A RELATIONAL APPROACH TO ORGANISATION CONSULTING & COACHING

STORIES, ARTICLES AND HARD-EARNED LESSONS

BILL CRITCHLEY

MY PROFESSIONAL LEGACY

A collection of articles and pieces

You have read a lot, I am sure, of articles, and some books, which have furthered your career in some way, some more memorable than others. Some of you will have written books. I wrote a book myself fairly recently ('Lessons in Leadership'), in which I attempted to lay out what I had learned about the messy reality of leadership in organisations. It was not an academic book as such, but it drew on a number of theories as well as my experience, a sort of synthesis if you like, of all that I think I know about leadership after some thirty years of consulting, teaching, and some leading on my own account.

I also realise that, along the way, I have written a lot of shorter articles and notes for presentations, across a wide range of subjects, from how we think about organisations, the *practice* of consulting, the *practice* of coaching, how 'strategy' is formulated and enacted, and also something about how we *learn* about what is really happening during processes of change (action inquiry), and how leaders really learn from each other (action learning), and also how consultants really learn (shadow consulting and supervision).

Some of this has been published in various journals and some not, and I thought it would be worth collating it all into one place, in one 'book'. I am thinking of it as my professional legacy which I would like to make available to anyone who might be interested, rather than leaving it littered across various files on my computer.

To this end, I have been working with Mark Bate, my web-designer and he has come up with this 'flip book' format, which I think is rather creative. All you have to do is to look at the content page and see what you are interested in, tap on the link and it will take you straight to it. You can also go to my website (below) and download any chapters in **pdf** format if you wish.

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PREFACE

As a preface to this book, I outline below the main themes which connect more or less everything I have written; there may be a few outliers, but most of the informing theories and principles come from three major sources;

The first theme is Gestalt.

I trained as a Gestalt therapist in order to become a better OD consultant, and as an old colleague, and early mover and shaker in the field, Gaie Huston, once said to me, there is something 'right minded' about Gestalt. The right mindedness is, for me, its persistent, often forensic focus on the dynamic present – what is **really** going on here; what are people thinking and feeling and how are they affecting each other in the ever-moving process of interacting. It sees the process of relating as core to human existence ("No Man is an Island" etc. *John Donne*). You will find more about Gestalt principles in this 'flip book'

The second theme is the perspective of organisations as 'Complex Social Processes'.

I owe much of my interest and understanding of this perspective to the late Ralph Stacey, with whom I studied, along with, among others, Patricia Shaw. I think it is fair to say that Patricia and I pioneered some early organisation work on cultural change informed rather rigorously by this perspective. I say rigorously because we were determined not to default into the easier option of programmatic work, and started our first assignment with a notice in the company newsletter introducing ourselves and saying that we would be in such and such a room on these dates, and that anyone who wanted to talk about the organisation culture – how they experienced it, good and bad, should turn up for coffee and biscuits and a conversation. Initially a few did, and then more came……

This perspective is, like Gestalt, radical in its way and sees the process of relating as core to organisational life and asserts that change arises through 'the interaction of difference' (shades of Gregory Bateson, for those of you who have come across him; 'Steps to an Ecology of Mind'). Again, you will find much more about this perspective in this 'flip book'.

The third theme is my own personal and professional experience.

In the early part of my career, in which I can now barely recognise myself, I worked largely in marketing ("The Past is a Foreign Country: They do Things Differently There". *L.P. Hartley*), and after some ten years, I realised I was disenchanted with my so-called career, during which time I had distracted myself by doing a lot of amateur acting and singing in various choirs; but I was acutely aware of my envy of those of my friends who seemed to have a 'vocation'. Time, I thought, to take myself seriously and managed to get myself to Cranfield to do an MBA. This really was different.

There I encountered 'organisational behaviour' and some remote recognition of what really interested me was kindled, but it seemed too out of reach. On leaving business school I became a conventional consultant in marketing and strategy, and learned some basic tools of the trade which have stood me in good stead, as indeed has my acting experience in the sense of being able to use my voice to good effect and make presentations.

I ended my conventional consulting phase in a small 'strategy boutique', where I met David Casey, who was one of their associates. I have been very fortunate to have a few mentors in my life, and he was the first, being a radical voice in the field of management development and a pioneer in the field of 'action learning'. We were working together on a so-called 'strategy' assignment, and David asserted that the one thing they did not need was the classical approach to strategy development. He convinced them that they knew all they needed to know about their own market, but what they did not know was how to work really well as an executive team. We jointly facilitated their working together as a team to develop their strategy.

David was very insistent that after each meeting we reflected together on what we were learning and how we were working together. During one of these reflective sessions David told me that he thought I was really an OD consultant. Although I did not really know, at the time, what an OD consultant actually was or did, what he said resonated with my growing awareness of some skill I had which I did not really know how to deploy, but it became apparent that it was manifesting in this process of team facilitation.

At this point it is probably necessary to say that I had, earlier, been in group therapy, with a man called Robin Skynner at the Institute of Group Analytic Practice, for some five years as I separated from my first wife, and I knew a thing or two about group dynamics. This early experience of being a client in a small therapy group, which met twice a week, taught me much about group dynamics and has been foundational in what became, over time, an integration of therapeutic principles and organisational consulting.

What had seemed ‘too out of reach’ became a possibility, and to cut a long story short, I ended up joining Sheppard Moscow, then a leading firm of OD consultants. In the early days there I felt like an impostor; what is this thing called ‘OD’ and how do I practice it? I felt in danger of being found out, so I sought out some way of developing my skill and one of my colleagues suggested I seek out Petruska Clarkson.

So it was that I found my second mentor in the person of Petruska Clarkson, who went on to found Metanoia Institute, where I trained simultaneously in both Gestalt and Transaction Analysis over a period of some 10 years. Towards the end of my time at Metanoia someone suggested that I could become a therapist, as I had done the requisite hours and only needed to be accredited (diploma and then an MSc).

Following what I now see as a three-year apprenticeship in the craft of OD at Sheppard Moscow, David Casey introduced me to Ashridge Consulting, where he was also an Associate. There I practised as an OD consultant, created and led a Masters in Organisation Consulting (AMOC), and started a coaching programme for consultants. The Masters morphed into a Doctorate, I learnt how to be an academic supervisor, and became a visiting professor at Middlesex University.

A variegated career you might say, but one which started as working to live, and ended as a ‘vocation’. There are some core ingredients which are weaved into this ‘flip-book’; experience of living in organisations and later of leading within them; experience of career and personal change, experience of OD consulting and coaching, and experience of rigorous, and innovative academic learning.

I hope you will find the meanings I have made of all of this, recorded and collated in various formats over time, interesting, useful, and occasionally enjoyable.

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A simple hyperlink.

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Chapter 1.1
A View Of Organisations As 'Complex Social Processes' Suggests That The Main Currency In An Organisation Is Conversation, Or 'Communicative Interaction'

Professor Bill Critchley, July 2018

A radical reframe of the practice of leading.

An introduction to some core ideas behind the assertion that ‘Conversation’ is the core process in organisations.

My intention in writing this article is not simply to make a philosophical or academic point, but to offer leaders a very practical and in my view much needed alternative view of organisations and consequently the practice of leading. To this end I am making a bold, yet simple claim based on the observable phenomena of human bodies in interaction, whether it be face-to- face, virtually or in any other way, gesturing towards, and mutually affecting one other. My claim is that organisations are exactly that - human beings in an on-going process of communicative interaction. In other words, organisations are not things that can be worked on, but a participative process of interaction, in which the main process is, put simply, ‘conversation’.

Indeed, the very noun, organisation, is misleading, because my 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 I shall continue to use the word organisation, because not to do so would become a rather tortuous avoidance of common parlance, I am strictly speaking being inconsistent with what I am proposing. Nevertheless, I do think it is important to change our habitual ways of thinking and talking about organisations as if they are ‘things’.

More fundamentally I 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. I 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 leadership practices which I shall examine in detail in this article.

I intend to offer a radical view of the process of leading. It challenges the prevalent way of thinking about leadership as a stand-alone set of competencies, often underpinned by some rather exceptional personal characteristics such as charisma or intellectual brilliance, in favour of a ‘process’ perspective, which is essentially relational, participative and contextual.

In this article I intend to use the terms manager and leader interchangeably. Some theorists choose to separate them and suggest they denote different functions, one being more operational and the other more ‘strategic’ and pan-organisational.
I am personally doubtful whether these distinctions are very helpful and I hope the reasons for this will become clear through reading this article.

1. THE POSITIVIST PERSPECTIVE: THE FALLACY OF LINEAR DYNAMICS

Before exploring the theory of complex responsive processes that informs this reframe of the practice of organisational leadership, I 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 my 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.

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In my 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 which 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. 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 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 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.

2. 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/leadership 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’.

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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.

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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 I 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 on-going, self- organising patterning of communicative interaction of people in their local situation in the present moment.

The term 'organisation' is a 'social construction', 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.

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

"We are all participants"

The complex responsive process perspective asserts that an organisation is not a fixed entity or thing, but a constant, 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.

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The sociologist George Herbert Mead described this process of communicative interaction rather succinctly by saying that “The meaning of a gesture is in the response”. (1967, p. 146) 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.

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 there 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.

“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.

“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 are expected to deliver specific, pre-determined outcomes.

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This presents one of the most fundamental challenges for managers living within the prevailing 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. In the short term, where managers can be reasonably confident of outcomes, such as sales revenue, or units of production, more traditional forms of management 'control' appear to work for some of the time (see diagram below), but in the in the longer term it is little use relying on procedures and mechanisms to 'reduce uncertainly'. Leaders need to act into uncertainty knowing that outcomes cannot be predicted or controlled.

"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 is 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.

"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. Complex responsive process theory draws attention to diversity, and the potential of amplifying it to create the possibility of change, while at the same time recognising that too much diversity may be counterproductive to any kind of joint action.

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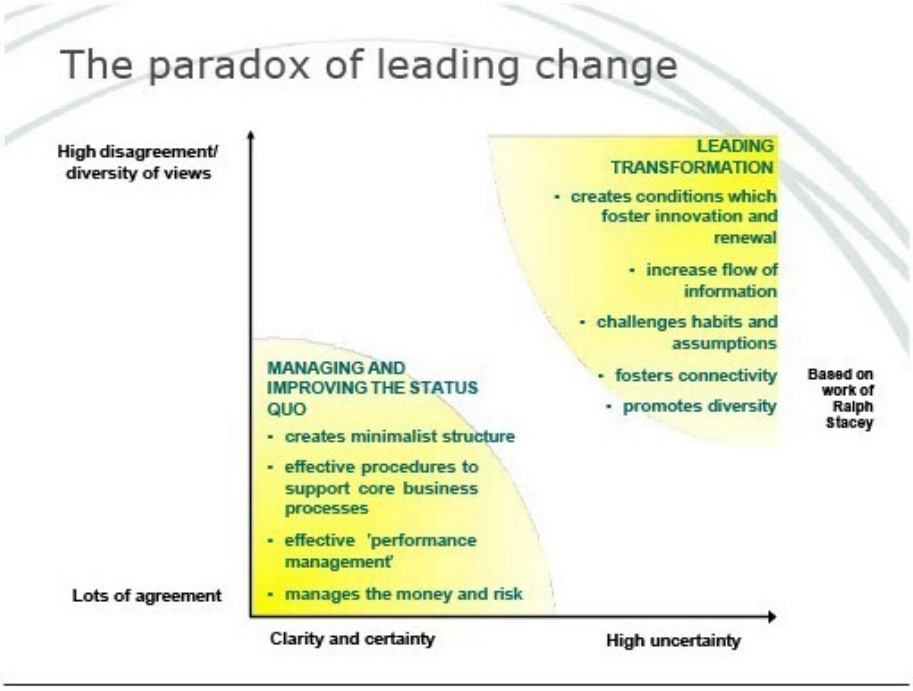
“Talking is powerful action”

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.

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.



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3. THE PRACTICE OF LEADING FROM THIS PERSPECTIVE

(what follows is simply a set of suggestions for leaders, rather than a prescription)

Here is a summary of main implications for leaders, taking the view expounded in this article, and many will feel quite counter intuitive for those who have been immersed in the conventional organisational paradigm.

- Leaders cannot 'get outside' the 'system' to get an 'objective' view
- They are participants in a continuous self-organising process
- Unintended consequences are normal and inevitable
- Control is an illusion; no one person is in control
- Conversation is the only game in town
- Change/innovation arises through the amplification of difference
- High profile gestures (such as strategic intentions) can only be operationalized locally, by adapting them to local contexts

Here are some of the implications for the **practice** of leading, or how leaders make a real difference.

- Leaders are convenors of conversation, across departmental boundaries
- Because they are constructed as powerful (therefore evoking both positive and negative transference), they need to minimise power differentials (highly directive or authoritarian exercising of power induces fear and hence disempowers others)
- Good decisions are rarely made by individuals acting on their own; they need to consult others
- Self awareness is a critical leadership capability
- "Be the change you want to see", because followers tend to mimic their leaders – leaders can be seen as 'cultural carriers'
- Leaders attribute importance to certain issues and themes, and can make illegitimate the discussion of others
- They have a powerful influence through what they say and do on the formation of values
- They promote certain kinds of language or metaphor or ways of speaking of things, and so have a major influence on 'defining' or 'constructing' reality'
- They need to balance appreciation with constructive criticism
- They need to provoke inquiry into what is really going on in the present, rather than promote idealisations of what is supposed to be going on

They do all of these things through the way they engage in relating and communicating.

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Chapter 1.2
A Relational Perspective on Leadership; empowerment, freedom and accountability

Professor Bill Critchley and Colleagues Feb 16th 2009

There are some core themes and principles which I believe provide a firm basis for developing an 'empowered' leadership culture which is capable of sustaining organizations through complex and difficult times. These ideas emerge from work I was involved with at Ashridge Consulting, and discussions with, and contributions from Ashridge colleagues (in particular Caryn Vanstone), which are significantly informed by the research of Professor Ralph Stacey of the University of Hertfordshire. These themes are:

- The perspective on organisations as complex social processes
- Seeing the core organisation process as 'communicative interaction'
- The crucial difference between 'managed change' and transformation
- The role of leaders in creating the conditions for innovation

These themes are supported by a number of specific principles and ideas:

Innovation, and The principle of self4organisation.

This principle is counterintuitive for many leaders but it is core to fostering innovation. It comes from research carried out in applying complexity ideas to organisations, and consists in the discovery that groups of people operating from broadly similar cultural rules and assumptions will naturally create their own order. Hence anarchy does not occur in the absence of control. However self-organisation looks messy to managers educated to think of control from an engineering perspective, and hence they are inclined to 'take control' and suppress the creative potential. Innovation comes from **optimizing** this creative potential

The principle of local intelligence

This is more easily understood; many managers know that the people doing the job are more likely to come up with effective solutions to problems, if they are allowed to and supported, than managers at a distance. Too often they are not trusted, or allowed to do so.

These two principles taken together are absolutely core to empowerment

In charge but not in control

The prevailing expectation of leaders is that they should ‘be in control’. Most research and experience suggests that in complex fast moving organisation contexts control is an illusion. For most managers this is recognized as a lived reality, but they do not know what the leadership alternative is. Once again, ‘empowering people’ is part of the answer. However leaders need considerable help in:

- Conceptually understanding the complex nature of organisations
- Learning to let go of their own personal control needs.

Communicative interaction or ‘conversation’ being the core process

The realisation that a leader’s job is to engage in, provoke and stimulate the informal interactions and conversations as well as focus on task, and that shifts in culture emerge more through paying attention to patterns, norms and habits and the quality of communication and connection, than rearranging the formal structure, seems a critical insight.

A relational view of leadership and power

The word ‘empowerment’ which is a rather over used cliché, has become part of the management vocabulary, and it is easy to forget that, taken literally, it implies a rather radical redistribution of power.

Power has become a ‘dirty word’, often associated with bullying, repression and autocracy. But it is a much more subtle, ever present phenomenon that arises normally from the process of human organising in all parts of our everyday lives. Part of the problem of addressing power in organisations is that we are almost afraid of speaking it out loud, because of its negative connotations. Yet, one cannot address empowerment without addressing the process by which power dynamics arise and are maintained in the social process of organising.

This is a relational process – ie happening between people. This means that power is not the ‘possession’ or ‘attribute’ of an individual or role, but an experience which two or more people ‘buy into’, both consciously and unconsciously, giving rise to a pattern of dominance/submission.

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This dominance/submission pattern is then embedded into role structures, value systems and policies and procedures creating a sense of order and predictability as well as some degree of comfort and belonging. It is important to recognise that human beings are creatures who both seek to lead and, critically, seek out leadership – hence our readiness to subjugate ourselves to processes and systems that enable us to join in and be part of a community.

For a shift in power to happen (i.e. empowerment of those previously not with power) and for something new to therefore emerge, there must be a shift in both parts of the power dynamic.

Freedom and accountability as a co-arising phenomenon

If we take a close look at our lived experience, we quickly see that the day-to-day problems of complex organising on a global scale give rise to ongoing problems which are universal and inevitable. These problems include local choices that are neither predictable nor controllable; and anxiety created from uncertainty and lack of linear connection between our intentions, actions and results in the larger, global, competitive landscape. However, traditional corporate thinking suggests that ‘if only’ we could find the perfect system, we would be able to wrestle these issues into a manageable process. This gives rise to ever more complicated management processes, policies, budgets and frameworks which still, annoyingly, fail to deliver us the degree of control we crave.

We all live with the paradox of being free as human beings while at the same time being constrained by our need to live as members of society and organisations with these complicated processes, norms, conventions, values and so forth. Members of organisations often surrender their responsibility for making effective choices by conforming to the formal rules of the organisation and complying with the authority of their seniors. They thus avoid the anxiety of making adult choices and choose to live dependently in a 'parent child' culture.

An empowering culture requires people to acknowledge their freedom and step into their adult responsibility to make effective choices and decisions in consultation with others and take responsibility for unpredictable consequences of their actions. In this sense we are free the moment we accept accountability, and we are accountable the moment we accept that we are free. These two experiences cocreate each other.

Any organisation that wishes to embrace empowerment must therefore work directly with the human experience of free accountability and the adult anxiety that comes with it.

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Comparing a development approach to creating an 'empowered' leadership culture based on a traditional view of leadership, with one based on a relational and participative view of leadership

Conventional leadership – individualist/transactional

There is a traditional view of leadership which tends to be preoccupied with the leader as **an individual.** This view assumes the leader to be capable of detachment and objectivity in relation to what is being lead. The focus tends to be on **clarifying** the leader's roles (e.g. strategist, planner, decision maker, motivator etc) and on **analysing** the situation to be lead. We would categorise this as an instrumental perspective on organisations which gives rise to a transactional model of leadership.
The development logic, which follows from this set of assumptions, would be to analyse required competences, develop skills, and provide tools and techniques, and from this logic 'empowering' would be seen as a skill to be developed.

Our view is that 'empowering' is more than a skill, and that to 'empower' someone is a contradiction in terms. Genuine empowerment requires a significant alteration in the power dynamics between leaders and the led, and we suggest that this is a significant shift in mindset, and hence would imply a transformation in the prevalent leadership mindset and culture. We would describe it as a move from transactional leadership to **relational** leadership.

Empowered leadership – relational/participative

This emerging view of leadership is based on the assumption that an organisation can be more usefully viewed as an ongoing, complex set of social interactions rather than the prevailing, rather mechanistic view, heavily influenced by engineering thinking.

From an empowered perspective, leadership is a relational practice wherein power arises **between** people in an ongoing negotiation of mutual influence, albeit within a framework of formal authority.
The main point we are making here is that an empowered culture implies a shift from a mindset wherein employees are dependent on leaders to make decisions, inform, and motivate (power over), to mutual dependence (power with) in which both parties participate in an empowered process. Leaders need to step in, to join with, while followers have to choose to take power. We believe that in consequence the 'power quotient' increases considerably from the conventional leadership model, and we assume this to be the primary purpose of any initiative to develop the leadership capability to lead in complex and uncertain times.

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Chapter 1.3
Published Article Taking Sustainability Perspective On Leadership

Talent Engagement Review Summer Volume 2011

Leadership

Sustainable leadership

Professor Bill Critchley, visiting professor at Middlesex University, says it's time for a re-think of how we approach leadership if organisations expect to keep abreast with the shifting global conditions

Key learning points

1. Leaders being solely preoccupied by profits and growth is not sustainable
2. Employees want personal and organisational values aligned
3. Psychological and physical wellness are hallmarks of effective leaders
4. Employees are demanding a shift away from authoritarian cultures

The recent financial crisis together with a growing awareness of the finite nature of the earth's resources, has given rise to some questioning of two of the most fundamental tenets of Western capitalism. Namely, that growth is the primary goal of economic activity, and that maximising shareholder value is the main purpose of the individual firm.

Some business thinkers are openly wondering whether these twin goals are any longer sustainable, and there seems to be more acceptance of the need for corporations to be responsible as global tenants, to pay more attention to the broader consequences of economic activity and to adopt more sustainable practices. However, these twin assumptions underpin the prevailing management ideology of 'investment capitalism', and there are few signs of any significant moves to a more sustainable business culture.

If nothing else, the credit crunch has brought home the accelerating interdependence that characterises markets and society. The term 'market' is a convenient linguistic conceptualisation of what is an essentially human process of communicative interaction — our trading institutions are no more and no less than groups of people continuously

interacting with each other, each with their own agendas and intentions. Clearly, this interplay of different intentions and actions cannot be controlled because such a complex interactive process is inherently uncontrollable. The ever-widening and increasing speed of global connectivity is making this process increasingly complex, as small local changes amplify across international populations, generating widespread patterns such as the credit crunch, inequalities in income and living standards, and climate change. These are outcomes no one chose or wanted.

While adopting initiatives in the areas of corporate responsibility and sustainability are necessary, they are not sufficient. A radical reconceptualisation of organisations, and of the role and nature of leading, is also needed. While the systemic crisis that occurred in the financial services industry seems to have been pivotal, I would argue the crisis was the consequence of a flawed view of the nature of organisations, what leaders are supposed to do and hence how they are developed.

The assumption underpinning the existing paradigm — that the prime task of a business is to maximise shareholder wealth — requires managers to act as 'agents' of shareholders. Then, acting on the belief organisations are 'systems' with machine like characteristics that can be controlled, they see their role as to design and then drive the 'system' in order to achieve the required return. Despite it becoming rather obvious no one is 'in control', few leaders are questioning the management ideology that has prevailed for the last 100 years. The inherent unknowability of complex economic events, the messy unpredictability of business life, the futility of elaborate planning rituals are 'known' but still not formally acknowledged in business schools, management practice and education.

Our lived experience of uncertainty and unpredictability have led some management theorists towards complexity theory as a potential source of new insight into our experience of organisations. Complexity theory proposes that order emerges out of chaos without any external design agency. One of the main insights is that order in the form of pattern, emerges naturally through the interaction of competition and collaboration — order and disorder at the same time. This 'self-organising' perspective seems to make better sense of business and organisational life.

Businesses are now seen as participants in a wider complex ecology with responsibility for minimising their environmental impact, and improving their contribution to social welfare; knowledge workers seek to be treated as participants rather than a 'labour' force, and yet the formal 'employment contract' remains more or less unchanged and the current management paradigm virtually unquestioned.

Research findings

Our research (2008) illuminated the dynamics in the relationship between leaders and their organisations that can either lead towards long-term sustainable success or business failure and derailment. These findings form the basis of a paradigm shift in the way we think about leadership and how it is developed. It is an approach that centres on leaders exercising a duty of care for their own sustainability as well as the wider business and the society they are a part of and, in so doing, addresses the interdependent nature of leadership in organisations. We call this 'sustainable leadership' and it works on a number of levels:

- The personal level of sustaining psychological and physiological health. Our research shows leaders who attend to their personal sustainability have greater perspective, wisdom and balance.
- The organisational level where people are enabled to realise their own potential in the service of organisational purposes in line with what they see as sufficiently congruent with their own sense of personal purpose.
- The sociological level of playing a responsible part in the broader community. This means both understanding the impact of the business in society and adapting business strategies which take account of broader societal issues.
- The ecological level of ensuring the ordinary, day-to-day practice of management constantly pays attention to minimising the impact of the business on the environment.

In practice

Our research indicates four core

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The crisis was the consequence of a flawed view of the nature of organisations, what leaders are supposed to do and hence how they are developed

dimensions to sustainable leadership:

- *reflection on action* — learning from experience; being conscious of the assumptions and patterns that guide action and open to embracing alternatives;
- *psychological intelligence* — having a clear sense of personal purpose that serves the larger concerns of the world and an awareness of personal assumptions and motivations;
- *physical well-being* — effective management of stress and sufficient self-care;
- *negotiated engagement* — employees explicitly negotiating the relationship between their own sense of personal purpose and that of the organisation.

Importantly, it is the integration of the first three, followed by their engagement with the organisation which constitutes effective leadership development and generates sustainable leaders, and is more likely to create sustainable organisations.

Reflection on action

It is one thing to act, but quite another to reflect seriously on action and hence to learn. This is somewhat counter-cultural in the high performance atmosphere of many organisations, and yet research shows management learning takes place mainly 'on the job'. We think creating a legitimate and disciplined process of 'action research' is at the very heart of developing effective leadership in complex and unpredictable circumstances.

Psychological intelligence

Personal purpose: if we ask a leader 'what is your purpose?' the initial response may well be incomprehension. If you press them to think about what kind of society they want to create for future generations, what kind of organisation they want to create for their employees, what effect they want their organisation to have on the environment, they may wonder what all of this has to do with their job as a leader. We suggest responsible leaders need to think about their personal purpose rather than unthinkingly align the narrow commercial aims of the organisation with their own interests.

Motivation: in our experience, all motivations have a shadow side. For example, the desire to succeed can tip over into a desire to succeed to the exclusion of all other considerations, and at the expense of others. The desire to manage others is similarly a valuable motivation until it becomes an end in itself. Such 'neurotic' motivations usually have their roots in early experiences and are never sustainable in the long run. They frequently lead to burnout or create toxic work environments. Helping leaders develop insights into their motives, is another hallmark of sustainable leadership.

Physiological well-being

There is overwhelming research evidence that neurotic motivation (invariably unconscious) often combined with over-identification with the organisation (lack of sense of personal identity) gives rise to physiological stress levels which are unsustainable in the long run. Long-term consequences include sleep problems, alcohol dependency and burnout. Paying systematic attention to practices that foster long-term physiological well-being is another hallmark of sustainable leadership.

Negotiated engagement

The employee in an adult relationship with the organisation is the final hallmark of sustainable leadership. Such a move from authoritarian to participative cultures fosters a distributed model of leadership and hence a widely shared sense of responsibility and ethical practice in our corporations.

It seems there has never been a better time to examine our notions of organisation and leadership, to promote a more ecological perspective on the role of organisations in the world, and to adopt a sustainable approach to the development of those who lead our organisations. ■

CHAPTER 2
STRATEGY

Sub-Chapters

- CHAPTER 2-1 - The implications of the 'Complex Social Process' perspective for the development of strategy
- Chapter 2-2 - Making Sense of the Notions of Strategy, Systems, and Complexity

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Chapter 2-1
The implications of the 'Complex Social Process' perspective for the development of strategy

Professor Bill Critchley

Introduction

The concept of strategy influences, either implicitly or explicitly, much management thinking and practice, and it tends to be informed by a particular view of what an organisation is.

How this view is understood and applied has important implications for how we make sense of our experience as leaders and facilitators of strategic change. The purpose of this chapter is to examine this perspective, which prevails as the current orthodoxy, and to propose a radical alternative which has significant implications for the conceptualisation and practice of strategy. The alternative offers a perspective which sees organisations as ‘Complex Social Processes’ (Stacey et al., 2000), and is radical in the sense that it challenges most of the core assumptions inherent in the orthodox way of thinking about organisations.

The Origins of the current orthodoxy

A key shift in the evolution of organisation in the early 1800’s was the emergence of non- owner ‘managers’ when managers tended to be seen as the masters and oppressors of working people. The shift was driven in part by the desire of this emerging managerial class to gain the same legitimacy as that enjoyed by lawyers and physicians

The way of gaining professional respectability in those times was to hitch one’s wagon to the enlightenment project by making claims to rational and objective scientific rigour. The desire to claim scientific legitimacy was primarily driven by the need of managers for identity, established through power and status, which began, from around the late 1800’s in the USA, to be conferred on managers through the acquisition of an MBA, the passport to managerial position and privilege

Then in 1911, Frederick Winslow Taylor, normally seen along with Henri Fayol as one of the ‘founding fathers of ‘scientific management’, published his book, ‘The Principles of Scientific Management (Taylor, 1911), and in 1917 Fayol published “Administration Industrielle et Générale" (Fayol, 1917).

Taylor's interest was the observation and analysis of the components of a job, and the identification of the skills needed to perform the job. Fayol's interest was similar; he proposed there were five primary functions of management and fourteen principles, the first mentioned being the division of work – he focused on splitting an organisation into a number of specialist activities, and consequetly job analysis, time and motion, and organisation design were the main legacies of Taylor and Fayol.

These two powerful voices established management as a rational, 'scientific' set of activities, consisting in forecasting, planning, organising, controlling and coordinating, with the corollary that organisations exist as units in an economic system that can be manipulated to maximise efficiency. The principle assumptions underpinning this conception of organisations and management were that efficient causality could be established, and rules set which workers would follow. This casts workers as rule-following 'agents'. Indeed Taylor recommended that managers hire men, sound in body but not burdened with any desire or capacity to think, which would potentially obstruct the rational direction and control of the managerial elite!

It would seem that any considerations about the ethical implications of depriving the majority of the work force of any self-determination were, and still are in many contemporary organisations, largely ignored. Perhaps that is why we are experiencing around the world an increasing number of broadly anti-capitalist protests, with bankers tending to bear the brunt of some fairly inchoate expression of anger against a social order that seems to bestow wealth and privilege on a tiny minority at the expense of the majority.

One of the major problems inherent in this 'scientific' perspective is that human beings will not slavishly follow rules. This has always been true, although at the dawn of the industrial revolution people were more willing to trade autonomy for the promise of material well being. With the contemporary shift to the 'knowledge economy', and its requirement for creative talent, it becomes even more obvious that the mechanistic conception of management simply cannot work in the long run.

Recognising this new reality still seems too heretical for many managers schooled into the belief of the management prerogative, although the economic debacle of 2008 should have provided some of the most convincing evidence to disturb this mind-set.

Current Approaches to Strategy

These twin pillars of orthodox management thinking, efficient causality and scientific psychology, have formed the bedrock of most Western 'Business School' teaching until this day, and still constitute the dominant managerial discourse, and this of course includes thinking about strategy.

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The school of strategic thinking which has had most influence in business can be described as the school of 'strategic choice' – a transformational process in which organisations adapt to environmental changes by restructuring themselves in an intentional, rational manner.
There have been a number of writers broadly within the school of 'strategic choice', and the one who is probably most familiar to managers is Michael Porter (Porter, 1980). He suggested that leaders had three main types of choice: 'Cost Leadership' strategy, a 'Differentiation' strategy or a 'Focus' strategy.

There is a generic methodology that is implied by the notion of 'strategic choice' which is generally followed by all writers, and is quite familiar to most managers, so a brief overview will serve. The methodology breaks down into four main phases. The first is to carry out some industry analysis, to understand the structure and market dynamics of the industry in which the company operates, and to identify trends, opportunities and threats. The next phase is to carry out an analysis of the business's current position in the market in relation to its main competitors (competitive analysis, share and profitability analysis and so forth) and to undertake a diagnosis of the organisation's strengths and weaknesses. The third phase consists in identifying strategic options, and the final phase is concerned with making and implementing a strategic **choice.**

Most senior managers, and anyone who has been to business school with their emphasis on rational analysis, will recognise what is essentially a process of **aligning** the company to its environment. We are familiar with it and it appears to have some face validity, so we probably have not thought to question this established and habitual way of approaching business strategy.

However, if we closely examine some of the assumptions which inform the school of strategic choice, many of them appear to have become, at best, obsolete, and quite probably wrong.
The first assumption is that environmental changes are largely identifiable and that future states can by and large be predicted. We now realise that we live in a highly unpredictable world, and this has become almost a truism. When some scientists in the United States defence establishment developed a way of exchanging research information via a 'web', no one could have forecasted what impact this development would have on the way we live our lives; even when the internet was established in its early days, its effects were wildly exaggerated and underestimated at the same time. So the idea that managers can predict future states and base plans upon them does not resonate with experience.

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Furthermore, while one firm is working out its strategy, so are all its competitors, either formally or informally. As each player **acts** into its competitive landscape, so it changes it, and as all competitors in a market are simultaneously acting into the 'market' landscape, it is clear that the combined impact is complex and dynamic. Taking this one step further, I would suggest that a 'market' as such is a metaphor or a convenient linguistic construction. The 'market' does not exist independently of the businesses and the consumers who create it. We are all participants in a process of interaction, affecting it and being affected by it at the same time. When you think about it, this seems common sense, but we have developed a habit of **thought** which speaks of 'the market' as a set of impersonal forces having an independent existence outside of the companies who compete with each other. This is clearly nonsense. We are all 'participants' in the 'market' creating it by the decisions we make and being created by it **at the same time**. Clearly an asset manager acting on behalf of a large insurance company has much more influence than a single individual, but it is nevertheless the on-going interactions between people which create the 'market'.

This realisation – that we are affecting and being affected by our environment *at the same time* - calls into question another assumption of the strategic choice school, that of clear cut cause-and-effect links, where one thing affects another in a clearly defined linear fashion.
Most managers are familiar with the experience of unintended consequences, but these are usually seen as the result of poor planning or poor implementation.

The Emperor has no clothes

Increasingly, managers are finding that the conventional nostrums of management theory do not explain their lived experience of unpredictability, complexity and lack of control. On the whole they tend to assume that this is either because they are not applying them properly, or it is because they do not know all they are supposed to know – someone out there has a solution. However when theory does not explain experience, the sensible thing to do is develop a better theory, and this is what 'complexity theory', or a version adapted to the social nature of organisations, offers.

The core premise of the theory of 'complex social processes' is that organisations consist in on-going processes of dynamic interaction, of continually emerging understandings and responses and reconfiguring of priorities and activities. This is a different onotology which sees organisation as process rather than as entity. Thus an organisation has no materiality or substance but is continuously emerging through the communicative interactions of people as they go on together.

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Acknowledging this newly understood ‘truth’ leads to the realisation that managers may be in charge, but they are not in control in the long run (Streatfield, 2001). Reg Revans (Revans, 1980) made the distinction between “programmed knowledge”, when a manager is faced with a ‘puzzle’, and complex problems. Short run, operational puzzles, such as how to optmise a manufacturing process, may give the illusion of control, but most of what managers face, particularly in the realm of ‘strategy’, are long run, complex organisational problems The best a manager can do is to pay attention to emerging phenomena and continuously respond and adapt.

The Complexity Perspective

The Contribution of Complexity Science

The early formulations of Complexity Theory were radical in that they proposed a new way to make sense of phenomena in the world, a way that shocked the scientific community when the first inklings of it began to emerge in the early part of the last century. It proposed that order emerges out of chaos without any external design agency. As Stuart Kauffman (Kauffman, 1996) puts it, “Order emerges for free”. Such a way of seeing inevitably has major implications for society, religion, politics and of course, organisations. If no external design agency is required for order to emerge, then what is the role of the manager in organisations?

What was discovered was a new kind of order; it was not predictable, repeatable, reproducible order, but unpredictable **pattern,** pattern which cannot be foretold from the original conditions. There seemed to be a principle of **self-organisation** at work. There are many examples of this in nature, for examples swans flocking, termites building complex structures, and so forth. Through the development of computer simulations scientists similarly discovered self-organised, emergent order. The simulations consisted of a number of simple programmes or ‘agents’, each agent being given some rules of interaction about what to do when it encountered another agent. The important point here is that *there was no overall blueprint for how the simulation would unfold* – all that was given were rules of interaction to each individual agent.

The key discovery was that as the simulation was set in motion, and the agents interacted with each other, a pattern emerged which could not have been predicted from the local rules of interaction. With simple rules of interaction, only one type of pattern emerged; but with more complex rules, including rules for replication, patterns generated further patterns and the agents modified the rules of interaction – as if the agents had learned to adapt themselves to their environment and adapt their environment at the same time.

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Once again none of this was pre-determined or prescribed. A further characteristic of these patterns was that they were not uniform, or to put it another way they were similar and different at the same time.

Order emerges in the form of patterns, and these patterns are stable and unstable at the same time, because the on going processes of agents interacting in complex ways produces stability and change at the same time. So, four important characteristics emerged from the complexity simulations which would seem to have some face validity for organisations, namely: **self-organisation, emergence, pattern,** and **stability/instability at the same time.**

The Challenge to Current thinking.

Managerial language is full of control metaphors - we talk of “driving the change agenda”, of “managing change”, of finding the point of “maximum leverage” in the ‘system’ to bring about change. To really understand the implications of the complexity perspective is to recognise that such language is meaningless and obsolete. Yet many of the books and articles on the subject written by management theorists are still shot through with these sorts of phrases.

Order in the universe cannot be predicted or made to happen. At the same time, we are all familiar with recurrent patterns in organisations which seem to occur under certain conditions. This tempts us to believe that if we can understand the cause of these patterns, we can also understand how to create new patterns. This misunderstands the core insight of the complexity perspective made earlier, which is that by their complex and dynamic nature social processes are inherently unpredictable and uncontrollable.

If we attend carefully to the language of some organisation theorists who have encountered complexity theory and seek to ‘apply it’ to organisations, it reveals their underlying assumptions. For example, some talk about how to “move” an organisation from one ‘attractor’ to a more desirable one (an attractor being a concept drawn from quantum physics to describe the apparent focal point of a dynamic system). Others, who have come across the early work with computerised simulations which used only a few simple rules, talk of identifying the few rules which will lead to a desirable new pattern.
The mistake such writers make is to take the results of some experiments undertaken under controlled scientific conditions, and extrapolate them to social conditions.

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It is but a short step to a new set of toolkits and recipes, wrapped up in pseudo scientific terminology, on how to “manage” complexity. And we are back full circle to the sometimes banal and often grandiose managerialist language of individual control, unitary purpose, and cause and effect.

The Development of Complexity Thinking in relation to Organisations

Stacey et al (ibid) developed the theory of ‘Complex Social Processes’ which is a synthesis of sociology, psychology and some insights from complexity theory which do seem to shed some light on the nature of organisations. But it is rooted in sociology and the work of George Mead (Mead, 1934) and Norbert Elias (Elias and Kilminster, 1991). The core premise is that organisations consist of human beings in an on-going process of communicative interaction, affecting and being affected by their environment, but not in control over it or each other. The temptation is to think, because human beings **employ** artefacts (buildings, machines etc.) and **create** artefacts (products, logos, patents and so forth), that these artefacts constitute the organisation. What I am arguing is that when we talk about an organisation we are actually referring to a process of organising which itself consists in communicative interaction.

The ‘organisation’ emerges in the various patterns and flows of communication as people go on together. 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. A sense of organisational identity develops over time through the norms and habits, the stories and myths, the historical recollections and shared history; it is social through and through, and it is continuously being renegotiated in a never-ending process of communicative interaction which manifests as the meetings, reports, policies, procedures, structures and such that people experience as the ‘stuff of organisational life’.

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. The members of the (processes of) organisation are 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.

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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.

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. Patterns of gesture and response are of course mediated by cultural norms and language rules which enable shared meaning to be more or less arrived at quite quickly; but in a complex exchange, misunderstandings and different interpretations are the norm rather than the exception.

In organisations, rules about how things are to be done, custom and practice, and organisational norms fulfil a similar stabilising effect, but we begin to understand that this emergent process of communicative interaction is inherently unpredictable and hence uncontrollable in the way that scientific management and systems theorists have assumed. 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.

