regardless of whether it is a process or a state, purpose is a foundational capability for mastering turbulence.

Being Purposeful and Well

Purposefulness is undermined and eroded by turbulence. Rapid change and continual disruptions can generate persistently high levels of anxiety and stress, which demands total attention and effort for weeks, months and even years. These exact a toll on individuals, teams and organizations and can even grind down entire ecosystems, such as the American financial regulatory system during the Great Financial Crisis.

Uncertainty and complexity similarly degrade mental performance when sustained for too long. Thanks to the work of evolutionary biologists, neuroscientists and psychologists, we now know much more about the connections among environment, mental performance and behavior. In conventional

psychology, research finds that anxiety leads to depression and defensive responses such as disengagement; dissociation (that is, creation of mental defensive boundaries); denial (often expressed as fantasies and myths about others); and physical withdrawal (such as quitting) (Menzies-Lyth, 1990). Newer research in neuroscience takes a different tack. David Rock notes (2010, p.3): “The threat response is both mentally taxing and deadly to the productivity of a person — or an organization. Because this response uses up oxygen and glucose from the blood, they are diverted from other parts of the brain, including the working memory function, which processes new information and ideas. This impairs analytic thinking, creative

of solid physical conditioning and attention to nutrition. Having a major high-visibility merger almost derail due to the poor health status of an M&A team member is risky for the entire company. We are not suggesting that perfect physical health and nutrition need prevail across the whole company, but management has to be aware of the risks present and actively manage them.

Psychological wellness is partially a function of physical wellness, as the David Rock quote illustrates. It is all about building healthy, high-brain performance that in turn supports cognitive functioning, sense making and appropriate types of emotional response to situations.

We define purposefulness as “thought and supportive action based on a clear sense of purpose and grounded in a positive self-identity and core set of values and beliefs ...”

insight and problem solving; in other words, just when people most need their sophisticated mental capabilities, the brain's internal resources are taken away from them.” Clearly, those kinds of reactions do not support positive identities and purpose.

We therefore believe that being purposeful requires full and equally sustained attention to wellness. Wellness is a concept that has expanded over time to include much more than “health and fitness.” In the United States, escalating health care costs have been a major reason why companies have given increased attention to preventive care. However, high levels of anxiety, stress and depression associated with work have also been recognized as factors in falling employee engagement and productivity. Wellness initiatives are now either already highly developed or being launched in a majority of U.S. companies (McCann, 2013).

Three Forms of Wellness

We define wellness broadly to include physical, psychological and social wellness. Regarding *physical wellness*, our personal experience with senior leadership teams engaged in grueling change initiatives such as mergers has revealed the critical importance

Social wellness recognizes that humans are social animals who require nourishing social contact and relationships in order to be psychologically well. Those relationships are found at work, home and in the community. Research has shown that individuals lacking social wellness experience greater illness, higher death rates and do less well under stress. Going it alone during long periods of high stress is a recipe for burnout and failure.

Being Purposeful Across Levels

At an individual level, being purposeful means maintaining a positive self-concept and a physically and psychologically healthy presence that can sustain him or her in highly ambiguous, stressful and demanding work situations. It also means that the employee develops and maintains positive relationships with others at work, at home and in the community by staying attentive to what is happening to others. These relationships become extremely important just when conditions become the most demanding.

At a team level, team members' values and beliefs support their collaborative work performance. Their values and beliefs are aligned and resonant such that they draw strength and vitality from each other. In a High AR, ➤

purposeful team, no member drags down the team's ability to achieve its work goals because of a lack of wellness.

At the organization level, the leadership team frequently communicates and manifests the company's set of shared values and beliefs within a compelling vision and sustainable concept of the company within society. Stephen Covey (2004) calls this an organization's "significant contribution," and it is essential for employee engagement and self-fulfillment. The company expresses sincere commitment and support for wellness initiatives as one aspect of its pursuit for continuous improvement.

Action-oriented individuals, teams, organizations and ecosystems are capable of intelligently acting alone or collaboratively with others.

For an ecosystem, being purposeful means that a group of organizations shares the belief that their collective efforts yield valuable contributions to each other, the economy and society. As a result, there is a strong, shared sense of legitimacy among its members and stakeholders that affirms their collective sense of purpose and meaning. Together they create what Michael Porter and Ralph Kramer (2011) call "shared value" for themselves and for society. Industry groups such as health care networks, associations like the World Business Council for Sustainable Development, and certain kinds of cross-sector social partnerships are examples (Selsky & Parker, 2005). There is also increasing attention to wellness at an ecosystem level as organizations in some industries and communities with risky health and demographic profiles begin to collaborate with each other to change those profiles (Buettner, 2010).

Four other capabilities flow from being purposeful. Below we describe each briefly based on our recent book (McCann & Selsky, 2012).

Being Aware

Being aware means that individuals, teams, organizations and ecosystems are sensitive to their environments, actively scan and engage in sense-making of what they perceive and experience, and form action hypotheses about the opportunities and risks detected.

