STARTING WHEN WE TURN UP
Consulting from a Complex Responsive Process Perspective

By Professor Bill Critchley and Hartmut Stuelten. Draft in preparation for publication

1. THE PURPOSE OF THIS ARTICLE: A RADICAL REFRAME OF THE WORK OF ORGANISATIONAL CONSULTANTS

Our intention in writing this article is not simply to make a philosophical or academic point, but to offer to fellow consultants a very practical and badly needed alternative view of organisations and of working with organisational change. To this end we make a bold, yet simple claim based on the observable phenomena of human bodies in interaction, such as sweating, breathing, gesturing towards, and mutually affecting one other. Our claim is that organisations are exactly that - human beings in an ongoing process of communicative interaction. In other words, organisations are not *things that can be worked on*, but *a participative process of interaction*.

Indeed the very noun, organisation, is misleading, because our contention is that what we really find when we take our experience seriously and inquire rigorously into this phenomenon we call 'organisation', is a continuously evolving process of organising. Although we shall continue to use the word organisation, because not to do so would become a rather tortuous avoidance of common parlance, we are strictly speaking being inconsistent with our advocacy. Nevertheless we do think it is important to change our habitual ways of thinking and talking about organisations as if they are 'things'. More fundamentally we think it is important and timely to exchange today's conventional, positivist philosophy, a perspective that abstracts from what is really going on in organisational life, for a perspective that is focused on and grounded in the lived experience of being part of the organising process. We believe this reframe offers a fundamental challenge to the conventional way of understanding the nature of organisations and thus provides a very useful alternative approach to organisational consulting practices which we will examine in detail in this article.

We intend to offer a radical view of the process of consulting which deconstructs the conventional sequence of consulting activities, starting with diagnosis, then moving forward to prescription and implementation, and challenges the prevalent way of thinking about consulting as an analytical and objective process of problem identification and solution. We re-conceptualise consulting as an emergent process of participative inquiry, privileging social process, relationship, shared meaning making and reflective practice.

2. THE POSITIVIST PERSPECTIVE: THE FALLACY OF LINEAR DYNAMICS

Before we explore the theory of complex responsive processes that informs our reframe of the work of organisational consultants, we want to briefly look at the conventional, positivist stance from which organisations are predominantly understood today, that is, how the following chain of (often unconscious) assumptions borrowed from scientific and engineering thinking has lead to a linear, and in our experience inaccurate, *if this – then that* view of organisations.

    A. An organisation is a *whole* made up of various parts (e.g. strategy, processes, functions, people, and infrastructure) that need to complement each other and be aligned accurately with each other in order for the organisation to function as effectively and efficiently as possible. Because the parts can be controlled, control of the organisation is generally possible.

    B. Since control is possible, an organisation can be steered towards desired, predictable business outcomes.

    C. This steering is performed by the organisation's managers; it starts at *the top* of the organisation and *cascades downwards*.

    D. These managers ensure the achievement of the organisation's purpose by developing effective visions, strategies, systems, processes, and tools that are implemented by the people working *within* the organisation.

In our view this way of thinking about organisations is flawed. Why is this important? It is important because it leads us into the habit of treating categories, such as the category 'organisation', 'manufacturing', or 'marketing', and concepts such as 'strategy' or 'change' as if they are forms of pre-existing structure in organisational life which are real and constrain and determine our social interactions. We lose sight of the fact that they are social constructions, symbols for describing similarities, themes and patterns in the ways we choose to organise our interactions. In our view, they do not really exist in any embodied, real sense, but are only the collective meaning we make of themes and patterns which emerge over time as norms of behaviour, habits of thought and action, and as such they are consequences of our history of interaction rather than determinates of it.

In thinking of them as the natural order and characteristics of an organisation, managers (and consultants) unconsciously construct their role as architects, or designers, whose main role is to 'build' an organisation 'fit for purpose', and then to 'drive' and control it, to optimise its performance. Many managers and consultants have become increasingly dissatisfied with these conventional theories and explanations of organisational life because they are finding that the expectations which this way of thinking imposes (such as being able to predict the future, determine a rational strategy, fully comprehend from an objective perspective the workings of their organisation, to align and attune it, to come up with the 'right' answers to complex problems and so forth) is completely unrealistic and extremely stressful because these expectations and theories fail to resonate with and make sense of their actual, everyday lived experience.

3. THE COMPLEX RESPONSIVE PROCESS PERSPECTIVE: A RADICAL REFOCUSSING OF ATTENTION

In the last few years this dissatisfaction has lead some management theorists towards complexity theory as a potential source of new insight into our experience of organisations. The complexity science perspective provides a rigorous and challenging, but also liberating and useful way of thinking, which, while offering no prescriptions or easy 'recipes' has profound implications for management, and hence consulting practice.