This has major implications for the way leaders and consultants think about the nature of organisational strategy.
The complexity perspective challenges managers to act in the knowledge that they have no control, only influence. They can advocate and aspire, but they cannot predict. There are no absolute truths, only ethical decisions to be made in the here and now. This may be a difficult premise to accept at first because it runs so counter to our habits of thought, but it begins to appeal to common sense.

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Indeed I introduced this perspective to a leading professional services firm, who had brought in a head of strategy to bring a greater sense of shared direction and coordinated implementation into their business. They were having difficulty embedding a formal and systematic strategic approach in their networked, knowledge based, partnership type of organisation. The complexity perspective resonated with their experience and helped them make sense of why 'strategic planning' was simply not working.

One of the real difficulties for us as managers is that while we have no absolute control in the long run, and we cannot predict with any certainty the outcomes of our actions, we remain responsible for them. It behoves us to pay attention to the impacts and effects of our decisions and to reflect thoughtfully on our intentions, and in the light of experience to attempt to anticipate their likely consequences, and to enter again into the never ending cycle of action, inquiry, reflection, action and so on.

Implications for Managers

We have all had the experience of attending regular meetings, where there is a fixed agenda and the participants are usually the same. Often the meeting takes place in the same room at the same time, but while there is a familiar pattern, the meetings are never exactly the same – different conversations, slightly different combinations of people and so on. So our experience confirms how conversational patterns emerge in organisational life, some of them formal (such as the meeting's agenda and topics of discussion) and some of them informal (such as the sense-making that takes place outside of the formal topics, the 'gossip' or rumour).

We have experience of how a key event, such as a heated exchange, a particular decision, the inclusion or exclusion of an individual can shift the pattern of interaction, either temporarily or permanently. We have the experience of being taken by surprise, of not anticipating that a particular event would lead to a particular outcome. So our experience tells us that change is unpredictable, that small differences can amplify into larger pattern shifts.

We also know that managerial practice consists in engaging in myriads of connecting meetings and conversations through which we attempt to negotiate and agree joint action. Purposive 'joint action' is broadly what organisations are formed for, and it is continually being negotiated.

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We know that power differentials play a part in these negotiations, and that what emerges is rarely entirely predictable, and by no means rational, and yet, because we are steeped in the conventions and assumptions of scientific and systemic management, we continue to believe we can plan and control change! Complexity theory confirms what we learn from our experience, but what our education and conditioning makes it hard for us to accept. What I have described above in referring to 'myriads of connecting meetings and conversations' is what I see as the main currency of organisations

Much of this is informal in nature, but clearly organisations require good enough, minimalist structures to manage short term performance, sensible procedures for managing work flows, good systems for managing performance and money and so on. This is the stuff of ordinary management with which all managers are very familiar; it is clearly important to do it well, but because of the influence of machine thinking it is often overdone.

Particularly in organisations with a bureaucratic history, the capacity for self-organisation is largely suppressed, so that all change is seen to need elaborate planning and the development of detailed blueprints before anything can happen. This focus on getting the 'right structure' is often not only painfully slow, it can also have the opposite effect to that which was intended, or at best reproduce what is already present (such as re-structuring an organisation without attending to how members relate or how they do what they do).

Implications for Strategy

It is helpful for managers to think of themselves as in charge but not in control. This requires them to act with intention by formulating strategic intentions (**anticipating** possible outcomes) in the knowledge that they cannot predict outcome.

Strategy, as my good friend Patricia Shaw (Shaw, 2002) observed, is the interaction between chance and intention, so what they need to do, having formulated a strategic intention is to work with, and learn from the outcomes which actually emerge, rather than spend precious time in analysing 'what went wrong'. So this suggests two core strategic activities; formulating intentions, and responding to consequences.

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A case study

When working for Ashridge Consulting, a colleague and I were invited by a Division of a reasonably large engineering group to help them with their ‘strategy’.

Each ‘business’ within the group had its own infrastructure, in particular its own sales force, and quite understandably staff saw this site as the source of their livelihood, and the sales people strove to win orders for it, often in competition with other members of the same Group.

An emerging group of powerful global customers now sought a more integrated response, expressed in the jargon of the day as a requirement to be a ‘ global player’, a ‘virtual company’, particularly in the areas of price, quality and service. These customers were threatening to withdraw their business unless this supplier “got its act together”.

Our first contact

We were invited to attend a meeting of the ‘change group’, which was effectively the Board with one or two additional people, as observers so that we would learn something about the business and the key players. At some point I was asked whether I had any observations, and made some comments about the process, particularly the way, as it seemed to me, the C.E. had, in a chairman-like way, ridden over any disagreements or contentious areas. He took this to heart, more than I had expected, and frequently referred to it throughout the assignment, with good humour, but in a manner which suggested it had been a significant moment to him.

It did seem to be a defining moment in that it established in their minds what sort of consultants we were and what sort of relationship we were going to have. This was despite the fact that my colleague, who is a powerful character, made some extremely perceptive points about the business issues they were facing, which they took little notice of. Thus, the leadership of the assignment informally fell to me through my direct participation in the communicative patterns.

The process which evolved

The change group had identified a number of strategic issues they thought needed addressing, and their plan was to nominate some staff to task groups, bring them all together at a conference and ‘set them off’ so to speak. They wanted us to design and manage this for them, and then ‘train’ the groups in how to lead strategic change, and get ‘buy in’. We argued that their model of strategic change whereby they identified the strategic issues and assigned people to tasks would neither ensure that they were addressing the most important issues nor that anyone would ‘buy in’.

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We persuaded them that a process whereby a large group of managers met over two days to identify the issues, and organise themselves around those issues would be more likely to create ‘buy in’, and stimulate the organisation’s innovative capability. This idea was strongly resisted by some members of the Board who saw it as usurping their ‘right’ to decide what the issues were, and it challenged their assumption that their view would be the ‘right’ view. However it seemed to resonate with the Chief Executive’s experience of the limitations of the usual ‘top down’ approach to the formulation of strategic intention.

We started with a two-day workshop for about 50 managers to begin a dialogue about what becoming ‘global’ would entail. We had two process intentions in mind; one was for the CE to express his general intention without being too specific about the ‘how, and the other was to expand and deepen the quality of communicative interaction through creating opportunities for people to start talking and addressing problems in groupings that crossed their normal country, site or national boundaries.
Our longer-term intention was to challenge the boundaries of their thinking, and to provoke them into experimentation with innovative ways of working.

For example, as engineers they tended to tackle problems with ‘project groups’, with defined terms of reference, a clear statement of goals, milestones and methodologies. This was very much part of their existing culture or pattern, and while it solved problems incrementally, it was unlikely to create any innovative strategies.

The workshop was a new experience for most participants, and by their standards it was quite messy. On the first day we had some well thought- through design, to introduce people to the ‘global’ intention, and identify the issues that this gave rise to. We asked Board members to participate in the group discussions, and from time to time to take up their role as the Board, and sit in the middle of the room, responding in real time to these issues as they came up.

Some of the Board were very uncomfortable with this, but for most participants it symbolised something totally different and welcome in terms of management style, and the only question was whether it would be sustained. On the second day we designed on the hoof, in order to get to a manageable number of issues and to have some people taking ownership of these issues.

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The change initiative groups

Five change initiatives formed, and we subsequently worked with each one to help them define what was **really** important in the broad area they had chosen, what could usefully be a project, and how to tackle what could not be turned into a project.
Some six months later we brought these groups together with the Board to review their activities, to learn together and to develop further initiatives. This was the process designed to learn and respond to the consequences of enacting the strategic intention.

Commentary

This example highlights, in my view, the importance of maintaining both stability (providing a clear intention and a process structure), and creative instability in the process of working strategically. On the boundary between stability and instability, so the theory goes, lies the possibility of optimum creativity. In organisational terms this means working on the boundary between the formal and the informal, and this is one of the ideas which informed the overall design of our work.

We started with a reasonably large grouping, which we kept working in one large room (we did not have break-out rooms) in order for people to have a better sense of themselves in a wider context thereby stimulating connectivity. Within some broad parameters we invited them to explore their reality, to discover what the issues were, as opposed to giving them a diagnosis and asking them to work on the problems (the approach which was first mooted by the client), and we allowed groups to form around the issues which emerged rather than attempt to assign individuals to issues (self-organisation).

It is interesting to observe that senior managers did not think that the ‘right’ issues had been identified, but we encouraged them to let this rather messy process of self-organisation unfold rather than have them impose their own change agenda, and many of the groups subsequently redefined the issue they were working on, thereby demonstrating their capacity for creative self-regulation.

Finally we realised how important it was that senior managers did in fact join the change groups but not as the group leader. They were thus not excluded from the process as they would have been in a ‘bottom up approach’, but were able to influence it by participating in the informal processes of the organisation, as opposed to exerting their influence through their formal leadership role, evoking compliant responses to the exercise of formal power, and inhibiting the organisation’s potential for innovative self-organisation.

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Usually, when I present this case study, I am asked what were the ‘results’ of this strategic initiative? This is a frustrating question when I may have just spent some time arguing that organisations are dynamic and non-linear, and hence that it is impossible to make linear connections between action and effect!

It is also understandable, coming, as it does from such a deeply ingrained habit of thinking in causal, linear sequences of the ‘if this…then that’ variety. It is such a fundamental tenet of managerial thinking, that we take action ‘in order to’ achieve something, that it is hard to gainsay without being thought a naïve fool!

However what we achieved is what we did. We enabled a different pattern of conversation, which provoked, excited and disturbed in equal measure. The question it is reasonable to ask is the extent to which the pattern disturbance amplified around the organisation, increasing its innovative potential, and to what extent ‘old’ patterns reasserted themselves afterwards. I don’t know the answer to this question, but I assume some of the old patterns would inevitably reassert themselves, and I hope that some ‘learning’ took place which would lead to new and more innovative ways of responding to emerging strategic issues.

Some Practical Principles

Let me conclude by suggesting some practical principles which are implied by this perspective:

- Managers are supposed to be in charge, and yet they find it difficult to stay in control. It is helpful for managers to think of themselves as in charge but not in control. This requires them to act with intention (anticipating possible outcomes) in the knowledge that they cannot predict outcome. What they need to do is to work with, and learn from the outcomes which actually emerge, rather than spend precious time in analysing ‘what went wrong’.
- Managers need to be relieved of the expectation that they should always know what to do / be able to diagnose the problem / find the solution – these only emerge through engaging in processes of conversation
- It is more important and useful for managers to turn their attention to how things actually get done (informal processes of conversation) rather than to designing systems and procedures in the belief that this is how things ought to be done
- Inquire into what works well and encourage it
- What sustains organisational continuity and what makes for creative change are the messy processes of social interaction

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- Systems and procedures are merely codified and routinised conversations – at best they will represent good practice, in for example quality maintenance, safety, recruitment etc. – At worst they may become an obsolete and cumbersome set of procedures which inhibit innovation
- Diversity is key to innovation. The pursuit of organisational harmony, consistency, shared values and total collaboration is inimical to innovation – diversity and difference, messiness and contention are necessary for creativity and transformation
- Managers need to engage in both the formal and the informal processes, paradoxically maintaining stability/consistency and provoking novelty and innovation at the same time
- Power differentials need to be minimised if diversity and difference and hence the possibility of novelty is to emerge
- Change starts **locally.** It is far more effective to foster local initiatives and experiments than to embark on costly, formalised 'whole organisation' change programmes

In summary, I am suggesting that organisations are complex social processes which are characterised simultaneously by stability and instability. Stable patterns of interaction tend to be maintained through designed, legitimate networks of roles and accountabilities through which people pursue official goals and policies. Instability, and hence the possibility of transformation, emerges locally in the simultaneous operation of many informal networks in which significant political, social and other processes are at work contributing in vitally important ways to the effectiveness of the organisation. In my experience the prevailing assumptions which inform much managerial behaviour and consulting practice are still mainly machine based, which leads to an over-emphasis on the importance of, and need to control the legitimate system through structural, procedural and programmatic solutions.

The radical complexity perspective suggests that organisations continually emerge in an unpredictable way as they evolve into the unknown. Strategy, from this perspective is merely the process whereby senior people orchestrate a conversation about future intentions and possibilities, based on their best anticipations of market opportunities, and a realistic assessment of the company's capabilities.

It assumes that no group in the organisation has a monopoly of wisdom, that mobilising the collective intelligence within an organisation is more likely to come up with creative but sensible ideas than an overly engineered, linear planning process, and that 'strategy', at its best, is an experimental and innovative process.

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There are of course, exceptions to every rule, when single individuals or elites have for a while appeared to successfully drive a company's strategic development through the force of their personalities and particular creative vision. Our culture loves a hero and we are inclined to massage the evidence in favour of the hero myth, but it is always questionable how 'single-handed' such a process actually was. In the long run the evidence suggests that participative approaches to strategic development are more sustainable.

Strategic leadership consists in large part in mobilising the intelligence of an organisation, articulating strategic intentions and constraints, convening conversations to inquire into emerging themes and issues, and supporting initiatives and experimentation.

Leaders have the paradoxical role of establishing and maintaining the necessary structure and processes through which the organisation 'manages' its everyday business, while **at the same time** provoking and stimulating the innovation which is necessary for the organisation to continuously respond, transform itself and create its future.

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Chapter 2–2
Making Sense of the Notions of Strategy, Systems, and Complexity

How these concepts are used; how they relate to one another, and the implications for leaders and managers.

Professor Bill Critchley - May 2006

Introduction

These concepts influence, either implicitly or explicitly, much management thinking and practice. They are informed by theories and sets of assumptions which have similarities but important differences. Sometimes they are unhelpfully conflated.

How they are understood and applied have important implications for how we think about leadership and change, and how we make sense of our experience as leaders and facilitators of change.

The notion of strategy in organisations is extremely familiar, probably reasonably well understood, but overused and hence its use has become degraded. ‘System’ is also a word with a well understood, common meaning. It is used fairly widely to describe a part of an organisation, such as an IT system, but it is also used by many change consultants to describe an organisation as a ‘whole’. As such, it derives from systems theory, and its meaning in that context, and some of the implications of a systems perspective on organisations are less well understood. Complexity is again a word with a common meaning which is well understood. However it has recently become associated with a particular perspective on organisations and the nature of change, with some fairly radical implications for leaders.

The purpose of this article is to examine these three concepts, to consider their implications and how they relate to each other, to provide leaders of change with some conceptual frameworks with which to make sense of their experience, and to guide them in the development of their practice as leaders.

Strategy: reflecting on the current use and misuse of the concept of strategy; reflecting on its origins and application to business; and reviewing the main schools of strategic thinking

Let us start with one of oldest business concepts and probably one of the most over- used words in business, strategy. Most managers use this word in two ways; one to describe a three level hierarchy, namely objective, strategy and tactics, and at the same time to denote one of the steps in the hierarchy. So when a marketing director decides to develop a '**Marketing Strategy'** he/she will normally start by determining the objective (the what) e.g. to achieve a percentage share in a particular consumer market, then the *strategy* (the how), in this example through some trade-off between price and quality, and finally the tactics, some combination of advertising, sales, distribution, promotion and so forth.

So we start with some confusion over the use of the word. The confusion grows since this hierarchy has come to be used at a number of levels. I could equally, and perhaps more appropriately have given an example of a '**Business Strategy'**, where the overall objective would be some combination of profit, turnover and growth aspiration, and the *strategic* dimension would be a definition of product-market relationships. So the marketing director's objective constitutes part of the CEO's strategy. Then, to go back to the previous example we would probably find that distribution, advertising, sales, HR, IT and so on, all have their own 'strategies'. It seems a good discipline for any department or function to articulate and regularly review what it is trying to achieve and how it intends to go about it, but inappropriate to call this simple discipline a 'strategy'. The word is over-used and degraded, and is more often used to enhance a department's or function's sense of its own importance than to describe an organisation's strategy.

The 'concept' of strategy was originally used to describe the relationship between a business and its environment. It became popular as Western economies moved out of production orientation, when consumer demand well exceeded production capacity and Henry Ford was able to say words to the effect of "You can have any colour provided it's black". Up until then power had largely been with producers. Then, as rapid improvements in technology, efficiency and communication increased supply and hence consumer choice, producers had to start competing for markets.

The key to survival in competitive markets came to be seen as the ability to think and act strategically, and many consultancies were born of the imperative to inculcate strategic thinking into the Boardroom. What I intend to do is to examine the way of thinking which informed the strategic process.
The main school of strategic thinking which has had most influence in business can be described as the school of 'strategic choice' – a transformational process in which organisations adapt to environmental changes by restructuring themselves in an intentional, rational manner (Zajac and Kraatz, 1993).

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There have been a number of writers broadly within the school of ‘strategic choice’, and the one who is probably most familiar to managers is Michael Porter (1980, 1985). He suggested that leaders had three main choices: a ‘Cost Leadership’ strategy, a ‘Differentiation’ strategy or a ‘Focus’ strategy.

“Strategy is all about competitive superiority.” Michael Porter

There is a generic methodology which is implied by the notion of ‘strategic choice’ which is generally followed by all writers and is quite familiar to most managers, so a brief overview will serve. The methodology breaks down into four main phases. The first is to carry out some industry analysis, to understand the structure and market dynamics of the industry in which the company operates, and to identify trends, opportunities and threats. The next phase is to carry out an analysis of the business’s current position in the market in relation to its main competitors (competitive analysis, share and profitability analysis and so forth) and to undertake a diagnosis of the organisation’s strengths and weaknesses. The third phase consists in identifying strategic options, and the final phase is concerned with making and implementing a strategic **choice.**

Most senior managers, and anyone who has been to business school and had to work their way laboriously through many case studies, will recognise what is essentially a process of **aligning** the company to its environment. We are familiar with it and it appears to have some face validity, so we probably have not thought to question this established and habitual way of approaching business strategy.

However, if we closely examine some of the assumptions which inform the school of strategic choice, some of them appear to have become, at best, obsolete, and quite probably wrong.

The first assumption is that environmental changes are largely identifiable and that future states can by and large be predicted. We now realise that we live in a highly unpredictable world, and this has become almost a truism.

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When some scientists in the United States defence establishment developed a way of exchanging research information via a ‘web’, no one could forecast what impact this development would have on the way we live our lives; even when the internet was established in its early days, its effects were wildly exaggerated and underestimated at the same time. So, the idea that managers can predict future states and base plans upon them does not resonate with experience. Technology has so speeded up the rate of communication that product life cycles have shortened to the extent that product enhancements can be redundant before they reach the market.

The Shell oil company gave up its linear approach to planning based on elaborate forecasting techniques, and adopted the methodology of scenario planning whereby it offered its leaders a number of future possibilities to stimulate their thinking, and to provoke their responsive capacity.

Furthermore, while one firm is working out its strategy, so are all its competitors, either formally or informally. As each player acts into its competitive landscape, so it changes it, and as all competitors in a market are simultaneously acting into the market landscape, it is clear that the combined impact is complex and dynamic. Taking this one step further, complexity theory recognises that a ‘market’ as such is a metaphor or a convenient linguistic construction.

The ‘market’ does not exist independently of the businesses and the consumers who create it. We are all participants in a process of interaction, affecting it and being affected by it at the same time. When you think about it, this seems common sense, but we have developed a habit of thought which speaks of ‘the market’ as if it somehow has an independent existence outside of the companies who compete with each other. This is clearly nonsense.

So another assumption of the strategic choice school, of clear cut cause-and-effect links, begins to look distinctly questionable. Most managers are familiar with the experience of unintended consequences, but these are usually seen as the result of poor planning or poor implementation. Ralph Stacey (Stacey, 1995) quotes an example of the Saturday Evening Post in which promotion expenditure taking the form of free trial subscriptions was having the intended effect of boosting sales volumes, but as the proportion of subscribers on free trials rose, average subscription rates plummeted thereby reducing profits. When this was added to increased advertising rates, leading to more than proportional reductions in advertising volumes, the magazine went out of business.

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Complexity theorists would assert that unintended consequences are inevitable because, as suggested above, all participants are simultaneously affecting and being affected by a complex process of continuously evolving interaction, which by definition cannot be predicted. So as organisations are participating in a 'complex process of continuously evolving interaction' they are by definition, complex, nonlinear and dynamic processes. In other words cause and effect is untraceable in this complex process of reciprocal interaction – I shall return to this theme later.

Several theorists have recognised the problem with this static model of the strategic process; it is not how it is done in real life, because the informing assumptions are invalid. Strategy is actually a dynamic and interactive process.

One of the most well known theorists who popularised an alternative approach is Henry Mintzberg. Mintzberg (1994, 1998) made a distinction between deliberate strategy and emergent strategy. Emergent strategy originates not in the mind of the strategist, but in the interaction of the organisation with its environment. He claims that emergent strategies tend to exhibit a type of convergence in which ideas and actions from multiple sources integrate into a pattern

"The very essence of strategy making is a learning process." Henry Mintzberg

This core understanding, that organisations **consist in** on-going processes of dynamic interaction, giving rise to continuously emerging understandings and responses and reconfiguring of priorities and activities, gave rise to the notion of 'organisational learning'. Acknowledging this newly understood 'truth' leads to the realisation that managers may be in charge, but they are not in control in the long run (Streatfield, 2001). The best a manager can do is to pay attention to emerging phenomena and continuously respond and adapt. In this view, organisational learning becomes one of the core functions of any business enterprise (See Peter Senge's *The Fifth Discipline* (1990).)

This way of understanding organisations is more or less congruent with a complexity perspective, but now I want to deal with some core distinctions between complexity thinking and systems thinking.

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Systems thinking: its origins, influence and main assumptions; its operational usefulness; and its shortcomings as an overarching perspective on organisations and the nature of change.S

Until the 1950's, organisation and management thinking had been heavily influenced by Frederick Taylor (1911) in the United States and Henri Fayol (1916) in Europe. Taylor's interest was the observation and analysis of the components of a job, and the identification of the skills needed to perform the job. Fayol's interest was much the same – he focused on splitting an organisation into a number of activities, and so job analysis, time and motion, organisation design were the main legacies of Taylor and Fayol, who were the fathers of 'scientific management.' This way of thinking casts the manager as scientist, and the organisation as a series of parts to be organised in a logical way according to laws of cause and effect, which can be identified.

Systems thinking began to emerge as a potential new paradigm in the 1950's, but there were three broad strands coming from different origins: general systems theory, which arose from the research of some biologists, the best known of whom was probably von Bertalanffy (1968); cybernetics, which was largely lead by engineers (Ashby, 1945, Beer 1979); and a third strand in systems thinking known as systems dynamics. Systems thinking represented a paradigm shift in perspective from the Taylorist focus on parts, to the whole. The whole came to be thought of as a 'system', and the system was in turn thought to be part of a supra system. The parts were not simply additive in that they affected each other. The focus of attention shifted from understanding the parts, or entities, to the **interaction** of the parts to form a subsystem and the interaction of subsystems to form a system.

It is mainly sufficient for our purposes to outline the broad concept of systems thinking as above, but we need to elaborate a little more on cybernetics. With its focus on control, cybernetics has probably had the most pervasive influence in management thinking. Cybernetic systems are understood as self-regulating, goal-directed systems adapting to their environment.

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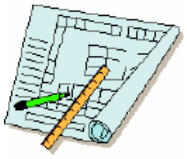
A central heating system is a simple example, where the resident sets a desired temperature, and a thermostat acts as a regulator at the boundary of the system and its environment by detecting the gap between the desired and the actual temperature and triggering the system to switch on and off. It thus maintains the desired temperature through a process of negative feedback monitoring and control. This simple cybernetic concept informs most performance management and quality control processes.

Broadly speaking this paradigmatic shift in thinking locates the manager as a system designer. Here the emphasis is on understanding a 'systemic' set of causal relationships and the key parameters which can be used to 'control' the system's operation. The 'self regulation' of the system with its environment is thus maintained through setting, monitoring and controlling these parameters. Systems thinkers made a distinction between largely closed systems, for example an internal combustion engine, and 'open' systems which were involved in a continuous and quite complex exchange with their environment.
It is fairly obvious that many management processes, such as planning and budgeting, are predicated on similar assumptions. It has also permeated the thinking of many organisation consultants who regularly refer to an organisation as 'the system'.



Before I move on to propose my general critique of systems theory as applied to organisations, let me say that in particular contexts it has useful applications. These contexts are largely operational, where work processes require high degrees of consistency and repeatability, such as manufacturing processes, computerised information systems, or regulated clerical procedures which are likely to be suitable for a fair level of automation.

In such contexts, where efficiency, effectiveness, and optimal c-ordination are the imperatives, system thinking provides a useful conceptual framework, always provided that it takes account of the need to enable human beings to take initiative and respond in the event of unpredictable and hence unprogrammable events, and to adapt readily to changing circumstances.

Systems thinking thus has a place within a broader understanding of the nature of organisations. However, it becomes problematic in my view when systems thinking is taken as **the informing perspective** on the nature of organisations. The problem is that it makes a number of assumptions which do not really seem to hold water when we examine them carefully in the light of our experience.

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The main assumption is that describing an organisation as ‘a system’ implies some essence or materiality. It reifies an organisation; it assumes it has some existence independent of those who seek to control it. However, if we ask what constitutes this essence, if we try and point to it, we begin to see the difficulty of this way of thinking. Some might say it lies in the financial statements, but Enron has demonstrated convincingly that financial statements are but one construction of a company’s reality. It assumes that a manager or consultant can stand outside the ‘system’ and observe it objectively, but it has now almost become a truism that an observer influences what is perceived. It assumes the existence of objectively definable boundaries, both between subsystems and between the organisation and its environment. But try to define where the boundary between a company and its environment really lies, and the problem becomes obvious; do we, in our definition, include or exclude suppliers and customers, contract workers, franchised operations, contracted-out services, contracted-out R&D and so forth? Internal boundaries are determined by how we differentiate between functions and roles. Many of these distinctions are based in custom and practice, but we know that they are essentially arbitrary as we experience functions converge, and structures evolve and change.

It also poses an ethical problem, because it assumes that only managers have choice, while all other employees are treated as components of the system obliged to follow the rules laid down by managers, and are thus disenfranchised of any freedom or choice. It is easy to say that they have the freedom to go elsewhere and earn their living in another way, but this conveniently avoids reflecting on the ethics of a managerial norm or tradition of thought which treats the majority of employees as system components to whom choice is denied, and whose fate and modus operandi is determined by a minority.

To quote Stacey, Griffin and Shaw (2000), “Management science continued as before and the first wave of systems thinking about organisation paid as little attention as management science did to ethics, ordinary human freedom and the unknown nature of the final state towards which human action tends.”.

Some of the assumptions of systems thinking are shared by some of the early complexity thinkers, particularly those who were experimenting with computer simulations, or who were working in the physical sciences. However there are some clear differences between complexity **science,** and taking a complexity perspective on social phenomena, and it is this difference which Ralph Stacey is at great pains to make, and on which I elaborate later.

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However, before moving on to an exploration of the important contribution I believe complexity thinking makes to our understanding of organisations, I want to conclude this section by emphasising the clear distinction between my own thinking about organisations as 'complex adaptive **processes'** (the complexity perspective), and systems thinking. This most important distinction, as I observed above, is that systems thinkers see organisations as entities which a manager can stand outside and observe. In that sense systems thinking retains a machine or engineering metaphor in which the manager is cast as architect or designer determining the shape and nature of the system and its rules of interaction. All that is required is for the manager to have the intelligence and experience to understand the system of interactions which determines the whole, so that he/she can intervene at points of maximum leverage.

It is worth noting that systems thinking fits well with the Strategic Choice school of strategy, because it assumes that outcomes can be predicted and hence that organisations can be controlled; and we can see how attractive this combined way of thinking is to managers who have been brought up to believe that it is their job to be in control, who are charged with making 'right' decisions, and are rewarded for steering and directing the organisation in a pre-determined direction. And it is not surprising that it comes hard when the very foundations on which managers understand their practice to be based begin to look questionable.

However, in the following section I suggest that this is what the complexity perspective, in which organisations are seen as complex social processes, does; not because it is mischievous or wilfully subversive but because, increasingly, managers are realising that conventional management theory does not explain their lived experience. The complex social process perspective suggests that we are all participant in an ongoing process of communicative interaction, from which no one can detach themselves and 'see the whole', about which no one can claim an 'objective' truth, and over which therefore no one person has control. This perspective offers a different way of making sense of our experience of organisational life and suggests a way of thinking which, while offering no prescriptions, implies very different approaches to leadership and change.

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For some managers it seems so outrageously subversive of their world view that they refuse to contemplate it; others resonate with it intuitively, but worry about its implications. In the following sections I attempt to articulate the ideas which are relevant to organisations and suggest why we should take them seriously.

The Complexity Perspective: a brief overview of the origins of complexity thinking; distinguishing between complexity science and a complexity 'perspective', which is informed by an integration of sociology, psychology and insights from complexity; and the implications for managers.

THE CONTRIBUTION OF COMPLEXITY SCIENCE

The early formulations of Complexity Theory were radical in that they proposed 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. They proposed that order emerges out of chaos without any external design agency. As Stuart Kauffman (1995) puts it, "Order emerges for free". This is a very difficult concept for managers to accept because it implies that no-one is in control.

This was a new kind of order; it was not predictable, repeatable, reproducible order, but unpredictable pattern, pattern which cannot be foretold from the original conditions. There seems to be a principle of self organisation at work here. There are many examples of this in nature, for examples swans flocking, termites building complex structures, and so forth.

Some simulations carried out by computer scientists similarly discovered self-organised, emergent order. When they programmed a number of 'agents' in a simulation, they gave each agent some rules of interaction. Each 'agent' was effectively a computer programme with some local rules of interaction about what to do when it encountered another agent. The important point here is that there was no overall blueprint for how the simulation would unfold – all that was given were rules of interaction to each individual agent. The key discovery was that as the simulation was set in motion, and the agents interacted with each other, a pattern emerged which could not have been predicted from the local rules of interaction. With simple rules of interaction, only one type of pattern emerged; however, with more complex rules, including rules for replication, patterns generated further patterns and the agents modified the rules of interaction, a form of second order learning. Once again none of this was pre-determined or prescribed.

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A further characteristic of these patterns was that they were not uniform, or to put it another way they were similar and different at the same time. So four important characteristics emerged which would seem to have some face validity for organisations, namely **self organisation, emergence, pattern,** and **stability/instability at the same time.** Order emerges in the form of patterns, and these patterns are stable and unstable at the same time**.**

THE CHALLENGE TO ORGANISATION THINKING.

Managerial language is full of control metaphors - we talk of “driving the change agenda”, of “managing change”, of finding the point of “maximum leverage” in the ‘system’ to bring about change. For anyone who has really understood and taken to heart the implications of the complexity perspective, such language becomes meaningless and obsolete. Yet many of the books and articles on the subject written by management theorists are still shot through with these sorts of phrases.
Order in the universe cannot be predicted or made to happen. At the same time, we are all familiar with recurrent patterns in organisations which seem to occur under certain conditions. This tempts us to believe that if we can understand the cause of these patterns, we can also understand how to create new patterns. This misses the entire point of the complexity perspective, which is that social processes are inherently unpredictable and uncontrollable.

If we attend carefully to the language of some organisation theorists who have encountered complexity theory and seek to ‘apply it’ to organisations, it reveals their underlying assumptions. For example, some talk about how to “move” an organisation from one ‘attractor’ to a more desirable one. Others, who have come across the early work with computerised simulations where a few simple rules were used to programme a number of agents and pattern emerged, talk of identifying the few rules which will lead to a desirable new pattern. The mistake such writers make is to take the results of some experiments undertaken under controlled scientific conditions, and extrapolate them to social conditions. It is but a short step to a new set of toolkits and recipes, wrapped up in pseudo scientific terminology, on how to “manage” complexity. And we are back full circle to the sometimes banal and often grandiose managerialist language of individual control, unitary purpose, and cause and effect.

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FROM SCIENCE TO SOCIOLOGY; THE DEVELOPMENT OF COMPLEXITY THINKING IN RELATION TO ORGANISATIONS

It is important to acknowledge the origins of complexity thinking in organisations as an extension of scientific research, so that some of the early writing about complexity theory and its application to organisations appears to be an easy segue from systems thinking (itself largely originating from engineering and biology), leaving many systems practitioners believing that complexity theory is a development of systems theory. Complexity theory, like systems theory, has its origins in the natural sciences, which in themselves are deeply rooted in the quest for 'truth'. This quest for truth takes a typical form: the search for the primary elements of matter, closely allied to which is the attempt to adduce causal relationships. The perceptual and assumptive framework is essentialist in nature, and the construct of individual entities acting upon one another is more or less taken as axiomatic in this scientific perspective.

Much of the early writing by people like Gell-Man (1994) and Holland (1998) was rooted in the scientific paradigm; they studied complexity as scientists studied nature, and their views differ very little from neo-Darwinian views on causality with their emphasis on survival through natural selection and adaptation. Stacey in his early writing (1993) followed a similar path. However, he and his colleagues Griffin and Shaw (2000) began to question the way the study of natural phenomena was being applied to organisations which are social phenomena. They see 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. In assuming that the properties of complex systems in nature could be attributed to organisations, a category error is being made. So for example, when managers talk of "re- engineering" an organisation, they are making the ontological 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.

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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.

Stacey et al move away from complexity as science, and offer us a theory of 'Complex Social Processes' which is a synthesis of sociology, psychology and some insights from complexity theory which do seem to shed some light on the nature of organisations. But it is rooted in sociology and the work of George Mead (1934) and Norbert Elias (1989). The core premise is that organisations are nothing more than human beings in an on-going process of communicative interaction, affecting and being affected by their environment, but not in control over it or each other. The 'organisation' emerges in the various patterns and flows of communication as people go on together. It is what has come to be called a social construction; it emerges 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.

A sense of organisational identity is constituted in the emergent patterns, the norms and habits, the stories and myths, the historical recollections and shared history; it is **social** through and through, and it is continuously being renegotiated through a never- ending process of communicative interaction. This is a **process** view of organisation which argues that an organisation, unlike natural phenomena, has no **essential** qualities, and all members of what we misleadingly use a noun to describe (i.e. organisations), are **participants** in creating an emerging social process. We cannot by definition get outside it; as participants we simultaneously create and are created by the process of engaging together in joint action.

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 the 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.

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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. So the static 'systems' way of thinking about communication as the transfer of the mental contents of one brain to another gives way to a much more dynamic understanding of meaning arising in interaction, of being negotiated and constructed in an ongoing process of communicative interaction.

Many patterns of gesture and response are mediated by cultural norms or by language rules which enable shared meaning to be more or less arrived at quite quickly; but in a complex exchange, misunderstandings and different interpretations are the norm rather than the exception. In organisations, rules about how things are to be done, custom and practice, and organisational norms fulfil a similar stabilising effect, but we begin to understand that this emergent process of communicative interaction is inherently unpredictable and uncontrollable.

This is one of the major insights of this process view of organisations, that they are in the long run unpredictable and hence uncontrollable in the way that scientific management and systems theorists have assumed.

The complexity perspective challenges managers to act in the knowledge that they have no control, only influence. They can advocate and aspire, but they cannot predict. There are no absolute truths, only ethical decisions to be made in the here and now. This may be a difficult premise to accept at first because it runs so counter to our habits of thought, but it begins to appeal to common sense.

One of the real difficulties for managers is that while we have no absolute control in the long run, and we cannot predict with any certainty the outcomes of our actions, we remain responsible for them. It behoves us to pay attention to the impacts and effects of our decisions and to reflect thoughtfully on our intentions, and in the light of experience to attempt to anticipate their likely consequences, and to enter again into the never ending cycle of action, inquiry, reflection, action and so on.

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IMPLICATIONS FOR MANAGERS

We have all had the experience of attending regular meetings, where there is a fixed agenda and the participants are usually the same. Often the meeting takes place in the same room at the same time, but while there is a familiar **pattern,** the meetings are never exactly the same – different conversations, slightly different combinations of people and so on. So our experience confirms how conversational patterns emerge in organisational life, some of them formal and some of them informal.

We also have experience of how a key event, such as a heated exchange, a particular decision, the inclusion or exclusion of an individual can shift the pattern of interaction, either temporarily or permanently. We also have the experience of being taken by surprise, of not anticipating that a particular event would lead to a particular change or pattern shift. So our experience tells us that change is unpredictable, that small differences can amplify into larger pattern shifts.

We also know that managerial practice consists in engaging in myriads of connecting meetings and conversations through which we attempt to negotiate and agree joint action. Purposive 'joint action' is broadly what organisations are formed for, and it is continually being negotiated. We know that power differentials play a part in these negotiations, and that what emerges is rarely totally predictable, and by no means rational, and yet, because we are steeped in the conventions and assumptions of scientific and systemic management, we continue to believe we can plan and control change! Complexity theory confirms what we learn from our experience, but what our education and conditioning makes it hard for us to accept.

What I have described above in referring to 'myriads of connecting meetings and conversations' is what I see as the main **currency** of organisations. Much of this is informal in nature, but clearly organisations require good enough, minimalist structures to manage short term performance, sensible procedures for managing work flows, good systems for managing performance and money and so on. This is the stuff of ordinary management with which all managers are very familiar; it is clearly important to do it well, but because of the influence of machine thinking it is often overdone.

Particularly in organisations with a bureaucratic history, the capacity for self- organisation is largely suppressed, so that all change is seen to need elaborate planning and the development of detailed blueprints before anything can happen. This focus on getting the 'right structure' is often not only painfully slow, it can also have the opposite effect to that which was intended. Let me conclude by summarising some practical implications for managers of thinking of organisations as complex social processes.

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- Managers are supposed to be in charge, and yet they find it difficult to stay in control. It is helpful for managers to think of themselves as in charge but not in control. This requires them to act with intention (anticipating possible outcomes) in the knowledge that they cannot predict outcome. What they need to do is to work with, and learn from the outcomes which actually emerge, rather than spend precious time in analysing 'what went wrong'.
- Managers need to be relieved of the expectation that they should always know what to do / be able to diagnose the problem / find the solution – these only emerge through engaging in processes of conversation
- It is more important and useful for managers to turn their attention to how things actually get done (informal processes of conversation) rather than to designing systems and procedures in the belief that this is how things ought to be done
- Inquire into what works well and encourage it
- What sustains organisational continuity and what makes for creative change are the messy processes of social interaction
- Systems and procedures are merely codified and routinised conversations – at best they will represent our best thinking, in for example quality maintenance, safety, recruitment etc. – at worst they are an obsolete and cumbersome set of procedures which inhibit innovation
- Organisations need lean and effective systems and procedures which are themselves regularly reviewed and updated
- Diversity is key to innovation. The pursuit of organisational harmony, consistency, shared values and total collaboration is inimical to innovation – diversity and difference, messiness and contention are necessary for creativity and transformation
- Managers need to engage in both the formal and the informal processes, paradoxically maintaining stability/consistency and provoking novelty and innovation at the same time
- Power differentials need to be minimised if diversity and difference and hence the possibility of novelty is to emerge

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In summary, I am suggesting that organisations are complex social processes which are characterised simultaneously by stability and instability. Stable patterns of interaction tend to be maintained through designed, legitimate networks of roles and accountabilities through which people pursue official goals and policies. Instability, and hence the possibility of transformation, emerges in the simultaneous operation of many informal networks in which significant political, social and other processes are at work contributing in vitally important ways to the effectiveness of the organisation. In my experience the prevailing assumptions which inform much managerial behaviour and consulting practice are still mainly machine based, which leads to an over-emphasis on the importance of, and need to control, the legitimate system through structural, procedural and programmatic solutions.

The radical complexity perspective suggests that organisations continually emerge in an unpredictable way as they evolve into the unknown.

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CHAPTER 3
CULTURE

Sub-Chapters

- Short Article on How to Operationalise Shein's Notion of 'Levels' of Culture
- Embedding Coaching in the Leadership of an Organisation
- A Dialogic Approach to Gender Diversity

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Chapter 3-1
Short article on how to operationalise Shein's notion of 'Levels' of Culture

Some ideas about culture and how to work with it

Professor Bill Critchley and Adrian Mclean June 2009

Definitions of culture are legion. What is common to all of them is the recognition that culture is simultaneously intangible and tangible, impossible to capture and fully describe, and yet ever-present and potent. It is not a ‘thing’ which can be managed, and yet it is the source of ‘rules’ which guide much behaviour in organisations. Broadly speaking we see culture as the habits, patterns, taken for granted routines, rituals and shared assumptions about how things are done around here. An important dimension of culture is the way in which power and authority are experienced and used.

