In my white paper *Self-Transcendence* I distinguish between being in a state of allowing vs. being in a state of doing. When we allow ourselves to open-up such that we are able to tune-in to the higher frequency energies of the unified field, we are filled with a sense of awe, wonder and clarity about our life’s true mission or purpose, coupled with a renewed passion and commitment to fulfill it. In that state of awareness, we more clearly recognize the limitations of the ego-based self that we have embodied to date. For many, this is a pivotal point in their lives. They are now ready to embrace *ontological design*, a methodology that enables one to re-structure the principles of coherence that constitutes the self, and thereby bring it into alignment with its transcendent state.

The PàVima Institute views the world from the paradigm of transcendence. This perspective enables us to see more clearly how the contracted energy of a paradigm constituted in fear and separation impacts such factors as creativity, innovation, power and identity. Ontological design helps us to shift the observer we are such that we can operate from this new paradigm. It does so through tools and practices that enable us to re-design our identity and our offers to bring them into alignment with the higher frequency energies of the unified field. By designing and immersing ourselves in this new “game” of who we are, we are transformed in the process. In other words, we create a new game, and the new game, in turn, creates us – the transcendent selves we are committed to becoming. This is how ontological design works.

Ontological design is a discourse invented by Fernando Flores, an engineer, entrepreneur, politician, educator, and author of several books including “*Understanding Computers and Cognition: A New Foundation for Design*” with Terry Winograd (1986). In the early 80s, Flores recognized the historical significance of the emerging world of PCs and networks. Working as a researcher at Stanford University while completing his PhD in computer science at UC Berkeley, he made an historical philosophical breakthrough that was neither theoretical nor abstract. His insight was grounded in very practical concerns, namely: software design, management practices, process design, and education. In Flores’ view, most of the difficulties related to productivity, quality, and innovation were rooted in an historical cognitive blindness, a condition of not knowing that we don’t know, about our understanding of work. His critique didn’t target particular management traditions, such as bureaucratic administration, scientific management, rational decision making, or cybernetics. Rather, it was directed at the philosophical underpinning of all of those theories.

Inspired by Hubert Dryfus’ interpretation of Martin Heidegger, by John Serle’s deconstruction of John Austin’s theory of speech acts, and by Umberto Maturana’s biological argument that we humans are constituted in language, Flores claimed that our understanding of work missed one fundamental component: *a phenomenology of action*. It sounded simple, but his claim challenged our historical assumptions about management, our criteria for organizational development, and the principles of software design. In short, he claimed that the essence of work is communication, specifically engaging in conversations that engender commitments,
and that commitment always occurs in the listening of the participants. In effect, his reinterpretation of work put language and human coordination at the center of this new perspective.

REALITY AND LANGUAGE

In my paper *The Evolution of the Brain*, I make the a priori argument that we human beings are, in essence, linguistic beings in that we are constituted in language. This means that, unless we can consciously resonate with the higher frequency energies of the unified field, reality is based mostly in language. In other words, we can only express what language allows us to express since reality shows up within a linguistic clearing. We observe whatever we observe according to our traditions, our distinctions, and our concerns. These are all linguistic phenomena. For example, without the distinction “computer”, I cannot observe a computer. I may see an object with differences in color, shape and structure, but not a computer. Similarly, Eskimos have more distinctions for snow than most people have. The difference is not biological. They have different distinctions based on different concerns for survival and living. Therefore, the question “How many kinds of snow are there?” only makes sense within a certain tradition of distinctions.

It is important to see our distinctions as distinctions and not just as names that things have. Things don’t have names. We, as linguistic beings, give them names, and the process of giving them names often constitutes them as things. By making distinctions, we specify the units and entities that populate our world. We cannot observe something for which we don’t have a distinction. This is why I say that we see with our eyes, but we observe with our distinctions. People with different sets of distinctions live in different worlds, or as the great Austrian philosopher Ludwig Wittgenstein said, “You cannot enter any world for which you do not have the language.” Therefore, it is necessary to understand how language constitutes significant dimensions of our reality. Social realities are normally linguistically generated. We go to war because we hold certain interpretations; we fall in love and build our relationships and marriages out of stories that we make in language; we play power games such as politics from our capacity to generate new realities through language; and we develop our identities as stories about ourselves.