Complexity theory is radical in that it proposes a new ontology, one that shocked the scientific community when the first inklings of it began to emerge in the early part of this century. In essence, it proposes that order emerges out of chaos without any external design agency. This is different from Darwin's theory of evolution with its competitive emphasis on 'fitness' and 'adaptation'. One of the main insights that emerged from the work of complexity scientists is that order in the form of **pattern**, emerges naturally through the interaction of competition **and** collaboration, order and disorder **at the same time.** As Stuart Kauffman put it in his book, *At Home in the Universe* (1996) "order emerges for free". Such a way of seeing inevitably has major implications for society, religion, politics, and potentially, organisations. If no external design agency is required for order to emerge, then what is the role of the manager in organisations?

The key question is whether these insights from the natural sciences can be translated into the social field, and it would seem that some of the principles, like the principles of 'self-organisation', 'emergence' and 'pattern formation' offer some important new insights into the nature of organisations and hence management and consulting practice.

However we need to proceed with caution. In the same way that assuming organisations are synonymous with machines has led us into some of our current misconceptions, so, assuming that the properties of complex systems in nature can also be attributed to organisations, we may be making a similar mistake. When managers talk of "re-engineering" an organisation, they are making the perceptual mistake of assuming that organisations are machines. An organisation is clearly not a machine, nor is it the machinery, the buildings, the brand(s), the logo and so forth; it is not any one of these artefacts of organisation. If one were to refer to an organisation's DNA, one would be making a similar mistake of assuming that organisations are biological organisms. An organisation does not reside or exist anywhere in a material sense. It may be useful in certain circumstances to think of organisations **as if** they were organisms or machines, as systems theorists do, so long as we remain aware of the 'as if' nature of our hypothesising. So we would be making the same type of category error if we were to assume that organisations are 'complex adaptive systems' as found in nature.

There is a fundamental distinction between natural phenomena, which have an existence independent of human existence, and social phenomena which emerge through human beings' interaction with one another and with their environment. Whilst many natural phenomena can be reduced to a mathematical abstract, (and this, as stated earlier has its place in manufacturing and engineering) such thinking is not appropriate to the study of the complexities of human social intercourse.

In contrast to the theories about organisations based on mechanistic, systems, biological or complexity *science*, the theory of complex responsive processes of relating developed by Stacey, Griffin, Shaw, and several of their colleagues offer us a theory of 'Complex Responsive Processes of Relating' which is a synthesis of sociology, psychology and some analogies from complexity theory, which offers us a radically different perspective on the nature of organisations, which, as we said in the introduction to this article, seems much closer to our lived experience (Stacey, Griffin and Shaw, 2002; Stacey, 2003; Stacey, 2005; Fonseca, 2001; Streatfield, 2001; Shaw, 2002; Griffin, 2002; Griffin and Stacey, 2005). They define organisations as *processes of ongoing, self-organising patterning of communicative interaction of people in their local situation in the present moment*.

. The term 'organisation' is a 'social construction'; it is a mental construct created in the meanings people make together, some formalised in brands, logos, contracts of employment, and some negotiated in the informal conversations which are the stuff of organisational life. It is not held by any one individual but is constantly being re-created through the conversations and interactions that people experience together. This is a process view of organisation which argues that an organisation, unlike natural phenomena, has no essential qualities, nothing that makes it an object in its own right worthy of a noun 'organisation' to describe it.

We will now review the main propositions which flow from this perspective, before going on to the specific implications for organisation consultants.

"We are all participants"
An organisation is not a fixed entity or thing, but a constant, self-referencing process of gestures and responses between people. The members of this process of organising are all **participants** in creating a social process which continuously evolves into an unknown future. We cannot, by definition, get outside it; as participants we simultaneously create and are created by the process of engaging together in joint action. You ask your subordinate to do something, and she responds in some way which will inevitably be informed by her values, assumptions, preconceptions and interpretations of your 'gesture'. She will not respond like a robot; she will make her own meaning of your request.

Mead described this process of communicative interaction rather succinctly. He said "The meaning of the gesture is in the response". He used the word 'gesture' to mean any communicative move, verbal or physical, towards another. While as humans we gesture with intention – for example I want to convey some information to you, ask you to do something, scare you, convince you or whatever - it is only in your response that the 'meaning' of the interaction emerges. Imagine that I move to shake your hand at the end of a quarrel, but you respond to it as an aggressive gesture and move away, and I run after you……. so in a series of gestures and responses, patterns of meaning emerge. This is a spontaneous dance of meaning-making in which neither party can predict the other's response. They can anticipate but not predict, and in a conversation of gestures during which each party is well attuned to the other, the gesturer will be modifying her gesture even as she gestures and notices the respondent's shift in expression, or body posture.