Cultural patterns are very resilient and often persist long after particular events or people gave rise to them, and hence a failure to attend to cultural phenomena has bedevilled many a merger or change programme. The problem is how to access something so amorphous and diffuse, and Edgar Schein offered us a practical model as a basis for exploring organisation culture.

LEVELS OF CULTURE

Artefacts Outward manifestations, such as buildings, furnishings, objects, settings, PR, high profile symbols. Rituals, Stated values, policies, procedures, systems; these all constitute the outward manifestation of an organisation’s culture.

Behaviour Spontaneous actions, routine responses, enacted realities, emergent norms, and values inferentially absorbed often via role models. One of the ways to explore culture is to pay attention to differences between espoused and enacted or stated values.

Mind set Basic assumptions and worldview that underpin thinking and behaviour; mostly unconscious; also analogous to paradigm, mind set, and sometimes partially articulated as the ‘business model’.

EmotionalGround The passions, aspirations and aversions that represent the emotional energy within a culture. Often well camouflaged, muted or expressed in distorted forms.

While this model is represented as a hierarchy it is important to understand that this is only a diagnostic convenience. All these levels mutually inform one another, and constitute mutually reinforcing patterns of thinking, feeling and behaving. However it is a useful framework for making an elusive concept more accessible.

APPROACHES TO WORKING WITH CULTURE

My/our starting point is usually to embark on a process of **jointly inquiring** into the current culture(s), working with individuals groups or larger forms, using a number of different techniques, e.g.

- Story telling
- On first joining
- Viewing from the perspective of another organisation
- Heroes, villains and fools
- Critical incident analysis
- Typical incident analysis.

These techniques can be used in small group or workshop situations, as the basis for individual interviews, or in large group settings.

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Chapter 3-2
Embedding Coaching in the Leadership of an Organisation

Creating a Coaching Culture: Professor Bill Critchley 2017

The Purpose of Coaching

•An enabling relationship through which the subordinate learns, explores a question, solves a problem…

• A process in which the subordinate takes responsibility for the agenda.

• A process in which the manager is neither invested in, nor has predetermined the outcome.

• A relationship in which the manager's primary role is to facilitate a subordinate's learning and develop their capability rather than solve their problem for them

•A mutual relationship in which both parties are open to change and risk.

Conditions for Coaching

- Find a space where you will not be disturbed or distracted; phones off
- Minimise obvious power symbols such as desks, formal seating arrangements
- Allow at least an hour for a coaching meeting
- Make clear to your subordinate that it is their agenda

Principles of Coaching

- Coaching should be seen as a developmental rather than a remedial process
- The basis of an effective coaching meeting is a negotiated ‘contract’
- The coaching relationship is a reciprocal one in **service** of the subordinate’s learning and development

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Skills of Coaching

- Negotiating a contract
- Paying full attention
- Listening without attachment to outcome
- Reflecting back/paraphrasing
- Summarising
- Inquiring/asking open questions

Skills of Coaching

- Notice your own responses and offer them as appropriate
- Notice and test taken-for-granted assumptions
- Offer ideas and suggestions which build on theirs
- Provoke and support their thinking
- challenge them to take responsibility

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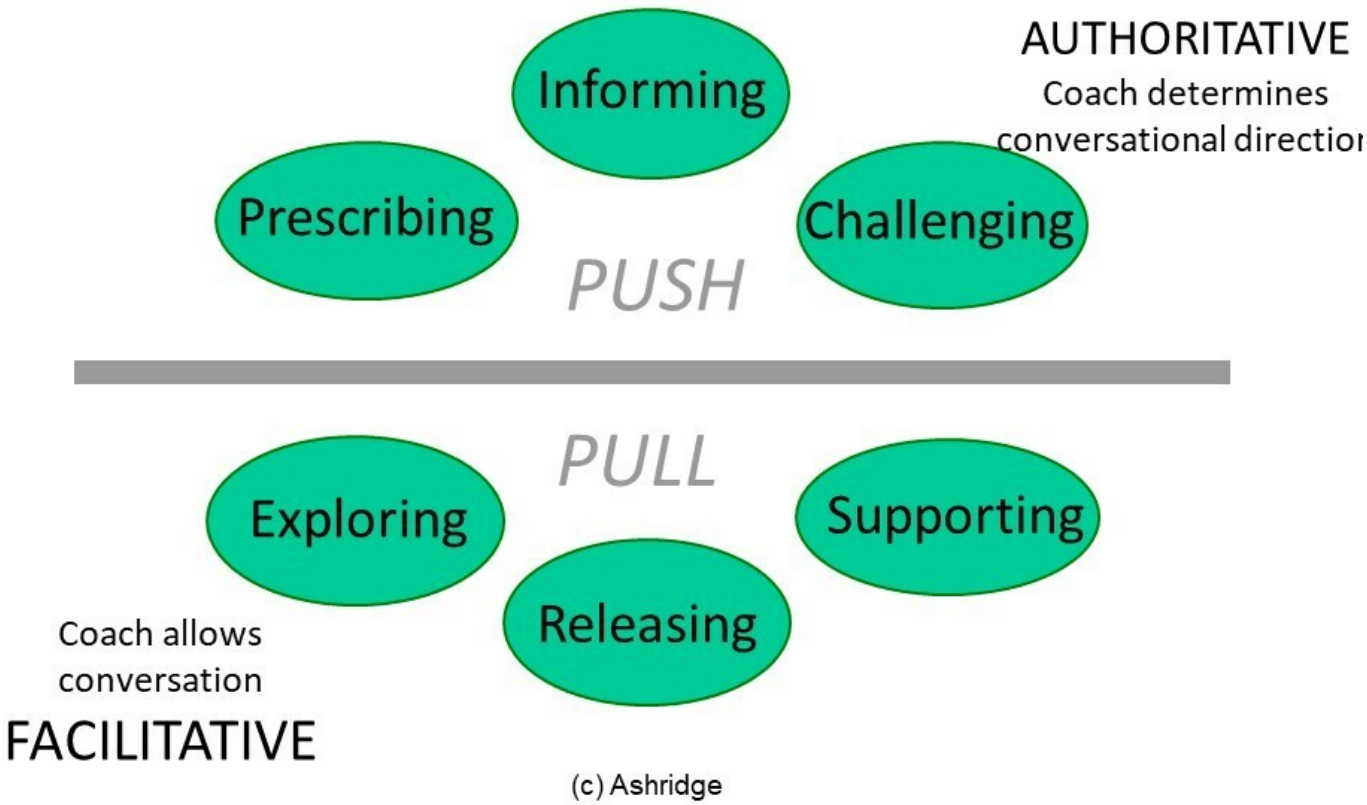

Developing a coaching culture

- A culture in which leaders see it as a core part of their role to develop others, to encourage them to take responsible initiatives.
- A culture where leaders model the culture they want to see.
- A culture in which coaching skills are seen as a core competence of leadership.

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Developing a coaching culture

- A culture which promotes direct communication, and values different views and experience.
- A culture in which leaders mobilise the collective intelligence of the whole organisation.
- A culture which values the development of emotional intelligence, as well as problem solving,

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Professor Bill Critchley April, 2014

Chapter 3-3
A Dialogic Approach to Gender Diversity

The 'Problem'

It has become a fairly general truism that women are likely to be disadvantaged in their progress to the senior echelons in many organisations. The data certainly suggests that the ratio of women to men in management positions declines quite significantly towards the top of most management hierarchies.

A range of general assumptions are commonly made about why this is so, the most general being that organisational cultures tend to be patterned by masculine values, belief systems, attitudes and behaviours. Within this kind of umbrella assumption are included a wide range of views about the nature and extent of the 'difference' between men and women, the role of biology, social expectations and patterning, parenting, the interplay between work and family life, and so on.

Because something is defined as a problem, it is axiomatic that solutions have to be found, and because the problem is usually constructed in terms of a form of discrimination 'against' women, most solutions seek to redress the balance by various forms of positive discrimination, such as leadership or mentoring programmes, or sponsorship for women, and anti-discrimination polices and procedures to ensure equal opportunities, and so forth.

Whereas these solutions may well have been useful to some extent, the 'problem', as defined, is still with us, and has been for some time. We think continuing with these kinds of solution is merely trying harder, and that it is time to reformulate how we think about the problem.

What we want to suggest is that stop trying to 'fix' the women or 'fix' the men. This has the perverse effect of making both men and women feel bad as the source of the problem. If we focus instead on the relationship between men and women, and invite them to reflect deeply and robustly on what they are co-creating together, and what they would like to change, we start to address the **systemic** nature of this phenomenon. This can be done through setting up 'dialogue groups throughout the organisation.

Why Dialogue Works

Business discussions are typically conducted at the level of opinion, conjecture and conclusion. They are focused on debating points of view and making decisions as quickly as possible in order to move to action and solutions.

In dialogue people are asked to slow down that process in order to disclose more of the personal assumptions and beliefs that lead them to the conclusions they draw, opinions they hold and actions they take. As these assumptions and beliefs are generally out of people's conscious awareness, bringing them into the open is often illuminating and leads to a quality of conversation most people have rarely had before in a business context.

Much recent experience has demonstrated the value and impact of 'dialogue' as a way of provoking organisational and cultural change.

It is a very different approach from the more normal project based approach to changing processes and procedures. A dialogue around a broad theme, such as, in this case, gender, brings a group of interested and engaged people together to have honest conversations and inquire into the issue based on the evidence of their experience; then take responsibility for mobilizing change, rather than assume the change will be brought about by some higher authority or department charged with designing a new set of policies, procedures or systems.

The experience of being in this type of conversation is a powerful intervention in itself and builds capacity amongst leaders for deeper exploration of issues of vital importance to the organisation.

A dialogue approach enables men and women in the organisation to sit down and talk together with deep honesty about how their careers have actually developed. The benefits from this approach are that:

- Greater understanding will emerge between men and women about similarities and differences in how they see the world and their careers, how the environment and culture impact on them, and what unconscious biases and assumptions they make about each other
- Individuals, both male and female, who participate will gain insights and may feel empowered to enact change
- At the same time the organisation can collate the themes from their collective thinking to inform structural or process changes as necessary at a later stage

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The Dialogue Process

The process needs to be sponsored by senior leaders in the organisation; it is important that it is not seen as another ‘initiative’ imposed by a central function, and grafted on to ordinary work.

It begins with a clear intention to inquire into how informal career decisions might cumulatively and inadvertently begin to affect men and women differently, from early on in their careers:

1. Understand how these decisions are made, by whom, and what the consequences are.
2. Unearth assumptions, ways of thinking, environmental or cultural factors, policies and working practices in the organisation that may be exacerbating or maintaining the situation.
3. Consider the impact of choices that men and women make for themselves in their careers, explore why they make them and what the differences are.
4. Encourage participants, as they come to new insights about the situation, to become ambassadors for change and take action within their own businesses.

The dialogues are held in groups of around 12, made up of an equal number of men and women at a similar level in the organisation..

Once several groups have been through these dialogues, recurring patterns across the organisation begin to emerge that can be considered for action at a broader organisational level.

The most effective action will tend to be practical changes in the behaviour and thought processes of leaders that are encouraged at all levels in the business, rather than programmatic action taken by HR.

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CHAPTER 4
CONSULTING PRACTICE

Sub-Chapters

- Chapter 4-1 - A Published Article on 'the New Practice of Organisational Consulting'
- Chapter 4-2 - An Overview of the Roots and Development of Organisation Development (OD) as a Practice
- Chapter 4-3 - Taking A 'Systemic Perspective' In Supervising Or Developing A Consulting
- Chapter 4-4 - The Use of ‘Shadow Consulting' and ‘Parallel Process’ in Becoming a Learning Consultancy

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Chapter 4-1
A Published Article on 'the New Practice of Organisational Consulting'

The new practice of organisational consulting

Reframing the consulting process

Bill Critchley

In this article, I explore the implications for organisational consultants of working from a 'process' perspective on organisations. I start with a brief overview of this perspective, and then explore its implications for OD practitioners in terms of three kinds of 'shift' in approach: the shift in role; the shift in what we pay attention to, and the shift in the consulting process. I argue throughout that, in order to make a noticeable and sustainable difference for the 'better' in an 'organisation', we - clients and consultants - must work as fully-embodied human beings with what is actually happening in the moment in our local situation.

I am indebted to Dr Hartmut Stuelten with whom I worked to elaborate on these ideas in an unpublished article, and will be using the pronoun 'we' on a number of occasions to denote our shared view.

Keywords

social process, communicative interaction, self-organising, 'relational'

Adopting a process perspective

The prevailing way of viewing organisations is to think about them as if they are somewhat like machines to be engineered. If we listen to the discourse in most organisations we will hear such words as 'engineering', 'driving', 'leveraging' rather frequently. Such words betoken an instrumental mindset, as if an organisation is a 'thing' which can be 'engineered' or 'driven' from A to B. This leads to an over-emphasis on the felt need to control the legitimate system, through structural, procedural and programmatic solutions.

An alternative way of thinking about organisations - and one that I believe is closer to our lived experience, and supported by the emerging study of complexity - is to view them as complex *social processes*, in which people create priorities, strategies, plans and so forth, by interacting with one another (see YouTube video). This phenomenon that we call an 'organisation' could more aptly be described as an on-going process of 'communicative interaction' or *conversation*.

Research into organisations as 'complex social processes' suggests that they are characterised by patterns of stability and instability *at the same time*. Stable patterns of interaction tend to be maintained through designed, legitimate networks of roles and accountabilities through which people pursue official goals and policies. Instability, and hence the possibility of novelty and transformation, emerges in the simultaneous

operation of many informal networks in which significant political, social and other processes are at work that contribute in vitally important ways to the effectiveness of the organisation.

The radical process perspective suggests that organisations continually emerge in an unpredictable way, as they evolve into the unknown, where what emerges is always potential, but unpredictable transformation. 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; there is an inherent process of what came to be known as 'self-organisation'. As Stuart Kauffman puts it in his book, At Home in the Universe (1996) "order emerges for free".

Broad implications of emergent order

Organisations require good enough, minimalist structures, to manage short term performance. However, these self-organising dynamics are not widely appreciated, and in many organisations with a bureaucratic history, the capacity for people to self-manage their own contributions - individually and collectively - is largely suppressed. As a result, all change is seen to need detailed planning and the development of complicated blueprints before anything can happen. This focus on getting the 'right structure' is often not only painfully slow, it can also have the opposite effect to that which was intended. I work with clients to recognise where structure is inhibiting the possibilities of innovation and experimentation.

I see the role of the OD practitioner as seeding and encouraging more widespread collaboration and self-management, while working at the same time with senior managers to discover a leadership role that is powerful and influential without being oppressive. I do this by focusing on senior managers' paradoxical role of sustaining the formal procedures necessary for operational effectiveness, while stimulating and promoting the less formal emergent processes in the organisation which are the source of innovation, healthy problem solving and, ultimately, quality and service. In this article I elaborate on what this might consist of in practice.

Changing how we conceive the role of OD consultant

In proposing this change to a **process** perspective of an 'organisation' I see three major shifts in how we conceive our role as OD consultants.

First shift: from objective, positivist intervener to relational, participative inquirer.

Positivist action assumes that organisations are 'things' that have intrinsic attributes, such as hierarchy, structure, strategies, rules, procedures, and culture, and that improving, changing or 're-engineering' these are the focus of a conventional consulting intervention that one might call the *working on* approach.

Because we understand an 'organisation' as an ongoing process of communicative interaction between people, through a process perspective we shift our focus towards the patterns and quality of this interactive process and our way of engaging and relating in it. From this perspective we no longer construct our role as ***working on something***, but as ***relating with someone.*** In other words, we consciously use the difference we bring (e.g. in background, experience, perspective, presence) to provoke a process of inquiry ***amongst and with*** clients.

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Second shift: from solution to transformation

The second shift in our role as organisation consultants is from delivering *instrumental, problem-focussed interventions* (which clients sometimes refer to as *turn-key solutions*) based on linear-causal assumptions, to one which supports an emergent and unpredictable process of *transformation of relational patterns*. Traditionally, consultants are brought in to solve a problem within the client's organisation, which the clients are unable to solve by themselves, or to provide some expertise which the organisation lacks. The implicit 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 analysed, a better future is defined, a rational step-by-step process for achieving 'it' is designed, and finally, a carefully managed implementation process is executed by assembling and connecting the right parts and the right intelligence.

However, from a complexity perspective, we let go of the image of ourselves as saviours, bearers of best practice, or providers of finely tuned analytical solutions. We therefore understand ourselves neither as solution experts nor as process facilitators (Schein 1988, p. 3 - 12), because both approaches assume a linear process of problem definition, diagnosis, and improvement implementation. In contrast, we see our role as one of *participants in the co-creation of opportunities for people to explore for themselves their individual and collective issues; to make their own meaning and to take thoughtful, individual and joint action in the knowledge that specific outcomes are unpredictable and ultimately unknowable*.

Transforming the quality of organisational functioning

For us, 'communicative interaction' consists of all the communicative gestures, as Mead (1967) describes them, which evoke responses from others and give rise to meaning. His definition goes beyond just verbal gestures, ranging from small physical or vocal moves between individuals, to large-scale gestures. The latter include such things as value statements, re-structuring, or building a new factory in China, as gestures from senior managers to the organisation (and the market) at large. For all practical purposes, we can visualise this process of continuous gestures and responses between people as a 'conversation'. Thus, when we turn up as consultants, we can think of what we are doing as participating in an on-going conversation or "in the everyday art of *going on together*". (Shaw 2002, p. 5)

We are thus using the term 'conversation' in its broadest sense to describe the dynamic process of communicative interaction. This is patterned by power dynamics, conversational themes, norms and values which have emerged over time. As consultants (and, as such, as temporary members of the organisation) we are both enabled and constrained by these patterns. An essential orientation of an organisational consultant is to be curious and interested in these patterns; to pay attention to our 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 or understand 'the patterns' fully. But, if we arrive freshly into each situation, we can be more attuned to **refocusing our attention** from concentrating on the problem and its solution, towards focusing on the five qualities of organisational functioning hypothesised by Ralph Stacey (2003, p. 414 – 422).

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These are:

- **The quality of engagement:** To what extent are those people within the organisation affected by the topic under consideration, engaged in conversations?
- **The quality of conversation:** How are legitimate themes that organise our client's experience sustained, and how are shadow themes, which are frequently not voiced openly, brought into the public forum?
- **The quality of diversity:** How is diversity fostered and encouraged while at the same time sustaining some measure of necessary stability within the organisation?
- **The quality of holding unpredictability:** How do our clients and we consultants cope with acting into 'the unknown'?
- **The quality of holding anxiety:** How does a particular situation, context or challenge give rise to anxiety and how do our clients and we ourselves cope with this anxiety?

Third shift: reframing the consulting process

Now I want to look at what this way of understanding the phenomenon of organisational life might mean for the consulting process. In essence, we need to let go of the conventional notion by which we think of the consultant as objective diagnostician, and of consulting as a series of sequential steps, each one a necessary precursor to the next.

Instead, consulting simply starts when we turn up. That is, it starts when we first *join* the on-going process of communicative interaction with and within our client's 'organisation'. As our first gestures call forth some response, we are already making some kind of difference - albeit a small one. So, even when we arrive at what conventionally might be framed as a 'sales' or business development meeting, the process of engaging with the client has begun. We therefore use the term 'living inquiry' to denote a methodological form which, while giving some structure to the process of consulting, also conveys a sense of the spirit and nature of our engagement with this continuously emerging conversational process.

Living Inquiry

We are defining this term in relation to our consulting practice very specifically. On the one hand, this is to imply a particular *stance* and, on the other, to describe the discipline, or *methodology*. As a stance it implies an authentic personal 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. By this we mean not just to that which arises in the moment of interaction, but also to our prior assumptions, prejudices, value dispositions and motivations, and how these inform us during the course of the work. This is the discipline of reflective practice.

As regards methodology, we have argued above that consultants *join an ongoing conversation* which, by definition, does not have a beginning or an end. It is helpful for consultants to be mindful of the fact that they always turn up and leave in the middle of something. In our conception of the consulting process, we are therefore trying to dismantle much of the instrumental, predictive, formal structuring which usually surrounds

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consulting interventions. At its core, our approach is to *join this ongoing conversation and work with whatever emerges, while paying close attention to the five vital signs of organisation outlined earlier*. At the same time, we offer clients the security of *some* structure, both to satisfy the formal requirements of procurement and budgeting, and also to map for them what our involvement as consultants might look like.

Again, as I said earlier, we can think of this process 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. Alternatively, we could choose to start by inviting people to say how they experience the problem, and facilitating an explorative conversation. These two examples represent completely different kinds of gestures which will evoke very different responses, and will create very different sorts of relational dynamics. The first focuses on the problem, constructs it as an objective reality, and privileges the consultant's expertise. In contrast, the second focuses on people's lived experience of their subjective reality (instead of 'the problem'), assumes that there will be different perceptions, and privileges a form of social interaction as a means of exploring a multitude of subjective realities and ways forward. This latter gesture is 'relational' in its intention and nature, and is informed by the notion of organisation as a dynamic social process, while the first gesture is instrumental in intention, and is informed by a linear, diagnostic perspective. Living inquiry adopts the former stance.

In essence, *living inquiry* consists of four core processes - *engaging*, *inquiring*, *experimenting, and learning* – that are *all* going on all of the time; like four separate, but interrelated strands in a plaited loaf of bread. This is illustrated in the diagram below:

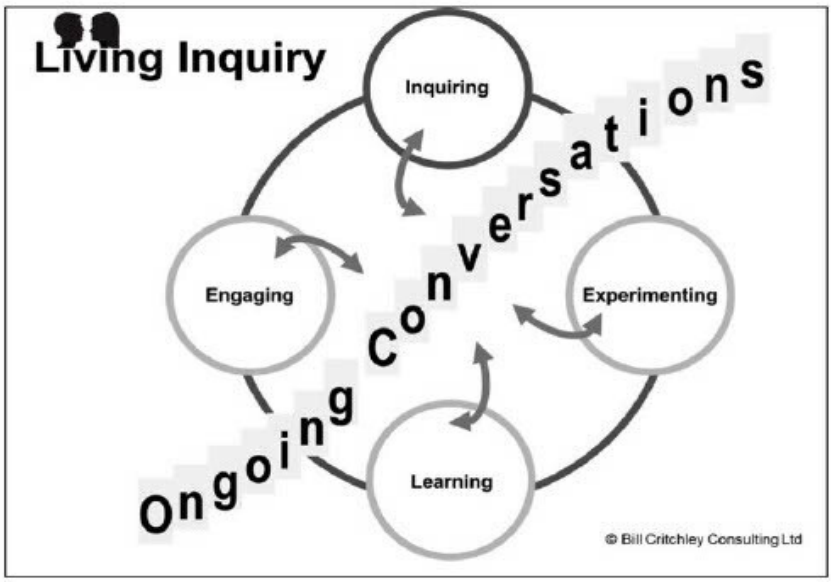

Figure 1. Four core processes of living inquiry

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Four core processes of living inquiry

Engaging

Taking a relational approach requires us to always think first of the *process* of engagement, and then pay attention to the emerging patterns of gesture and response in this engagement process, 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*. As Rodenberg ((2007) suggests, 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 has a primary influence on the quality of any human encounter. We therefore *engage* with the clients in a participative process of exploration.

We use the term 'engaging' to mean that, whatever else we are doing, we are entering into a *relationship* with other human beings. This puts the quality of relationship at the forefront of our consciousness. It is through relationship, rather than through particular techniques or rigid methodologies, that change occurs. As psychologist Carl Rogers observed as long ago as 1957:

> *"For constructive personality change to occur it is necessary that (…) two persons are in psychological contact. (…) All that is intended by this first condition is (…) that two people are to some degree in contact, that each makes a perceivable difference in the experiential field of the other."* (Kirschenbaum and Land Henderson 2001, p. 221).

The importance of the quality of relationship is now endorsed by research carried out in the fields of both psychotherapy, and coaching. In the words of Gregory Bateson, it is the "difference that makes a difference" (1972, p. 381).

Crucially, too, we usually refer to the people with whom we engage as our 'clients', while many of our colleagues still talk about engaging with 'the system'. The danger with using the latter term is that it tends to de-personalise our clients by abstracting from them as individuals and by reifying 'the organisation'. Once we lose sight of the essential truth that organising (instead of *the* organisation) and consulting are social processes, and that we are relating to interdependent individuals in their specific context, we are likely to become instrumental in our practice. This is indeed how most conventional consulting is conceptualized.

Inquiring

As the initial conversation with our clients broadens into a wider engagement, increasing the number of people involved in the inquiry, the conversation develops into a mutual exploration of the issue as 'framed' in the initial contracting phase. As such, this enhances participants' sense of involvement, and influence.

The nature of inquiry

We distinguish clearly between the kind of 'inquiry' we are proposing here and the kind of 'enquiry' 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, usually located in the efficacy of structural arrangements and the logic of cause and effect.

In contrast, we use the term 'inquiry' very differently; meaning a participative process of exploring multiple perspectives with the expectation that some consensus about critical issues will emerge.

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Experimenting

A robust joint inquiry *changes the conversation,* and 'themes' which seem to be organising people's conversations, start to emerge. These give rise to the possibility of new forms of 'joint action'. The inquiry, characterised by almost simultaneous processes of exploration and consolidation, *is* the change process. However, it is useful for the consultant to draw attention to these emerging themes by designing a more structured meaning-making and action-taking process. We do this by drawing attention to those emerging themes and 'progressing' various 'initiatives' configured around particular aspects of those themes.

In some instances, a more formal coordinating event might be needed, where relevant 'stakeholders' are brought together to make meaning of what is emerging. For some clients, it might also be necessary to symbolise a specific activity 'phase', by forming working groups to address particular aspects of the change in a co-ordinated fashion. If so, the most important thing is that these groups maintain the fluid and emergent nature of the process and do not collapse the spirit of the ongoing inquiry/ experimenting into an over-elaborate and linear planning process.

Learning

The fourth aspect of our living inquiry is learning and review – both as a continuing practice and at particular junctures. Although this is happening all the time, it is helpful to signal some formal way of reviewing the experiences and effects of the inquiry as a punctuation in the conversational life of the organisation, and attempt some collective reflection on themes which have emerged throughout the inquiry, as a basis for ongoing improvement.

Conclusion

The key argument that I have made in this article is simple:

> *In order to make a noticeable and sustainable difference for the 'better' in an 'organisation' we - clients and consultants - must work as fully-embodied human beings with what is actually happening in the moment in our local situation.*

Conventional, linear cause-effect based consulting methods that focus on working with *abstractions* and *generalisations* (e.g. the organisation, the manufacturing function, the strategy, the process, the customers) lend themselves well to mechanical, engineering issues (e.g. assembling a car). But these do not lead to lasting improvements, if mistakenly applied to long-term organisational functioning - a social rather than mechanical process.

In contrast, consulting from a process perspective requires a *relational* approach, in which we *engage as knowledgeable people with other people* in an ongoing process of live encounters, rather than consult to clients as objective experts through pre-scripted rituals (e.g. agenda-driven meetings, presentations, or written reports). This, I suggest, requires personal presence, courage, and the ability to handle the paradoxical nature of organisational life. It is also quite likely, and quite understandably so, to be anxiety-inducing.

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This way of working can also provide considerable personal challenges to our clients. Hiring OD consultants to help 'make things better', only to be told that, despite clear intentions for the consulting work, we can neither predict nor guarantee precise outcomes, requires them to demonstrate trust, courage and a similar ability to handle anxiety. Helping them to contain their anxiety, as well as containing our own, is integral to the living inquiry process.

Finally, we need some way of ensuring that we are serving, as well as we can know, our clients' best interest. As we join the on-going processes of communicative interaction, in which we are both shaping our clients and being shaped by them, ethical decisions are being made all the time. We therefore continuously need to keep our own motivations and intentions under review, often through employing our own supervisors, to ensure that we are behaving 'ethically'. There is no generalised 'code' capable of anticipating all eventualities; ethics and values emerge in the activities in which we engage in any given moment, and, as Shakespeare observed, "'Tis rigour, not law." (Rodenberg 2007, p. 253).

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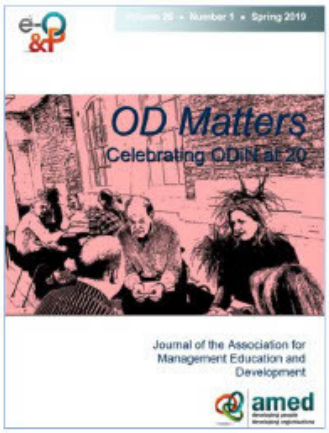

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Chapter 4-2
An Overview of the Roots and Development of Organisation Development (OD) as a Practice

Overview of OD by Prof. Bill Critchley

- Scientific Management is the context from which OD springs
- Founders of Scientific Management were both engineers:
  - Frederick Taylor(1911) in USA and
  - Henri Fayol (1916) in Europe
- Taylor's concern was the efficient performance of physical activities, reducing them to smallest possible parts
- Focus on measurement, standardisation, skill specification, fit
- Saw management as an objective science, defined by laws, rules and principles
- Manager as scientist, regarding the organisation as a machine - a sum of its parts:
  - governed by efficient causality
  - some sets of rules which are optimal
- Fayol saw management as forecasting, planning, organising, co-ordinating and controlling (French bureaucracy)

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1

The beginnings of OD

- Elton Mayo, a social psychologist was one of the first to challenge this entirely mechanistic view of management - conducted experiments in what motivated people
- Shift to thinking about organisations as 'system'
  - main shift was from understanding the parts to understanding the *interaction* of parts and subsystems to form a whole (more that the sum of its parts)
- Most important strand here is cybernetics because of its deep influence on organisational practice
  - cybernetic systems are self-regulatory, goal directed systems, adapting to their environment, e.g. central heating
  - all planning and budgeting systems, quality management, performance appraisal, reward systems are cybernetic in character
- Underlying way of 'seeing' organisations is an engineering perspective - fine for steady state

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2

OD as a response to mechanism

- Broadly concerned with people and the relations between people
- Takes the views that *organisations are fundamentally about* people and the relations between people (value)
- Hence the focus of interest became:
  - Individual motivation
  - Group work/team dynamics
  - Inter-group
  - Whole system
  - Socio-tech

Interest in boundaries or interfaces

The tools of OD

- System diagnosis
- Team building
- Inter-team work (conflict resolution)
- Change management
- Individual development
  - competencies
  - coaching
  - etc
- The portfolio of all HR Departments

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The focus of OD today

- Perceiving organisations as social processes
- Seeing strategy as an emergent process
- Working with change as an inherent phenomenon
- Stimulating innovation
- Disturbing fixed patterns and routines
- Minimising power differentials
- Promoting minimalist and effective formal structure and procedures
- Fostering diversity, connectivity and constructive dialogue
- Fostering ecological perspective/Corporate responsibility

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Chapter 4-3
Taking A 'Systemic Perspective' In Supervising Or Developing A Consulting Practice

What it is not

- An organisation is **not** a ‘system’ or thing
- Often conceptualised as ‘parts’ interacting, so that cause and effect can be mapped (Newtonian view)

Social process perspective is a process perspective, seeing an ‘organisation’ as a process of organising, or ‘communicative interaction’; shaping and being shaped simultaneously

What it is

- I use the adjective ‘systemic’ to describe the patterning of interaction (gesture-response) which emerges through interaction, configured around norms, habits, values, rituals, power dynamics and so forth
- To highlight the fact that we are embedded in context, and hence always shaped by context
- This notion ‘decentres’ the individual and pays attention to the pattern of interactions in which we participate
- As a consultant I ask three kinds of question:
    - What does this context evoke in you?
    - How are you sustaining it?
    - What do you do to amplify or dampen any particular pattern of interaction (e.g. suppose a person complains of a domineering boss; do they comply, complain in the corridors, behave rebelliously etc)

Field Theory is a form of systemic thinking where a team, or individual, is invited to ‘widen’ their perspective and ‘look at’ everything which might be influencing or shaping the situation under review (what’s going on in the world, what is happening in the more immediate context, the current state of the business, the nature of the business – for example a medical business will try and diagnose the problem in terms of an infected or faulty part, a firm of lawyers will try and solve problems with logic and take no account of feelings or relational dynamics and so forth.

Team application

In dysfunctional teams, the tendency is to look for the team member who is ‘the problem’. If we take the view that everyone shapes and is shaped by the team dynamics simultaneously, then all members are’ co-creating the dynamics, influenced by the ‘field’ as above.

One way of looking at the apparent ‘problem’ member is that he or she may be a symptom of something which is not being addressed by the team as a whole; they may be ‘acting out’ on behalf of the team. Usually some aspect of a person’s personality is being triggered by the team dynamics, so someone who is naturally competitive may be more so; a perfectionist may become really frustrated or aggressive by what they see as the team’s incompetence; a natural rescuer may inhibit necessary disagreement and so on (see the short piece on psychological roles in groups).

A good way to work with this is to invite team members to reflect on being in this team evokes in them; what role they take up. I sometimes start this exploration by putting people in pairs with the question “who are you in this group”? I give them a simple structure to work with and it is usually quite revealing and leads to a reflective group conversation which people own up to their contribution.

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Chapter 4-4
The Use of 'Shadow Consulting' and 'Parallel Process' in Becoming a Learning Consultancy

Introduction

For many years as a practioner of organisation consulting and therapy, I have been aware of a strange phenomenon known as 'parallel process'. I was first introduced to this by David Casey, a mentor and colleague of mine with whom I worked in my formative years as an 'Organisation Development'1 consultant, and with whom I wrote two articles, one on top team development, and the other on understanding and working with organisational culture from a psychological perspective. Both of these have become quite well known in our field (Critchley & Casey, 1984, 1989).

Subsequently I discovered this phenomenon was well understood and written about in the field of psychotherapy, in which I was training, and used extensively in the practice of supervision[2]; more recently it has come to be acknowledged in the field of coaching. **Less has been written about it specifically in the context of Organisation Consulting.** David and I were increasingly bringing psychological ideas and practices into our work as organisation consultants, facilitators of action learning sets, and 'OD' consultants.

We used to meet regularly to review our work, and these meetings took the form of co-supervision meetings during which we each took some time to be the client of the other, and we tended to refer to this process as 'shadow consulting'.

[1] The application of organization psychology as 'process consulting', focusing on inter- personal dynamics, in groups, between groups, and in the whole organisation

[2] Supervision is a form of coaching for consultants whereby one person, usually a fellow consultant, listens to a colleague talk about their practice to enable them to reflect on what they are doing, for example what contract they think they have, what kind of relationship is developing between them and their client(s). The 'supervisor' would normally be fairly experienced and would be looking out particularly for the dynamics in the consultant-client relationship. I regard supervision as an essential form of 'quality control' for OD practitioners

When I joined Ashridge Consulting and took responsibility for professional development, I introduced **Shadow Consulting** as a process for enhancing our learning about our work, in particular our client relationships.

In talking about 'shadow consulting' as a form of supervisory practice, I am conflating two ideas, 'parallel process' and 'shadow consulting', which are different but co-dependent. It is important to unpack these, and I will start with the idea of **shadow** consulting.

Shadow Consulting as a process

The process of 'shadow consulting', involves a consultant or team of consultants, telling the story of a current piece of work in the presence of another professional, usually from a related field. The role of the 'other' is to listen to the story, paying attention less to the content (the specific problems, themes or issues inherent in the work) and more to the relational dynamics, between the consultant and the client organisation, as well as within the consultant team, if it is a team. The consultant project can be at any stage, beginning, concluding or somewhere in the middle. It can also be going 'well' or 'badly'. Most consulting projects do not go as planned, so at the very least the consultants should be interested in reviewing their 'progress' (I am always chary of the word progress because it implies a destination, whereas the reality is that consultants merely participate for a while in the on-going life of the organisation – maybe process would be a better word).

The role of the 'shadow consultant' is a highly skilled one and I shall be saying more about this in the course of this article.

The concept of 'shadow'

The use of the word ' shadow' is significant as it implies a very specific role, which goes beyond that of coach or supervisor. Taking it rather literally we could say that by looking at our 'shadow' we ' see' aspects of ourselves which are not in view, which are unlit, which shift and change shape from different perspectives, always moving, always different; the role of the shadow consultant is to highlight or reveal shadow aspects of our relationship with our clients.

The word 'shadow' is often taken to mean 'bad' in some way, but taken literally it means what it says, aspects of ourselves or the relationship which are not in view.

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From a Jungian perspective we could add that our shadow consists in those parts of ourselves which are unconscious and which may possibly include motives which are the opposite of those that we espouse. So for example, while we may claim that our sole purpose is to 'enable' a Chief Executive to whom we are consulting, we could be unconsciously pleased that he is vulnerable and dependent on us giving us a sense of power over a senior figure. It is unlikely we would allow ourselves to be aware of such a base motivation!

Shadow as unconscious process

Psychotherapists are very familiar with the phenomenon of unconscious process, and hence with the metaphor of 'shadow', and they take it for granted in their work. Many people who work in business life, on the other hand, are rather suspicious of what they might privately dismiss as 'mumbo jumbo'. I have my feet in both camps having worked in, or consulted to business organisations of one sort or another throughout my career, and having trained in the psychotherapies in order to become a more effective Organisation Development Consultant, and now practice as both an organisation consultant and psychotherapist.

I do think psychotherapists tend to mystify the concept of the 'unconscious', but it can be made perfectly accessible and understandable. If you think about the fact that in our very early years the neural connections in our neo- cortex (the conscious thinking part of our brain) have not yet been made, and yet we are experiencing strong feelings in our responses to our carers, feelings which are unmediated by any conscious thinking process, it is self evident that these feelings are unconscious in the sense that they are not available at the time to cognitive inspection. Later in life, if we choose to engage in deep reflection about the nature of who we are we may infer something about the etiology of strong feelings, but we can never know for certain.

Such strong feelings may be triggered again in adulthood when we meet a person who, or context that viscerally reminds of us of an early experience which evoked a strong response, for example of being left alone, of feeling abandoned, let down, scared, of being made to do something, or finding ourselves in scary situations and so forth.

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Even later on in our childhood, when we are capable of cognition, we may encounter situations which give rise to feelings of embarrassment, of shame, of feeling incompetent, unwanted, excluded, or at the opposite end of the spectrum, of feeling 'the favourite', the one of whom a lot is expected, the one responsible for keeping the peace in the family and so on. These experiences, particularly when they are repetitive, shape us over time, in a way of which we are largely unaware. Usually we have nothing to compare them with, and hence take them for granted; this is the way life is.

These patterned responses are by definition 'unconscious' in the sense that there may be no specific 'events' to remember; only a long running pattern of experience. Some feelings or mood states may have become an underlying substratum to our existences which are not specifically accessible or namable. We may have developed coping behaviours which enable us to avoid or deal with situations that evoke them. For example I am particularly sensitive to being excluded or 'not wanted' by whatever group I value at a particular time. This manifests itself at work where I worry about whether I shall be asked to join a consulting team being put together for a project, so I go around looking busy and unavailable so that I don't have to face the reality of whether or not I am wanted on the team!

Some people seek therapeutic help to gain insight into this 'substratum' or unconscious when they sense something is disabling them, or impairing their ability to function well, while others get through life well enough without seeking professional help.

Most OD consultants, in my experience, have sought some form of therapeutic development because they come to realise that a keen self- awareness and well-developed reflexive capability are essentials of our trade.

That is why, on entering the OD profession and realising that I was ill equipped to do this kind of work, I enrolled for what turned out to be a prolonged period of psychotherapy training. It is also why I subsequently founded the Ashridge Masters in Organisation Consulting, with the intention of combining psychological and organisation development into one programme.