THE GENERATIVE VS. THE DESCRIPTIVE PROPERTIES OF LANGUAGE

Language is not just a mere description of reality -- a passive picture of something that already exists. Language is action. When we speak we act. Language generates reality and action through speech acts: requests, offers, promises, assertions, declarations and assessments. By saying something we can generate new realities. For instance, after receiving the verdict of “guilty” or “innocent”, one’s future actions are modified. The rigor and mastery with which one engages these speech acts determines how effectively one will coordinate future action because each speech act is a commitment in language. In this way, we intervene in the drift of life. Because something was or was not said, no matter how insignificant it may appear to be, life is transformed, our possibilities change, the future is affected, and the drift of life itself is modified. In this respect, language is not just words. Language is what allows us to have a future and allows us to have a past. Language allows us to make observations. There is no tomorrow without language. There is no yesterday without language. By acting in language we produce a world of distinctions, actions and interpretations that were not there before, but that form the social reality that we live in from then on.
Therefore, the kind of observers we are is based upon the language of distinctions in which we live. Flores refers to any such set of distinctions as an ontology. Thus, ontological design constitutes a new ontology (a language of distinctions) that Flores created so that we can become different observers and, therefore, more powerful actors in the world, and agents of our lives. In short, he invented a new phenomenology of action as expounded in his 1982 doctoral thesis entitled Management and Communication in the Office of the Future. His new ontology formed the basis for his insights and writings about managing networks of conversations, the linguistic ontology of organizations, conversations for action, conversations for possibilities, ontological reconstruction of discourses, team leadership, strategy, and the importance of cognitive moods and emotions in eliciting commitments.

THE ONTOLOGY OF LANGUAGE

When we call something ontological we are referring to our interpretation of those constitutive elements that we all share as human beings and make us the kind of beings that we are. Mastering the ontology of language is not a technique for classifying how we and others speak, nor is it simply a better method of communication. That makes it trivial and shallow. Rather, it is a way of being in the world in which we are a stand for dignity, integrity and authenticity. Our beingness and how we act are one. People who approach it as a “technique” are stuck in the modern (as distinct from post-modern) paradigm of knowledge as a process of “acquiring” information and then “applying” it. As a result, our beingness is separate from our doing-ness.

To overcome this cognitive blindness, Flores founded Logonet Inc., and proceeded to assemble a diverse team that included computer scientists, biologists, physicians, philosophers, politicians and a variety of business professionals. Together they created the Ontological Design Course to serve as a laboratory for leadership development and innovation based on networked social practices which, in turn, would have a profound impact on redesigning or reinventing the selves that we are committed to becoming in a post-modern networked world.

TRANSFORMATIVE TECHNOLOGIES

Ontological design harkens back to an adage coined by Marshall McLuhan during the advent of television when he declared, “the medium is the message”. In effect, McLuhan is proposing that the medium (e.g. television) itself, not the content it carries, should be the focus of study. He argued that a medium affects the society in which it plays a role, not only by the content it delivers, but also by the characteristics of the medium itself. McLuhan further argues that the content of a transformative technology is usually viewed at its inception as an improvement over existing technologies. Computers, for instance, were named as such because they were seen as more advanced calculators. In other words, the initial content of a transformative technology is usually drawn from the technology it will ultimately supplant. For example, the content of television when it first arrived on the scene was drawn from radio. I call it a transformative technology because it is ushering in a new paradigm, although that is not obvious at first.

Flores, on the other hand, is a visionary because he recognized years before the advent of the internet, and decades before FaceBook, MySpace, LinkedIn, and Twitter appeared on the scene that computers were
not just accounting and scientific calculating devices; they were transformers of communication. To that end, in the mid-80s he formed Action Technologies, a software company in Silicon Valley that developed the first ever e-mail program. He named it The Coordinator because it organized office life around linguistic distinctions. An e-mail message had to be explicitly labeled as a “request” or an “offer,” and a meeting added to employees’ electronic calendars would be termed a “conversation for action” or a “conversation for possibilities,” depending on the intent. All of these actions were synchronized and linked across the network so people could easily coordinate scheduling and other details. This novel feature would eventually become a common function in e-mail and scheduling programs like Microsoft Outlook. Thus, The Coordinator was one of the world’s first social networking software applications.

The Coordinator is a transformative technology because we are transformed simply by using it, and that use, in turn, allows us to envision applications that could not be seen before we engaged with it. In other words, we build the tools and the tools, in turn, build us. This is ontological design. Blind to this understanding, many people today view language simply as one of the many “tools” that man has at his disposal. They see language as something that humans “have” that they may then “use” or “apply”. This way of viewing us and the world we inhabit is blind to the process of ontological design. Language may have started as a “tool” that homo sapiens developed, but through recurrent interactions over millennia, it slowly shaped and eventually constituted who and what we are as an embodied way of being. Costica Bradatan says it best by observing, “Just as you grow into the world, the world grows into you. Not only do you occupy a certain place, but that place, in turn, occupies you. Its culture shapes the way you see the world, its language informs the way your think, its customs structure you as a social being”.

I participated in the Ontological Design Course, and was coached by Flores and his team for six years while I was the CEO and co-founder of a company that manufactured interior products for business jets. By incorporating the principles and practices of ontological design, my team and I re-designed our approach to manufacturing. Specifically, we organized the entire workforce into multi-disciplinary, systems-based, product teams. We also incorporated team-based compensation coupled with extensive education, training and coaching. The results were dramatically shortened manufacturing cycle times, accelerated innovation, improved quality and customer service, and increased profitability in a system that abandoned the use of time clocks, and did not employ foremen or supervisors to monitor performance. Thus, we shifted the wage-labor paradigm by infusing a spirit of entrepreneurism throughout the workforce by fostering ambition, self-esteem, dignity and pride of ownership, while increasing real wages for all employees well above the industry standard. These results culminated in our selection by Inc. magazine as one of the Best Small Companies to Work for in America.