The interactions that we have with each other simply create more interactions. Our interactions do not add up to a *whole* because they continuously evolve. Neither is any stable or bigger *thing* behind peoples' interactions. There is not *the company* that does something to people: there are only individual people relating to each other. Managers may perceive themselves as standing 'objectively', outside of *the system* in order to work *on it*, but this is an illusion, as there is no system to be outside. Power differentials are of course constructed between manager and subordinate, but there is no *away from* the constant process of relating; we are all participants in it all of the time. We are not standing outside of the river watching it go by; we are swimming in the river being part of its constant flow by forming it and at the same time being formed by it.

People in organisations (and, of course, in society at large) achieve very complex tasks by coordination and cooperation which is possible due to our ability to communicate with each other through language and other symbols (e.g. bodily gestures, writing). Thus, the organisation is not a purposeful *entity that enables* this joint action, but the joint action itself *is* the organisation (Stacey, Griffin and Shaw 2002, p. 187).

"Patterns emerge without a master plan"
Although no grand master plan exists, through the multitude of local interactions overall patterns emerge. In other words, although no one is in overall control of the totality of people's local interactions overall behavioural patterns emerge. Complex responsive process theory calls this phenomenon *self-organisation* and *emergence*.

Self-organising patterns of interaction of people in their local situation are paradoxical due to their nature of no one being in control. As soon as we relate to another person, we form that relationship and at the same time are formed by it, thus we constrain and enable others in our relating to them and are constrained and enabled by them at the same time. The complex responsive process perspective draws our attention to the *paradoxical* nature of social interaction, a paradox being a self-contradictory statement about a situation (namely one that constrains and enables simultaneously) containing conflicting states which cannot be eliminated or resolved, only held in awareness.

"Being in Charge but not in control"
One important implication of the paradoxical nature of organisational life is that managers are seen as being *in charge*, while being at the same time *not in control*. Managers have to act with intention on the expectation of a particular outcome, at the same time knowing that this specific outcome will not materialise exactly as intended, requiring them to be ready for whatever the outcome will be. This simultaneous knowing of one's intention while not knowing the consequences of one's action generates much, usually undisclosed, anxiety, given that most managers and consultants are expected to deliver specific, pre-determined outcomes. This presents one of the most fundamental challenges for managers living within a deterministic paradigm where the assumption of linear dynamics of cause and effect still predominates, and why we believe that coming to understand the non-linear dynamics of complex processes would have such a liberating and normalising effect on management practice.

"Stability and instability at the same time"
Patterns of gesture and response are of course mediated by cultural norms and language rules which enable some degree of shared meaning to be arrived at quite quickly and provide some sense of stability; but in a complex exchange, some misunderstandings and different interpretations will also occur at the same time – this the norm rather than the exception. In organisations, rules about how things are to be done, custom and practice, and organisational norms also have a similar stabilising effect, but we begin to understand that this emergent process of communicative interaction is inherently predictable and unpredictable at the same time, and hence uncontrollable in the way that scientific management and systems theorists have assumed. This has major implications for the way leaders and consultants think about the nature of organisational change. The complexity perspective challenges managers to act in the knowledge that they have no control, only influence. They can advocate and aspire, and they can anticipate, but not predict. There are no absolute truths, only ethical decisions to be made in the here and now

"Talking is powerful action"
If organisations are **processes of communicative interaction,** then 'conversation' in its broadest sense, is the primary organisational process. This process of conversation organises itself by narrative themes that appear in a multitude of different forms, such as meeting agendas, discussions, rumours, norms and so forth, and sometimes cohere over time into implicit and explicit values, which themselves may constellate into ideologies. Since the organisation *is* the patterns of people's conversations, *the organisation* changes as the conversations that people have with each other and thus the power relations between them change. This notion challenges the traditional way of thinking about communication as the transfer of information from one brain to another (rather like digital data is copied from one computer to another), and instead sees communication as a dynamic and non-linear process whereby meaning arises in the process of interaction, being negotiated and constructed in a way that enables the possibility of novelty, or 'learning' to emerge.

Therefore, what people talk and do not talk about in organisations and who is included in and excluded from these conversations and hence the 'patterning' of conversation is of paramount importance to organisational change.

"Deviance creates movement"

Much conventional management theory speaks of the need for alignment, but contrary to this received wisdom, it is through misunderstanding, contention, and a certain amount of messiness that novelty (and hence innovation) emerges. If we all had the same view all of the time then nothing new would emerge. If we would have the same conversation about the same theme based on the same view, we would most likely never discover anything new. Novelty emerges from diversity. Complex responsive process theory, therefore, places a high value on diversity and at the same time sees too much diversity as counterproductive to any kind of joint action.