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In talking of ‘shadow consulting’ what I am referring to is the way in which unconscious or ‘shadow’ material may be evoked in consulting relationships. This in itself is not so difficult to comprehend; for example I have experienced meeting a particular kind of Chief Executive, usually a man on the tall side, with an authoritarian tendency, who tends to trigger in me my very early responses to my Father who always seemed slightly disappointed in me. So I start trying to impress my client. This usually has exactly the opposite result to the one I am unconsciously seeking (to be approved of) and a good shadow consultant will enable me to see what is going on and help me develop coping strategies. This we would say is mainly ‘my stuff’.

Occasionally, something else happens, as well, when I meet that Chief Executive; something that’s different and more complex. A pattern of responding to my client may evolve which is similar in form to a pattern of relating he is involved in in his daily work context. This is what I am calling ‘parallel process’. So if, in the example above, I have the courage to say, to my client that that while I know I am pretty competent at what I do, I am nevertheless noticing my desire to impress him rather than tell him what I think he really needs to hear, he might reveal that he has been wondering why members of his management team rarely challenge him.

Bingo! We’re on to something important. A good shadow consultant needs to help the consultant distinguish between what is purely his personal unconscious response (sometimes called ‘baggage’), and what may be indeed a parallel process. What I want to propose is that we need to become aware of how parallel process can undermine the quality of our work as OD consultants. I also want to suggest that by becoming more aware, and learning how to work with this phenomenon, we can sometimes significantly shift the dynamics and effectiveness of our work.

I would go even further and say that we have an ethical responsibility to learn about and take account of parallel process in our work. I will now move into describing how I understand this phenomenon in the context of organisation consulting.

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Parallel process

Parallel process is a phenomenon arising from the dynamic, systemic nature of organisations. Put very simply it suggests that the dynamics within an organisation are potentially reproduced between the organisation and a consultant, or within the consultant team. This can be explained by understanding organisations as patterns of interaction that simultaneously form and are formed by members of the organisation.

As a consultant engages with the patterns that configure an organisation, they participate in this process of mutual influence; the organization unconsciously tends to ‘induct’ the consultant (as it does employees) into particular patterns of behaviour, and by so doing inhibits their potential to create change. The interesting question for the consultant is whether, and to what extent they personally have a propensity for the induced behavioural pattern.

This is where the understanding of ‘shadow’ and some psychotherapy theory is useful. A pattern of interaction inherently involves both conscious and unconscious communication because this is the nature of being human, as I explained earlier. To take an example which David and I explored in our article ‘Organisations Get Stuck Too’ (Critchley& Casey 1989), an organisation pattern may be characterised by an obsessive-compulsive motivation whereby the norm is to work diligently to get everything ‘right first time’, to plan exhaustively, to have low tolerance for experimentation and to suppress, or at least to not express, affect.

A consultant engaged, for example to bring about change, may unconsciously collude with the pattern of perfectionism if he is susceptible to it, and only succeed in creating more of the same, so no real change emerges.

Discovering the parallel dynamics provides a unique opportunity for the consultant(s) to learn about the client, to review past, and plan future interventions, and to learn about themselves. I now go on to outline how it can be used in the context of a shadow consulting relationship, and discuss the particular skills required of the person(s) playing the ‘shadow’ role, but before I do that I need to elaborate on the notion that organisations are, as I said above, dynamic and systemic in nature and characterised by patterns of interaction.

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A Social Perspective on Organisations

"We are all participants"

I am proposing a particular perspective on organisations that asserts that an organisation is not a fixed entity or thing, but a constant process of gestures and responses between people. The members of this process of organising are all participants in creating a social process that continuously evolves into an unknown future. We cannot, by definition, get outside it; as participants we simultaneously shape and are shaped by the process of engaging together in joint action. You ask your subordinate to do something, and she responds in some way that 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.

The sociologist George Herbert Mead described this process of communicative interaction rather succinctly by saying that "The meaning of a gesture is in the response". (Mead, 1967). 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.

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 no entity, i.e. *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.

"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 (Stacey, 2000) calls this phenomenon *self-organisation and emergence*.

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The Shadowing Context

Consultants inevitably participate in these patterns; they cannot stand objectively outside them, although as new participants they may start by being less emotionally engaged, and so maintain some level of detachment, at least in the early stages of an assignment. Over time however they are likely to be drawn unconsciously into these patterns, and the extent to which they get 'caught' by them will be determined by their own unconscious material.

This is why shadow consulting is not only potentially powerful but also necessary. Psychotherapists are **required** by their ethical codes to have supervision to help them pay attention to how they are participating in their clients' dramas. In my view we consultants owe it to our clients to do the same.

Psychotherapy, as an older profession, has come to recognize that a therapist, as an ordinary human being, inevitably participates in an unconscious exchange with their client, and indeed sees this as a key element in the learning process. However for this learning to occur the unconscious dynamic has to be recognized and explored. This almost always requires a third party (the supervisor) to help the therapist spot unconscious process.

The OD profession is less professionalized and regulated; unconscious process is not so well understood, or indeed accepted as a phenomenon, and hence supervision is not seen as an integral part of OD practice. I think it should be, because unconscious process is an inevitable part of any consulting interaction, and not only can much be learned from exploring it, some ill effects can arise from ignoring it.

The Process of OD Supervision

A consultant or a team of consultants is working with a client organisation. At **any** juncture in the assignment, the consultants call upon a professional colleague or colleagues to join them in a review process as a 'shadow' consultant. Anyone invited into this role needs to understand the potential sensitivity of the material which may be revealed, and hence it is important that he/she takes responsibility for finding a quiet space where there can be no interruptions, and ensures that there is plenty of time.

Many OD consultants claim that 'learning' is core to their practice, but when they come face to face with a potential 'unconscious' pattern of behaviour that may well disturb their self-image or be incongruent with their espoused values, they may potentially feel some embarrassment or shame; they are, after all, human! Here the skill of the 'shadow consultant' in being both provocative, and empathetic and supportive is paramount.

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It does not matter whether there is a particular problem or not, and it is important that the consultant team does not over-prepare themselves. The most important thing is that they tell their story the way it is, without 'presenting'. It is usually helpful to describe:

- The way they see their client organisation;
- The contract they believe they have;
- The interactions that have occurred;
- Hypotheses about dynamic or repetitive patterns (of particular interest are patterns in the consultant-client relationship)
- The interventions made, and their perceptions of their impact;
- Their experience of how the client organisation has affected them;
- Their thinking about what they might do next

Meanwhile the shadow(s) listen and observe. An important decision for them is when and how to use their 'data'; what follows are some ideas about the different levels of parallel process which may emerge.

Working at Different Levels

The single consultant

I shall start by talking about a shadow working with a single consultant. The first job for the shadow is to reflect back what they see happening between the client(s) and the consultant, noticing any behavioural patterns (changing meetings or arrangements, controlling, avoiding etc) or emerging feeling dynamics (for example, does the consultant feel a weight of responsibility for outcomes, appreciated, used instrumentally, emotionally close or distant, frustrated etc). The first question for the consultant is whether any of these patterns or dynamics are reflected within the client organisation, or that part of it with which they are engaging. This will give rich diagnostic information to the consultant, and can also shape subsequent interventions.

In conceiving of an organisation as pre-existing patterns with which the consultant engages, it is inevitable, as I suggested earlier in this paper, that the consultant will become inducted into these patterns to some extent, and that he/she will be unaware that this is happening. This has very important implications if you think, as I do, that a consultant's job is to make a difference. It would suggest that our capacity to make a difference declines as we become more enmeshed in our clients' dynamics, through which our behaviour becomes moderated, and our capacity for 'difference' is gradually eroded.

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Shadow consultants can help consultants to become aware of this subtle process of reciprocal influence. If the particular nature of this dynamic is understood, the consultant can make a conscious choice to change their own behaviour, and hence **interact with their client differently** thereby evoking a different effect. In this way a consultant can induce change more powerfully than by any attempts to ' manage change', although he/she will not know in advance the nature of the change she will induce; there's the rub.

The consultant team

Often consultants work as teams and this presents the shadow consultant with rich possibilities. The first job is the same as above, but the second job for the shadow is to draw attention to the interactions **within** the consultant team. These are likely to parallel, to a greater or lesser extent, the interactions both between the consultants and the client, **and** within the client organisation, and will therefore enrich understanding of the dynamics, often, in my experience in quite unexpected ways.

The role of the shadow in this situation is to enable the consultant team to process their dynamics, and this is a subtle and sensitive task, involving drawing attention to power dynamics, inclusion and exclusion, and the habits, norms and values evolving in the team. Of course a team's dynamics are co-created by its members, **but** I am suggesting that a critical influence is likely to be the patterns and dynamics of the client organisation.

The shadow and the consultant(s)

The third job for the shadow is to suggest reviewing the dynamics evolving in the shadow process itself, including those between shadow and the consultants and **between** the shadows if there is more than one. The transactions between shadow and consultants are likely to directly parallel those between the consultants, and by inference will shed further interesting light on the dynamics of the whole field.

How to learn from Parallel process

Clearly there is much that can be learnt about the client organisation and the dynamics of the complex pattern of interactions from the application of parallel process phenomena, and an important element in the configuration of this pattern is the consultant herself. So, as consultants we can learn a great deal about ourselves, about the impact we tend to have, about patterns of interaction we are likely to get involved in, and about our propensities both helpful and unhelpful.

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However, this kind of learning requires a real willingness to open oneself non-defensively to feedback; a commitment to see oneself as systemically part of creating or sustaining any process we are engaged in, and this can be hard for anyone who is used to the notion of consultant as disinterested, dispassionate outsider, capable of sustaining an‘ objective’ view of the client organisation.

The Skills of a Shadow

I will give a resume´ of what seem to me to be the essential skills of a shadow consultant, although I do this with some reservation. Most of them are almost too obvious to say, and yet in the quality of their application lies the essence of effective shadow consultancy (and a large part of good consultancy).

- Giving full and close attention
- Being fully present without a particular agenda, and without expectations of specific outcomes (creatively indifferent)
- Observing patterns, repetitions and interactions
- Noticing energy flows (intensity and quality)
- Noticing your own bodily sensations
- Allowing intuition to work on the unfolding story
- Paying attention to your own feelings and responses
- Noticing your fantasies and associations
- Reflecting, summarising and clarifying
- Giving feedback
- Offering hypotheses
- Exploring options

Developing skills as a shadow consultant can be likened to an intensive training in suspending judgement, developing intuitive capacity and hypothesis formulation, and in appreciating complex dynamics. These are core skills for OD practitioners seeking to create learning consultancies.

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CHAPTER 5
GESTALT PRACTICE

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Chapter 5-1
An Overview of Gestalt Theory & Principles in Relation to Consulting

ASHRIDGE consulting

Gestalt: a relational approach to consulting

Gestalt Therapy: a relational approach

ASHRIDGE consulting

- Initially developed by Drs' Fritz Perls and Laura Perls in Germany/ South Africa and a comprehensive development of theory, methodology and practice in a seminal work by Perls, Hefferline and Goodman (1954) in USA
- Relational Gestalt Therapy theory has a few main ideas that differentiate it from other approaches and important when coaching from a Gestalt orientation
  1. It is concerned with '**awareness'** in the '**here and now**' relationship where past as remembered and future as anticipated exist in the present moment
  2. We are inextricably **inter-connected in a web of relationships** where we can **only know ourselves in relation to other persons, and situations**
  3. Focus on peoples existence and **responsibility for their 'way of being' in the world**
- Gestalt is a German word: to make in to a comprehensive whole
  - A concept that everything in nature (including us) has a built in desire to become whole or complete, which have characteristics that cannot be gleaned by analysing the parts
- Gestalt is not only a theoretically grounded therapeutic approach but also a philosophy for living
  - It's focus is beyond the individual, beyond even human inter-personal relationships as it also requires us to examine and address our interconnectedness to our world i.e. organisations, society, environment
- Gestalt subscribe to the belief and practice that
  - Self is relational and is of and from the field i.e. shaped by and shapes our context
  - Relationships are co-created between person and person and it is in relationship that growth and healing occurs
- Some core principles and methods for a Gestalt orientated coaching approach
  - Awareness
  - Contact
  - Phenomenology – the phenomenological method – focus on 'what is and the here and now'
  - Experimentation
  - Dialogue
  - Paradoxical Theory of Change

Awareness

- Awareness is the only goal of therapy (Yontef, 1989) as awareness of' what is' leads to change
- Awareness is more than introspection (which is primarily a cognitive process)
  - It includes our rich emotional , somatic and intuitive wisdom
  - It is grounded in our sensory relationship to our environment (i.e. our senses)
  - It is our capacity to be in touch with our own existence, to know what we are feeling, sensing, thinking and reacting moment to moment
- Awareness occurs in the 'here and now' of the living present i.e. our lived reality in the world we live in
- Awareness of self informs me 'what is me' and 'what is other'
- In coaching we need to be aware of self and pay full attention to the other
  - Endeavour to heighten their awareness of how they experience a situation
  - Increases 'choicefulness' in how a client responds in situations, that are not habitual and more 'appropriate' to ensure my needs are met

- Three zones of awareness (Perls, 1947)
  - Inner Zone : physical, bodily sensations, feelings and emotions
  - Middle Zone : our thoughts, fantasies, imagining, remembering rationalising and place of sense making (part of our inner world but highlighted as the zone to mediate between inner and outer. Often a zone of awareness that we overly rely on
  - Outer Zone: awareness through the five sense – seeing, touching, smelling, listening, tasting as well as talking and moving

- As coaches we need to;
  - shuttle between internal and external loci of awareness,
  - become aware of self and our client
  - alternate between directed awareness and undirected awareness

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Contact

- Humans are relational and 'hardwired' for contact
- Early interactions i.e. contact between child and carers is the means through which the development of personality begins
- Contact is the process by which the coach and client relate to each other (not just verbally) in the 'here and now'
- Health includes full and vibrant contact in the 'here and now' relationship
- Contacting is a co-created, mutually dynamic process and is field dependant
- There are ways we modify contact, due to influence of past patterns, beliefs or assumptions that may make the contact less vibrant and lively
- 'Some' key processes we use to modify contact include;
  - Introjection; 'shoulds /aughts' , the unquestioning acceptance of attitudes and ideas of significant others
  - Projection; aspects of self that are difficult to own/accept or aspects you see in others that you'd desire for yourself
  - Confluence; merge with another and giving up on what is important to you as difference is difficult to tolerate. Often tend to use pronoun 'we' rather than 'I'
  - Retroflection; 'to turn sharply back against' . They do themselves what they wish to do to others . Often expressed as manipulations of the body

Phenomenological Method

- Phenomenology – the study of 'what is' rather than what it 'appears to be'– it is a discipline and attitude as much as a set of techniques
- The phenomenological approach requires the coach to stay close to the 'here and now' experience, helping the client to explore and become aware rather than interpreting their behaviour/actions
- The goal of the Gestalt phenomenological exploration is awareness or insight – to enable the whole to be understood rather than the individual parts
- The phenomenological method (Spinelli, 1989) comprises of
  - Bracketing; our assumptions and beliefs
  - Description; we draw attention to **what we** notice in clients and **how** they make contact (i.e. the process) in relation to us, to increase awareness of their experience in the here and now. We do not interpret
  - Horizontalism; everything in the client's context is given the same importance i.e. we do not prioritise but await for a figure to emerge .Also we pay attention to what is absent in the clients exploration e.g. disowned feelings

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Dialogue

- In Gestalt therapy , we hold the belief that individuals have the potential for growth and fulfilment in their lives
- Dialogue is a particular form of contact where growth, healing and enablement occurs in authentic relationship with another
- Buber (1958) a philosopher, educator and a humanitarian anticipated and experienced the distancing between person and person in an increasingly impersonal society that was obscuring the relational sphere.
- Identified 2 primary attitudes (both necessary for human living) that a person can take in relation to others and the world generally
  - I-It relationship ; useful and necessary as it is way of relating to the other to understand context, facts , information . It is a necessary part of relating to live in the world
  - I –Thou relationship: is an attitude and orientation, which is a genuine meeting between individuals
- I-Thou dialogue has four key characteristics
  - Inclusion: imagining and entering as fully as possible into the experience of others
  - Presence: sharing perspective by modeling phenomenological reporting with discernment (i.e. see , feel , thoughts in the here and now)
  - Confirmation: acknowledge what is figural for client, but also what is alienated, absence, hence, holding hope for the clients potential i.e. what they might become
  - Commitment to dialogue: surrendering to the 'here and now' while living dialogue as something that is 'done' in the work not 'talked about'

Experimentation

- Process –experiential therapy (like Gestalt) where experimentation is part of the process is considered a factor of effective therapy (Cooper, 2008)
- Neuro-scientificic research has demonstrated that new experiences repeated over a period of time create new neural pathways (Stern 1985), which leads to greater choice making in how individuals respond
- Gestalt experiments emerge naturally in the here and now relationship – they are not planned in advance and are co-designed with clients
- Requires coach to adopt the phenomenological method and trust their intuition and creativity
- Aim of experiments is to try new behaviour and see what happens (Mackewn , 1994) where the coach has no investment in any particular outcome
- Can be used to heighten awareness around their part in the issue, try new ways of being, support to express unexpressed thoughts, emotions, practice new behaviours in safe environment
- Types of experiment could include for example ; metaphors and images, drawing, two chairs dialogue ; amplification/moderate, articulating what is unspoken, noticing and attending to the body , movement , use of poetry/ music , role play
- Experiments can occur during the coaching session or after

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Stages of Experiment

- Identify the emerging figure e.g. hesitation in challenging
- Suggest and offer experiment – check for agreement
- Grade the experiment –carefully noticing the clients response
- Develop the experiment with the client during the work
- Complete the experiment – attending to the clients energy and phenomenological experience
- Review the experiment
- Integrate learning from here and now and back in work/life
- Withdraw and await for new figure to emerge in work

(Adapted from Joyce and Sills, 2001)

Concept of figure and ground

- Humans do not experience parts of their environment separately, but organise things in to a meaningful whole
- A person keeps their attention on part of the whole only so long as his interest is maintained
- Figure is where the attention is focused
- Ground is the background within the scope of awareness, but not the focus of attention
- When figure is well differentiated, a person can respond clearly and take effective action i.e. where and what is the clients energy and interest
- Once figure (e.g. an issue re – team conflict, falling sales) is identified, acknowledged and addressed (e.g. conflict situation is spoken about or a plan to manage harsh economic reality is in situ) the figure then merges into the ground and a new figure emerges that requires attention

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Field Theory – connectedness

- Kurt Lewin (1952)– foremost exponent of field theory and founder of modern social psychology
- Field theory is a method and way of thinking which relates to the interconnectedness between events and the setting or situation these events take place
- Hallmark of field theory is to look at the 'total situation' rather than a piecemeal, or item by item analysis
- What happens to something in the field is a function of the overall properties of the field taken as an interactive dynamic whole
- the field as a whole is changed with the inclusion of something new
- As Gestalt is phenomenological and dialogic orientation where we co-create relationships then what we bring into the client system changes the mutual field with consequences for the client

Basic skills of a Gestalt informed consultant

- To attend, observe and 'selectively' share observations of what you see, hear, feel, think, notice etc in the 'here and now' coaching relationship
- To attend to your own experience (feelings, sensations, thoughts) and 'choicefully' share these
- Be present in here and now requires us to be; aware; notice the movement in the living present; notice how there and then informs here and now; notice how future hopes & anticipations informs here and now
- To focus energy on the client system and emergence or lack of themes (figures)
  - Act to support mobilisation so something happens
- To facilitate clear, meaningful, heightened contacts by exploring all parts of the client's relational connections
- To help the client achieve heightened awareness of its overall

process in completing tasks / unfinished business

- To model good relational contact and transfer capability to the client
  - By helping them recognise how they interrupt, block, support, enhance good contact in their work with you as coach
- Adopt the paradoxical theory of change (Beisser ,1971)where change occurs when a client invests him/herself in the situation, so full awareness of current reality is attained

Adapted from Nevis 1998

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Chapter 5-2
An Orientation To Consulting Based On Gestalt Theory & Principles

Bill Critchley - June 1996

Context

I started my career in consultancy immediately after completing my MBA. Like many of my contemporaries, I thought consultancy offered an obvious opportunity to apply my newly gained knowledge. It seemed unlikely that many companies would give me, someone who had spent 10 years in sales and marketing, a highly paid job in their finance department, or any other function of which I had no direct experience, and yet that was the hope of many people taking their MBA's, that they would be able to jump the functional barrier. Consultancy offered the best possibility, but even then, the best offer I was able to get was in a specialist marketing consultancy.

The prevailing consultancy paradigm at that time, and it probably still is to a large extent, was based on the assumption that the consultant would have greater knowledge or skills in a particular functional or technical domain than the organisation. The methodology of this paradigm is a linear-analytic one in which the consultant diagnoses the problem, and writes a report with recommended solutions, although these days he/she would be likely to get involved with the process of implementation.

This approach is fine where the assumption is justified, but far too often it is not, and the consultant has to engage in some skilful promotional and selling activity in order to promote an essentially spurious claim to expertise over and above the client's. Clients often collude with this at one level, because they would like a 'solution' to a 'problem' which they feel they have identified.

The client's collusion is based on a second shared assumption, that organisations work in a linear fashion, in which cause-effect relationships can be objectively ascertained, and hence problems correctly identified. There is much to suggest, from both recent and current research, that this view of organisations is extremely limited in its ability to handle the complex phenomena which managers and consultants are experiencing in their attempts to improve organisational effectiveness. Sticking with the old paradigm serves merely to sustain the myth of certainty and predictability in an essentially chaotic world.

The Gestalt approach on the other hand has field theory as its central premise, a way of thinking in which the total situation is appreciated as a whole, and there is acknowledgement of "the organised, interconnected, interdependent, interactive nature of the whole" (Lewin 1952). Taking this view, all events and phenomena only have meaning in their context, which seems to me to be a particularly helpful way of conceptualising organisations, and a useful starting point for thinking about a consultancy intervention. It also places emphasis on fully experiencing the 'here and now', the notion that by going fully into the experience of the present, the possibilities for action come clearly into focus. This emergent way of working seems a more appropriate way of engaging with complexity and uncertainty than attempting to predict and plan for it.

Theoretical Overview

The assumption which underlies a Gestalt approach to organisational change, is that change is a naturally occurring phenomenon which we cannot control. What we can do is enhance the organisation's capability to respond to its changing internal and external environment, to release its capacity to experiment and to initiate. For most managers who are trained to set objectives, and construct milestones to reach them, the idea that change cannot be 'managed' in the same way comes hard.

Furthermore there is an obvious implication that change is inherently unpredictable, and therefore attempts to 'plan change' in the way managers, brought up in the conventions of 'scientific management' assume they should, are futile. Stacey (1993) argues that elaborate planning procedures are merely a defence against anxiety, 'a denial of uncertainty itself'.

A further assumption of the Gestalt approach is that human beings and organisations have an inherent capacity to creatively adjust to their environment. This capacity to stay in healthy relation to one's changing environment is referred to in Gestalt terminology as 'self-regulation'.

This natural capacity for self-regulation is liable to be interrupted by environmental interferences, events and experiences which are neither bad nor good in themselves, but whose cumulative impact induces a fixed rather than a flexible and creative response. Hence any impairment of the capacity for self-regulation broadly defines the problem area in a Gestalt intervention.

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The main purpose of a Gestalt intervention is to increase awareness of the field and the client's relationship with it, through paying attention to and emphasising the processes and interactions taking place in the present. This focus is predicated on the 'paradoxical theory of change' (Beisser, 1970), whereby "change occurs when a person becomes what he or she is, not when he or she tries to become what (s)he is not".

The act of fully exploring and experiencing phenomena as they presently are, will lead to spontaneous self-organisation. This is the Gestalt theory of change, which is contrary to most prevailing theories of organisational change. It does not depend on evangelism, visions of the future, re-engineering or top down cascades, but on a fundamental view that human beings and the organisations they construct, have an inherent capacity to creatively regulate and organise themselves in response to their changing environment, if that capacity is nurtured and sometimes released. Leaving the final word with Beisser, "change does not take place through a coercive attempt by the individual, or by another person to change him, but it does take place if one takes the time and effort to be what one is - to be fully invested in one's current position".

Foundations of Gestalt Theory

The essential underpinnings of the Gestalt Theory of Change, are drawn broadly from the fields of Science, Gestalt Psychology, and Philosophy. Clarkson (1989) explains that 'in Gestalt, the whole is always greater than the part and any part refers to the whole. Most core Gestalt concepts overlap'. It is rooted in Existential Philosophy, it is explicit in Complexity theory, and is predicated on the Gestalt psychologists theory that it is characteristic of human perceptual processes to create meaning by the perception of wholes and the need for closure.

Clarkson suggests a clustering of three theoretical concepts, Holism (organismic wholeness), Change (cyclic flux) and Process (dynamic interelatedness). Yontef (1980) uses three principles to define Gestalt as a therapy which seem to be particularly helpful in understanding the role of the practitioner.

Principle one: Gestalt therapy is phenomenological; its only goal is 'awareness' and its methodology is the methodology of awareness (the Change principle).

Principle two: Gestalt therapy is based wholly on dialogic existentialism, i.e.the I-Thou contact/withdrawal process (the Process principle).

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Principle three: Gestalt therapy's conceptual foundation or world view is based on holism and field theory (the Holism principle)

Furthermore, any of the three properly and fully understood encompasses the other two. I now intend to elaborate briefly on each of these three principles, and in doing so it is interesting to notice the overlap between them - their essential indivisibility.

Phenomenology

Phenomenology has been interpreted as the method of faithful description of phenomena in order to get "to the things themselves". It places description first in the process of investigation, before experimental or other forms of data reduction take place. To be critical of one's own assumptions is a prerequisite of unbiased description, and in that respect it is a critical science. Husserl (1970) warned the investigator 'not to hunt deductively after constructions unrelated to the matter in question.....but to grant its right to whatever is clearly seen'.

As the science of meaning Phenomenology holds that every experience of reality is an experience of unities of meaning. This derives from the concept of intentionality which is central to Phenomenology. Intentionality means that any human experience or action has an object which is conceptually distinct from that experience or action, and may or may not exist independently.

That which I see over there, the pain which I feel within, the theory which I hold to be true, are all objects of my present acts of seeing, feeling, believing and as such they are said to be "intended" by these mental acts. They are intentional correlates in contrast to the Newtonian notion of objective reality in which subject is separated from object, and reality is chopped up into supposedly scientific manageable proportions.

Phenomenology is the methodology of Existential philosophy, which is not a doctrine but a style of philosophy in which the subject holds the truth, not the object, in which the subject is the existent in the whole range of his existing, and which tries to express the whole spectrum of existence known directly and concretely in the very act of existence. Phenomenology is the tool by which the existentialist explores her passionate, subjective experience, by which she becomes aware of her presuppositions, prejudices, her interpretational process.

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The phenomenological exploration, on the one hand focuses on, and gives prime value to, the unique and unshareable differences in every person's experience of their world. Unshareable in the sense that one person can never fully know the experience of another, or at least they can never be certain whether they know or not, and the assumption is that each complex interaction between a changing person and their changing environment will necessarily be unique. On the other hand, the essence of a person's experience may well correspond in many cases with that of others, and so the troublesome notion of 'reality', expressed in the Descartes/Newtonian paradigm as a concern for objective, robustly logical/analytical definition, is transformed into a process of subjective, consensual validation.

While psychology traditionally focuses on the individual, phenomenological psychology is situation-centred. The primary emphasis is on the person-world relationship. No analysis of behaviour is complete without an adequate description of the place in which, and with respect to which behaviour "takes place".

Field theory Field theory is particularly relevant for those of us who are interested in organisational change. Kurt Lewin (1952), who originally introduced the idea into social systems thinking, said that Field theory is not a theory in the usual sense, but a way of "looking at the total situation" rather than looking at it piecemeal.

There is acknowledgement of "the organised, interconnected, interdependent, interactive nature of complex human phenomena"; the theory emphasises the "interconnectedness between events and the settings or situations in which these events take place", and describes how human actions and experience are a function of the organisation of the field as a whole. With a field theory outlook we abandon looking for single causes, and we also abandon viewing phenomena in terms of cause and effect thinking. Lewin drew upon Maxwellian field theory in physics in which the fundamental "unit" is no longer a particle or a mass, but a field of force. Within a field, there is a constantly changing distribution of forces affecting things in the field. Events are determined by the nature of the field as a whole, which is constantly in flux.

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This concept of 'field' however, while having a scientific basis in Physics, can only be viewed as a useful metaphor when applied to social systems, and Gestalt practitioners have always had some difficulty in explicating it as a proper 'theory' of organisation, hence Lewin's reservation that it is not a theory in the usual sense, rather a way of 'perceiving'. What is more, it is a way of perceiving that tends to have more currency with intuitive, than with rational-analytic modes of thinking which have tended to predominate in organisations. Fortunately for Gestalt practitioners, with the growing awareness of the inherent complexity in organisations, the ideas contained within field theory now have more face-validity, and the emerging theory of Complexity itself seems likely to provide a more robust theoretical foundation for a field view of organisations (see below).

The Gestalt Model of Intervention

1, Presence

The notion of presence is core to a Gestalt model of intervention. By this I mean the way in which the interventionist is in the organisation. (S)he essentially joins the organisation, becoming part of the field; (s)he does not attempt instrumentally to 'do something to' the organisation, but rather to have an impact in the field through the quality of his or her presence. The interventionist provides a presence which may otherwise be lacking or discouraged in the system. Specifically this means:

1. Being authentically present in such a way that encourages others to be fully who they are

1. Modelling a way of solving problems which pays attention to the emergent, self-organising properties of the field
2. Helps to focus client energy on the reality of things as they are, rather than as they would like to believe they are, through a process of deep dialogic exploration
3. Facilitates dialogue across rigid boundaries, in such a way as to permanently loosen those boundaries

2. Consultant as Teacher

The consultant teaches the client system those skills necessary for functioning better in carrying out the functions of awareness, mobilisation, action and contact

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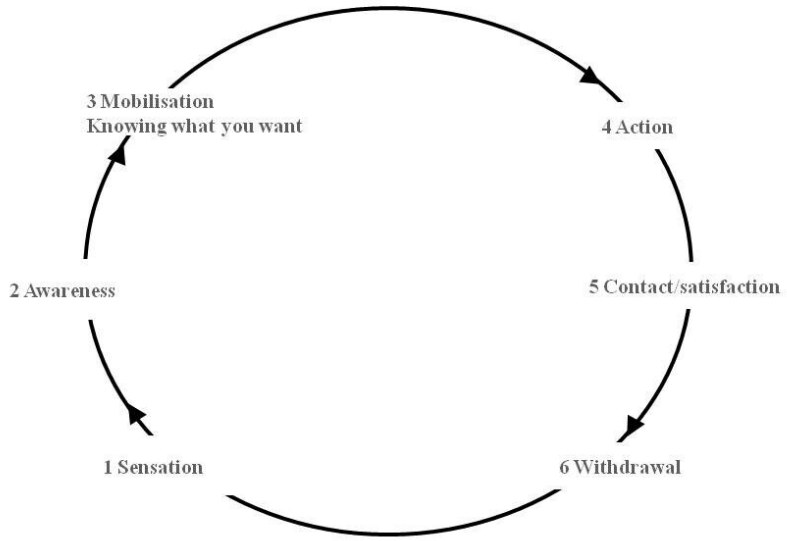
These functions form part of the Gestalt cycle of experience, which is one of the cornerstones of the Gestalt model. It describes the process by which people, individually or collectively, become aware of what is going on at any moment, and how they mobilise energy to take some action which allows them to deal constructively with the possibilities suggested by the new awareness.

The Gestalt Cycle



'Resistance to Change'

As with individuals, organisations are maintained by a system of beliefs, about how to survive, how to relate to their environment. Indeed we might argue that the essence of an organisation is the system of beliefs and perceptions that constitute it. The balance sheet may be what defines it for an accountant, but for those who work in it, it is a phenomenon, part shared and part personal. The shared beliefs are what is often described as 'the glue'. Edgar Shein (1985) talks about 'basic assumptions' as the roots of organisation culture, which inform all transactions both internally and externally and give rise to stable patterns and routines. While stable patterns and routines are both useful and necessary for effective organisational functioning, when they become fixed, they inhibit its capacity for adjustment and renewal. The basic assumptions began as conscious choices which led to success, so that these stable patterns and routines are therefore embedded in powerful, historically validated assumptions, which often lead to valiant efforts to defend and maintain them.

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They also provide a certain cohesiveness and meaning to members of an organisation, so attempts to change them give rise, not unnaturally to what is often labelled as 'resistance'.

However, as Nevis (1987) points out 'it is a label applied by those who see themselves as agents of change, and is not necessarily the phenomenological experience of the targets....most of the attempts to understand resistance are made from the perspective or bias of those seeking to bring about change'. From their point of view the most common reasons are likely to be:

- A desire not to give up something of value
- A misunderstanding of the change and its implications
- A belief that the change does not make sense for the organisation
- a low tolerance for change

All but the last give credence to the fact that there may be legitimate differences in the way various members of the organisation see the same situation, and what we have come to label 'resistance' can alternatively be seen as a variety of different views on the desirability of change, rather than an undifferentiated blob of 'resistance'.This is often created by imposed change, starting with the manager's articulation of some change objectives, or desired future state, and continuing with a planned set of activities to bring about the change, opposition to which is seen as a challenge to his/her legitimate authority (Nevis also observes that resistance as a concept or as a manifestation has meaning only where there are power differentials among people).

As a result of trying to 'manage change' in this way, we have come to assume that resistance is natural, that everyone is reluctant to change. This is not surprising if we are pushed, sometimes implicitly threatened, or if the process requires that the present reality is denigrated so that those involved in creating and striving to maintain it inevitably feel bad about themselves. Gestalt starts from the proposition that people and organisations are what they are for good reason, and that these good reasons need to be respected and taken into account in any change process. Donald Klein in his book 'Planning of Change', observes that without resistance to change, every new idea would be acted on immediately. There would be no continuity or stability, so we would be caught up and destroyed by chaos. Even our cells would burst because of the absence of resistant membranes to contain their substance. From this perspective, resistance is essential to life as we know it.

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While Gestalt assumes that change is natural, and a potential source of energy, paradoxically, change cannot occur without a necessary degree of stability and containment. A Gestalt practitioner will pay equal attention to the routines, procedures, rituals and boundaries which are necessary to provide stability, as to what is needed to release the natural potential for innovation and change within the organisation.

Organisations as Complex Systems

I want to introduce a final piece of theory because I think it is totally compatible with Gestalt, and also offers some extremely important and useful new thinking about organisations. This is emerging from the study of 'Complexity theory', which is as yet in its infancy, and we are developing it and modifying it as new theoretical insights are combined with our experience of working with organisations. It appeals to me both because it helps me make more sense of my current experiences with organisations, and also because it provides some potentially more rigorous theoretical underpinnings to field theory. Here is a brief overview.

Complex adaptive systems are networks of large numbers of agents, each interacting with others according to their own principles, laws or rules (schemas). In inanimate systems, the agents follow their rules of interaction without ever changing them - these are thus deterministic systems which display no learning. What one agent does affects the others simply because they are interacting with one another. Laboratory experiments and computer simulations have recently made some important discoveries; they have revealed that at low levels of energy/information flow, and when each agent is connected to, interacting with, only a few others, the system displays the dynamics of stability - in the sense that the word is used by sociologists, economists and psychologists we can say that the system displays the dynamics of stability. That is to say, the behaviour patterns produced by the system are regular and predictable, collapsing to one kind of behaviour, a point, or displaying regular cycles, which are quite complicated but are perfectly predictable. Furthermore, any small disturbance in this pattern will be rapidly damped away by the operation of the system. When each agent is interacting with, connected to very large numbers of agents, when energy/information levels in the system are very high, the system displays the dynamics of explosive instability with a tendency to disintegrate when it comes up against a constraint. Here the system amplifies any deviation. The real discovery is that at some critical pointin energy/information flow and connectedness between agents, the system displays the dynamics of a phase transition between stability and instability - just before it becomes explosively unstable, it displays a dynamic in which it is both stable and unstable at the same time, in which it is both amplifying and stabilising changes. This dynamic is referred to by Ralph Stacey as 'bounded instability', and I have drawn heavily on his lucid writing for this explanation (Stacey 1997).

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Stacey goes on to point out that when we move from inanimate systems to living systems, we can still think of them as complex networks and so the same basic dynamics will apply. However the schemas of agents in living systems anticipate the consequences of certain responses to their immediate environment, and both behaviour and the schemas themselves are continuously revised in the light of experience. The networks learn therefore in both simple and complex ways. The spontaneous interaction between agents gives rise to aggregate patterns of behaviour which have the capacity to both constrain and enable emergent behaviours, but we can never know which, so that neither can be predicted or explained in terms of the other (Shaw 1997).

Agents, themselves complex adaptive systems, and networks of agents are thus embedded in a perpetually novel, shifing environment which they co-constitute and co-create with other agents and networks of agents (Holland 1992).

To summarise: complex systems are non-linear, dynamic feedback systems, driven by simple feedback laws, capable of generating behaviour so complex that the links between cause and effect, action and outcome, simply disappear in the detail of unfolding behaviour. Feedback can have either an amplifying or a dampening effect, and it is impossible to know which of those two possibilities will occur. 'When a nonlinear feedback system is driven away from stable equilibrium towards the equilibrium of explosive instability, it passes through a phase of bounded instability in which it displays highly complex behaviour. There is what we might think of a border area between stable equilibrium and unstable equilibrium, and behaviour in this area has some important characteristics; while it is unpredictable, it also displays what has been called a hidden pattern. It is in permanent flux, and the implicate order emerges while the system in this phase is inherently self-organising. In this phase the system has the greatest capacity for innovation and regeneration.

These characteristics sound very similar to many of the underlying principles of Gestalt; indeed Heraclitus himself might have asked, "so what's new?"

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What Heraclitus did not foresee was the impact of the ideas of Newton, Descartes, the neo Darwinians and many others within these modern traditions on the western world's modes of thought, and the way these modes of thought have inevitably infiltrated Gestalt practice, if not its rhetoric. This way of conceiving organisations represents, in Kuhn's (1970) sense of the word, a paradigm shift from the modernist perspective, and as managers come to adopt it, and to learn a new type of behaviour, so they will become liberated from the forms of recurrent 'Stuckness' defined by Watzlawick et a1.which I describe at the end of this chapter.

An Example:

I was working with some colleagues for a reasonably large engineering company, which had grown by a series of acquisitions and needed to respond to some of its large car maker customers' demands that it become more integrated in its capability to respond. This was expressed in the jargon of the day as a requirement to be a ' global player', a 'virtual company'. In this case the natural boundaries defined by a country or a site which had previously defined the business entity, which people saw as the source of their livelihood,and for which they strove to win orders, often in competition with other members of the same Group, were now seen as an impediment by an emerging group of powerful global customers. These customers threatened to withdraw their business unless this supplier "got its act together".

Our way of working with this organisation was to start by holding a two-day workshop for about 50 managers to begin a dialogue about what becoming 'global' would entail. We had two process principles in mind; one was to create opportunities for people to start talking and addressing problems in groupings that crossed their normal country, site or national boundaries, and the other was to challenge the boundaries of their thinking, to provoke them into experimentation with innovative ways of working. For example, as engineers they tended to tackle problems with 'project groups', with defined terms of reference, clear statement of goals, milestones and methodology. This is fine for many types of problem, but it was very much part of their existing culture, and while it solved problems incrementally, it was not capable of radical innovation. Their view was that the company was facing radical change and our view was that it therefore needed to learn innovative ways of working.