They are active learners and open to new ideas to improve their performance. They are not reluctant to experiment with ideas or processes that may be contrary to prevailing wisdom or practice. Because they work hard at making sense of uncertain, ambiguous events and conditions, they tend to operate more effectively. Being aware requires very effective cognitive processes for sense-making at all levels.

At the individual level, how can we expect such open-mindedness and heightened awareness among information overloaded and distressed employees? The natural reac-

tion is to withdraw, not open up to even more information, ambiguity and uncertainty (Staw, Sandelands & Dutton, 1981). As turbulence increases, these abilities need to be nurtured all the more. Encouraging wellness and articulating a strong sense of purpose can help. The High AR aware employee is an active learner with a curiosity about the larger world, able to place events in context and with sufficient meaning to act or react.

High AR aware teams are characterized by having well-developed information gathering, filtering, sharing and decision-making processes that support collective sense-making and continual generation of action options. These processes are embedded in the team's routines and are often linked to sophisticated information technologies and knowledge management platforms that all can access.

Such systems and processes, along with highly developed roles and specialized responsibilities, become even more formalized at the organization level. Examples include strategic planning and scenario building processes and practices, or competitive intelligence units that are constantly scanning and interpreting what is happening. For example, scenario-based planning may be used to test ideas and construct images of alternative futures based upon the ideas and trends percolating through a company's external environments.

An example of being aware at the ecosystem level is companies sharing information across a dispersed value chain to better coordinate their actions. Members of a global supply chain may collaborate continuously to wring costs out of products and manage supply flows. Industry associations or specialized research groups such as The Conference Board or Gartner also perform invaluable scanning, sense-making and interpretation functions for their members.

Being Action Oriented

Being action oriented means having a "forward-leaning" posture and an openness to change made possible with access to appropriate resources — people, systems, processes and structures — for supporting quick movement. Action-oriented individuals, teams, organizations and ecosystems are capable of intelligently acting alone or collaboratively with others. They are strongly predisposed toward execution in the service of purpose.

At the individual level, the High AR action-oriented employee feels competent in taking the initiative, acting or reacting as necessary, to create advantage or avoid a collision with an external event. Action is premeditated and calculated, with full anticipation of both the upside potential and downside risks from acting quickly and decisively.

While some individuals may be powerful enough to decisively impact a situation, those instances are relatively rare. The team is the basic unit of work in the contemporary workplace and core mechanism for executing change. This may be a work team on the shop floor or a C-suite executive team. A High AR action-oriented team has well-developed skills in shared problem solving, decision making and implementation in order to quickly deploy and redeploy all necessary resources. Such a team has access to key decision makers and is empowered to act and react quickly and decisively. Members are cross-trained and "ambidextrous," smoothly introduced and exited because teaming competencies are highly developed (Birkinshaw & Gibson, 2004).

Being action-oriented for organizations means fostering an adaptive design mindset that fundamentally alters how its design is visualized. A firm's design is an expression of its preferred way of adapting to its environments for greatest impact. Organization

design is conventionally viewed as the choices made for grouping or bundling related units of work, such as by function, SBU, project or some hybrid. Now, rethink design as a flexible bundle of capabilities that support specific goals and strategies at a point in time. Being High AR action-oriented means finely tuning the process of identifying needed capabilities, developing and bundling them, and then applying them for maximum impact.

At an ecosystem level, collective action becomes more challenging because each organization has its own unique purpose and different capabilities for moving quickly and sustainably. Central to being action-oriented at this level is a shared appreciation among members of what is happening in their area of common interest and what to do about it together, such as setting up an R&D consortium to develop a next-generation technology platform for the industry. They use mechanisms for building the shared appreciation and supporting communication, such as task forces and search conferences. This enables coordinated, sustained action across ecosystem members (Normann & Ramirez, 1993). Lobbying efforts by trade groups, for example, are often effective at enabling public policy initiatives. Similarly, NGO networks mobilize and deploy tremendous amounts of resources after a natural disaster.

Being resourceful at an individual level means behaving much like an entrepreneur — engaging in the ongoing quest for resources, talent and support to grow a big idea, despite setbacks.

Being Resourceful

Being resourceful at an individual level means behaving much like an entrepreneur — engaging in the ongoing quest for the resources, talent and support to grow a big idea, despite setbacks. Such individuals have the drive to pursue a big idea, drawing upon talent and resources wherever needed.

For teams, being resourceful means utilizing practices and processes that bring out the best thinking and innovative ideas from all team members and others supporting the team. High AR resourceful teams are able to

think and act creatively in both gaining advantage and minimizing setbacks. Group development practices designed to foster team creativity and innovativeness have become common rituals in most knowledge-based companies.

At the organization level, being resourceful means building an innovative mindset and culture. While innovativeness is most often expressed through new products and services, it derives from a company's internal processes and activities. Such a company is creative and improvisational in how it develops and uses financial, physical and human assets. High AR resourceful organizations take what they have at hand and reuse it in novel ways to meet novel circumstances.