A metaphor might bring this point to life; a river only flows if there is a difference in elevation of the landscape through which the river flows. If there is no difference, you have a lake, not a river; you have stability, not movement. But at the same time, if the elevation is too steep or too abrupt, you have a waterfall and not a river. In other words, if the differences are too big, no constructive joint action is possible. By amplifying or introducing differences, existing patterns are disturbed and new ones have the possibility to emerge; however, which new ones cannot be predicted. Introducing consultants into an organisation is one way of introducing difference and this provides a useful segue into the next section of our article.

5. IMPLICATIONS FOR THE ROLE OF CONSULTANT

MAJOR SHIFTS IN HOW WE CONCEIVE THE ROLE OF CONSULTANT
The role of the organisation consultant in this new paradigm is neither an easy nor a comfortable one, but it is intellectually and emotionally challenging. In our work, as we are re-defining it, we sometimes make a real difference, which is extremely satisfying, and sometimes the effects of our involvement are more equivocal. It is however, difficult to know at the time whether we are being useful or not, which is a problem in the face of the prevailing expectation that we evaluate each step in the change process and that we contract for specific outcomes before we have even begun.

We see three major shifts in our role as a consequence of taking this perspective.

First shift; from intervener to participative inquirer
The first is from the role of *intervener,* to the role of a *participative inquirer.* Intervention implies that we intervene as neutral outsiders into an organisation, with an objective to change something from x to y through a series of planned steps. The complexity perspective challenges us to re-think our role as an objective and impartial observer; rather we **participate** in an organisation, bringing our own beliefs and prejudices and affecting the organisation by our very **presence**. The concept of presence assumes considerable importance from this perspective, implying that our 'way of being with' our clients, the quality of our connection and contact is as, if not more important than any technical knowledge or skill we possess; and of course we participate with **intention**, and we say more about this later in this paper, but we see this intention in its broadest sense as being in service of provoking a process of inquiry.

Second shift; from positivist action to relational engagement
The second shift is one from *positivist* action to *relational engagement.* Positivist action assumes that organisations have some intrinsic realities, such as hierarchy, structure, strategies, rules, procedures and so forth, and that improving, changing or 're-engineering these are the focus of a conventional consulting intervention. If we understand organisation as a process of communicative interaction then we shift our focus onto the patterns and quality of this interactive process and our way of engaging and relating in them.

Third shift; from solution to transformation
The third and related shift is from a solution-orientated practice based on linear causal assumptions, to one which acts into an emergent and unpredictable process of 'transformation'. Consultants have traditionally been brought in to solve a problem which the client is unable to solve, or to provide some expertise which the organisation lacks. The expectation is that the consultant leads the organisation 'out of the wilderness' into 'the promised land'.   This implies a role for the consultant in which current problems are highlighted, and a better future defined, with the means to achieve it, through a rational planning process that assembles and connects the right parts and the right intelligence. The implication is of active intervention and passive response, also of preconceived solutions, and accompanying methodologies.

It is difficult to let go of the underlying positivist assumptions that lead us to this view of organisations as malfunctioning machines that may be restored to regularity through clockwork logic. However, the complexity perspective challenges us to let go of our image of ourselves as saviours, bearers of best practice or finely tuned analytical solutions, and to become participants and designers of opportunities for people to explore the organisation issues for themselves, to make their own meaning and to take thoughtful action in the knowledge that outcomes are unpredictable.

6. THE PRACTICE OF ORGANISATION CONSULTING
The complexity perspective conceptualizes an 'organisation', not as an entity but as a **process** of communicative interaction. We need to constantly remind ourselves that this is a fundamental shift in thinking. This process both uses and creates artifacts (machinery, products etc), but these do not constitute the organisation.

Communicative interaction consists in all gestures which have communicative intent or communicative effect, and hence it includes more than verbal communication; it includes any form of 'gesture' towards the other, and such gestures range from small physical or vocal moves between individuals, to large- scale gestures such as the

issue of value statements or re-structuring as a gesture from senior management to the organisation at large. For all practical purposes we can characterize this process of communicative interaction as a 'conversation', so that when we turn up, we can think about what we are doing as participating in an on-going conversation, or as Shaw puts it **'**Changing the Conversation in Organisations' (ref)

So we are using this term 'conversation' in its broadest sense to describe the dynamic process of communicative interaction, which is patterned by power dynamics, themes, norms and values which have emerged over time, and as consultants we are both enabled and constrained by these patterns. So an essential orientation of an organisation consultant is to be curious and interested in these patterns, to pay attention to their own experience of engaging with them, and as we act into them, to notice what responses we provoke, and how we experience them. Of course we can never know them or understand them fully, but as we arrive freshly into a situation, we will be more attuned to noticing difference.