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Out of this initial workshop a number of change initiatives formed, and we worked with each one to help them define what was really important in the broad area they had chosen, what could usefully be a project, and how to tackle what could not be turned into a project. The group concerned with customer service, for instance, started by defining four parameters of customer service; They then identified the processes which had the greatest impact on these parameters, what was needed to improve each of these processes and ended up with an impossible list of projects! They then tried to prioritise the list, and then finally came to realise that the final outcome of all this work would be to solve a few problems. The question then became how to have a wider impact, how to engage everyone with the issue of customer service, so that everyone started to think of what they did in terms of its impact on the four parameters. The members of this group began to get themselves invited to operations group meetings, to explain their analysis, point out some of the problem areas in specific terms to specific groups. Some groups accepted the analysis and initiated their own activities to tackle the problems, and other groups were less willing to 'own' their problems, but such is organisational reality. Nevertheless the members of the customer service group now saw themselves as leaders of a change initiative rather than members of a project team.

One member of our team was less exercised by the need to release innovative potential, and felt the need to pay equal attention to incremental improvement in the engineering, project-based culture. He worked with one group to help them rationalise their production systems, and another to establish an efficient and effective pan-organisation costing system. Organisations need to feel sufficiently secure in their ability to get things done via the formal systems before they can embrace innovation in their business processes.

Commentary

This example serves to highlight the importance of maintaining both stability and creative instability in organisations, and therefore the need to both honour and challenge 'resistance'. In working on the boundary between stability and instability, we were drawing on the principles of Complexity Theory.
We started with a reasonably large grouping, which we kept working in one large room (we did not have break-out rooms) in order for people to have a better sense of the 'field' of the organisation.

Within some broad parameters we invited them to explore their reality, to discover what the issues were, as opposed to giving them a diagnosis and asking them to work on the problems (the approach which was first mooted by the client), and we allowed groups to form around the issues which emerged rather than attempt to assign individuals to issues (self-organisation).

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It is interesting to observe that senior managers did not think that the 'right' issues had been identified, but we encouraged them to let this rather messy process of self-organisation unfold rather than have them impose their own change agenda, and many of the groups subsequently redefined the issue they were working on, thereby demonstrating their capacity for creative self-regulation.

Finally we realised how important it was that senior managers did in fact join the change groups but not as the group leader. They were thus not excluded from the process as they would have been in a 'bottom up approach', but were able to influence it by participating in the informal processes of the organisation, as opposed to exerting their influence through their formal leadership role, evoking compliant responses to the exercise of formal power, and inhibiting the system's potential for innovative self-organisation.

Stuckness in Organisations

In most organisations there is much talk of the need for change, and much of the response to the change imperative seems to consist in trying to do things faster, in draconian coat cutting measures, in programmes to improve customer service, in delayering initiatives and their like. One organisation counted up to eighty six current initiatives! Organisations are talking about 'initiative exhaustion' because most of the work is additional to the every day work load.

It would seem however that this frenetic activity is creating exhaustion, without solving 'the problem', and is in many cases making matters worse. Managers are experiencing a new phenomenon which is not susceptible to conventional management techniques, where a fundamental shift in their assumption base is required.

It has always been understood that management is about improving things, but the techniques of improvement are not applicable to fundamental change.

Organisations tend to tackle fundamental change by applying improvement techniques, so what results is more of the same, including more work and more stress. At a recent workshop with Richard Pascale, who is a proponent of the need for a fundamental shift in what he calls the organisation's 'context - the underlying assumptions and invisible premises on which its decisions and actions are based', one manager eventually burst out: "I don't believe in breakthroughs - fast incremental change is what gets results".

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Watzlawick, Weakland and Fish (1974) defined 'Stuckness' as repeated attempts to solve a problem which only succeeded in reinforcing the problem. They described four archetypical patterns of Stuckness, 'trying harder', 'if only' solutions, 'utopian' solutions and 'setting paradoxes'.
These types of stuckness are described in detail in the book, but essentially the stuckness is created by the attempt to solve the problem. For example, if an organisation's revenue is insufficient to generate a required level of profit, it has a problem, but it is not stuck. If repeated attempts to increase the revenue only succeed in raising revenue, reducing margin, increasing effort and consequent fatigue and frustration, and not increasing profit, then it is stuck.
The reason for repetitive failure, if we discount pure incompetence, must lie in the inappropriateness of the underlying mindset or paradigm which informs our attempt to solve the problem. Since the industrial revolution we have tended to view organisations as machines, which can be 'set a direction', monitored, and controlled. Cause and effect links are assumed, and 'rational' behaviour is expected.

The technologies which derive from this objectivist, mechanistic paradigm, such as planning processes, project management techniques, continuous improvement, re-engineering, performance management etc. are well known and can only work within the current paradigm, and because they derive from it, they are not capable of changing it. They are nevertheless widely applied to bring about fundamental change, that is change which probably requires a radical shift in both the way its members understand, and work in the system, and in its way of relating to its external environment.
The most frustrating experience for managers engaged in change initiatives is that despite their best endeavours, they do not experience the real shift they had planned for; plus ca change, plus que c'est la meme chose.

It is of course very hard for managers who have struggled to the top of their organisations, to accept that the rules by which they played need to be fundamentally changed. They are usually willing to make substantive changes to the way work is done, often involving what appears to be quite major restructuring, but they are understandably unwilling to question the fundamentals, such as the distribution of power, the inherent hierarchy and related principles of reward; the role and purpose of management, the purpose of the organisation, in effect the deep cultural patterns, routines and assumptions of the organisation which lie at the heart of the current paradigm.
A major part of the job of any Gestalt intervention is to help organisations respectfully understand and work with these patterns of stuckness, to enable them to see and understand better the properties of social systems, and to work more effectively in them.

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Chapter 5-3
"Organisations Get Stuck Too": Patterns of stuckness in organisations, using the Gestalt Cycles Theory of 'Interruption to Change'

by Bill Critchley and David Casey

The literatures of psychotherapy and family therapy make it clear that individuals and families get stuck because an impasse develops between a conscious desire for change and an unconscious desire to avoid change. Fisch, Watzlawick, and Weakland (1974), explain how, in these circumstances, some attempts to change can actually make things more rigidly fixed; trying harder is one classic way of remaining stuck, as every insomniac knows. "Stuckness" is defined by Watzlawick as:

> ***A person, a family, or a wider social system enmeshed in a problem in a persistent and repetitive way, despite desire and effort to alter the situation.***

Small groups get stuck too. It is 40 years since Bion (1961) told us that small groups work at two levels: the conscious level of the work group and the unconscious level of the basic assumptions groups. The mysterious forces of the latter, emanating from the unconscious psyche of the group and with one commanding purpose (the survival of the group) are very strong and so long as they remain out of awareness, exercise a powerful influence on the functioning of the group.

If individuals and groups work at two levels, perhaps organisations also work at two levels - conscious and unconscious. This is hardly a new thought - crowd theory has long been used to explain the extraordinary behaviour of lynch mobs, fanatical religious assemblies and football hooligans. Lyall Watson (1986) regards the crowd as a living organism in its own right - with a deep unconsciousness of frightening power.

In our work with organisations attempting change, we often come hard up against powerful forces blocking change, which seem to operate out of the awareness of the organisation, yet are created by the organisation. An assumption that organisations work at two levels, conscious and unconscious, would seem to fit the facts. By adapting ideas from Gestalt therapy we have identified five different ways organisations get stuck:

- The suppressed organisation
- The hysterical organisation
- The knowing-and-angry organisation
- The frightened organisation
- The task organization

Over three years we have enlisted the help of several psychotherapeutic models. Our working assumption has been that organisations are living organisms with conscious and unconscious processes. Psychotherapists know that the conscious and the unconscious act as countervailing forces in a person's psyche and in psychotherapy one important task of the therapist is to bring more of the unconscious into the conscious arena, so that change becomes possible at least. In organisation change it may also be necessary to uncover unconscious processes and indeed it may be futile to attempt organisation development at the conscious level of organisation processes alone. So a client who asks for help in improving conscious organisation processes like delegation, communication, decision making, planning and the like, should in fairness be warned that work at that level may not result in lasting change, unless it is accompanied by diagnostic work at a deeper level - just in case the organisation's unconscious may turn out to be working in the opposite direction.

Interventions appropriate to each particular organisation blockage are described in a later part of the article. Again we have learned from psychotherapy - the rationale for intervening in a particular way, and especially the warnings about which interventions to avoid, rely heavily on the work of psychotherapist Paul Ware (1983).

Figure 1. The Gestalt Cycle

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How Organisations get Stuck

Gestalt thinking throws a lot of light on how organisations get stuck; first, a brief explanation of the Gestalt cycle, for those not familiar with that model.

The notion of a cycle, starting from rest and moving through a phased cycle of energisation back to rest, is central to Gestalt. The cycle describes the essential nature of the interaction between an organism and its environment. It is a natural cycle and individuals move through its phases with or without help; or they may get stuck. The cycle (see Figure 1) describes a flow and ebb of energy in the continuous process of need fulfilment essential to an individual's survival and growth. We move from rest through a series of phases to full contact with our food, with our friends, partners or colleagues or issues which we need to tackle, followed by satisfaction and withdrawal.

The first phase, as a new experience begins to emerge, is internal sensation; as we begin to focus the sensation on to something or some person in our external environment, we attach meaning to the sensation; this is described as "awareness". As we become aware of what the sensation is telling us - as we give it meaning - we begin to mobilise our energy towards the external object through clarifying the nature of the interaction we want.

We then take concrete action to bring about contact; at some point when the fullness of the experience is realised, we achieve satisfaction, and then finally we withdraw from the experience and another cycle may begin.
That is no more than the briefest outline of a rich and insightful model. It is not possible to do justice here to Gestalt theory with all its very practical principles and useful axioms. Many readers will be familiar with Gestalt and for those who want to dig deeper, the literature is very accessible (Goodman, Hefferline and Perls, 1972).

Of course, we do not sail through life enjoying the rhythmic fulfilment of all our needs in this way - and that is where Gestalt therapy comes in. Gestalt therapy offers a way of getting there more frequently and more completely each time. The notion of "more completely" is important because few of us experience the full amplitude of our own possibilities - our lives are good but they could be better. Here the notion of interruptions is useful. We trip ourselves up by interrupting the cycle in various ways, blocking the free flow of energy. When this happens habitually at the same point, we become stuck (see Figure 2).

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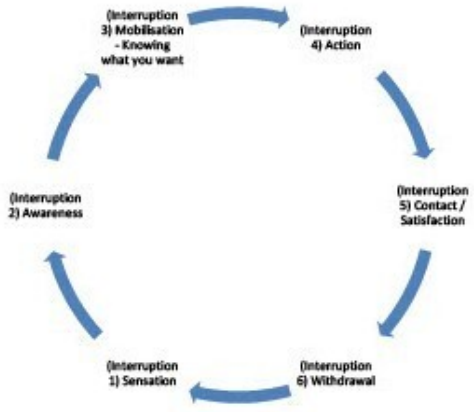
As children we have powerful needs and wants. In an ideal world, our perfect parents would have responded to these in a perfectly timed and appropriate way, which would have enabled us to grow into resourceful, open, thinking, spontaneous, effective adults.

The reality of course is that the process of development and parenting is so complex, that parents, with the best will in the world, rarely get it right. Consequently children must adapt to the inadequacies of their nurturing environment. Adaptations take the form of interruptions to otherwise natural functions. For example, it is natural for children to have temper tantrums, but if the parents admonish them persistently and sternly, they will either learn to repress their feelings altogether, or to find another indirect form of expression. Certain typical patterns of interruption emerge, to form identifiable personality types. These types indicate the broad lines of a personality's development and suggest likely behaviour patterns.

Figure 2.
The Gestalt Cycle with Interruptions



So it is with organisations. Organisations have personalities too - that is what "organisation culture" means. We have already proposed that it is legitimate and useful to think about any organisation as a living organism with a life of its own, working at two levels - the conscious and unconscious. We now find it extremely useful to take this one step further and hypothesise that organisations, being living organisms, also go through the Gestalt cycle in their interactions with their environments. This is a useful hypothesis (however vulnerable it may be to rigorous academic assault) because it opens up the immediate possibility that organisations may suffer the same interruptions to their Gestalt life cycle as individuals do - perhaps organisations get stuck too!

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Our combined practical experience, over a number of years in many organisations attempting major change, convinces us that this is so. What we had never been able to do until now, was make sense of all the frustrations and paradoxes generated by attempting to offer consultancy help to, an organization which is stuck. Psychotherapists, and especially Gestalt therapists, are used to that - and they have a very convincing explanation - we who work with organisations as our clients can learn from them.

ORGANISATIONS HAVE PERSONALITIES TOO - THAT IS WHAT "ORGANISATION CULTURE" MEANS

We will now take the bold step of listing some of the characteristics exhibited by organ isations when they become stuck (or interrupted) at different stages of the Gestalt cycle. As an introduction to each description we will include an abbreviated description of the individual personality type suffering from the same interruption.

1 - The Suppressed Organisation - Interrupted before Sensation

People stuck here have difficulty with the very first step in the cycle - they interrupt their own sensations, which has the sad effect that they seldom show much feeling and appear withdrawn individuals seeking solitary interests. They are difficult to relate to emotionally because they appear unmoved by situations in which an emotional response would be appropriate.

Organisations stuck here rely heavily on rules and procedures and mechanistic control systems. They are usually quite rigid and well defended against feedback. Much of the work is likely to be repetitive and fairly simple, as in traditional insurance companies, government departments, old-fashioned banks and building societies.

These organisations are predominantly concerned with detail, the scale of thinking is micro, not macro, tasks and duties are defined in detail, demarcation and compartmentalisation abound. Strategic thinking is rare, as is interest in change or anything new. Even now as we move towards the next century, organisations of this type can be found in many sectors of the economy.

BUREAUCRATIC BEHAVIOUR IS IN LARGE PART THE RESULT OF EXTERNALISED DEFENSIVE ACTIONS ... TO AVOID ANXIETY

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At their worst such organisations appear to be in a state of permanent withdrawal, and those who work there do so mainly to earn a living, deriving little satisfaction from the work itself.
Michael A. Diamond, in his article "Resistance to Change" (1986) states: "Bureaucratic behaviour is in large part the result of externalised defensive actions of organisation participants to avoid anxiety". He goes on rather gloomily to say "a truncated psyche is the inevitable human product of the personal experience with bureaucratic hierarchy" - this may be because the organization itself has a truncated psyche, blocked as it is against feelings.

2 - The Hysterical Organisation – Interrupted before Awareness

People stuck here habitually respond with emotional excitability. Their emotions are close to the surface and freely accessible. One unfortunate consequence of this is that they may get carried away by their sensations and attach inappropriate meanings to them, which is where their difficulty lies; their feelings are available but their awareness is limited.

...DRAMA COMPANIES DESPERATELY
UNABLE TO GRADUATE FROM
THEATRICAL PASSION TO ECONOMIC VIABILITY...

Organisations stuck here are in stark contrast to the suppressed organisation - instead of denying feelings, these organisations go overboard with their feelings and much of their time is taken up with experiencing and expressing sensation. Where they fail is in extracting any sort of sense from this welter of sensation - they have plenty of excitement, but they do not know what it means for the organisation's health.
These are the exhilarating and chaotic advertising agencies, lurching from one crisis to the next; drama companies desperately unable to graduate from theatrical passion to economic viability as a production company; some so-called caring organisations unable to think themselves beyond their deeply felt compassion and into the practical world of providing genuine help. Many such organisations stay stuck because by and large they enjoy the experience of sensation.

The block is essentially a thinking block. This type of organisation does not think through its problems effectively, instead it is inclined to react over-excitedly to events which then escalate into crises. Some other observable symptoms are likely to be: above average intrigue and gossip, some of it malicious, dependence on "them", decision-making processes which are at best woolly and vague and an absence of good system and procedure. The general sense to an observer is that these organisations are in a fairly constant state of excitability and pain.

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3 - The Knowing-and-angry Organisation - Interrupted before Mobilisation

People stuck here are very aware - they think a great deal. What they fail to do is mobilise their energies to decide what they want. Procrastinators are a good example they are typically stuck here. People with this interruption lay the blame for their difficulties fairly squarely on others' shoulders.

Organisations stuck here are strong on thinking - everyone will know what the problems are. The organisation's difficulty lies in moving beyond an intellectual grasp of what is wrong to knowing what it wants out of the situation.

These organisations are fond of diagnosis, and their diagnosis will be quite sophisticated so it ill-behoves a consultant to go in with his/her diagnosis, because their's is bound to be superior - they have been at it longer.

There will usually be a high degree of blaming for the perceived problems; blaming of senior management, blaming of the system and the environment plus a reluctance on the part of individuals to take personal responsibility for either the problems themselves or for finding solutions.

These organisations are angry yet unable to decide what it is they really want. There is resentment simmering beneath the surface - resentment of old injuries, anger at being left out and at the same time, and paradoxically, anger that someone else has not solved their problems.

Small groups talk about problems in corners but never in open forum. Meetings will be large because everyone will feel left out if they do not attend, yet nothing is decided because nobody really knows what it is they want - all they know is what the problems are. Typically these intellectually able organisations continually revisit their policy statements - every six months a new version of the organisation's mission appears - each new version starting froni a new intellectual standpoint, but never actually being agreed.

It is hard to diagnose this condition because the key organisation pathology of anger remains muted and repressed and the presenting impression is of intellectual competence and well articulated under standing of the problems facing the organisation.

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4 - The Frightened Organisation - Interrupted before Action

People stuck here can bring into focus what it is they want, yet can still be interrupted before choosing what to do. To choose action A is to reject action B and that choice may of course turn out to be wrong. There is a risk involved in moving into action where there is a risk there is a fear. People interrupted at this point exaggerate potential consequences and hold themselves back.

Organisations stuck here have, in common with the first three so far described, an underlying feature of the organisation's pysche known clinically as "passivity" - that is an unwillingness to solve problems. They frequently get stuck after knowing what they want (being mobilised) but before taking the action they want to take. We believe that what holds them back is fear; so the underlying pathology of these organisations is unresolved fear, just as unresolved anger was the underlying pathology of knowing-and-angry organisations stuck at the last interruption.

At first glance the frightened organisation is very active indeed and to say that it is stuck seems absurd. However, we have learned to look critically at busyness, at long-working hours at the top and work overload at middle management levels. We look for real action arising directly from all this activity - and often the search is in vain.

If the organisation is stuck at this point there is no clear link between thought, intention and action. One powerful clue is the constant drafting and redrafting of reports; even minutes appear first as a draft for approval before circulation. A simple check of the number of copy letters sent out regularly can be an eye-opener (sending lots of copies spreads the risk).

Meetings proliferate, not as places for quick decision making but as another mechanism for avoiding risk. Frightened organisations spend a lot of energy avoiding risk. If the possibility of real action looms in sight an immediate call goes out for "a paper" to be prepared. The paper will be in draft and when the final draft eventually reaches the inevitable meeting, the minutes are gestated for weeks or months and even then the minutes will be in draft. The merry-go-round of activity designed to reduce risk goes round and round: the organisation is stuck.

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5 - The Task Organisation - Interrupted before Contact

People stuck here are obsessed with thinking and doing; they tend to be perfectionists, paying too much attention to the individual parts at the expense of the whole. They are inclined to be over dutiful and conscientious - their output is high but they pay a price. That price is the ability to surrender without reservation to each full experience.

Organisations stuck here take themselves very seriously. All organisations exist to do a task, but some get so obsessed by task that they get stuck.

The kind of comment an observer makes about organisations with this blockage, is that they do a lot of efficient things, but somehow, they do not quite score - they miss the point in some indefinable way, the sum of all their actions does not amount to the best thing, the most appropriate thing for their customers.

Divorce lawyers do a first class legal job for their clients, but they often miss the real point which must be to negotiate the optimum solutions for the family system as a whole rather than maximise the settlement for one client. Management consultancies produce superb technical solutions which clients cannot use fully. Research laboratories produce ideas which their companies are unable to exploit fully because of lack of money, people or market potential.

MANAGEMENT CONSULTANCIES
PRODUCE SUPERB TECHNICAL SOLUTIONS
WHICH CLIENTS CANNOT USE FULLY

The notion of contact is very appropriate here - in the examples above the organisations do not make full contact with their clients, they make partial contact, they get it partly right but the result of the interaction is not fully satisfying, to either party. There is efficiency but no joy. Internal relationships are very taskdependent and functionally dictated; people exchange ideas rather than make full human contact with each other. In the top management team true consensus is unlikely to emerge because the organisation cannot see the point of long-drawn-out deliberations in search of consensus - when all business decisions are, in their view, databased, right or wrong.

There is no denying that many organisations interrupted before contact have a successful record. Joyless, efficient Local Authorities provide acceptable local services; very many companies managed this way turn in excellent financial results. So why should they worry about being stuck?

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The argument for attempting to move through this interruption is not simply that organisation life could be so much more fulfilling with much less tension and much more joy - there is a deeper danger. These organisations tend to be overworked and short sighted. Problems of a short-term nature fill the horizon and are coped with well by the application of whatever state-of-the art technique or technology is available. Action and risk-taking are the order of the day. As a consequence little energy is left for the less pressing philosophical issues concerning the longer-term relationship of the organisation with its changing environment.

...PERFORMANCE FIRST, PROCESS
IF THERE IS TIME, IS THEIR MOTTO

The perfect becomes the enemy of the good and action becomes the enemy of real contact. Task performance has primacy over human relations or managerial issues - performance first, process if there is time, is their motto. Not that it should be the other way round, but task and process are actually interdependent and an organisation stuck at action is denying this.

The Exhausted Organisation (?) - Interrupted before Withdrawal

For completeness, we should mention a possible sixth kind of stuckness. In the individual it might be thought of as a state of "burn out" when people stay in contact too long, losing the capacity to complete transactions properly by withdrawing and resting. There may well be organisations in a state of exhaustion corresponding to individuals experiencing burn out. We do not deal with it here simply because we have not so far come across it in any organisation; until we have some experiences we prefer not to speculate, because there are so many surprises in this work, we prefer not to guess until we have been there.

Organisation Interventions

Diagnosis, exciting though it is, will not tell you what to do. Our hypothesis that organisa tions behave as organisms led us to enlist the help of psychotherapy and this has proved immensely useful in diagnosis. We felt sure psychotherapy could be at least as helpful in showing us how to make effective interventions. The effective intervention is the one which helps the organisation move out of the impasse which is holding it in unconscious patterns of repetitive behaviour. It is rarely the obvious intervention. In fact, the road to long-cycle organization change is strewn with traps - some laid by the client, some by the consultant and some even laid jointly by client and consultant working in an unconscious collusive pact.

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The danger of traps came to our attention in the work of psychotherapist Paul Ware (1983). He developed a useful strategic framework for working with individual personality adaptations, based on choosing, at any time, one of the three possible therapeutic interventions: cognitive, affective or behavioural. In other words you can get the client to think, to feel or to do something.

For each personality adaptation, there is an entry point, a target aimed at, and also a trap door to be avoided. These are different for each personality type. For example, an individual interrupted before sensation defends against feeling by investing their energy elsewhere, in this case in withdrawn behaviour. To intervene first at the feeling level, although it appears to be the obvious thing to do (because that is where they eventually need to be) is to walk into the trap. The starting point is to confront their behaviour because that is where they are investing their energy now. It means, in fact, starting where the client is.

Ware encourages this general rule of always starting where the client is investing energy now (in thinking, in feeling or in doing). We are finding this a good rule in organisation interventions too - always start by joining the client organisation below the threshold where the organization has got stuck.
To make this clearer we will now consider the intervention strategy appropriate to each of the five kinds of stuck organisation described above.

Releasing the Suppressed Organisation
Organisations stuck here are heavily defended against feeling. In the 1960s members of many such organisations found themselves dragged through T-groups, encounter groups and the like in the name of what the OD people called "unfreezing". The idea was that following the "unfreezing", attitudes and ways of doing things would be changed, and then the new practices would become institutionalised. Few of these change programmes achieved their original goals.
There is a refreshing admission of failure in a little book, Making Waves in Foggy Bottom (1974). "Foggy Bottom" is the endearing American colloquialism for the US State Department. What failed was a head-on attempt to introduce feelings into one of the world's great bureaucracies. And those who tried and failed were Warren Bennis, Alfred Marrow, Chris Argyris, Harry Levinson and Rensis Likert, no less! Even the most skilled can fall into traps, for here is a perfect example of one of Paul Ware's traps. At first sight it seems perfectly logical - if an organisation is bureaucratic and therefore suppressing feeling, let's create opportunities in which the organisation might be encouraged to experiment safely with feelings ... But this is precisely what the organisation is most defended against.

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The entry point for suppressed organisations is elsewhere. They are introverted organisations whose unconscious is concentrating on security and maintaining the status quo. Energy is invested in withdrawn behaviour, so that is where to begin - the best entry point is where the organisation is currently investing its own energies.

A conventional consulting approach is an effective way to start: the consultant diagnoses the environment in which the organisation operates, so that it is compelled to face the consequences of its behaviour for its survival. Nothing less than a threat to its very survival will be powerful enough to change an established bureaucracy. In "Foggy Bottom" the top management (who killed the project, in the end) knew that the US State Department was not actually under threat, so there was no need to listen to that gang of behavioural scientists - however famous in their own field they might be. If a bureaucracy is not fighting for its life, organisation development is an unrealistic expectation.

The correct sequence is to try to get the stuck organisation to relate to its external world (behaviour), to refocus attention from the inside to the outside so as to perceive the dangers it faces if it does not change; then to rethink and adjust its relationship with the world. Long term, the organisation may start to connect with feelings, but it is the wrong place to start.

Releasing the Hysterical Organisation

Organisations stuck here are interrupted on the cycle at awareness - their defence system is constructed to avoid awareness. Since their energy is heavily invested in *feeling* this is the right place to begin, even though the real aim is to strengthen their thinking function. It is necessary first to empathise, to listen carefully, to show understanding, in order to gain entry. There is a delicate line to be drawn between showing empathy and becoming embroiled in interpersonal issues, which are likely to be the presenting symptoms in a sensation-seeking organisation. So there is a tightrope to be negotiated by consultant and client if they are to arrive together safely on the first piece of solid ground, on which the consultant confronts the process issue, which is a failure to *think* effectively.

...THERE IS A TIGHTROPE TO BE NEGOTIATED
BY CONSULTANT AND CLIENT IF THEY ARE TO
ARRIVE TOGETHER SAFELY...

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The next step is to show them how to *think* through a diagnosis, without doing it for them. There is a potential trap here too - they may well invite the consultant to offer a diagnosis. If the consultant falls into this trap, they may give every appearance of accepting his/her diagnosis but will in practice ignore it.
The temptation to prescribe, in effect to tell them what to do is very strong, because this is what they are likely to ask for. The route to take is: enter with their feelings (but don't get enmeshed); avoid the temptation to tell them how to behave; help them to do their own diagnostic thinking (but do not do it for them) so that they begin to think for themselves.

Releasing the Knowing-and-angry Organisation

Organisations stuck at the mobilisation stage (which is essentially about choosing a course of action) are unable to mobilise their energy to achieve a sharp focus and resolve the broad field of awareness into a clear figure. This cognitive activity is what is being defended against and in this case is the trap. The thinking that does go on tends to be circular or opaque; there is a lot of intellectualisation which can easily seduce the consultant into yet another diagnosis.

We spent six months bashing our heads against a brick wall in one organisation before we found an old internal document which had already clearly identified every single problem we were laboriously coming up with, in our diagnosis. The organisation was playing an intellectual game with us and we fell right through the trap door, which is *thinking.* We clambered out, dusted ourselves down and moved to the correct entry point which is *behaviour,* confronting their behaviour by identifying the games the organisation was playing with us and with itself.

We helped them to experiment with new ways of *doing* things. Next they needed to *feel* better about the organisation, less resigned, less resentful, more productive and more influential. Our role was to support the experimenters and confront old patterns of attitude and behaviour which were likely to sabotage the problem-solving activity (and of course, re-confirm old beliefs). It tends to be a long-term intervention (in this case 18 months) and at the same time it needs to have a stated withdrawal point to discourage dependency.

WE SPENT SIX MONTHS BASHING OUR HEADS
AGAINST A BRICK WALL IN ONE ORGANISATION
BEFORE WE FOUND AN OLD INTERNAL DOCUMENT...

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So the general pattern for the knowing-and angry interruption is to avoid the *thinking* trap, and begin where their energy is invested, which is in passive *behaviour.* Invite experimentation with new behaviour whilst offering support, and so help the organisation to *feel* better about itself. Long term, the organisation may come to *believe* in its potency (new thinking).

Releasing the Frightened Organisation

This kind of stuckness is common and consultancy help is likely to be needed over a fairly long period. Just as individuals put off getting started on something or agitate over a decision, so do organisations. The underlying cause is often some level of fear, fear that it won't be right, or good enough, fear of punishment or criticism, fear of choosing or making a commitment. All these possibilities circulate just beneath the consciousness of the frightened organisation, causing paralysis in the face of any demand for action.

The worst possible approach to a frightened organisation is to exhort them to "do something!" That is the trap (behaviour). The organisation is blocked against taking action and its unconscious voice is whispering in its ear "be careful ...it is not safe...no good will come of it ...you'll be sorry... "

As always, the right place to start is where the organisation has its energy invested, which is in thinking about possible disasters (not always at a conscious level). Next, the degree of fear needs to be reduced and some sense of safety and the beginnings of trust established.

The consultant's first job is to build trust and create safety around a chosen intervention, through *thinking* carefully alongside them. Confronting feelings directly (say in an early team-building event) would be unlikely to work because individuals would feel exposed, and would construe the event as an opportunity for others to take advantage of them in some way.

THE CONSULTANT'S FIRST JOB IS TO
BUILD TRUST AND CREATE SAFETY
AROUND A CHOSEN INTERVENTION

One way to start is to engage in cognitive work, one-to-one with individuals and at a point when enough trust has been established between the consultant and a critical mass of individuals, they can be brought together into a joint diagnostic and problem-sharing process. This trust-building phase can take a long time but it is dangerous to short-circuit the process because without this foundation of trust no sound progress can be made later

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. Privately owned organisations frequently live in the grip of fear, feeling themselves to be vulnerable to the next fanciful whim of the owner(s). In one such unlisted commercial business the Chairman owns most of the shares and the rest are spread evenly around a large number of ancient aunts and uninterested uncles. In practice the livelihoods of nearly a thousand employees are in the hands of one person or, at least that is how it feels to them. The organisation is understandably frightened, not least because its position in the marketplace is beginning to slip.

This business showed all the symptoms of a frightened organisation. The managing director has sought our help and this assignment is in progress at the time of writing. Although eight months have passed since our introduction, all our energies have been invested in working with individuals, especially the managing director. Later, when we judge the climate is a trusting one, we will collect people in groups.

In summary, the sequence starts with diagnostic work with individuals *thinking;* moves on to sharing the diagnosis in working groups so that members begin to experience sharing as safe *(feeling)* and finally moves into problem-solving activities *(behaviour).*

Releasing the Task Organisation

Being invited to help a task organisation can be a bit daunting - it already does everything so well! The trap which a task organisation sets (unwittingly) for the consultant, is to challenge the consultant to perform even better than they do, or to come up with the latest state-of-the-art operational technique. And most consultants, feeling slightly ruffled by this challenge will fall straight into the trap. But the fact is, that no consultant is capable of more than improving marginally the systems these efficient organisations already use, so the outcome is often dissatisfaction on both sides.

...MOST CONSULTANTS, FEELING SLIGHTLY
RUFFLED ...WILL FALL STRAIGHT
INTO THE TRAP

Task organisations are obsessed with a compulsive quest for more expertise, more systems, more accuracy, more efficiency. What is missing is an internally experienced sense of quality and satisfaction. The task organisation is already thinking frenetically - so this is where to start. The consultant's job is to get the organisation to forget task for the moment, but to carry on thinking, refocusing its thinking on process, on how things get done.

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The invitation to the organisation is to move its thinking to a higher plane, to go meta to the daily stuff of performance targets and the quest for task perfection.

The next step is to help them improve their process work, starting with task process (how they do their task) and moving on to feelings process (how they manage their feelings whilst doing the task). In this way the organisation will gradually bring feelings back into its working life. The final target is a new way of behaving, which we might call whole-person behaviour.

An organisation which has moved through the task blockage will not be distracted from its task; on the contrary, by managing itself holistically, being conscious of the essential task and also of the processes it employs to achieve the task, as well as the feelings it experiences and how it copes with those feelings, it will be ready to make full contact and achieve much more than excellence in the task - it will be open to experiencing the satisfaction it deserves.

Conclusion and Discussion

We would like to declare the exploratory nature of our work in this field and emphasise how coarse-grained is the parallel between personality structure and organisation culture. The usefulness quickly falls away if the analogy is pushed too far and in the end, if pushed to the extreme of stereotyping, would become seriously flawed and even counter productive. It is not our aim to provide a simplistic taxonomy of "organisation types", with a checklist of symptoms and a ready reckoner of intervention steps.

We do, however, suggest that one discipline may offer another a fresh way of seeing old problems. Just as chemistry is helping physics, and mathematics is helping family therapy (Fisch et al., 1974), so we find psychotherapy helping organisation change.

...THE USEFULNESS QUICKLY
FALLS AWAY IF THE ANALOGY
IS PUSHED TOO FAR...

The approach raises new questions at every turn. Does being stuck always imply being disadvantaged or are there cogent reasons why some organisations choose to become and remain stuck?

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Perhaps being stuck only becomes a problem when the way of working either becomes significantly incongruent with the needs of a new generation of employees or inappropriate to meeting the needs of the organisation's clients or customers? It would be silly to start stereotyping large organisations as "frightened" or "suppressed", when in fact separate parts may exhibit very different cultures. And, in any case, stuckness may be transient or relatively long-lasting, crippling or merely a nuisance, just as interruptions in individuals may vary in intensity from very serious, causing illness, to being mere traits of the personality.

And many questions arise for the consulting process itself: do you tell the client what your diagnosis is and in what circumstances do you reveal and share with the client your treatment plan? And how do you, the consultant, recognise when you are stuck, or when you are causing your client to become stuck, or reinforcing the client's existing stuckness or even caught in an unconscious conspiracy between yourself and your client?

Some questions remain to be answered. Meanwhile our practical experience has been that the approach is very useful and we would like to suggest there is an important place for what we believe is a new dimension to OD, alongside other kinds of OD.

...HIDDEN FORCES OF RESISTANCE ...OFTEN
LIE DEEP WITHIN THE UNCONSCIOUS
OF THE ORGANISATION

Most intervention strategies arise from the organisational metaphors and assumptions held by the practitioners. If you are a member of the classical organisation school with its machine-like and scientific precepts, you will probably focus on the formal structure, on re defining roles and accountabilities, on designing monitoring and control systems, as the vehicles for bringing about change. If yours is the human relations perspective you are likely to use group work as one of your major intervention methodologies. If you are a systems theorist, you will be interested mainly in boundary transactions and management.

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We work from a psycho-dynamic perspective and we feel this approach deserves to be placed alongside the others because we have found that the hidden forces of resistance which often lie deep within the unconscious of the organisation are ignored at our peril. That is not to say that all the other metaphors and assumptions are invalid - far from it, they often work well. However, they *sometimes* have nothing to say to us as culture consultants because they don't go deep enough.

Much of the psycho-dynamic theory is about defence structures and we believe it has a major contribution to make to working effectively with resistance to change in organisation. Watzlawick (1974) has written a seminal work on change. We think he is right to emphasise that the place to concentrate our energies is often not on change itself but on the defence structures which are preventing change.

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The Ordinary leader: By this I mean the capacity to be authentic, to own and express one's feelings, convictions, opinions and uncertainty, and to engage on an equal basis with those one is leading, rather than from a position of superiority. By being open and authentic, a leader removes the single biggest block to learning, the fear and dependency (or counter-dependency) engendered by superior status. The power in this type of leadership derives from **being** fully oneself, rather than living up to an image and an expectation of what leadership should be. It is both liberating and risky.

The Systemic Thinker: It has become a truism that organisations are becoming more complex as they become flatter, more decentralised and more transnational. Instead of pyramids they increasingly resemble complex matrices. The majority of information is now transmitted around 'informal' networks rather than via formal structures. The 'command and control' system is no longer a viable way of managing a form of organisation which is coming to resemble a fluid, self organising political network. the capacity to understand this emerging form and the principles of non-linear feedback systems, to network across boundaries, to think holistically rather than hierarchically is critical to fostering change and learning in organisations.

The leader as Developer: intrinsic to the idea of empowerment and learning is the belief that individuals have the potential to learn and grow; that given some real responsibility and the permission to make a few mistakes, they will exceed their own and others' expectations. Many organisations pay lip service to this, but to put it into practice managers need to fundamentally believe it. This is a hard nettle to grasp for managers brought up on a flawed version of Darwin's theory of the survival of the fittest.

The Radical leader: Radical leadership involves questioning the fundamentals, going to the root of things and re-examining them. In much of this article I have alluded to the basic set of unconscious assumptions which form the core of an organisation's culture. It follows that a leader of change needs the courage and skill to create a climate in which these are routinely challenged. This appears obvious, but as many leaders have, in part at least, become leaders through subscribing to these assumptions, the challenge is as much to themselves as anyone else.

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The 'can do' leader: This sounds rather banal, but it is worth saying. Organisations, particularly well established ones, breed an innate caution into their managers, a concern to do things the right way, to protect one's back, which translates for the majority into a propensity to find all the reasons why things cannot be changed, rather than a determined exploration of how they can be. The attitude that problems can be resolved, which translates into a "well, we can solve that" in response to the eternal problem, is vitally liberating and empowering.

Conclusion

Fundamental change, or second order change, involves making changes at a deep cultural level. The culture of an organisation is underpinned by some deep, taken for granted beliefs about the nature of organisations, the nature of people, and hence the nature of management. Some of these seem generic to our socio-economic culture and some are organisation specific. These basic assumptions constitute the boundaries of the prevailing box or frame of reference, the constraints to our thinking, the limits to our ability to solve a new order of problem. Confrontation at this level usually evokes powerful feelings among those confronted, and is often perceived as a risky undertaking for those within the organisational system.

My main proposition, however, has been that we cannot apply methods and techniques designed to effect improvement, to the problem of creating a fundamental shift in an organisation's culture. Ways of proactively working with this phenomenon are not really understood, despite the plethora of books and articles which would suggest the contrary. There are some pointers; I have suggested that we need to pay more attention to uncovering the present, in particular some of the assumptions and dynamics which lie embedded in current practice; we need to be more circumspect in our deployment of vision and values statements and their like. There is a lot of evidence that we try to take on too much, try to change everything in a big bang and scare everyone to death. It also seems likely that we pay too much attention to 'the top' thereby perpetuating the paradigm that we say we are trying to shift. Managers themselves need to re-think their role towards one which is more congruent with the prevailing nostrums of learning and empowerment.

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Chapter 5-4
Some Short Stories about Working with a Gestalt Perspective

An Organisational Story - Part I

The board of Motorpart approached Bill and a colleague with a typical situation and an unusual brief. The situation was to work on a particular change initiative, the brief was to 'come and listen to a board conversation, get to know us.' This invitation already had in itself the possibility for working from a Gestalt perspective as it invited the consultants to engage with the conversational reality of what was actually going on in a Board meeting. Delighted at such a 'progressive' brief, Bill and his colleague went along and sat in at the meeting. Towards its end, the Scottish CEO of the division turned to Bill and said, "You've been sitting there watching, is there anything you'd like to say?" Bill responded by talking directly to the CEO within the relational setting of the board – and he took a risk, by making rather provocative observations to a stranger. "Well the thing I've noticed," said Bill, "Is that from time to time someone disagrees with you, you tend to ignore, or ride over, their disagreement. This has the effect of quashing it." Bill noticed other members of the board smiling. "Was it just me, or is this a wider experience?" asked Bill addressing the wider group. There was agreement that this was a wider experience and to be something of a pattern.

The CEO referred to this moment many times over the next 18 months that they worked together and would jokingly say that, "Bill has taught me to be a leader." For Bill this story highlights the potency that observation of patterns of relating can have.

An Organisational Story – Part II

The genesis of this encounter was the Board of Motorpart's decision that the company needed to become more international and behave as one virtual supplier. This would require a new organisational structure to make it work. The senior team told Bill what they were going to do, "We're going to identify the main tasks and appoint groups to work on them. We want you [Bill] to train people in change – and by the way the people have to own the change."