At the ecosystem level, being resourceful means that members explore shared issues creatively and craft ways to complement each other's strengths and weaknesses. Mutual assistance is an established practice in a High AR resourceful ecosystem because members share a sense of purpose and a belief that the continued viability and health of its members benefits the whole. This is partly what Michael Porter and Ralph Kramer (2011) call the process of creating "shared value." They may develop elaborate protocols and processes for mobilizing and sharing

resources to support each other and access valuable resources outside the group. Consider the actions of the "too big to fail" banks during the financial crisis.

Being Networked

High AR networked individuals, teams, organizations and ecosystems build and sustain valued relationships for leveraging opportunity and serving as a lifeline when their own capacity is overwhelmed. They can call upon their network of relationships when pushed beyond their own ability to act, but they end relationships that pose excessive risks or costs

to sustain. They balance the value and risks associated with their relationships in deciding when to "go it together" and when to "go it alone."

Being networked as an individual means maintaining positive, active relationships with one's family, work group and community. This provides a sense of engagement and purpose to sustain the person during challenging times.

Being networked at a team level means members sustain positive relationships with other teams and other parts of the company. The team is tightly integrated into the functioning of the company with ready access to key decision makers and the resources members need to act quickly.

At the organization level, relationship networks are supported across all parts and levels of the firm and with external organizations and groups important to its performance. Those relationships are recognized as critically important to take what Rosabeth Kanter (1994) calls "collaborative advantage" of a situation or when the firm is threatened beyond its own ability to respond and only collective action will do.

Managing networks requires constantly managing boundaries and barriers to make sure individuals and teams can work across them to quickly seize opportunities. It also means working to minimize the damage of turbulence by creating or sustaining appropriate boundaries and barriers. Global supply chains and alliances illustrate how companies redefine boundaries and create strategies and tools for managing them.

At the ecosystem level, members maintain relationships supported by associations or groups, perhaps using governing units to regulate member relationships. A High AR networked ecosystem is integrally linked with other ecosystems so that responses can happen to shared situations that demand large scale collaborative action. Ecosystem-level action was evident in the broad-based response to Hurricane Katrina in 2005 in New Orleans, the responses to the events of Sept. 11, 2001, of many sectors such as airlines and energy, and joint actions of the Federal Reserve and other reserve banks during the 2008 financial crisis. Such collaborative endeavors tend to be messy, protracted and uneven in impact, but they create necessary capacity and boundaries at the scale of the damage. ▶

Development Implications of the Framework

In this article, we have attempted to bring into focus the increasingly damaging role that turbulence is having upon individual, team, organization and ecosystem performance. However, performance challenges are not being experienced evenly. No company need be victimized by rapid and disruptive change. Indeed, adaptive capacity — expressed through agility and resiliency — can even create competitive advantage when a company builds the five capabilities we have identified at multiple levels. The 4 x 5 framework in Table 1 identifies 20 targets for capability development and how they should reinforce each other.

No company need be victimized by disruptive change.

The five AR capabilities are an integrated set. AR is greatest when these five capabilities are consonant and aligned across all four levels. Some initiatives to develop High AR obviously require a great deal of time and financial investment, so it is important to establish a strategic plan that addresses those requirements. Working with the 20 intervention targets in the 4 x 5 table as an integrated set, not as isolated silos, is the key. Consider carefully how each of the five capabilities rolls out across levels and how it interacts with the other capabilities.

For example, in our book, Dr. David Hyatt of the University of Arkansas recounts that when Wal-Mart was struggling with intensified stakeholder pressures and consumer concerns in the early 2000s, it announced in late 2005 that large-scale change and innovation would now be driven for sustainability purposes. This refinement in purpose represented a dramatic turn in the company's strategy and arguably reoriented vital aspects of its core purpose. Throughout the following six years, this strategic move cascaded through the company and helped to improve awareness, action orientation, resourcefulness and networking capacity. The sustainability focus in Wal-Mart has yielded major cost savings and helped its entire global supply chain respond more effectively to global change.

The 4 x 5 framework we have outlined in this paper is the first attempt to consider agility and resiliency in an integrative way and the first attempt to operationalize those concepts as specific capabilities human capital executives can use to improve performance during very dynamic conditions. Our book outlines specific responsibilities for different C-suite positions that cannot be explored here for space reasons. However, we argue that the chief human resource officer is in the driver's seat in leading his or her company toward High AR. This is a strategic role and imperative for mastering turbulence. The specific intervention tools needed to do so are not really unique or exceptional. Using them in an integrated, sustained way, guided by a robust conceptual perspective and sense of purpose, is the challenge. **P&S**

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Joseph McCann is principal researcher in The Conference Board. He is co-author with John Selsky of *Mastering Turbulence: The Essential Capabilities of Agile & Resilient Individuals, Teams and Organizations* (Jossey-Bass 2012).

John W. Selsky is associate professor of management at the University of South Florida and co-author of *Mastering Turbulence* and a previous Walker Award author.