The following section takes a look at what this way of understanding the phenomenon of organisation life might mean in practice for the consultant.

Consulting as a participative act
It is best to get out of our heads the conventional idea that we start with contracting, then we do some diagnosis, then some planning, then some implementation and so forth. Consulting starts when we turn up; it starts when we first **join** the on-going process of communicative interaction which **is** what we mean when we shorthand this process with the noun, 'organisation'. Our first 'gestures' calls forth some response; we are already making some kind of difference, albeit a small one, so even when we arrive at what we call a 'sales' or business development meeting, the consulting process of engaging with the organisation has begun. We have asserted that we can no longer think of the consultant as objective diagnostician, and of consulting as a series of sequential steps, each one a necessary precursor to the next. So how then do we think about what we are doing when we turn up?

We think of consulting as consisting in four core processes, of **engaging, inquiring, experimenting** and **learning,** and these are **all** going on all of the time. For that reason it does not really make sense to separate them out and attempt to describe them individually, but writing is a paradoxical business! Frequently we are attempting to articulate in rational terms something which may be largely intuitive and non-rational, and to lay out in a linear form an essentially non-linear process. Nevertheless we have set ourselves the task of accounting for our craft, and as with the practice of consulting itself, we have to learn to work with paradox. So we will attempt to explicate each of these processes in a way which we hope will be practical and accessible.

Engaging
We use this term to mean that, whatever else we are doing, we are entering into a **relationship** with other people. This puts relationship at the forefront of our consciousness, or to use a Gestalt term, makes it 'figural' in our practice. It is through relationship, in our experience, that change occurs, and this view is, incidentally, now endorsed by research carried out in the fields of both psychotherapy, (quote) and coaching where the findings consistently suggest that it is the quality of relationship which is the major determining factor in outcome rather than particular techniques or methods.

We usually refer to these people with who we engage, as our 'clients', and many of our colleagues talk about engaging with 'the system'. The danger with this terminology is that it tends to de-personalise them as individuals, and reify the organisation. Once we lose sight of the essential truth that consulting is a social process and that we are relating to individual people in their context, we are likely to become instrumental in our practice, which is indeed how most conventional consulting is conceptualized and what we would see as its major deficiency. If on the other hand we assume that the quality of the relationships we create is probably the single most important factor contributing to the 'success' of any consulting project we will pay a great deal of attention to it.

We can think of this process of engaging, as we described above, as a series of gestures and responses. For example, if we are called to a meeting to discuss a problem with which we have been asked to help, there are a range of 'gestures' we could make. We could choose to make a power-point presentation offering our view of the problem and a method for resolving it, or we could choose to start by inviting people to say how they experience the problem, and facilitating an inquiry. These are completely different kinds of gesture which will evoke very different responses, and very different sorts of relational dynamics; the first focuses on the problem, constructs it as an objective reality, and privileges the consultant's expertise, while the second focuses on

people's experience of the problem, assumes there will be different perceptions, and privileges a form of social interaction as a means of exploring the problem.

The second gesture is 'relational' in its intention, and is informed by the notion of 'organisation' as a dynamic social process, while the first is more instrumental in intention, and is informed by a linear diagnostic perspective. Taking a relational approach requires us always to think first of the **process** of engagement, and then to pay attention to the emerging patterns of gesture and response, because it is in this process that meaning is made and action emerges. It also requires us to be continuously aware of the nature of our **presence.** By this we mean the way in which we impact on people through the quality of our attention, our capacity to listen, the congruence between what we espouse and how we actually interact, and so on.

Inquiring
First of all we need to clearly distinguish between the kind of **i**nquiry we are proposing, from the kind of **e**nquiry a police force might conduct into a crime, or an audit office into malpractice. The latter usage (more usually spelt with an 'e') implies a truth to be uncovered, while we use the term very differently, to mean **a participative process of exploration**. The two meanings of the word, both used in relation to social phenomena, denote fundamentally different world views. One assumes that there is some absolute reality to be discovered, usually located in the efficacy of structural arrangements, and the logic of cause and effect, while the other sees social process as dynamic and non-linear (human bodies affect and are affected **at the same time**). We have described these fundamental differences earlier in this article.

We are defining the term in relation to our consulting practice very specifically, to imply on the one hand a particular **stance**, and on the other to describe the discipline, or **methodology** of organisation consulting. As a stance it implies an orientation towards listening, exploring and making sense **with** our clients in a way which does not privilege our meaning making over theirs. It also implies paying rigorous attention to our own experience, not just in the moment of interaction but also to our assumptions, prejudices, value dispositions and motivations prior to engaging, and then how these inform us during the course of the work. This is what we call the discipline of reflective practice.