Bill asked the senior group, "Do you think deciding all this [the tasks and groups] will create a sense of ownership? Suppose you were to invite 50 people to come together, explain the need to them and then ask them to identify the issues that needed to be addressed?" The Scottish CEO thought this sounded great, although the concern of one set of country managers was "But suppose they come up with the wrong answer?"

What Bill was doing was challenging their directive way of approaching change and their assumption that if they ‘sold’ the changes well enough people would ‘own’ it. To Bill, as a Gestaltist, change happens in relationship, in the context and format within which issues are discussed and people volunteer themselves.

A Therapeutic Story

Bill was recently working with a psychotherapy client - a new client that he’d never met before. Bill noticed that the man was mumbling and muttering and looked away from Bill, to his right and down. After twenty minutes Bill said, “You tend to look at the floor and mumble when talking, are you aware you do this?” The man said he was aware of it, yes. Bill continued, “If you and I are to work together, I’m going to have to ask you to make an effort to speak to me so I can hear.” The session ended, and it being the introductory meeting, Bill asked whether the potential client wanted to continue working with Bill. “Yes,” he said, “No one has ever said anything about my speaking before.”

What do these Stories Highlight about Working from a Gestalt Perspective?

- Change happens in dialogue. Bill’s first intervention at Motorpart was to comment on, in a dialogic manner, the nature of the dialogue in the board. “A dialogic intervention commenting on the dialogue of the group,” as Bill put it. In the second part of the Motorpart story, the alternative approach to change that Bill proposes, has at its core an insistence that “if you want change to happen, you have to engage people in a dialogue about the issues.”

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- Raise awareness. In the therapeutic story Bill is bringing to his patients attention something obvious that the patient had not been aware of. So it was with the Scottish CEO and growing his awareness of how he quashed conflict. For Bill this awareness raising is about “bringing things into the known and/or talked about which have been in the habit of not being talked about.”
- “If you really want to change focus on what is.” A Gestalt perspective on change can be seen as paradoxical, for at its heart it contends that by really paying attention to the now, what needs to change will become obvious. This real attention brings with it a heightened emotional quality of attention and therefore amplifies different views which otherwise get pushed behind a façade of agreement. This contrasts with most traditional approaches to change, which tend to focus on a detailed vision of the future – a focus which results in the alienation of those people who have created and are involved in the present.
- Follow the principle of experimentation. Change happens through experimenting, trying something out and then seeing what happens. Creative experiments can be offered to interrupt a pattern or work with conflict. Bill gave a simple example; if two people are arguing strongly for their positions, get then to “switch positions and argue each other’s case. Invite each other to take the other’s perspective.”

Bill views the above four concepts as “right minded principles,” in that they appeal to our human experience. “We know that if we continually live in the past or the future, we waste our lives. We know that engaging in the present engenders a sensation of liveliness. We know that experimenting is the path to discovery.”

Heightening the Contact

A core Gestalt principle is that of ‘contact,’ which means the experience of a person coming into contact with ‘the other.’

“I invite people into a more direct contact with me. I draw attention to the ways people make contact.” For Bill this is in the service of heightening the contact that people make with others and the world around them, he pays attention to how people make contact with each other and invites them to do likewise. The reason for doing this is to get people to experience each other and the world around them more vividly. He is challenging one wisdom that encourages detachment at the point of contact and in its stead is offering an experience of contact that is more full blooded and present.

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What does Bill Mean by Contact?

Contact describes the process of coming into relationship with another person and Gestaltists do use the concept normatively, they talk of good contact and bad contact. Good contact is the experience of there being a full exchange between two people, where the consultant or therapist is “shuttling between the internal and external locus of attention, where I am noticing you and noticing myself.” Good contact is “giving full attention to this particular relational encounter in the here and now. Where I am not thinking about the future or what happens next. This means being fully present in the here and now with one another, with eye contact and bodily resonance. Where client and consultant are fully aware of what they are mutually evoking and creating in one another.”

In organisational settings, when working with groups, Bill asks questions which are experienced as more direct than most people are used to, a habit of questioning which is now completely natural to him. He describes how when with a group he will lean forward and ask questions such as “How do you feel when such and such happens?” Or, “Can you say a bit more?” Inviting people to intensify or stay with their contact with a particular experience, rather than moving on or detaching from it.

In an Action Learning set recently, one of the participants kept talking of ‘we’ when describing an event or a course of action. Bill kept asking him “Where are you?” To Bill this is an important point, it is about challenging people to own their actions, their part in things. In similar vein, Bill was working with a couple where the man kept talking of ‘the relationship,’ as if it was something apart and separate from him. Bill pressed him and asked, “What do you do to make the relationship unhappy?” The man looked irritated with Bill and he is aware that people do get irritated with him on occasions. In this case Bill pressed on. “This may be irritating, but let me explain why I’m concentrating on minor behaviours. I’m not interested in the incident itself. What I want to know is what each of you does. It is in these micro-interactions that change can happen.”

In this case the pattern of exchange was that she wants him to listen to her, he wants to solve the problem, she then withdraws and he gets angry. This pattern of interaction starts with a series of ‘moves’ by both parties, a pattern of gestures and responses which are subtly misunderstood, and hence lead to a predictable outcome in which both people feel confused and upset. The pattern will go on being repeated until either party changes their response so that a new possibility emerges.

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Amplifying Difference and Hearing News of Difference

Another Gestalt axiom is that change happens through amplifying difference, usually at the local level i.e. in the midst of the nitty-gritty of day to day activity and interaction. This runs counter to most established management practices where the goal is to smooth differences out, “go for agreement, align people.” Management language looks to reduce matters to what is common; it does not look to pay attention to small differences. The Gestalt principle is that by paying attention to recurring patterns at the local level, and the different experience that people have of these patterns, so a shift may occur at a larger level. To illustrate this Bill told me the story of a consulting group of which he was part.

It was a small group where the men all had the same job title and had been in post for a long time. Over time three women had joined who now all had the same grade, one below that of the men. They described themselves as the ‘tweenies.’

There came a time when they complained to the wider community, saying that they felt the established senior men were not noticing what it was like to be in a group of three outside of the established core. Bill now recalls that the response of the established senior group could have easily have been dismissive, seeing the complaints as little more than whinging. Instead the men said “Oh sh*t. It looks like we’re not leading very well.” As a consequence of paying attention to this different experience of the organisation, an entire re-examination of the way business was done was carried out, the management team resigned and then either re-applied or left the organisation.

The above story highlights how change happens from within a social frame. There is also a related notion that comes from the work of Gregory Bateson and is more focused on how an individual learns (changes). To Bateson, learning – which here Bill is conflating with change – happens when people hear ‘news of difference’. They are able to take on board a new perspective, a piece of data, which shifts their frame of reference. This cognitive/behavioural perspective supports and is supported by the Gestalt principle of amplifying difference in social contexts.

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Contact in Consulting Situations

Bill doesn't go to the same depth with his organisational clients in relation to their personal stories. He does however insist on a concentration, a focus on the now, and the experience of being in contact with this person. So if he is with someone he may say, "I am at the moment experiencing you as a bit prickly with me. I am feeling inhibited." The habit and discipline is that he uses his own responses with people. This surprises people quite frequently, as this is not what is expected from consultants and they will often at a later date comment on his relationship with people. "What we valued about you was your relationship with your colleague. Its directness, how you openly disagree with people and don't try to smooth things over." Bill believes this frees people up to be more honest with each other.

Change Takes Place in Relationship

This is a core belief in Gestalt (and is similar in many ways to certain precepts of complexity thinking). For the consultant or therapist the need is to be absolutely present in the moment, in dialogue, in people talking together. Change, in the sense of something new or novel, happens in conversation with others and does not happen if I stay with the established pattern of self talk. The relational context demands, or rather gives the opportunity for, an inquiry into how what I say and think is different to what the other thinks and does. It also provides a grounded situation for me to experience how what I say and think impacts the other. It is the context within which the continued negotiation between similarity and difference can take place, it confirms and disconfirms various parts of our identity. As Bill summed it up, "If I allow myself to be slightly disturbed then I change."

However, being in relationship is not enough in itself. In group settings, people start saying something new only if they open themselves up, make themselves vulnerable to one another, become willing to be influenced by the other, to have their sense of self challenged &/or changed but not to the extent that the self is too disturbed.

Being Present With Clients - Dealing with Idealisation

"Ideally I'm alert. I'm not tired or pre-occupied or too worried about being seen to be valuable. I am able to be really interested and willing to listen. To make myself available to this person or group and also simultaneously able to think intelligently about what I'm hearing and also notice my own responses."

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“Of course sometimes I am pre-occupied, I may not listen well.” But that is not in itself a problem, for it “may lead to something interesting.” Because of a mistake, or a piece of incompetence, something will shift in the dynamic in the client/ consultant relationship. Often and most importantly it can “break the idealised transference that occurs between client and consultant.” Bill went on, “In an ideal world I would not be ideal – or even aspire to be ideal. Even though, of course, I’m human and so I do.”

“The opposite of idealisation is to make yourself vulnerable, make yourself accessible. I don’t think you should diminish yourself. Being vulnerable is not the same as diminishing or belittling yourself. Using phrases such as “I’m not confident,” serve as an invitation for the consultant to be persecuted.”

Being Present With Clients - Staying Observant

“I need to be very observant, to notice if someone is looking anxious or withdrawn. It starts with an unfettered noticing and a willingness to explore what I’ve noticed, so if someone hasn’t spoken for a while, I ask them why.” Bill may frame this by saying something like “I notice you haven’t spoken for a while and I am aware that I am wondering what you are thinking?” If someone is dominating a group then Bill may say, “I notice I am finding it quite hard to interrupt you or disagree with you; I experience you as quite a dominating voice in the group.” Bill feels one of his skills is his ability to stay open to his feelings such as being impatient or anxious and then to use them to explicitly explore what is going on in a particular consulting context.

Running a Workshop

Bill was running a workshop on Leadership in Complexity for The Thoroughgood Corporation (TTC) recently. Bill was nervous as he doesn’t like set piece workshops, he was also discomforted by three people from TTC who had asked to sit in on the session to observe him. They sat to the side of the workshop in silence.
Bill found himself speeding the group work up, cutting short the time allocated for people to do exercises and becoming increasingly aware of the three silent witnesses. Bill noticed that he was worried that they were getting bored and also became aware that he wanted to impress them. So Bill went over to the three and explained that he was orienting himself around their presence, rather than attending to the group. By speaking of it to them, he was thus able to interrupt his pattern of wanting to entertain them and refocus himself on the group for whom the workshop had been designed. “I bring what’s happening into the present, and through dialogue, I interrupt its ability to disrupt me.” The risk for Bill is that he doesn’t realise how anxious making this can be for others.

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Emotional and Intellectual Presence

Gestalt privileges emotional presence over intellectual presence, 'lose your mind and come to your senses,' was Fritz Perls – the leading populariser of Gestalt – axiom. His intention being to privilege the body and develop Gestalt as a challenge to the traditional psychoanalytic method, which can be seen as a very heady process, focusing on the intellectual cognitive process. Perls wanted to reintroduce the importance of the body as a source of meaning making. Bill would suggest that he probably went too far the other way and diminished the value of good thinking.

"I am interested in re-integrating thinking and feeling. I want to encourage people to think strongly and feel intelligently." By thinking strongly he means in contrast to a dry, desiccated habit of thinking. So in an Action Learning set when the subject was around car manufacturing, Bill could understand it well enough to engage. To be at his best, Bill needs to understand enough of the content, sensory engagement is not a substitute for intellectual engagement.

The intellectual engagement is not, however, so that Bill can solve their problem, it is so that he can improve the quality of his contact with his clients. It enables him to reflect back well what has been said, both content and process are equally important. This made me wonder about how long it takes to become a consultant in the mode that Bill was outlining here, based upon both deep seated emotional and intellectual skills. It seems to me that developing into the kind of consultant that Bill represents takes quite a long time. He has now been a consultant for twenty years and feels he "is just coming into his own." Without being too categorical, we agreed that it was unlikely that it would take less than eight to ten years to develop the necessary social, intellectual, technical and emotional capacities.

Field Theory

Field theory is, in the view of its originator Kurt Lewin, not a theory, but a way of seeing. Lewin put forward the idea that in social settings everything is connected to everything else. The implications for consultants (or managers) being that if an intervention is made in one part of an organisation, it will inevitably have an effect somewhere else because of the natural inter-connectedness of all things.

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Bill understands Lewin's perspective as a metaphorical one; he was taking a perspective from the physical sciences and applying it metaphorically to social systems. Consequently Bill questions the need to take this as absolutely true. Instead he finds the thinking in complexity theory more compelling. Complexity theory focuses on the patterns of inter-action in a better way, for Bill. In complexity theory, "we may or may not connect with each other," connection is not inevitable. The focus is on patterns of connection, which Bill thinks is often what is meant when people talk of organisational patterns, culture or norms. "We are connected through our interactions with each other and not through some mystical third force…and we may or may not make a difference. Sometimes effects get amplified and sometimes they get dampened." What Bill is introducing is a more explicit agency at work within organisational connection than is suggested by Lewin.

In both these perspectives, Complexity theory and Field theory, the focus is taken away from the individual and shifted to mutual interactions between people. For Bill this is about reframing our understanding of what it means to be an individual who exists as part of a community, it is about seeing the dynamic co- existence of the sense of I and the sense of we. "We can't be a community without individuals or an individual without community." He further exemplified this belief with reference to Mead's comment, "The individual is the singular and the group is the plural of the same social phenomena." For a consultant this is a demand to move beyond the notion of simplistic individual agency.

Collective Accountability and Field Theory in a Firm of Design Engineers

Bill is currently working with a firm of design engineers that serves as a potential example of this. The firm has a very intelligent managing partner, who works extremely hard and is getting very stressed by the situation. His presenting problem is that he has got individual parts of the business doing their own thing and he needs a strategy for the business as a whole.

As Bill talked to him, it became apparent that everyone left it up to him. The management of the business was left to him while the children did their own thing and abrogated their responsibility for the management of the business as a whole. The senior partners did not feel accountable for the business and left it to him.

Bill arranged a meeting of the senior partners where they raised the issue of accountability. Bill was able to use this to feed in the theme of collective accountability. Owning his own observation Bill said, "It seems to me that what is really needed is a leadership team that has a shared sense of collective responsibility. Currently you leave issues of collective responsibility for the business to the managing partner, who is willing to take on this responsibility. You need to shift this."

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The Tough Consultant

Bill has worked with this firm of design engineers for over three years. During the early days when working with the partners to develop a better sense of strategy Bill was described as being very tough on them – and that this was just what they needed. After the work, however, they continued to work with a more emollient colleague of Bill's. Three years later they came back to Bill, "It's your toughness we need now."

Tough is a Gestalt quality, a willingness to name things that are unnamed, to offer a provocation that makes a difference. This doesn't mean you'll always get the recognition that you feel you deserve. The design engineering story has a happy ending, Bill's work for TTC doesn't. The work for TTC got put forward for an award for the quality of the design, Bill's role in the design was crucial (I have had this confirmed by the chief client at TTC) and yet he was not in the Ashridge team that went to the ceremony. Tough doesn't mean you're loved.

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Chapter 5-5
The Self, Psilocybin And Self-Organisation. Something New And Something Old.

Bill Critchley - December 2022

There is currently much interest and research being undertaken into the potential uses of Psilocybin, in particular at John Hopkins University and at Imperial College, pioneered by David Nutt and run by Robin Carhart-Harris. I am less interested in the arguments for or against using Psilocybin than I am in the emerging insights from the neuroscientists into how our brains work. What do we make of it? How might it affect how we work?

A particular TED talk given by Simon Keremedchief sets out very clearly and accessibly what pscilocin (the active ingredient in Psilocybin) actually does in the brain, and how it works, and in the process provides some important insights into brain patterning.

He starts by talking about the 'default mode network' (DMN) which he says is active all the time when we are not engaged in external activity. He calls it a ‘sub conscious’ neural network which is, so to speak, always **on**, whether we like it or not. It is, he argues, where we think about ourselves, have detailed memory recall, make judgements etc, and claims it is largely responsible for human consciousness. The DMN, by the way, if you like the technical names ascribed to mental processes, is situated in the medial prefrontal cortex and the posterior singular cortex, connected by the angular gyrus. Maybe it is helpful to know where this pattern is located in the brain, but in my language, it is a recursive and slowly evolving pattern of neuronal connectivity which has been evolving since birth, or before. Eric Berne, the originator of Transactional Analysis, described it rather evocatively as ‘script’.

It sounds to me remarkably similar to how many of us in our profession have come to think about 'the self'; namely our pattern of thinking, feeling, perceiving, making sense of ourselves, our self- narrative, including of course all our negative beliefs and propensities, giving rise to anxiety, obsessions and so forth. We know it is largely unconscious, but not in the rather mystical and impenetrable way described by Freud et al, because we know it is possible for a therapist to enable a client to examine some of these beliefs and stories, and how they have evolved.

The crucial aspect of this view, which is entirely consistent with Goodman's view of the self created at the boundary, is that the self is not a 'thing', it doesn't exist anywhere - it has no essentialist nature, except in so far as it is a recursive pattern or path of neuronal connective activity in the brain, and because it has become 'sedimented' over time and automatic, it is very hard to shift.

I am seeing some really interesting connections with my own pre-occupations and research, albeit in a different domain. Over the last 20 years I have been involved in research into the complexity sciences, in particular how they might inform how we think about social processes of interaction

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". This became referred to as the inherent capacity in all social systems for self-organisation. The term 'complexity' is used to denote the fact that cause and effect is non-linear, so that it is impossible to trace any particular effect back to any single cause, nor is it possible to predict specific outcomes from particular actions or 'moves'.

Social processes are inherently unpredictable, what we might call an inconvenient truth for politicians, economists, managers, and so forth. 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 leader or manager?"

One of the insights is that social processes are essentially patterns of communicative interaction characterised by stability and instability **at the same time**; too much stability (repetition, routine or recursive pattern) leads to long term decay, while too much difference, or novelty gives rise to explosive instability.

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As far as human beings are concerned we know that stability provides a sense of identity (for good or ill) but small differences can be amplified into transformative shifts in identity which I see as the goal of therapy. The main connection I want to make between the insights of complexity science and neuroscientists' research into brain functioning is that it seems reasonable to assert that the brain is a complex adaptive, self- organising system, what the brain scientists describe as neuroplasticity. The DMN is a recursive pattern which evolves over time, automatic, unconscious and hard to access. The exciting discovery from Nutt et al is that when psilocin binds with the serotonin receptors, the blood flow to the DMN is severely reduced, so that the self-organising brain creates new connections and exchanges of information between different brain regions which have hitherto lain dormant. Keremedchief refers to it as returning to a child state in which there is a much higher state of brain connectivity which, in children gradually gets paired down into functional requirements. By the way, it is interesting that children up until the age of 6-9 months do not differentiate between different sensory inputs, so they live in a kind of sensory hallucinogenic state, until the brain starts to differentiate between different sensory inputs. Sometimes this differentiation is never fully achieved and is referred to in adults as synaesthesia, so it is unsurprising that people having a magic mushroom 'trip' experience synaesthesia, but of course they think they are having a magical spiritual experience!

If you think about it this is a **massive reorganisation of the self**, it is equally unsurprising that people are blown away by the experience, and because psilocin is an exact replica of the serotonin molecule which is naturally occurring, it does no harm to the brain and people have no bad after-effects as they do with other mind-altering drugs; the research into the uses of psilocybin seems to have some potential, but what we don't know is how long-lasting the effects are. Interestingly I have a client who told me yesterday he had been on a weekend and had an experience which had lived up to all the short-term expectations but he still needs therapy!

My one reservation is that I think Keremedchief makes a slip from rationality to belief towards the latter end of his talk. He says that in his view, people 'discover their subconscious self'. This implies there is a 'pre-existent self' and it also implies there is something good, pure and wonderful about it. I am always doubtful when people make this move, either into rediscovery of pure self (the Rousseau ontology) or into some sort of transcendent claim (the spiritual perspective). So I think there is, as always, a danger of the 'magic bullet' aspirations which comes with much innovative research into human well-being, but at the same time I think there is much in this emerging research to both affirm and challenge our practice as Gestalt practitioners.

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CHAPTER 6
TEAMS & TEAM BUILDING

Sub-Chapters

- Chapter 6-1 - A Methodology For Working With Executive Teams
- Chapter 6-2 - A Published Article Challenging The Humanistic Ideology Of Team Building
- Chapter 6-3 - The Principles Of High-Performance Team - Work
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Chapter 6-1
A Methodology For Working With Executive Teams
Professor Bill Critchley 2010

Introduction

Bill Critchley specialises in the area of team and organization development, strategy and change. He is associated with Ashridge Business School and has a long history of experience, working at senior levels in a wide range of organizations, in both private and public sectors.

While my philosophy is grounded in a strong theoretical base and attention to research, my work is highly practical and focused on learning in action, engaging with individuals, groups and teams on real issues, in real time. I work systemically with my clients, understanding that real change comes about through shared ownership of learning, and experimentation at an individual, team and organizational level.

My Perspective on Top Team Facilitation and Development

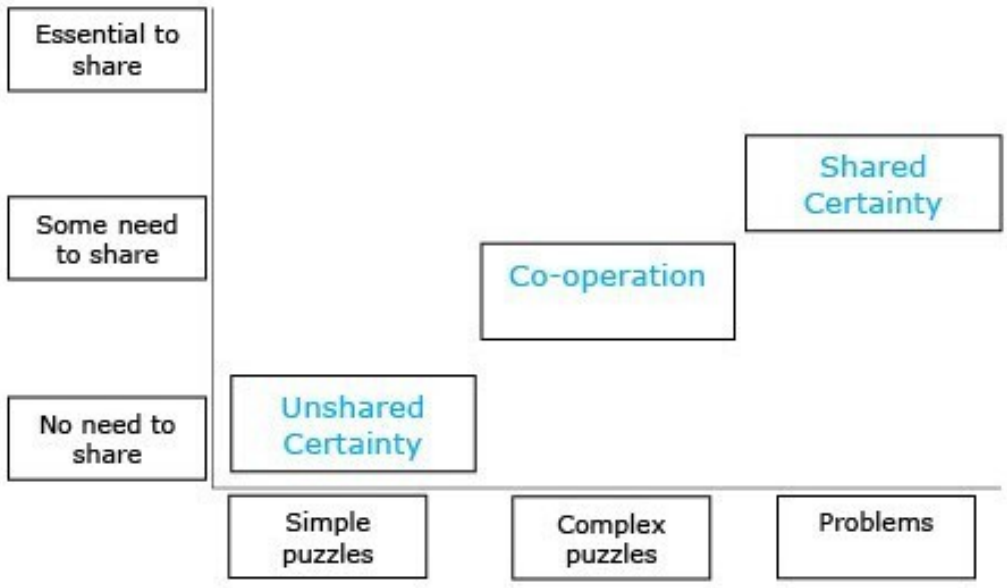
Experience of working with senior teams demonstrates clearly that the quality of relationship and dialogue at the top will have a significant impact throughout the business. Not only do employees tend to emulate the behaviour of their most senior leaders, but interdepartmental relations will be directly affected by the quality of relating within the executive team. Hence it is not uncommon for organisations to seek to improve their senior managers through team-building exercises and off-sites.

The difficulty with a senior team, however, is that it isn't always a team. Many of the decisions taken relate to functional responsibility, where there is some degree of clarity regarding the options and where decisions can be made based on effective evaluation of those options. These are organisational *puzzles*, reasonably tangible and related to the 'how' of management (e.g. 'how do we implement the new CRM system?). Perhaps only 5-10% of time is spent in the top team making *strategic* decisions, but these are the decisions that shape the organisation, where data is limited and there is little agreement or certainty on how to progress. These are the *problems* that the senior team is expected to address.

Puzzles and problems require different approaches and recognizing when an approach (or mode) is appropriate will create a more effective working group.
In an article I wrote with a colleague ('Second Thoughts on Team Building', (1984) Mead, vol 15, with Casey, D), we proposed three modes of working in top teams:

1. **Unshared Certainty** – puzzles are simple and operational; there is no need to share with the wider group. Decisions are taken within the functional area.
2. **Co-operation** – puzzles are more complex and require sharing of ideas, approaches and decision-making
3. **Shared Uncertainty** – this is the domain of the strategic decision and other such problems where a high degree of sharing is required to overcome obstacles of personal agendas, function protection, risk aversion and so forth. Attachment to the known and knowable is replaced with group responsibility for entering into the unknown with the combined knowledge, expertise and wisdom of the whole group.

The third mode is rarely reached, usually because the obstacles are particularly difficult to overcome.



For a top team to function optimally requires the ability to work across all three modes, knowing which mode is appropriate when and engaging fully with the processes associated with that mode.

My Approach to Top Team Facilitation

Seen from the perspective referred to above, my approach, then, is about working with the team to reflect on the purpose of the group, finding the most suitable modes for the task, and noticing how effective the team is in each mode. By focusing on real issues at hand, rather than hypothetical situations or role-play, I attend to the real-time functioning of the team, providing insight and challenge in the moment, enabling the team to adopt more effective working practices in situations where the impact is immediate.

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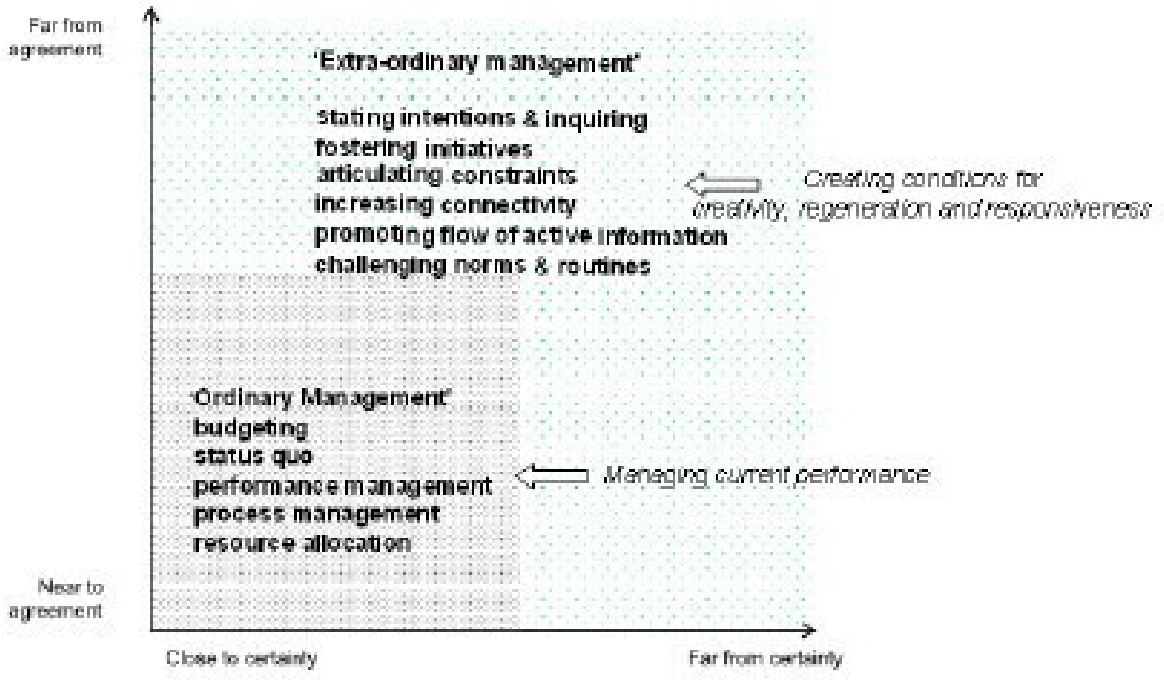
The model below provides a practical framework for engaging with this approach:



Broadly, the majority of tasks will fit in either one or the other of the boxes above. The domain of *'ordinary' management* equates to the first and second modes, of unshared certainty and co-operation. Tasks may require co-operation, sharing of information and possibly negotiation, but will have some tangible parameters. Effectively this domain is about enabling optimal functioning in the realm of 'business as usual'.

The domain of *'extra-ordinary' management* equates to the third mode of shared uncertainty. This is where direction is uncertain, possibilities are unclear, and strategic decisions require the combined wisdom and experience from all team members regardless of function. By paying attention to patterns of relating among team members, and challenging assumptions and routine thinking, an opportunity is created for novelty and new thinking to emerge.

In addition to working with the group as a whole, it can also be useful to coach team members individually, especially where behavioural or personal characteristics are impinging on effective working. Much of the work we undertake is a combination of group facilitation and individual coaching, providing a consistency of consulting intervention and opportunities to 'try out' new behaviours with appropriate support.

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Chapter 6-2
A Published Article Challenging The Humanistic Ideology Of Team Building

Second Thoughts on Team Building

Bill Critchley & David Casey

A good example of something needed in Management Development- examining issues raised in practice. In this case the authors question the value and assumptions which underlie teamwork and team building and ultimately their usefulness in certain settings. On the basis of this analysis they develop ideas for future practice of working with management groups.

PART 1: Teambuilding- At What Price and At Whose Cost?

It all started during one of those midnight conversations between consultants in a residential workshop. We were running a teambuilding session with a top management group and something very odd began to appear. Our disturbing (but also exciting) discovery was that for most of their time this group of people had absolutely no need to work as a team; indeed the attempt to do so was causing more puzzlement and scepticism than motivation and commitment. In our midnight reflections we were honest enough to confess to each other than this wasn't the first time our team building efforts had cast doubts on the very validity of teamwork itself, within our client groups.

We admitted that we had both been working from some implicit assumptions that good teamwork is a characteristic of healthy, effectively functioning organisations. Now we started to question those assumptions. First, we flushed out what our assumptions actually were. In essence it came down to something like this:

We had been assuming that the top group in any organisation (be it the board of directors or the local authority management committee or whatever the top group is called) should be a team and ought to work as a team. Teamwork at the top is crucial to organisational process, we assumed.

We further assumed that a properly functioning team is one in which:

- people care for each other;
- people are open and truthful;
- there is a high level of trust
- decisions are made by consensus;
- there is strong team commitment;
- conflict is faced up to and worked through;
- people really listen to ideas and to feelings;
- feelings are expressed freely;
- process issues (task and feelings) are dealt with.

Finally, it had always seemed logical to us, that a team building catalyst could always help any team to function better- and so help any organisation perform better as an organisation. Better functioning would lead the organisation to achieve its purposes more *effectively*.

The harsh reality we now came up against was at odds with this cosy view of teams, teamwork and teambuilding. In truth the Director of Education has little need to work in harness with his fellow Chief Executive and the Chair of the elected members' Education Committee, but the other chief officers in that local authority have neither the expertise nor the interest, nor indeed the time, to contribute to what is essentially very specialised work.

Even in industry, whilst it is clear that the marketing and production directors of a company must work closely together to ensure that the production schedule in synchronised with sales forecasts and the finance director needs to be involved- to look at the cash flow implications of varying stock levels- they don't need to involve the *whole* team. And they certainly do not need to develop high levels of trust and openness to work through those kinds of business issues.

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On the other hand, most people would agree that *strategic* decisions, concerned with the future direction of the whole enterprise, should involve all those at the top. Strategy should demand an input from every member of the top group, and for strategic discussion and strategic decision-making, teamwork at the top is essential. But how much time do most top management groups actually spend discussing strategy? Our experiences, in a wide variety of organisations, suggest that 10% is a high figure for most organisations- often 5% would be nearer the mark. This means that 90-95% of decisions in organisations are essentially operational; that is decisions made within departments based usually on a fair amount of information and expertise. In those conditions, high levels of trust and openness may be nice, but are not necessary; consensus is strictly not an issue and in any case would take up far too much time. There is therefore no need for high levels of interpersonal skills.

Why then, is so much time and money invested in teambuilding, we asked ourselves. At this stage in our discussions we began to face a rather disturbing possibility. Perhaps the spread of teambuilding has more to do with team builders and *their* needs and values rather than a careful analysis of what is appropriate and necessary for the organisation. To test out this alarming hypothesis we each wrote down an honest and frank list of reasons why we ourselves engaged in teambuilding. We recommend this as an enlightening activity for other team builders- perhaps, like us, they will arrive at this kind of conclusion: team builders work as catalysts to help management groups function better as open teams for a variety of reasons, including the following:

- They like it- enjoy the risks.
- Because they are good at it.
- It's flattering to be asked.
- They receive rewarding personal feedback.
- Professional kudos- not many people do teambuilding with top teams.
- There's money in it.
- It accords with their values: for instance democracy is preferred to autocracy.
- They gain power. Process interventions are powerful in business settings where the client is on home ground and can bamboozle the consultant in business discussions.

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All those reasons are concerned with the needs, skills and values of the *team builder* rather than the management group being 'helped'. This could explain why many teambuilding exercises leave the so-called 'management team' excited and stimulated by the experience, only to find they are spending an unnecessary amount of time together discussing other people's departmental issues. Later on, because they cannot see the benefit of working together on such issues, they abandon 'teamwork' altogether. Such a management group has been accidentally led to disillusionment with the whole idea of teamwork and the value of teambuilding.

We began to see, as our discussions went on through the small hours, that there is a very *large* proportion of most managers' work where teamwork is not needed (and to attempt to inculcate teamwork is dysfunctional). There is, at the same time a very *small* proportion of their work where teamwork is absolutely vital (and to ignore team working skills is to invite disaster). This latter work, which demands a team approach, is typified by strategic work but not limited to strategic work. It is any work characterised by a high level of choice and by the condition of maximum uncertainty.

Most people find choice and uncertainty uncomfortable. Many senior managers attempt to deny the choice element by the employment of complex models and techniques. We don't think most people's management experience teaches them to make choices about the future for instance; it puts the main emphasis on establishing as many facts as possible and reviewing options in the light of past experience. That's why models like, for example, the Boston portfolio model and the General Electric matrix are so popular. They provide comforting analytic frameworks for looking at strategic options, but they are appealing really to our operational mentality. The hope often is that they will magic up a solution to the strategic question. But of course they can't make choices for people and they don't throw any light on the future.

The top team of an organisation, if it is to achieve quality and commitment in its decisions about future directions, will need to pool the full extent of each individual's wisdom and experience. That means something quite different from reacting to a problem in terms of their own functional knowledge and experience. It means exposing fully their uncertainties, taking unaccustomed risks by airing their own subjective view of the world and struggling to build some common perceptions and possibilities.

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This is where that much abused word ‘sharing’ really comes into it’s own. In this context it is not merely a value-laden exhortation, it is vital to the future of the organisation. Ideas and opinions are all we have to inform our view of the future, but if we are to take a risk with fragile idea or opinion, unsubstantiated by facts, we will only take it if the climate is right.

Conversely, if we take the risk and the sheer airiness and vulnerability of the idea attracts forth a volley of ridicule and abuse, then it will die on the instant, lost forever, snuffed out like Tinkerbell.

Most functional executives, brought up in the hurly-burly of politics and inter- functional warfare, find the transition from functional to strategic mode very difficult to make. They do not always see the difference, and if they do, they are reluctant to leave their mountaintop, the summit of knowledge, experience and hence power, for the quality and shared uncertainty of strategic decision making. And yet there exists one area where real teamwork is not only necessary but vital.

We had now got ourselves thoroughly confused. We seemed to be forcing teambuilding on groups which had no need to be a team, and missing the one area where teamwork is essential- because choice and uncertainty are at a maximum and for this very reason managers were shying away from the work- work which can *only* be done by a team. We restored to diagrams to help clear our minds and these new diagrams form the basis of Part 2 of this article.

PART 2: Theoretical Considerations Concerning Management Groups

We found these kinds of discussions taking us farther and farther away from teambuilding and closer and closer to an understanding of why management groups work, or don’t work, in the ways they do. In the end, we developed two basic diagrams, showing the relationships between a number of variables which operate in management groups:

- the degree of uncertainty in the management task;
- the need for sharing in the group;
- modes of working;
- different kinds of internal group process;
- different levels of interpersonal skills;
- the role of the leader.

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We would now like to present these two framework diagrams as diagnostic tools, which a dozen or so management groups have found very useful in coming to terms with how they work and why. These simple diagrams are helping groups see what kind of groups they are and when and if they want to be a team, rather than jumping to the conclusion that all groups need teambuilding.

Throughout the discussion, we will be talking about the management group- that is the leader plus those immediately responsible to him or her, perhaps five to ten people in all, at the top of their organisation or their part of the organisation.

The first diagram (Figure 1) shows the relationship between the level of uncertainty inherent in any group task and the need for members of that group to share with each other. Expressed simply- 'The more uncertainty- the more need to share'. Everyday examples of this truism are: children holding hands for comfort in the dark or NASA research scientists brainstorming for fresh ideas on the frontiers of man's knowledge- any uncertainty, emotional, physical or intellectual, can best be coped with by sharing.

However, the converse is also true- where there is less uncertainty, there is less need to share. The same children will feel no need to hold hands round the breakfast table where all is secure; the NASA scientists during the final launch will each get on with their own well-rehearsed part of the launch programme in relative isolation from each other. Only if something goes wrong (uncertainty floods back) will they need to share, quickly and fully. It took us a long time to realise the full significance of that in terms of the need to share in a management group.

We are dealing here only with the top group of the organisation where task is the dominant imperative. There are other situations in which other objectives demand sharing, for instance if one is dealing with the whole fabric of a complete organisation and attempting a global shift in attitudes, then culture-building may become the dominant imperative and sharing at all levels in that organisation may become necessary. But that is a different situation- we are focusing here on the top management group where task must be the dominant imperative.

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In Figure 1 we have used Revans' powerful distinction between problems (no answer is known to exit) and puzzles (the answer exists somewhere- just find it) to describe different levels of uncertainty. To illustrate the difference between a problem and a puzzle- deciding about capital punishment is a problem for society; tracking down a murderer is a puzzle for the police.

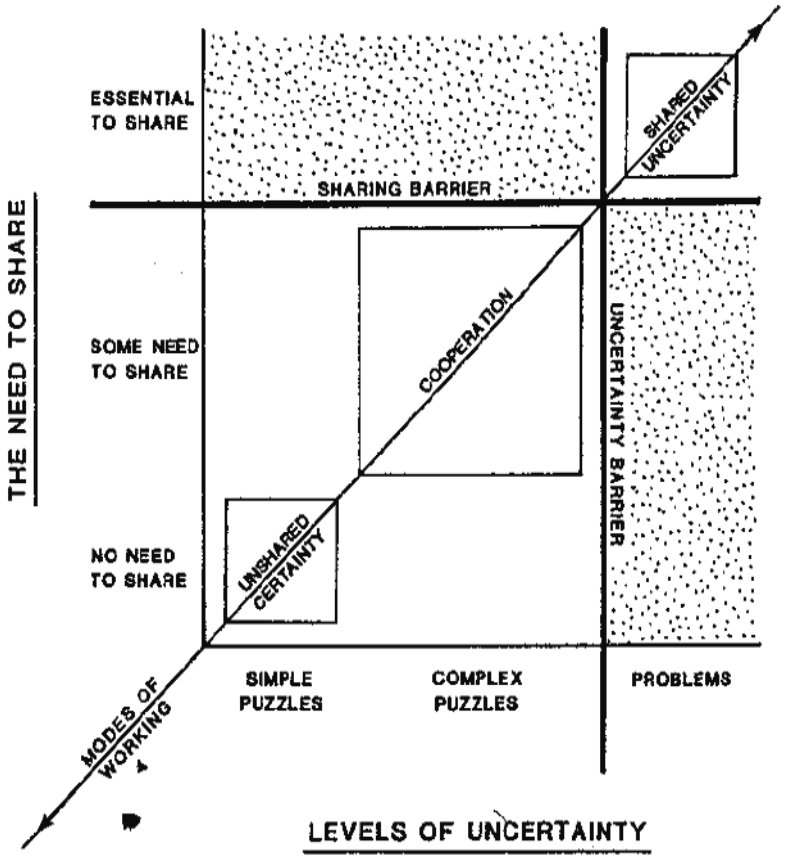

Figure 1. The More Uncertainty in its Task the More Any Group Has to Share

Work groups dealing with genuine problems (of which strategy is only one example) would be well advised to share as much as possible with each other. They should share feelings to gain support, as well as ideas to penetrate the unknown. Our diagram shows two shaded area. THESE SHADED AREAS MUST BE AVOIDED. The shaded area on the right indicates the futility of tackling real problems unless people are prepared to share. The shaded area at the top indicates that there is no point in sharing to solve mere puzzles.