As far as a methodology is concerned, we have argued above that consultants **join an ongoing conversation**, which does not sound much like a methodology! An ongoing conversation, by definition does not have a beginning or an end, and it is helpful for consultants to be mindful of the fact that they always turn up in the middle of something, and in our conception of the consulting process we are trying to dismantle much of the instrumental, predictive, formal structuring which usually surrounds consulting interventions. In theory we could broadly say that our approach to consulting is to 'join the on-going conversation and work with what emerges', but it seems self-evident to us that this is not sufficient. We need to offer the client the security of some structure, not least so that they can satisfy the formal requirements of procurement and budgeting, but also so that they can provide to their colleagues sufficient sense of the purpose, timescale and nature of the consulting intervention.

We need a way of marking our involvement as consultants, of mapping for our clients what it might look like, of delineating what we are paid for. We therefore intend to use the term 'living inquiry' to denote a methodological form which gives some structure to the process of consulting and conveys some sense of the spirit and nature of our engagement. This form broadly describes a number of phases, and while we are aware that this is somewhat artificial (once again we run into the problem of spurious linearity), we think it is necessary and useful.

The methodology is an overarching one and embraces the other core processes. So first and foremost it means that we are going to *engage* with you (the client) in a participative process of exploration. Being very pragmatic, most consulting assignments are initiated by some framing, by the client, of a problem or an area for improvement/development or change, so the first **phase** of the inquiry can be conceived as the 'framing' and contracting phase consisting, broadly speaking, of an exploration of what the consultant and client are going to do together (of course we are all familiar with being asked to 'deliver' some 'result' or defined 'outcome', but persuading our client that this is not a sensible form of contract is a pre-requisite of working from this perspective).

Phase one segues into phase two as this initial conversation broadens into a wider engagement, increasing the number of people involved in the inquiry (or conversation), and phase three consists of the process of making meaning of the exploration, of noticing what themes are emerging which seem to be configuring the conversations. Of course phases two and three are to a large extent synchronous, but often some form of more

formal coordinating event is needed, where all 'stakeholders' are brought together to make meaning of what is emerging.

Experimenting
Phase four consists in experimenting (clients like to call this 'implementation' or 'delivery'!). Of course the separation between inquiring and experimenting is entirely spurious. A robust inquiry **changes the conversation** and hence new kinds of 'activity' emerge. However we are so steeped in the belief that thought precedes action that it is hard to convince our clients that the inquiry **is** the change process. So it is helpful to symbolise an activity phase which is usually characterised by the forming of groups (often labeled change groups or task groups etc) to 'progress' various 'initiatives'. These are in effect extensions of the inquiry process configured around particular themes; the most important thing is that they do not collapse the spirit of the inquiry into an over-elaborate linear planning process and are perceived as experimenting and learning, thus maintaining the fluid and emergent nature of the process.

Learning
The 'final' phase is learning and review. Once more we want to emphasise that reflecting and learning is happening all the time, as all these phase activities are happening simultaneously, but again it is helpful to signal some formal way of reviewing the effects and experience of the inquiry as a punctuation in the conversational life of the organisation, and attempt some collective reflection on themes which have emerged through the inquiry.

The forms of inquiry
As a postscript we want to articulate what we see as the main forms which organisation consultants tend to contract with the organisation in order to legitimise their presence in the organisation and to generate inquiry:

- Legitimised chance encounter.
  This is, in effect 'consulting by walking around' and engaging with informal conversations as you encounter them. Positioning yourself in this role requires, paradoxically, careful thought and planning, in the way you set it up with your client, who will need to be fairly senior, how it is communicated around the organisation, and how you actually initiate encounters and participate in conversations. Shaw is one of the best known exponents of this approach (quote)
- Joining extant meetings, e.g. management team meetings, project groups, task groups etc.
  While this is easier, you still have to search out the meetings and contract with their sponsors, and persuade them that your presence will be potentially useful
- Convening one-on-one conversations
  This is such a familiar form that it is easy to set them us as matter of course without thinking through their purpose. It is all too easy for them to become diagnostic meetings where you find yourself as recipients of a cathartic download, and sole arbiters of meaning. This casts you in the conventional role of diagnostician and feedback giver. We tend to position one-on-one conversations as part of a conversational process in which we presume that one conversation will trigger others, and we therefore do **not** make the usual confidentiality agreements
- Convening meetings to explore topics
  This can be done informally around emerging themes, or more formally. Most of us are familiar with the demand to facilitate formal events around pre-determined topics. Sometimes their prescriptive nature makes it almost impossible to conduct a genuine inquiry, but more often than not we can 'design' the event so as to facilitate a sense of living inquiry
- Large group meetings
  Large group meetings are becoming a popular form in the field of Organisation Development, and there are many well known methods (Open Space future search etc), but they need care in how they are set up, how the purpose is framed, how participants are enrolled, who is included and who excluded and so forth. There is a tendency in our view for methodological prescription to overwhelm the spirit of inquiry.

7. PERSONAL CHALLENGES OF WORKING FROM THIS PERSPECTIVE

The Challenge of Acting with Intention while being unable to predict outcome
The single greatest challenge is to let go of our attachment to predictable outcomes, of making promises to our clients that we will 'deliver' specific results. This is very hard because clients are conditioned to expect defined

results which can be measured in some way. However what we have been suggesting or implying throughout this article that as social processes are dynamic and non-linear we cannot in good faith predict a clear linear relationship between action and outcome. We are suggesting that this is life, whether we like it or not. As we write this article we hear that Benazir Bhutto has been assassinated, and we read the pundits on what may be the likely consequences, but on one thing they are all in agreement, nobody knows. One pundit writes on the history of assassinations and how they have changed the world but always in unexpected ways, and rarely in the way the assassins intended.

So it is with consulting interventions, albeit on a smaller stage. This first challenge gives rise to an even greater challenge; we have to ask ourselves how we think about what we are doing; how we account for our activity, to ourselves, to our clients and to the wider context. This is both a practical question and an ethical one. On the practical question we need to satisfy our client that our involvement will be in service of something that can crudely be describes as 'better'. Examples might be fostering innovation, enabling change, or helping to bring people together around some shared sense of purpose; these are all examples of 'process' aims, as opposed to specific task outcomes, which we believe it is reasonable to hold out as real possibilities arising from our involvement.

The ethical question is with us all the time, because whatever contract we make with our clients, we 'show up' with our own agenda, to make some money, to satisfy our psychological motivations or to save the world! Often we neglect to ask ourselves difficult questions about our own intentions, and shelter behind the specious assumption that we are here solely to serve our clients needs. But of course, we are here to serve our own needs and oftentimes, while they remain subconscious, they are more influential than the client's. Ethically it behoves us to question both our own intentions and those of our clients, if we are to act with anything close to that overused word 'integrity'. Would we be willing to support an organisation's drive for growth if we believed it would be ecologically unsustainable? If we were being invited to do this by a FTSE 100 company would our desire for the prestige of being associated with such a company override our ecological sensibilities?

The difficulty and the challenge of the complexity perspective is that no prescribed code of ethics or values provides a reliable guide to action. Ethics and agendas arise in the moment, often in apparent competition. As we join the on-going processes of communicative interaction both sets of agenda are likely to evolve in the sense-making emerging in our interactions; ethical decisions are being made all the time, and so we need to continuously keep our own motivations and intentions under review.

The Challenge of Paradox
Another challenge of this perspective is that it reminds us of the inherent nature of **paradox** in social relations. Most of us find paradoxes uncomfortable and assume they need to be resolved.   Before we go any further, it is important to note that the terms paradox and dilemma refer to very different phenomena. A dilemma refers to a position or situation that offers a choice between two options, both of them often perhaps difficult or unpleasant. A dilemma can be resolved by making an *either - or* choice between these two available options (or, if possible by finding a third option).

In contrast, a paradox refers to a situation where two self-contradictory statements appear to be true *at the same time*. For instance, when having a conversation with someone, you influence the interaction and you are influenced by it *at the same time*. Due to its *at the same time* nature such a paradoxical situation cannot be resolved through an either-or choice, but only held in awareness, although an attempt at resolution has become a habit of thought.

Thus, one of the main implications of consulting from a complex responsive process perspective is living with the continuous tension created by having to hold two opposing, seemingly mutually exclusive positions at the same time that "can never be resolved, only lived with". (Stacey 2003, p. 12) The question we are therefore interested in is how we as organisational consultants can hold onto an *at the same time* position rather than trying to resolve the paradox by treating it as a dilemma and thus moving to a false sense of an *either - or* choice.

Let us explore what we see as some of the common paradoxical tensions:

Forming interactions and being formed by them
Coming back to our interaction example, as soon as we interact with another person, we form/influence that interaction and at the same time are formed/influenced by it. In short, we constrain and enable others in our

relating to them and are constrained and enabled by them at the same time. Any communicative process is a process of verbal and non-verbal gestures and responses between people, of which no one person can be in control or stand outside. As soon as we interact with others in whatever way, be it in person, on the phone, via email or letter, video or newspaper, we form and influence that interaction through our words, actions, and our bodily presence or absence, and at the same time we are formed and influenced by it.