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Two ‘barriers’ appear on our model; they indicate that a positive effort must be made if a breakthrough to a new level of working is to be accomplished. For instance the uncertainty barrier represents a step into the unknown- a deliberate attempt to work in areas of ambiguity, uncertainty and ambivalence. To avoid the shaded areas and arrive in the top right-hand corner, the group break through *both* barriers at the *same* time. This is the *only* way to solve genuine problems.

Most management groups stay behind both barriers in Figure 1 and handle work which is in the nature of a puzzle- and to achieve this they cooperate, rather than share with each other. As long as they continue to limit their work to solving puzzles, they are quite right to stay within the sharing and uncertainty barriers of Figure 1.

As team builders, we now see that we must spend time identifying which modes of working any management group operates. The three modes of working come out in Figure 1 as the diagonal and we would like to describe each mode, by working up the diagonal of Figure 1 from left to right:

Mode of unshared certainty. The proper mode of simple puzzles of a technical nature in everyday work where every member of the group is relatively competent within his/her field and speaks from the authority of his/her specialism. Ideal when the work issues are independent of each other- as they often are. A healthy attitude is ‘I will pull my weight and see that my part is done well’. Attitudes can become unhealthy if they move towards ‘my interests must come first’.

Mode of cooperation. The appropriate mode for complex puzzles which impinge on the work of several members of the management group. In this mode (very common in local authorities) group members recognise the need for give-and take, cooperation, negotiation and passing of information on a need-to-know basis. The attitude is ‘I’ll cooperate for the good of the whole and because other members of this group have their rights and problems too’. Sharing is restricted to what is necessary and each group member still works from the security (certainty) of his own professional base, recognising the professional bases of his colleagues.

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Mode of shared uncertainty. A rare mode. Partly because it is appropriate only for genuine problems (such as strategy) where nobody knows what to do, uncertainty is rife and full sharing between members is the only way out; partly because, even when it is the appropriate mode, many management groups never reach these professional heights. The attitude of members has to be 'the good of the whole outweighs any one member's interests- including mine. I carry an equal responsibility with my colleagues for the whole, and for this particular work I am not able to rely on my specialism, because my functional expertise is, for this problem we all face, irrelevant'.

Clearly this top mode of 'shared uncertainty' is extremely demanding and it is not surprising that many management groups try hard to avoid it. We know several boards of directors and even more local authority management 'Teams' who have devised a brilliant trick to avoid handling genuine problems requiring genuine sharing in the top mode. Quite simply- they turn all strategic problems into operational puzzles! How? There are very many variations of this trick available-

Appoint a working party

Ask a consultant to recommend

Recruit a Corporate Planner

Set up a think-tank

Etc

To make sure the trick works, the terms of reference are- 'Your recommendation must be short and must ask us to decide between option A or option B' Choosing between A & B is an operational puzzle they *can* solve and it leaves them with the comfortable illusion that they have actually been engaging in strategic problem resolution work, whereas the truth is they have avoided uncertainty, avoided sharing their fears and ideas, avoided their real work, by converting frightening problems into manageable puzzles. And who can blame them!

We don't feel we have the right to censure top groups for not working in the top mode of shared uncertainty. We do feel we have the obligation to analyse quite rigorously how top groups actually work, before we plunge in with our teambuilding help.

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In Figure 1 the size of the box for each mode indicates very roughly how frequently each mode might be needed by most management groups. Sadly, we see many management groups working in modes which are inappropriate to the work being done. It is not just that many top groups fail to push through to the top mode; many management groups get stuck in the bottom box quite a lot of the time, when they should be working in the middle mode. On the other hand other groups go through a pantomime of sitting round a table trying to work in the middle mode, but in truth feeling bored and uninterested because the middle mode is inappropriate and each member of the group could carry on separately with his own work, without pretending to share it with his colleagues, who don't need to know anyway. In other words their appropriate mode is unshared certainty and attempts at sharing are boring or frustrating facades.

Our diagram shows an arrow on both ends of the diagonal, to illustrate that all three modes of working are necessary at different times and effective work groups can and should slide up and down the diagonal. We do not see any management group working in one mode all the time- the really effective group is able to move from mode to mode as the *task* requires. Although it may think of itself as a management 'team', a top group will be truly functioning as a team only when it is operating in the top mode.

We use the word team here, in the sense used in the first part of this article, which we believe is the sense used by most in the first part of this article, which we believe is the sense used by most team builders in teambuilding work.

Because we now believe that working in the top mode of shared uncertainty is called for infrequently- by the nature of the work- and is actually practised even less frequently, we now doubt the value of teambuilding work with most management groups- when there is so much more urgent work to be done with these groups.
We found in Figure 1 that when we plot the level of uncertainty in the work, against the need to share, we discover three modes of working, on the diagonal of Figure 1. These three modes of working are:

- UNSHARED CERTAINTY
- COOPERATION
- SHARED UNCERTAINTY

We now want to go on to answer the question 'How does a management group work in each of these modes? What *processes* are needed, what *skills* are required, and how does the *leader* function?'

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The format of Figure 2 is the same as Figure 1, only the variables are different. The vertical axis of Figure 2 is the diagonal lifted from Figure 1 (modes) and two new variables are introduced- *processes* on the horizontal axis and *interpersonal skills* become the new diagonal.

Processes

To start with the horizontal axis- processes. We distinguish three levels of process in any group. At the most perfunctory there are *polite social processes*, very important to sustain the social lubrication of a healthy group but not focused on the work itself. The work is accomplished largely via *task processes*- the way work is organised, distributed, ideas generated and shared, decisions made and so forth. The third level of process concerns people's feelings (feelings processes) and how these handled- by themselves and by others.

Reference to Figure 2 will make it clear that as the mode of working becomes more difficult, ascending the vertical axis, from unshared certainty towards shared uncertainty, so the processes needed to accomplish this more difficult work, also become more difficult, as the group moves along the horizontal axis from simple basic social processes, through task processes, towards the much more difficult processes of working with people's deeper feelings.

Many groups never reach the top mode of shared uncertainty, where people's feelings are actually *part of the work* and all is uncertainty, excitement and trust.

The shaded areas are to be avoided (as in Figure 1). The right-hand shaded area indicates that it is absurd to indulge in work with people's feelings if the group is working only in the two lower modes of unshared certainty and cooperation- to engage in soul-searching to accomplish this kind of work is ridiculous and brings teambuilding into disrepute. The top shaded area indicates similarly that there is no need to share deeply when only the two lower levels of processes (basic social processes and task processes) are operating.

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However, a management group faced with the need to tackle uncertainty can either funk the whole thing, by staying safely behind the barriers (which is what most management groups appear to do) or, it can have the courage to break through both barriers simultaneously, arriving (breathlessly) in the top right-hand corner where the mode of working is shared uncertainty and the necessary processes are task and feelings processes together. Those few management groups which accomplish this - become TEAMS.

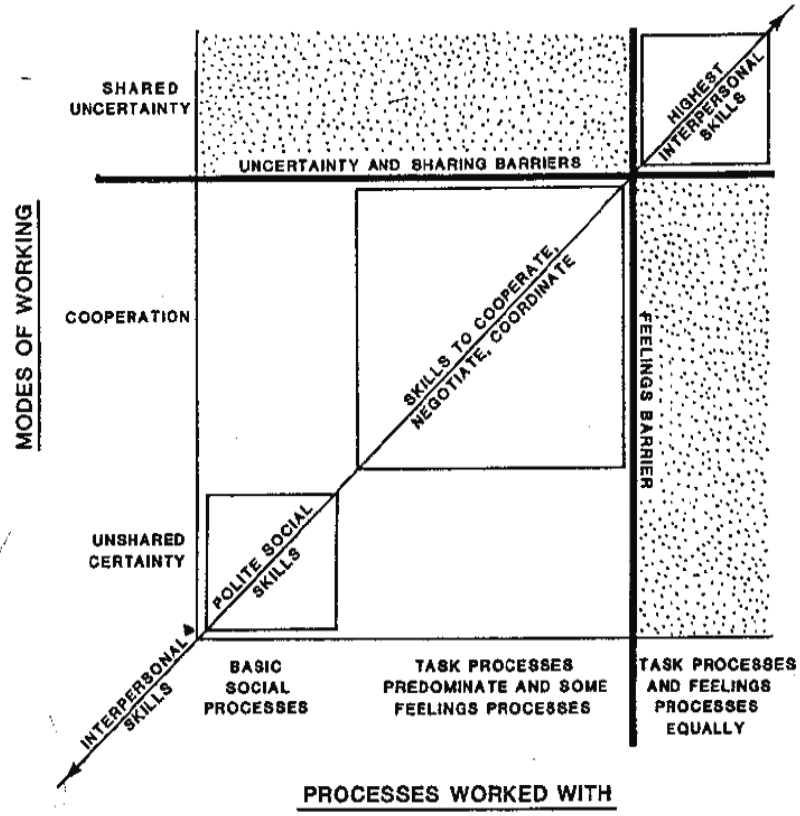

Figure 2. Different Modes of Working Require Different Processes

Interpersonal Skills

The final variable is the diagonal of Figure 2- 'interpersonal skills' and clearly there is an ascending order of skill from the lowest (but *not* least important) level of polite social skills to the highest possible level of interpersonal skills required in the ratified atmosphere of highest uncertainty and real teamwork. But, for the middle mode, a solid raft of straightforward interpersonal skills is needed by all managers - empathy, cooperation, communication, listening, negotiating and many more. We have come to believe that here is the greatest area of need.

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The Leader's Role

The group leader and group leadership have not been mentioned so far, in an attempt to keep things simple. The whole question of leadership is fundamental to the operation of all management groups and we would like to make some observations now.

Leader's role in the mode of unshared certainty: The leader is hardly needed at all in the unshared certainty mode and, indeed the social lubrication processes of a group working in this mode may well be carried out much better by an informal leader- there is nothing so embarrassing as the formal group leader bravely trying to lead the group through its Christmas lunch in the local pub!

Some local authority Chief Executives (so called) suffer an even worse fate- they cannot find a role at all, because the members of their management team (so called) steadfastly refuse to move out of the bottom mode of working, tacitly deciding *not* to work together and denying the Chief Executive any place in the organisation at all! This is not uncommon.

Leader's role in the mode of cooperation: The leader's role in the central (cooperation) mode, is well established in management convention. For example a clear role at meetings has been universally recognised to enable the leader to manage the *task* processes in particular. This role is of course the chairperson. Coordination of the task is at its core and most group leaders find this role relatively clear.

Leader's role in the mode of shared uncertainty: No such role has yet been universally recognised to deal with the processes in the highest mode, of shared uncertainty. In Britain, we have the added difficulty of our cultural resistance to working with feelings (in action learning language "No sets please, we're British'). In this sophisticated mode of working, the word 'catalyst' seems more appropriate than the word chairperson and often a team builder is invited in to carry out this role. But where does this leave the group leader? All management group leaders have learned to be the chairperson; very few have yet learned to be the catalyst. And in any case, to be the catalyst and the leader at the same time, is to attempt the north face of the Eiger of interpersonal skills. It can be done, but not in carpet slippers. If on the other hand, the role of catalyst is performed by an outsider, the leadership dynamic becomes i*mmensely* complex and adds a significant overlay of difficulty when working in a mode which we have already shown to be extremely difficult in the first place. No wonder teambuilding often fails.

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Some people will argue that management groups cannot even begin to engage with each other in any kind of serious work, such as for example establishing what the key tasks are, until they have first built a degree of openness and trust. We would disagree on two counts.

In the first place, as our diagrams illustrate, high levels of openness and trust are only rarely needed, and management groups get most of their work done very well without them, preferring for safety and comfort to remain relatively closed, and, covertly at least, distrustful. To ask such groups to make a major cultural shift, to take such big risks with each other as to be fully open and trusting, requires some mighty cogent justification.

Secondly, we have a theoretical objection to starting with feelings. Most management groups are likely to be task-centred, to be working at al intellectual rather than an emotional level. Approaching such a group suddenly at an emotional level will either generate shock, pain, distrust and confusion, or will produce a warm, cosy, euphoric, one-ff experience. In either case it will often be followed by rejection of the approach and its sponsor, the team builder.

So we are suggesting to all would-be team builders, that if their purpose is to be of real *value to their clients*, that they start by encouraging their clients to clarify the role and purpose of the management group in question, to identify the nature of the tasks which they need to address *as a group*-complex puzzles or real problems, and then to consider the appropriate modes of working, and the skills and processes which go with them. When we have reached this stage, most of us have the skills and technologies to provide what is needed. What is often left out is the diagnostic work which gets us to that stage.

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Chapter 6-3
The Principles Of High-Performance Team - Work

Professor Bill Critchley April 2011

1. The challenges of working as an executive or management team

Team working in modern, functionally designed organisations, does not come easily, particularly as most western organisations are predicated on an engineering assumption about the importance of each part performing effectively. Combine this deep-rooted assumption with the fact that most people rise to the top of their departments because they are experts in a particular function, be it planning, marketing, operations, distribution and so on, the function or department tends to take precedence over the group in terms of their **identification** with that function, their knowledge of it and their reward for its effective management.

Furthermore, departmental heads find themselves as de facto members of the 'group operations team' without any real sense of team purpose or commitment to the group 'team'. Many team meetings are little more than rituals or forums for communication. So, although much lip service is paid to the importance of teamwork, the reality is that many managers have few conceptual frameworks or models for thinking about what conditions might lead to effective top teamwork.

In our experience, there are a number of topics that might need to be covered as part of a team development project, such as:

- Establishing the purpose of being a team; what is it the team needs to do together? In practice this often leads to agreement about a broad agenda, which might cover items like strategy, structure, succession planning, people development, performance management etc.
- What structure of meetings is needed; for example, some teams have regular, short operational meetings, and less frequently more 'strategic' meetings where they give themselves time to reflect and discuss the longer term more complex issues. Bill Critchley has developed a model (below) which teams find very helpful in enabling them to identify their different purposes and hence the need for different kinds of meeting.

- How are they going to work together effectively as a team; a team needs to develop good enough interpersonal communication. Members need to understand something about team dynamics, e.g. power dynamics in teams, inclusion/exclusion, – there are two or three simple models for thinking about these kinds of dynamics, and how to work with them constructively
- Team roles, e.g. people take up particular roles in teams, and it is useful to become aware of these habitual roles, their effects and how to develop flexibility
- Team leadership; leaders need to develop the skill of facilitating and enabling consensus decisions within clear boundaries
- Useful protocols for decision-making and problem solving.

We find the following model (Critchley, 1984) an effective starting point to clarify the teams purpose and mode of operating. This model works on the assumption that most actual work is carried out in functions and is subject to functional expertise.

Much of the work is of the 'puzzle' variety, where solutions are discovered through the application of expertise. Some of these 'puzzles' are more complex and require inter-departmental collaboration and have to be co-ordinated, and then there are the 'strategic' problems, which are not subject to expertise, but need to be thoroughly discussed until some solution **emerges** by common consent. In summary:

- 1. **Unshared Certainty** – puzzles are simple and operational; there is **no need** to share with the wider group. Decisions are taken within the functional area. Many teams devote too much time to these functional issues to the frustration of everyone
  2. **Co-operation** – puzzles are more complex and require sharing of ideas, approaches and decision-making. This kind of operational co-ordination needs discipline and effective chairing
  3. **Shared Uncertainty** – this is the domain of the strategic decision and other such problems where a high degree of sharing is required to overcome obstacles of personal agendas, function protection, risk aversion and so forth. Attachment to the known and knowable is replaced with group responsibility for entering into the unknown with the combined knowledge, expertise and wisdom of the whole group.

Effectiveness in the third mode is hard to reach, because maturity and a high level of 'emotional intelligence' is required.

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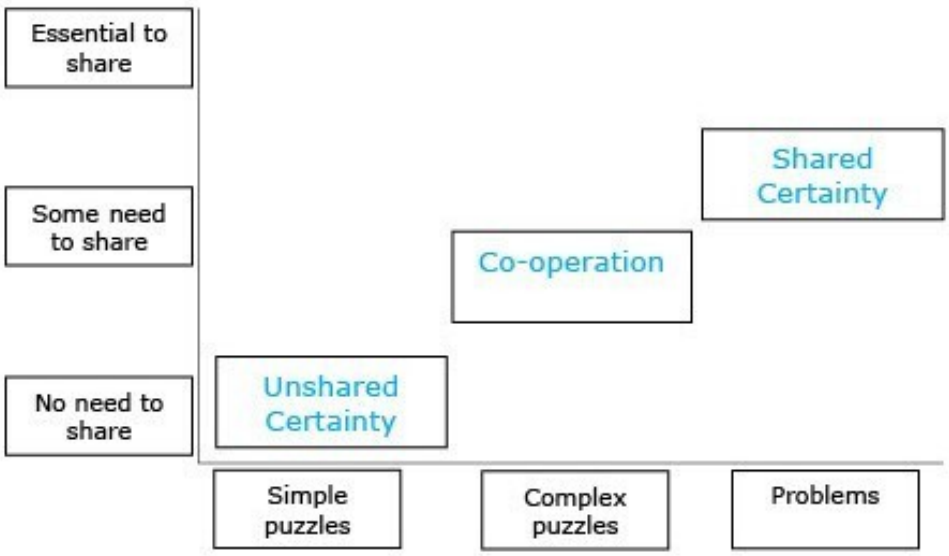

For a management team to function optimally requires the team to recognise these distinctions, to take off its agenda all functional items (mode 1), develop an effective and disciplined approach to mode 2, and to develop the dialogic skills to be effective in mode 3.

The main challenge for individuals is that they have to learn to leave their functional hats behind when they join a management or corporate team, and step up to a collective leadership role. This will require them to venture out of their comfort zone to engage in conversations about other functional areas, to make trade-offs and compromises in service of the overall good, and to become involved in the leadership of the whole group.

- A shared sense of purpose
- Shared accountability for achieving key goals
- A Credible leader
- Distributed leadershipUnderstanding of team processes
- Tolerance for uncertainty
- An inquiring attitude
- Capacity to hold difference and address conflict
- Relational skill (e.g. listening, disclosing, giving feedback)
- Equality of influence
- Capacity to challenge and take personal risk

CRITCHLEY, B., & CASEY D 1984. Second Thoughts on Team Building. *Management Education and Development, Vol.15, Pt.2, pp163-175.*

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Chapter 6-4
Executive Team Coaching

Professor Bill Critchley June 2017

The main challenge

The main challenge for any executive team is, in my view, whether or not *all* members are willing to take up *collective responsibility* for the whole, and whether the Boss is really up for that, as it involves some dilution of his/her authority. The reason for making this move is because research suggests that such a shared responsibility produces higher quality and more sustainable strategic decisions in the long run, but it requires a high level of maturity on behalf of team members and the CEO.

The dilution is a move from the unalloyed individual responsibility and accountability of the CEO (which is often what the Shareholders assume) to a *shared responsibility,* even though the CEO remains as the executive accountable for the performance of the whole. So, the CEO is sharing his or her responsibility while retaining ultimate accountability. This is apparently paradoxical but it is also, I think, what CEO's are paid to do.
Team members are usually judged on their performance in their functional role, and rarely for the way the perform as an Executive team. It may well be more comfortable for them to keep things this way and leave the burden of the whole to the CEO.

Two phases of strategic problem solving.

Many executive teams struggle with making collective "strategic' decisions, and a simple, two phase model of problem solving can serve as a useful heuristic for Executive team coaching.
Diverging In this phase, which has some similarity to 'brain storming', the group would be:

- Exploring together
- Offering and exchanging views and questions, and inquiring (there is a premium during this phase on the skills of listening and questioning)

Converging

In this phase, the threads of the conversation need to be pulled together into actionable themes, and the group would be:

- Summarising
- Testing for agreement
- Proposing options, suggesting practical steps

All members of the group should be doing this, but there is often a particular need for the leader, during this phase, to point to, and prioritise the emerging themes;

Often ‘facilitators’ play a major role in enabling convergence when they see their main task as to facilitate solutions to difficult problems.
However, I see the main task of the team coach as being to enable the group to reflect on and improve its working as a leadership team. My view is that if we try to perform this role on behalf of the team, it might be seen as useful in the short term, but it does not serve the long-term goal of becoming a really effective leadership team.

Lencione’s model of team work

I have also adapted the Lencione (Lencioni, 2002) model of team working because I think it is a useful way of monitoring the less conscious and explicit processes which go on in all teams.

Five requirements of teams

1. **Trust**- Can you allow yourselves to be vulnerable in this team – to express your concerns and anxieties without being told to get with the programme.
2. **Conflict**- Can you disagree with each other robustly, and know that you won’t rupture the fabric of relationships in the team; the desire to preserve artificial harmony stifles the occurrence of productive, ideological conflict

1. **Commitment**- are you willing to commit to being collectively responsible as a team, and commit to decisions made in the team - the key is to know you have been heard, even though the decision has not gone your way.
2. **Accountability**- are you prepared to hold one another the need to accountable for their behaviours and performance
3. **Inattention to Results**- the pursuit of individual goals and the focus on personal status erodes the focus on collective success

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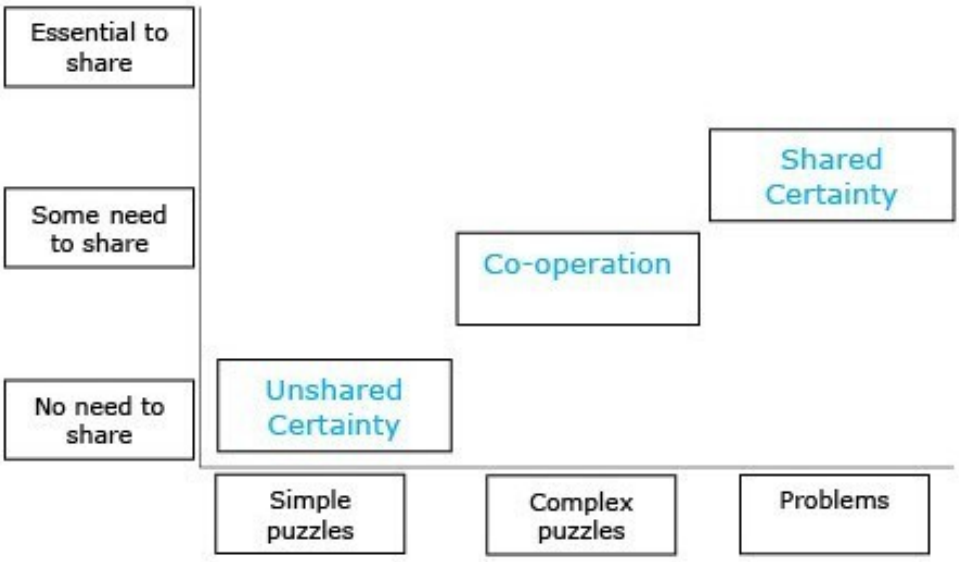
The Critchley model of Executive team working

I developed the following model which was described in an article entitled 'Second thoughts on teambuilding' (Critchley, 1984) as a useful starting point to clarify the teams purpose and mode of operating. This model works on the assumption that most actual work is carried out in functions and is subject to functional expertise. Much of the work is of the 'puzzle' variety, where solutions are discovered through the application of expertise. Some of these 'puzzles' are more complex and require inter-departmental collaboration and have to be co-ordinated, and then there are the 'strategic' or 'wicked' problems, which are not subject to expertise, but need to be thoroughly discussed until some solution **emerges and is forged** by common consent. In summary:

- 1. **Unshared Certainty** (bottom left) – puzzles are simple and operational; there is **no need** to share with the wider group. Decisions are taken within the functional area. Many teams devote too much time to these functional issues to the frustration of everyone
  2. **Co-operation** (middle) – puzzles are more complex and require sharing of ideas, approaches and decision-making. This kind of operational co-ordination needs discipline and effective chairing
  3. **Shared Uncertainty** (top right) – this is the domain of the strategic decision and other such problems where a high degree of *sharing* is required to overcome obstacles of personal agendas, function protection, risk aversion and so forth. Attachment to the known and knowable is replaced with group responsibility for entering into the unknown with the combined knowledge, expertise and wisdom of the *whole group*.



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Effectiveness in the third mode is hard to reach, because maturity and a high level of ‘emotional intelligence’ is required.

For a management team to function optimally in the third mode requires the team to recognise these distinctions, to take off its agenda all functional items (mode 1), develop an effective and disciplined approach to mode 2, and to develop the dialogic skills to be effective in mode 3.

The main challenge for individuals is that they have to learn to leave their functional hats behind when they join a management or corporate team, and step up to a *collective leadership role*. This will require them to venture out of their comfort zone to engage in conversations about other functional areas, to make trade-offs and compromises in service of the overall good, and to become involved in the leadership of the whole group.

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CHAPTER 7
COACHING PRACTICE

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Chapter 7-1
Relational Coaching - Taking the High Road

Bill Critchley

Introduction

The purpose of this chapter is to expand on what we mean by the term ‘relational’ coaching, and what if anything might be ‘edgy’ about coaching in this way. On the face of it, coaching is clearly relational as it involves two people sitting in a room talking to one another. What is there not to understand about ‘relational’ in that context? Indeed social existence is nothing if not relational.

However we, (that is I and my colleagues at Ashridge Consulting) mean something rather specific by ‘relational’, which is not just qualitative. In other words we are not just talking about a ‘good’ relationship, where people observe the social conventions of politeness and consideration, or going further, listen well to one another, take the ethics of mutual respect, diversity, justice and so forth really seriously. Of course such ethical principles are important -- and it is usually important to be polite, but sometimes it is useful to provoke, to go beyond the limits of social conventions and say something which may surprise and disturb our client.

This article elaborates on how we are using this word ‘relational’ in the particular context of coaching ‘practice’ by working through a number of perspectives, some practical, and some theoretical. It intends thereby to explain the somewhat radical nature of this approach to coaching.

I start with the psychological perspective of John Bowlby, as it seems important to ‘ground’ a discussion about a process which usually takes a dyadic form, in a basic understanding of human need, human personality and human interdependence. This is itself radical in the sense that coaching is normally located in a business context, or at least one where efficiency and effectiveness take precedence over psychological considerations.

Conclusions

Many team builders are unaware of the shaded no-go areas and dreamily assume that any progress towards open attitudes, free expression of feelings and genuine sharing in any management group, is beneficial. This is not so-to be of benefit there needs to be a very delicate and deliberate balance between what WORK the group has decided to pursue (what level of UNCERTAINTY) and the degree of sharing and expression of feelings the group is prepared for, to accomplish that work. Only if the balance is right will the management group be able to aim accurately at the top right-hand corner of Figures 1 and 2 and succeed in breaking through all the barriers at the same time, to experience real teamwork. Attempts to push through only *one* barrier (trying to handle uncertainty without sharing; sharing for the sake of sharing; being open for the sake of being open) will fail and in failing will probably make things worse for that management group.

Strategic planners are often guilty of pushing management groups towards handling uncertainty WITHOUT the concomitant abilities to share and work with feelings. Team builders are often guilty of the converse sin-pushing management groups to be open and share their feelings, when the group has no intention whatever of getting into work where the level of uncertainty is high. Neither will succeed. It is no coincidence that both strategic planning and teambuilding can fall quickly intro disrepute; it may be too late to save strategic planning from the management scrapheap- it is not too late to save teambuilding.

SUMMARY: Putting Teambuilding In Its Place

The problems we described in *Part 1* of this article centred round the dangers of consultants imposing their own values on a client management group when they engage in teambuilding work, instead of first finding out how that management group actually works, its context within the organisation, and hence what it really needs.

In part 2 we developed a diagnostic tool, in the form of two diagrams, which in the hands of a management group will enable it to understand how it actually works, and will provide it with a means of articulating the kind of group it wants to become, starting unequivocally from an analysis of its role and purpose and the work it has to do, rather than from some prior assumptions or values about how a management group ‘should’ work.

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He is asserting that attachment, or relational needs will always configure in one way or another how we live our lives, and I am suggesting that this primary need is bound to configure a coaching relationship, for when a coaching client meets his or her coach, he/she brings into the encounter, both consciously and unconsciously their experience of primary relationships, their expectations of someone who is supposed to be 'there for them'.

By analogy with parenting it seems reasonable to suggest that a skilled coaching process developed from a profound understanding of relational needs is capable of contributing to human growth. It also seems safe to suggest that coaching which does not take account of the relational dynamics inherent in the coaching process may well be ineffectual and at the worst potentially harmful.

Bowlby's ideas, although radical and controversial at the time he proposed them have become fairly mainstream in psychotherapy and are taken as more or less incontrovertible. However, they still seem fairly controversial in the field of coaching, as evidenced by the number of times during the course of our coaching programmes we are asked to define the boundary between coaching and psychotherapy. This question is predicated on the assumption that there either **is** or **should be** a clear boundary between the two, and a means of knowing when to 'refer' a client to a psychotherapist.

It seems to me to follow from Bowlby's assertions that to make such a distinction is impossible. Clearly coaching and psychotherapy have different purposes and take place in different contexts, but in both cases the relational dynamics will configure outcome and this is unavoidable.

This is evidenced by psychotherapy research into 'common factors', and recent coaching research into effective outcomes. Of all the variables having an effect on outcome, by far the largest impact comes from the relationship itself rather than from any particular method or technique (see the research section of this volume).

A Case Study

I was recently working with a client -- a new client who worked in the field of media production. He came because he felt unconfident in his work, rarely able to articulate his views unless directly asked for an opinion, and stifled by his fear of making any kind of social impact.

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I noticed that as he sat opposite me attempting to tell me why he had come, he was mumbling and muttering, mainly looking away from me, to his right and down.

Usually at first meetings I aim to gather some biographical detail and explore my client's work context, so that I have some sense of his wider 'field' or context, and in my experience the 'figure' or focus of the work usually emerges from this inquiry.

In this case, I was finding it hard to hear him, let alone understand what he was saying. I stayed with this, attempting to make some sort of sense for about twenty minutes until finally I said; "you know you tend to look at the floor and mumble when talking; are you aware you do this?" He said he was aware of it, yes. I continued, "If you and I are to work together, I'm going to have to ask you to make an effort to speak to me so I can hear." When the session, which was our introductory meeting, ended, I asked how he had experienced our encounter and whether he wanted to continue working with me. "Yes," he said, "No one has ever said anything about my speaking before."

This may not sound like rocket science, and as an intervention it does not really 'fit' into any of the standard models; for example it does not appear to be particularly empathetic, deploying skilled listening and questioning skills, but it drew attention in a very direct (and in this case necessarily pragmatic way) to what was going on between us, and it requires a certain courage to do this, as it breaks with most norms of social intercourse.

Some time after we finished meeting he wrote me an e--mail in which he said; "The course of coaching that I undertook with you has had a profound effect on me, and I think about it all the time". In Bowlby's terms I think I became a significant attachment figure, and my first intervention signalled to him that here was someone who wanted to have a relationship with him and was going to make some demands on him so that he could be both seen (I insisted that he make eye contact rather than look away and down), and heard. At the core of all relational practice, in my view, is the simple but profound need of our clients to be seen and heard and accepted, however hard they may try to disguise it, or send us up numerous alleys and byways sign--posted 'performance improvement'!

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Gestalt and Social Constructivism

I continue this exploration of 'relationship' in the coaching process with two related perspectives, Gestalt and Social Constructivism, which are at the same time practical and philosophical. Along with the theme of 'relationality' these constitute the core informing themes that run through the coaching programme at Ashridge.

'Gestalt' is a largely untranslatable German word that tends to be broadly associated with the notion of 'wholeness'. It was originated by a group of psychologists (Koffka, 1945; Köhler, 1945; Werheimmer, 1944) who were disenchanted with the scientific 'atomistic' and reductionist methodology which largely prevailed at the time (and still does to a great extent) and advocated a more 'phenomenological' methodology with the purpose of discovering the 'wholeness' of things. They also studied the nature of perception, and discovered that individuals tend to seek **pattern** in perceived phenomena and hence fill in the gaps when presented with an 'incomplete' pattern.

This discovery that people make meaning by **creating** pattern is of profound philosophical significance; it challenges the positivist assumption that 'reality' can be determined by systematic and rigorous observation by a detached observer. Instead it appears that people make their own reality through interacting with the phenomena they encounter.

To some extent we literally make our own worlds; thus it is in our interacting or relating with our environment, that we create meaning. So meaning emerges **in relationship**. Hitherto I have been arguing that relationship is core to the coaching process from a psychological perspective. Now I am suggesting that relationship is also core from an epistemological perspective.

This discovery presaged the development of the world view known as 'social constructivism' (Glasersfeld, 1995, Vygotsky, 1978). Broadly speaking Social Constructivism takes the epistemological position that nothing can be objectively known because we inevitably bring our subjective categories of knowing to the phenomena we encounter. Within this broad epistemological church there are a range of ontologies, from the Limited Realism of the cognitive psychologists (Ellis, 1998; Beck 1976) to the Social Constructionism and the primacy of the relational of Gergen (Gergen, 2003)

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While it is not the purpose of this chapter to explore social constructivism as an epistemology, it is important to emphasise that among those who advocate this world view there is much argument as to whether an objective reality actually exists out there to be known, or whether we are actively creating 'reality' through our own participation in it. The former view, which sees reality existing independently of human agency, is closer to received wisdom, and the latter view, which sees reality as a dynamic, emerging, participative **process** which humans both create and are created by, is a much more radical perspective.
Either way, all parties to this argument agree on one key thing, that 'reality' cannot be known objectively because human beings bring their categories of knowledge, their experience, their subjectivity to their knowing.

This philosophical underpinning to the word 'relational' has fundamental implications for coaching; it implies that coach and client are in a sense creating one another; meaning arises in the process of relating so the coach does not 'act upon' the client, does not act as an instrument in service of the client. Coach and client are engaged in a process of reciprocal influence. Thus the person of the coach must be fully involved; to attempt to withhold him or herself in the interests of impartiality or detachment merely attenuates the creative possibility inherent in the process of fully relating.

Thus the coach puts him or herself fully at risk in a process of **mutual** influence. This way of working has a very different quality from the rather dry and instrumental coaching process that is often practiced in the name of 'performance improvement', and keeps both parties relatively safe and protected from the risk of fully embodied relational engagement.

This 'relational' approach requires the coach to be capable of self--awareness and reflexivity, to allow him or herself to be **subject** to the process of relating, rather than to be in control of it, and hence to be open to being changed by the interaction. It is also risky in the sense that precise outcomes cannot be forecast. Working fully in the relationship increases the possibility of emergent novelty at the necessary expense of predictability.

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Gestalt Principles

The work of these early Gestalt psychologists was taken up by some pioneering psychotherapists, most notably Fritz Perls (Perls et al., 1951) who, with his colleagues, translated and developed it into a psychotherapeutic method. What are of interest to the coach are four key interdependent principles of this method and their relevance to coaching.

Principle 1

The first principle flows directly from the constructivist position, namely that change occurs in the crucible of a relationship, or in **dialogue,** to use their preferred term. The dialogic approach of the early Gestaltists contrasted significantly from the somewhat impassive stance adopted by classically trained psychoanalysts, who were usually seated behind their patient who was lying on a couch. Indeed, Fritz Perls who had trained in the psychoanalytic school, was very sceptical about the nature of the relationship they tended to create, the potential power it gives to the analyst and the dependency it can bring about.

The psychoanalysts sought to offer interpretations of a patient's free associations in their presence, and hence put themselves in some authority over the meaning to be ascribed to their outpourings. The Gestaltists sought a more mutual and reciprocal relationship as I have described above.

Nowadays of course, few coaches seek to explicitly arrange the coaching encounter so as to maximise their power. Nevertheless it is possible, by taking up an 'objective' and 'detached' stance, by seeking to solve the client's problem or by offering them advice, to unwittingly adopt a stance which takes power over the client.

The dialogic relationship is one in which power and influence is fluid, being continuously negotiated both consciously and unconsciously. The implication for coaches is that they need to pay continuous attention to the dynamics of the relationship they and their client are creating, and to do this they need to understand the dynamics of relating, be aware of their own patterns and habits, and to take the risk of reflecting on these dynamics **with their client.**

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Principle 2

The second principle is the principle of **awareness**. Perls took the view that psychoanalysis, in particular, overly privileged cognitive insight as the primary means of change, whereas our sensing is the source of all our knowing; it is our sensory contact with our environment that provides the material for our propositional knowing and it is easy for those of us who live in an environment which values rationality to lose touch with our bodily awareness. This has similarities with John Heron's (Heron, 1996) construct of a 'four level epistemology', which starts with experiential knowing, then moves to presentational knowing, and then to propositional knowing and finally to practical knowing. The implication is that unless knowing is fully grounded in sensory experience, it will be impoverished at the subsequent levels.

The Gestalt 'method' is to heighten our embodied awareness so that we become more aware of what we are sensing in our bodies, how we are feeling, what we are **noticing** in the process of relating to the 'other'. Through increasing our awareness we become more fully alive, and more fully 'present'.

Principle 3

The third principle is the focus on **the present**. This emphasises the utility of paying attention to what is happening **now,** rather than what happened 'then'. It does not deny the influence of our past experiences and conditioning but is primarily interested in how these experiences are being manifested in the present interaction, on the basis that we cannot change the past but we can change the present. Clearly the most present thing going on in the room in an encounter between coach and client is the relationship between them, and this is another powerful reason for paying attention to it.

Principle 4

Contact describes the process of entering into an encounter with another person, and Gestaltists do use the concept normatively; we talk of 'good contact' and poor contact. Good contact involves the reciprocal experience of a full exchange between two people, where each is shuttling between the internal and external loci of attention, where I am noticing you and noticing myself simultaneously. Good contact is giving full attention to this particular relational encounter in the here and now, and allowing the 'next' to emerge, rather than striving for it.

These principles are easy to say and not so easy to do; it takes courage: the following vignette may bring to life what I mean.

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A Moment of Courage

I was coaching the Director of a government body. He was a senior figure who had recently been knighted, and was entering the final stage of his career as leader of this organisation.

On the surface he was a confident, articulate, charming and powerful man, with considerable interpersonal skills; rather an archetypal, male leadership figure. I had worked with him over a number of years, and had always been rather in awe of him. I was eager for his approval and tried not to show it; I guess he attracted my paternal transference.

I had previously worked fairly extensively with him and his various leadership teams, and this coaching assignment was a departure from the usual form of my relationship with him. He had asked for a year's coaching in order to help him change his leadership style. He knew people found him intimidating, and he wanted to grow his subordinates rather than scare them, and make a significant shift in the leadership culture of the organisation.

He paid me in advance, and wanted to hold the sessions in his London flat. We were on about the third session; I had been 'trying hard' to reflect back, notice themes – all good coaching stuff, but I did not feel I was making an ha'pporth of difference. Everything I said he appeared to have already thought of, and at this particular moment he had been saying:

"You know, I don't know why people think I'm intimidating; I think I listen rather better than most people. I said:

"Yes, you are a very skilled listener, as indeed you are a very persuasive talker. But let me tell you how I experience you; either way, whether you are listening or persuading, you are ***so*** *skilful, that I feel I have absolutely no impact on you. I do not feel I can influence you, surprise you, offer you anything new at all, because you appear to already know or have anticipated anything I say"*

"What?" he said. "I don't understand"; he looked rather bemused. I knew in that moment by the change in his demeanour, that I had discombobulated him. I had taken a personal risk with this 'big' man, whom I so wanted to impress. It changed the dynamic of our relationship, and while I could have no idea whether it would change his leadership, I knew from his confusion that this was a moment of important learning for him.