Although we might have the intention to control the interaction in a certain way or steer it towards a certain outcome, this is not entirely possible. Because of the influences and constraints introduced into the interaction by the other participant/s we can neither completely predict nor determine how someone will respond to us and our gestures. You can never tell another person what meaning he or she should makes of what you do, or how they should perceive you, because they will inevitable make meaning for themselves and respond accordingly. All anyone can do is make intentional gestures to each other in the *here and now*. *Here* in this context refers to each person's local situation from which he or she relates at any moment to another person, who in turn responds from their local situation in the present moment, the *now*. No grand master plan exists, and through the multitude of local interactions overall behavioural patterns emerge over time.

The interactions that we have with each other simply create more interactions. Our interactions do not add up to a *whole*. There is no stable or bigger *thing* behind peoples' interactions. There is not *the company* that does something to people, there are only individual people relating to each other. Managers who falsely perceive themselves as standing (at least temporarily) outside of *the system* in order to work *on it* are also constantly participating in the process of relating. There is no *away from* the constant process of relating; we are all participants in it all of the time. We are not standing outside of the river watching it go by, but we are swimming in the river being part of its constant flow by forming it and at the same time being formed by it.

Maintaining and disturbing relationships
In order for any kind of sustainable joint action to be possible between people, they need to have a certain degree of coherence in understanding the world, as well as *good enough* relationships with each other. *Good enough* could, for instance, mean believing the other person is not intending to take advantage of you, is competent in what they do or say, and is honest. As relating is an ongoing process or activity and not a static thing (often we use the word *relationship* to fool ourselves that a relationships is entirely stable), behavioural patterns of relating emerge between people over time and have the potential to evolve.

As a consequence of this temporal view of relating we live with the paradox of *maintaining and at the same time disturbing relationships*. Take an example of two people in a long term relationship; on the one hand we make gestures to maintain it, by making time to be with each other, by honouring commitments, and through many taken-for-granted routines, but on the other hand if we do not disturb it by occasionally confronting some behaviour, by changing our behaviour, by breaking habits and routines, the relationship will become so repetitive that it will lose vitality. With clients, as well as meeting their professional expectations, we may need to challenge their opinion or approach, or question their assumptions and this may temporarily strain the relationship, while in the long run strengthening it.

Whatever we do in our communicative interaction with others has the potential to stabilise and at the same time disturb our relational patterns, allowing new ones to emerge, create vitality and paradoxically maintain the quality of the relationship.

Knowing and not-knowing
You can neither completely predict nor determine how someone will respond to your gesture. You can never tell another person the meaning he or she makes out of what you do because it only emerges from his or her response to it. This means that "…an institution does not function automatically because of some inner dynamic or system requirements; it functions because people at different points do something, and what they do is a result of how they define the situation in which they are called to act." (Blumer, 1986, p. 19)

The same inability to predict outcomes applies to everything we do in organisations (and in life). No matter how well you know your job, a given task or familiar situation, there are always things that you do not and/or cannot know that might change the outcome and lead to unintended consequences. Take a Shakespeare play – The actors know their lines, when and how to say them, in what sequence, and where to be when they say them. In other words, what happens in this play is highly predictable and knowable. And yet, even in such a tightly framed situation things might happen that no one can know beforehand; someone might forget their lines or come on stage at the wrong moment. Now imagine a piece of improvisation theatre in which the actors come on stage without any script or ideas for a plot whatsoever. The only thing they might know is that they have to play for a certain length of time. In this case, the plot simply emerges through the spontaneous interaction between the players from moment to moment, from gesture to gesture. Here, things are even more emergent and, consequently, even less knowable.

Organisational life, in our view, is more like improvisation theatre without scripts and fixed plotlines and dialogues, than a Shakespeare play. The implication, of course, is that despite all of our experience and expertise, despite all of our knowing, there are always at the same time things that we do not or cannot know. "In the living present of actual local production situations, there are always the 'unkowns', no matter how well a procedure or process is defined in advance, that is 'known'. In other words, this experience is paradoxically known the designed procedure- and unknown -the variations around it- at the same time." (Streatfield, 2001, p. 23)

Being in control and not in control
The fourth implication of the temporal nature of organisational life is that its members are seen as being *in control* and at the same time *not in control*. If we see organisations as social processes, then it is obvious that we are not dealing with predictable mechanical, linear dynamic causal chains, but with unpredictable, non-linear dynamic processes of emergence and self-organisation. A manager might be in control of what she says during a strategy presentation to a group of employees. At the same time, however, she is not in control of how the employees understand and agree with what she says. From this perspective, managers (and consultants) might act on the expectation of an outcome, while knowing at the same time that this specific outcome might not materialise.

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