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In that moment I took the risk of paying attention to what I thought was going on between us. This is something we can all learn to do but it requires us to take a risk. There are in my experience usually three elements to this kind of intervention; first I make an observation that is fairly factual; secondly I declare my experience, and thirdly I may offer a hypothesis. For example, I might say; 'I notice you have been telling me about a number of your problems, and that I have been doing my best to offer you possible solutions (observation). I am beginning to sense that none of my attempts quite hit the spot, and I am feeling a little ineffectual (my experience -- takes courage to say this!). Maybe you don't really believe that I can help you, or possibly that anyone can help you?' (Hypothesis – more courage required!).

This orientation puts the dynamics and quality of the relationship at the forefront of the coach's attention. Most coaches tend to be preoccupied with their client's story and problems, which are clearly important, while the relational dynamics sometimes pass without notice and are rarely commented on. What I am proposing is that 'the relationship' between coach and client is at least as important, and is often the means to the most important learning and change.

The next perspective on which I propose to draw, both elaborates the philosophy of social constructivism and complements Gestalt principles. This is the principle of communication as described by George Mead a sociologist writing in the 1930's. The Gestaltists discovered the way human beings make meaning by creating patterns and hence **creating** reality. Mead investigated in close detail how **social** meaning in particular emerges in the process of communicative interaction. If we are to be effective as coaches in consciously working with relationship, it behoves us to understand how 'relating' works.

Communicative Interaction

George Herbert Mead described this process of communicative interaction rather succinctly by saying that "The meaning of a gesture by one organism is found in the response of another organism " (Mead, 1967 p.147)

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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.

This way of understanding the basic communicative process seems to resonate with most people’s lived experience. The most important proposition to get our heads round is that this process, while it may appear otherwise, is **non--linear.** One person does not transmit a message to another person like a broadcasting signal. The process is simultaneous; as one gestures, the other is making meaning **at the same time** and the first gesturer is also simultaneously responding so that meaning emerges in the interaction.

This non--linear process is complex, witness the myriads of misunderstandings and surprises that arise in any conversation, and we have to contend with two further important factors. The first factor is particularly important for the coach, namely, that much of the gesturing and responding is influenced by ‘unconscious motivation’. We cannot always take a gesture at face value and neither can we take our own response at face value.

There is not space in this chapter for a full discussion of unconscious motivation, but most of us are familiar with the notion that oftentimes patterns of behaviour and feeling, which are conditioned to some extent by early experience in our families, schools and so on, are triggered in response to certain here and now situations (in other words, we act out the past in the present). While we may understand this as a consequence of being human, we are usually unaware of it at the time a particular pattern or response is evoked. This is a rather simplified version of what is generally meant by ‘unconscious process’, but it will suffice, and a coach who practises relationally needs to have some understanding of the nature and implications of unconscious process.

The second factor, by which I mean the ‘relational context’, has much broader implications.

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This is the realisation that this complex process of communicative interaction **is clearly uncontrollable by any one person**. The implication of this, for a coach in a dyadic coaching relationship, has already been substantially covered in this chapter, but what about the implications for organisations? This is the context in which most of our clients live, and what we are suggesting is that the core communicative process is uncontrollable in the conventional sense of managers 'being in control' of their organisation; such a proposition may be anathema to many managers.

"We are all participants"

What I am suggesting is quite radical; I am suggesting that 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.

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, 2000 p.187)

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What generally prevents social processes from spiralling out of control is that as interdependent humans, attempting to live together in the world, we evolve ‘rules’ whereby we can go along together. Because we **need** other human beings in order to survive we are inevitably constrained by each other’s needs and wants so we are simultaneously free and not free.

What we are learning from complexity science is that there appears to be a self-- organising principle in nature whereby order emerges from apparent disorder. The order cannot be predicted from the initial starting conditions but pattern emerges through interaction.

The implication for society is that it is in itself a self--organising process. Living in tighter knit communities like organisations, this self--organisation manifests itself as ‘rules’ which emerge over time and are constantly evolving, taking the form of hierarchy, systems and procedures, and all the informal codes and conventions which constitute an organisational ‘culture’. Often these ‘rules’ feel, to those lower down in the hierarchy, imposed, and rather impervious to influence. In practice they have emerged over time in the on--going process of communicative interaction; they did not come down as ‘tablets of stone’ from any mountain.

I notice how many times in the above paragraphs I have used the word relating, and what I am suggesting is that ‘relating’ is **the core social process** and hence coaching is not just relational in itself, but it is part of a wider relational process which is the essence of what constitutes organisational life.

Conclusion

In this article I attempt, through drawing on John Bowlby’s pioneering psychological work, and with some examples from my own practice, to show how, in a psychological sense, coaching is a profoundly relational process. I have suggested that effective coaching depends on understanding, and having the competence to work with the relational dimension.

I go on to suggest, drawing on Gestalt psychology and constructivist epistemology that change and learning emerges in the crucible of the relationship, and that, paradoxically, while the aim of the coach must be to create a relationship in the service of the client, it is nevertheless an inter--subjective and interdependent relationship in which coach and client participate.

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I then draw on the ideas of George Mead, a sociologist, to explore the dynamic of communication as a simultaneous movement of 'gesture and response' in which meaning is **created** in a communicative dance by two people, giving further weight to the proposition that coaching is inherently a non--linear, non-- instrumental, dynamic relational process.

Finally I draw on some ideas from complexity theory to suggest that the organisations in which clients work are 'processes of communicative interaction' in which 'relating', in its broadest sense, is the core process. I am suggesting that organisations are social through and through and that coaching is thus not just relational in itself, but is part of a broad web of relating which constitutes what we have come to call organisation.

I think this relational perspective has important implications for the contracting and evaluation of coaching assignments, for the competence coaches need to acquire, and for the development of coaching practice.

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Bill Critchley July 2023

Chapter 7-2
An adaptation of my book 'Letters to a Leader' for coaches

LETTER ONE: THE PHENOMENON WE CALL 'ORGANISATION'

Principle one: 'Organisations' are complex social processes.

"Patterns emerge without a master plan"

"Being in charge but not in control" – the systemic nature of organisations

"Being in charge but not in control" was the title of one of my fellow student's PhD thesis at Hertfordshire University. He came to realise that, while he was paid as a supply chain manager to be 'in charge', he could never be 'in control', another inconvenient truth for those who advocate a version of management which is predicated on the importance of gaining control.

Organisations are *systemic* in nature. Systemic is another concept often used to characterise the patterns of interaction and connection which I have described above, and it is a useful shorthand to remind us of the interconnected nature of organisational process in which a movement in one part may well, like the proverbial butterfly flapping its wings and causing a typhoon, amplify or change an organisational pattern, but equally it may not. Change occurs when some small deviation in a pattern becomes amplified.

Lesson one: context is all

Lesson two: It's what you do next that matters

Lesson three; best practice is an illusion

IMPLICATIONS FOR COACHES:

Bowlby and Attachment Theory

John Bowlby argues (Bowlby, 1988 p.5), that certain 'basic' types of behaviour, such as sexual behaviour, exploratory behaviour, eating behaviour, and, of particular interest to this article, attachment behaviour and its reciprocal, parenting behaviour, are to some extent pre--programmed and biologically rooted, but also to a large extent 'learned'. In outlining this position he observes that keeping these types of behaviour conceptually distinct from each other is in contrast with traditional libido theory that treats most types of behaviour as the "varying expressions of a single drive" (ibid p.5).

On the same page he observes that "the modern view of behavioural development contrasts sharply with both of the older paradigms, one of which, invoking instinct, over--emphasises the pre--programmed component and the other of which, reacting against instinct, overemphasised the learning component" (ibid p.5).

He thus, helpfully in my view, collapses the nature versus nurture argument which continues to polarise much discussion about the extent to which coaching and other 'helping' professions can really make a difference, and observes of parenting behaviour, that while it has strong biological roots, "all the detail is learned, some of it during interaction with babies and children, much of it through observation of how other parents behave" (ibid p.5).

Bowlby is arguing that human beings have a primary need for attachment, in both the physical and the psychological sense. He says:

1 Ashridge Consulting developed a programme called 'Coaching for Organisation Consultants' which at the time of writing has been running for some 6 years and has also been developed into a Masters Programme. Both these programmes are based on the argument that coaching is inherently relational

"*A feature of attachment behaviour of the greatest importance clinically, and present irrespective of the age of the individual concerned, is the intensity of the emotion that accompanies it, the kind of emotion aroused depending on how the relationship between the individual attached and the attachment figure is faring. If it goes well, there is joy and a sense of security. If it is threatened there is jealousy, anxiety and anger. If broken there is grief and depression"* (ibid p.4).

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- Encourage a ‘systemic’ perspective, which ‘de-centres’ the individual as the problem focus. The focus needs to be how does the problem ‘emerge’ from the systemic conditions, and individual ‘problem’ behaviour can be seen as a symptom of the dynamics in play
- Similarly encourage clients to be less self-critical and to reflect on what the ‘system’ is evoking in them (questions like “is your behaviour in this organisation similar to your behaviour in other contexts?”). So, you are inquiring into two things; what the systemic dynamics evokes, and what are the **learnt** patterns of behaviour your client tends to bring (sedimented into their DMN)

Note: 'the default mode network' is active all the time when we are not engaged in external activity, a ‘sub conscious’ neural network which is, so to speak, always **on**, whether we like it or not. It is, where we think about ourselves, have detailed memory recall, make judgements etc, and some claim it is largely responsible for human consciousness. The DMN, by the way, if you like the technical names ascribed to mental processes, is situated in the medial prefrontal cortex and the posterior singular cortex, connected by the angular gyrus. Maybe it is helpful to know where this pattern is located in the brain, but in my language, it is a recursive and slowly evolving pattern of neuronal connectivity which has been evolving since birth, or before. Eric Berne, the originator of Transactional Analysis, described it rather evocatively as ‘script’.

We know it is largely unconscious, but not in the rather mystical and impenetrable way described by Freud et al, because we know it is possible for a coach or therapist to enable a client to examine some of these beliefs and stories, and how they have evolved.)

- In public sector organisations, without the rather singular profit motive, the context is often more circumscribed by complicated descriptions of purpose, and elaborate sets of rules and policies to ensure compliance and consistency. Consequently, they tend to be quite hierarchical and ‘upward looking’; some can be stifled by bureaucratic procedure – I worked with one University to ‘change their culture’ and discovered that they had around 150 committees; I said it was a waste of everyone’s time convening these ‘open space’ inquiries unless the substantially reduced the number of committees.

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However, I do think that executives often take refuge in these externalised constraints to mitigate the risk and responsibility for taking decisive action.

- Enquiries into what happened are largely a waste of time, energy and money for a number of reasons: their purpose in large part is to cast blame; they take a long time and by the time they come out, the reasons for having them will largely be forgotten, and to justify their expense, they come out with extensive lists of recommendations which are rarely implemented, and in any case the past is rarely repeated although historians like to claim that it is only through understand the past that we …. well what – predict the future? Clearly not. Encourage your clients to rely on a 'good enough' understanding of recent mistakes and, if the word applies, 'failures', and then decide **what action to take next,** knowing that evidence from the past will not help a great deal, and the consequence of future action can only be anticipated.

LETTER TWO: INCLUSIVITY

Principle two: inclusivity

- **Lesson four: leading is human and right-*minded***
- **Lesson five: you are what you do**

Note: The splitting between being and doing is similar to other splits, such as the split between thinking and doing, or thinking and feeling (head and heart).

The myth of a singular and enduring me

Accepting that you are a nasty person would be a hard pill to swallow if you were to assume that you were just one kind of person, but we all 'show up' differently in different contexts. For the majority of us we have some sense of a continuous narrative and history about who we are. What we may lack is an integrating capacity, an awareness of how we show up differently, particularly when some of these ways may not be congruent with our self-image, how we would like to think about ourselves and be seen by others. Hence, we use the ways I outlined above, of justifying behaviour of which we may not be too proud, and by telling ourselves that we have no choice, but you **can choose** who you are and how you behave.

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There is reasonable evidence to suggest that leaders who do not treat people well, do not create sustainable organisations in the long term; they tend to be better known, perhaps because they make for a better media story; but there are many highly effective leaders with low profiles, who do not get, or court, publicity, who do, on the whole, treat people well, and you can find many examples of these in, among others, Jim Collins' book, 'From Good to Great' (Collins, 2001), and his other book with Jerry Porras, 'Built to Last' (Collins, 1994).

Suggestions for managers

- Understand your **'self'.**
    - How do you handle everyday relational incidents and exigencies - do you react or respond?
    - Get to know your 'script'
- Spend some time with a coach.

You, as a leader, might choose to spend some time with a coach, but the important thing is to become more aware of your reactive tendencies so that you are better able to **respond** proactively and generatively to your colleagues and subordinates.

IMPLICATIONS FOR COACHES

- Your main behavioural aim is to raise your client's awareness of how they 'show up' and the effect their ways of interacting has on others.
    - Start by paying attention to what your client evokes in you as one way of finding out what responses they elicit from others, e.g. do they listen to you, allowing themselves to be impacted by what you say. (Because leaders tend to want people to accept their views and carry out their wishes, they tend not to be interested in hearing contrary views and have become quite skilled in non-listening, in three main ways; the first is 'justificatory' listening whereby they explain why what they think and want is justifiable. The second is 'defensive' listening, whereby they explain why the contrary view or objection is wrong, and the third is 'deflection' whereby they do not address the question or alternative view, by subtly, or not so subtly shifting the topic - much beloved by politicians. Real listening requires us to open up to the other, to be vulnerable - ref. Brenee Brown's Ted talk).

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- Inclusivity requires leaders to take account of others' views and perspectives in their decision making so that people feel their contribution is valued.
- List item #3
- Explore how people think about what it is to be a leader, e.g. do they see it as donning some professional cloak?
    - Discourage them from trying to create a false split between personal self and professional self; challenge the much vaunted, but spurious split between being and doing.
    - Encourage them, liberate them to take the risk of being themselves, with which comes real accountability.
    - Remind them of one of the simple rules of W.L. Gore & Associates; 'everyone at Gore consults with other associates before taking actions that might be "below the waterline," causing serious damage to the company'
-
    - *To expand your data base, conduct a small number of '360' interviews but do it yourself, keeping it simple (what is your **experience** of being led by x; what does he/she do well, what would you like more of/less of) and so forth.*

LETTER THREE: COMMUNICATION

Principle three: communication

*(*The sociologist George Herbert Mead, as mentioned above, described the process of 'communicative interaction' rather succinctly by saying that "the meaning of a gesture is in the response" (cite 1967, p. 146).

- Lesson six: leadership is relational practice

What I am proposing from the process view of organisation is that the main currency is 'communicative interaction', mediated of course by its formal arrangements in which participants are shaping and being shaped simultaneously.

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By ‘relational’ I mean something rather specific, which is not just qualitative. From an existential perspective, we are always in relation to someone or something, as life is inherently relational. We are all made of the same stuff; we are born into a relational context, formed by our primary carers and the milieu into which we are born, and we are, in the broadest sense, interdependent and interconnected. Even when you are entirely on your own, separate from others in a physical sense, your experience is still relational in that your very ability to state “I am alone” is only possible because you are able to distinguish different types, or forms of relation.

Being in a ‘relationship’ with another person, is just one form, or example of relatedness.

‘Relational leadership’ is a shift from the individual-centric perspective which has tended to characterise the discourse about leadership, towards an acknowledgment of the inherently mutual nature of all social process, and therefore prioritising the importance of the co-created, ‘here-and-now’ relationship as the central medium for influence and transformation.

Lesson seven; the folly of utopian solutions

Lesson eight; how to make ‘high profile’, communicative gestures

Lesson nine; never make an important decision on your own

IMPLICATIONS FOR COACHES

Remind your client of George Mead’s adage; “the meaning of the gesture is in the response”, and its core implications:

> *You can’t get a message, intact, out of your head into someone else’s head; they will hear what you say according to their experience, their categories of knowledge, and most importantly their feelings about and projections on to you the message sender.*
> *Your client needs to inquire into what sense people are making of what they are communicating – how they are hearing it, and then work with the response rather than repeat what they said in the first place.*
> *Communication is a non-linear emergent, ‘relational’ process rather than a linear cause and effect one, hence outcome is inherently unpredictable.*

Introduce them to Edgar Schein’s notion of “high profile” and “low profile” gestures.

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All leaders have to make high profile gestures from time to time (addressing a large number of people).

High profile gestures elicit the maximum amount of cynicism and mistrust, but coaches can help them do it as well as possible.

Low profile gestures simply consist in the everyday contact the leader has with people, how they show up, and it is from these encounters that subordinates infer their real intentions and agendas.

Hence, helping our clients to become more aware of how they show up, the impressions they create, their impact on people, their willingness to listen and their openness to influence.

It also requires us to help clients to become more aware of the dynamics of power, as it enables and disables.

Suggest to them that leadership is a 'relational practice'. Whether they like or not they are always engaged in a relational process, whether this is authoritarian or participative. Most coaches do not see their job as encouraging authoritarianism, but to develop an inclusive participative style which also requires a leader to be appropriately ***authoritative.*** *Their job is provide frameworks (strategies, policies, values, etc, many of which may be co-created) within which to mobilise* ***joint action;*** *this entails such activities as convening, engaging, inquiring,* ***deciding*** *and mobilising.*

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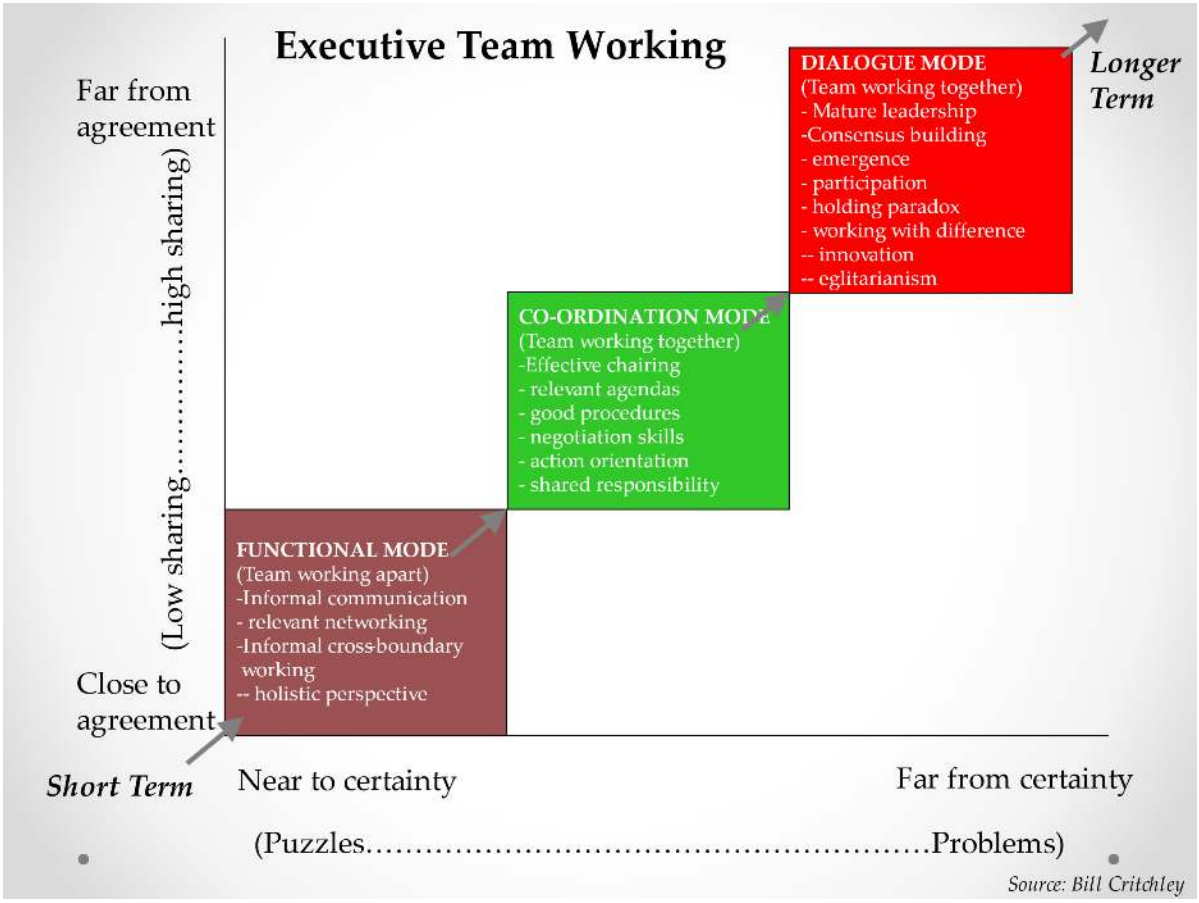
LETTER FOUR: YOUR TEAM

Principle four; teams and teamworking

A model showing executive team roles and 'modes' of working



Source: Bill Critchley

Possible actions to develop your client's team (basis of team coaching) There are a number of topics that you might need to cover as part of a team development project, such as:

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- Establishing the purpose of being a team; what is it the team needs to do together? In practice this often leads to agreement about a broad agenda, which might cover items like strategy, structure, succession planning, people development, performance management etc.
- What structure of meetings is needed? For example, some teams have regular, short operational meetings (mode 2), and less frequently, more ‘strategic’ meetings (mode 3), where they give themselves time to reflect and discuss the longer term more complex issues. Teams have found this framework very helpful in enabling them to identify their different purposes and hence the need for different kinds of meeting.
- How are they going to work together effectively as a team in the different modes? Mode 2 requires a team to develop ‘good enough’ interpersonal communication, while mode 3 demands the skills of **dialogue**, where understanding something about team dynamics might be helpful, e.g. power dynamics in teams, the dynamics of inclusion and exclusion, to mention but two. There are some simple frameworks for thinking about these kinds of dynamics, which might inform the dimensions of teamworking to be explored, and any experienced team coach
- should be able to provide them. However, do be wary of over-elaborate models which purport to diagnose team functioning. The best use of models is when they are used lightly, to provoke conversation, and they should not, in my view, be used as interpretative tools. I do think some people in my profession tend to over rely on them.
- Team roles; people are inclined to take up particular roles in teams, and it is useful to become aware of these habitual roles, their effects and how to develop flexibility.
- Team leadership; leaders need to develop the skill of facilitating and enabling consensus decisions within clear boundaries.

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PROTOTYPE DESIGN FOR xxxx TEAM DEVELOPMENT

Timings are guidelines only; we need to give time to what seems to be most important – 'elephants', the big things in the room which nobody is talking about, are important; 'dead fish', the 'bad' things that happened in the past which people still go on about, are only useful if they illustrate a norm or pattern which is still being acted out. Propositions for change are probably the most useful. Mobiles should ideally be off and time can be allowed in the breaks to attend to the urgent.

Day one

8.00 am Overall Purpose

11.00 'To be or not to be' a 'team'

- Do we act as a leadership team?
- Broadly, what will it take to become an effective team
- What should be our role, purpose, and priorities?

Work in three groups (unfacilitated) and report back to facilitated group discussion

11.45 Getting to know each other better (life stories, and who you are in this group)

12.30 **Lunch**

13.30 The listeners 'introduce' their partner, plus responses.

14.30 **Working together as a xxx leadership team**

Possibly introduce a couple of models here.

- What is working well?
- What particular behaviours impede our performance as a team, e.g.
    - **Trust**; what would be needed to enable trust, and what might be difficult (e.g. being able to admit vulnerability without losing face; to feel your views are listened to and respected etc.)
    - **Conflict**; how willing are you to disagree with colleagues, to challenge received wisdom (what would you fear?). How do you experience each other's style of dealing with difference - 'conflict styles'?
    - **Collaboration;** how confident are you that colleagues will work collaboratively rather than work to their own agendas?
    - **Commitment:** how confident are you that collective decisions will be upheld?

Working in three groups for 60 mins (I think we might well facilitate these groups) and bringing back to the large group for a dialogue (60 mins)

16.30 break

17.00 Reflections on the day; what are the main themes emerging

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Day 2

0800 **Relationships with key stakeholders**

- Where are they working and not working?
- What improvements do we need to focus on?
- Agreed actions

Stakeholder mapping in groups of three.

Each group brings proposals for group review – maybe leader allocates key stakeholder relationships to each group)

10.00 Coffee break

10.30

- How do we communicate what we have agreed?
- How do we enlist everyone in the overall strategic purpose?

11.30 '**Rules of Engagement'**

- Creating an appropriate working structure, e.g. meeting frequency and agenda creation, separating strategic and operational meetings, balance between virtual and face to face??
- Required behaviours and holding each other accountable (how do we actively monitor ourselves against the expectations we have set today?)

12.30 Short intro. to an 'appreciative stance', and appreciations about the day and a half

13.00 Close

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LETTER FIVE: A QUESTION OF PURPOSE

Dear Leader

What is your purpose? Do you have a personal purpose, or do you take it for granted that it is your job to fulfil the organisation's purpose? If you do have a sense of personal purpose, do you see it in purely financial terms or does it extend beyond financial goals? My next principle explores the crucial role of purpose.

Principle five; purpose as the foundation of all action

- What are we doing (this is what is usually meant by mission)?
- Why are we doing it (this is what is usually meant by purpose)?
- How are we going to do it (this is what is broadly meant by strategy)?

These are simple questions, and it helps to put them in simple terms, but answering them is not so easy.

These really are important questions.

Lesson 11: Finding purpose

Implications for coaches. Encourage your clients to:

- Reflect on their own purpose; what difference do they want to make to their organisation, a question which, when I ask it, often flaws leaders, who have not thought beyond implementing the objectives of the company? In my view this is not enough; a leader has responsibility for the qualitative life of the organisation, and some might see beyond that to the wider society and the environment.
- When your client is about to embark on some major project or initiative, ask him/her, "is this congruent with my purpose?" If congruence is not immediately apparent, then, "what purpose is it serving?". A sense of purpose is not immutable as context changes, and their your purpose has shifted, or another purpose has emerged, and that is useful information; sometimes we find our sense of purpose by interrogating our actions, but I am suggesting you keep asking your client the 'why' question, as you take up an 'attitude of inquiry'.
- Conduct some 'appreciative inquiry' among the people who work for your client, asking the question, "when are we at our best?"

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Appreciative inquiry is a co-operative search for the best in people, their organisations, and the world around them. It was developed at Case Western University as an approach to change, as an antidote to the more conventional one which starts with a problem to be addressed. Case Western came to the view that this 'deficit' approach to change was counter-productive, and it is a methodology we used a lot at Ashridge, and is based on the following propositions:

- In every society, organisation or group, something works well.
- What we focus on becomes our reality, created in the moment.
- The act of asking questions of an individual, organisation or group influences the group in some way.
- People have more confidence in creating the future relationship (the unknown) when they carry forward parts of the past (the known).
- If we carry parts of the past forward, they should be what is best about the past.

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CHAPTER 8
ACTION INQUIRY & ACTION LEARNING

Sub-Chapters

- CHAPTER 8-1 - Inquiry As The Core Skill Of Fostering Collaboration
- CHAPTER 8-2 - Action Inquiry As An Approach To Organisational Transformation
- CHAPTER 8-3 - The Methodology Of Action Learning
- CHAPTER 8-4 - Facilitator Guide To Action Learning

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Chapter 8-1
Inquiry As The Core Skill Of Fostering Collaboration
Balancing advocacy with inquiry

Taking your experience seriously

- Organisations are inherently social in nature
- There are no absolute truths
- The tendency towards abstraction is a way of avoiding responsibility
- Learning and understanding how things **really** are requires you to pay attention to your **experience**
- Learning together is the basis of effective change
- Learning together requires you to express your experience honestly

The Meaning of the Gesture is in the Response

- The habit of advocacy (communicating **my** views, thoughts, suggestions, instructions)
- Inquiry is the means by which leaders discover how colleagues and subordinates **respond** to their gesture
- It requires asking questions, listening and incorporating (allowing ourselves to be influenced by the other)
- The practice of collaborative inquiry is the cornerstone of innovation

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Chapter 8-2
Action Inquiry As An Approach To Organisational Transformation

A Comprehensive Approach To Organisational Transformation, Change and Development.

Professor Bill Critchley & Dr Kathleen King

Abstract

The financial crisis and the economic downturn have raised widespread concern about business practices and the state of our corporate world. Moreover, organisations are increasingly expected to account for their impact on their social and natural environment. Management research has been criticised for a pseudo-scientific approach that remains detached from practice, with researchers being more interested in publishing in peer reviewed journals, than with the practical relevance of their research (Currie, Knights & Starkey 2010, Ferlie, McGivern & De Moraes 2010).

In our workshop we start from the advocacy that participatory action inquiry, with its emphasis on reflexivity, stakeholder engagement and attention to different ways of knowing, is particularly suited to contemporary challenges in organisational change and development. True to action inquiry principles we intend to engage with workshop participants in a collaborative exploration of the promises and challenges of action inquiry for future organisational research, practice and learning.

Towards a radical change in organisational practices

Day and Power (Day, Power 2008), argue that in order to thrive in a world that is heading for increasing uncertainty, complexity and ambiguity, organisational leaders and change agents, will have to adopt a way of thinking that is fundamentally different from our traditional analytical approach.

They call this *ecological thinking.* Where analytical thinking values historical data and analysis, assumes cause and effect relationships, reduces phenomena down to individual issues and seeks certainty and stability, ecological thinking looks for patterns and interdependencies, assumes complex, non-linear relationships, values curiosity, insight and intuition and works creatively with paradox, uncertainty and contradiction. It requires us to pay attention to the repercussions of organisational strategies on the long term health of the wider ecosystem.

This shift in thinking and working, referred to by Day and Power, is related to the distinction Ann Cunliffe (Cunliffe 2009) makes between reflective and reflexive practice. Reflective practice, she argues, is based on the positivist assumption that we can make logical, objective and accurate statements about the world, and that we can take a rational, logical and analytical approach to organisational issues, in line with what Day and Power call analytical thinking. *Reflexive* practice on the other hand, grounded in a social constructionist paradigm, challenges the assumption that there is one, rational, objective view of the world. Reflexive practitioners, according to Cunliffe, question their ways of being, acting and relating. She calls this 'self-reflexivity' and considers it the basis for ethical and responsible practice.
Another aspect of reflexivity, critical reflexivity, involves "looking for paradoxes and contradictions, (…), and recognizing multiple perspectives (…). Critically reflexive managers (…) question 'normal' taken-for-granted strategies, policies and programmes and organizational practices as a basis for understanding how and why these practices might impact people and exclude them from active participation in organisational life" (Cunliffe 2009, p48).

In times of high anxiety, it is particularly tempting to pursue an illusion of control through extensive planning, through taking an analytical approach to solving complex and messy problems, and to rely heavily on external experts who offer blueprint solutions; behaviours that Brown and Starkey (Brown, Starkey 2000) have called "defensive routines". Wadsworth (Wadsworth 2008) suggests that we will continue to encounter the paradox of people around the world wanting to be maximally self-organising when they are in a healthy state, and in a vulnerable state wanting to be organised and succumbing to being organised or even coerced.

She argues that action research[1] and its many variants is increasing in popularity amongst practitioners and social scientists alike and suggests that current conditions of constant and rapid change, widely differing perspectives, conflict and increasing inequality, provide compelling reasons for this proliferation.

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Action Inquiry: a method for developing sustainable organisations?

In our view, creating an organisational context in which reflexive practices and ecological thinking can flourish, will require a profound change in the way we approach organisational learning, research, policy making and practice. In the fragmentation brought about by a rationalist tradition, management research and learning have become detached from management practice, with serious consequences for organisations and their immediate and wider context alike. Social science research that takes place at too great a distance from the action or practice under examination, risks getting it wrong or being overly presumptive.
Conversely, frenetically busy planning and acting erodes the time and energy to stop and think about what is done and why, or to inquire more deeply into people's experiences before hurtling onto the next thing (Wadsworth 2008).

Engaging in Action Inquiry effectively reconnects learning and practice with research. Rather than merely bringing researchers and managers closer together – in itself a worthwhile aspiration (Pasmore et al. 2008) - it enables individuals, groups, communities and organisations to develop their own reflexive capacity and become less 'unthinking doers', whilst assisting researchers in embedding their research in the real works of actors and action, in effecting becoming more like thoughtful, well-rounded actors (Wadsworth 2008).

[1] We use the term Action Inquiry (Torbert 1991) rather than Action Research – Wadworth's term of choice, to indicate the emphasis on the researcher's role (Ladkin 2004) and *reflexive* disciplines. For some practitioners and researchers the term Action Research evokes a more positivist reflective stance.

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So what does the practice of Action Inquiry entail? Bill Torbert (Torbert 1991, p220) describes it as “research conducted in everyday life (…)” rather than only within “sanitized experimental environments, survey designs, or reflective, clinical, critical settings”. He distinguishes three kinds of inquiry practices:

- First person inquiry, which is about developing self-awareness and presence of mind and which Fisher and Torbert (Fisher, Torbert 1995) call ‘studying oneself in the midst of action’. Reason and Bradbury (Reason, Bradbury 2001) think of it as the researcher’s ability “to foster an inquiring approach to his or her own life, to act with awareness and to choose carefully and assess effects in the outside world while acting”. In other words, first person inquiry practices develop a person’s reflexive muscle, in the service of *personal integrity* and effectiveness. Without a first person aspect, Action Inquiry can become limited by the lack integrity or blind spots of the individual actors (McGuire, Palus & Torbert 2008).

  First person inquiry practice is deeply challenging. (Torbert 2004) suggests that our intimate relationships, our organisations and social science itself are not familiar or comfortable with being inquired into. Opening up one’s organisational conduct to rigorous inquiry is a not very common practice, generally associated with situations of misconduct and trouble. The proliferation of literature following the collapse of corporate giants such as Enron and Lehman Brothers, describes vividly the lack of accountability from leaders to themselves, their staff and their stakeholders, and the extent to which corporate behaviour has become immune to scrutiny. Which leads us to the practice of second person inquiry.

- Second person inquiry can be described as our “ability to inquire face-to-face with others into issues of mutual concern” (Reason, Bradbury 2001). Unlike some other social science research practices, second person inquiry is research *with*, rather than *on* others. In this process, researcher and participants (not subjects in the traditional sense) remain interested in how power is played out in relationships, with the aim of generating a critical and constructive *mutuality*. Second person inquiry seeks to develop the collective abilities of inquiry partners as reflective practitioners. Thus it reduces power differences which get in the way of honest and open communication and generates more complex, nuanced, and mutually shared understanding from which to act effectively.

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Second person inquiry seeks to foster mutuality. According to Torbert (Torbert 2004), inquiring openly in the power play between agents, developing collaborative (dialogic) ways of conversing together, and jointly finding out and agreeing the value of what we are creating together, are essential ingredients of mutuality. Espoused by many organisational development consultants, mutuality is a challenging concept to most managers and researchers. To open one's conduct to profound scrutiny requires a different mindset and behaviour from merely submitting one's behaviour to a corporate audit or from complying with rules and procedures.

- 'Third Person' research concerns extending questions about power and mutuality in and beyond the human context, exploring power dynamics between people, organisations and their social, cultural and natural context. Torbert (Torbert 2004) sees third person inquiry as being in the service of '*sustainability*': "Without a strong 3rd-person research aspect, inquiry becomes divorced from its extended effects in space and time". It is particularly the long-term impact on society and on our natural habitat that has been deeply and catastrophically neglected in our organisational practices. To make daily attention to the consequences of our actions, in the small, medium and long term; on our immediate, wider and global context, is a discipline long overdue.

Paying attention to what counts as 'data'

Belenky and colleagues (Belenky et al. 1997) point out that our basic assumptions about the nature of knowledge, truth and evidence profoundly affect the nature of our interaction with the world. Human sciences, in search of objectivity, have carefully attended to excluding tacit knowing, or knowing grounded in intuition, emotions or the body for being too subjective. Abstract, conceptual, intellectual knowledge still reigns supreme, also in organisations. Artful, embodied, intuitive knowing is relegated to the private sphere and considered irrelevant at best, and inappropriate or suspect at worst.

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Action Inquiry, on the contrary, typically draws on diverse forms of knowing, not just empirical and conceptual, but also experiential, presentational and aesthetic, relational and practical (Marshall, Reason 2008). It honours intuition and tacit knowing, what Shotter (Shotter 1993) has called “knowing of the third kind”, the kind of knowing that arises as we engage with others in the process of living and invites practitioners to seek synchronicity between different modes of knowing across territories (Reason, Torbert 2001). It requires us to extend our epistemology “by paying rigorous aesthetic and embodied attention to the ways we receive and respond to the world through our experience, movement, stories, image making, musicality, practice, play and performance (…) as well as through our ideas and theories” (Heron 1992).

Seeley (Seeley 2011) suggests that cultivating greater equity between our different ways of knowing requires a systematic attention to what gets noticed and valued, what gets taken seriously, by whom. Quoting Charlton, she argues that it is through aesthetic engagement that we can recover our lost sense of our interconnectedness with the rest of life on the planet. She argues that “If we, our organisations and the other-than-human (upon which we depend) world are to flourish then we must carry the responsibility to become more wholly human, (…) to actually *live* and *be* in ways which invite the artful *and* the intellectual, the embodied *and* the theoretical, the hearty *and* the heady with equal thoroughness, seriousness and enthusiasm.

William Carlos Williams, in Asphodel, That Greeny Flower, says it beautifully

It is difficult
to get the news from poems
yet men die miserably every day
for lack
of what is found there

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Conclusion

The effects of our detached, fragmented, analytical approach to organising are staring us in the face. The financial crisis of the first decade of the new millennium has reverberated across the globe. The pending ecological crisis is increasingly hard to ignore, even for the most die-hard sceptics. International business and the Academy have colluded to a greater or lesser extent in a short sighted, fragmented and fragmenting approach to their respective practices. We are in desperate need of a radical reflexive turn if we are to avert further and irreparable damage to our very habitat and prepare for the increasing complexity, uncertainty and ambiguity that lie ahead. Action Inquiry, with its rigorous discipline, integrating inquiry, learning and practice, and drawing on an extended epistemology, can offer a valuable alternative to our limiting, analytical heritage.

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Chapter 8-3
The Methodology Of Action Learning

Origins

Action learning was pioneered and developed as a method by Reg Revans, who after an initial career as an academic at Cambridge and the University of Manchester, became Director of Education at the National Coal Board in 1945.
He worked with E.F. Schumacher (Small is Beautiful) and Eric Trist (a pioneer of the profession of Organisation Development) among other luminaries of the time, and became convinced that the key to improving managerial performance lay not with experts but with practitioners themselves.

This was an unpopular view with Business Schools which were in the early stages of their development, but is a view that is supported by much current research.

Brief Overview

Much programmed development activity is designed on the assumption that managers need to 'acquire; new knowledge and skills. Two well-known problems associated with this 'classroom' based model are that it locates responsibility for 'teaching' with the tutor, and frequently the new knowledge and skills fail to transfer into the workplace.

Research suggests that managers learn most from experience and 'mentors'. Action research places responsibility for learning on the participant, and requires that they inquire into a topic that currently exercises them. The action learning 'set' provides a structured opportunity to reflect on their experience with colleagues. The role of the tutor is to design and facilitate this learning process and offer theories or frameworks that may help them make sense of their experience.

The participant commits to experiment back in the workplace, and the cycle is repeated.

Reg Revans wrote "There is no learning without action and no (sober and deliberate) action without learning".

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Professor Bill Critchley - June 14th 2012

Chapter 8-4
Facilitator Guide To Action Learning

OVERALL PURPOSE

The overall purpose of Action Learning is to enable the members of a group or 'set' as it is formally known, to **learn.** Many participants are used to being taught, which they learned from many years at school, but they are not so familiar with adult learning. A main part of the facilitator's own development is to 'learn how to learn' and create these conditions in the learning group.

The adult learning cycle

Action Learning is primarily designed for leaders and managers to learn by reflecting rigorously on their **experience,** supported and challenged by their peers.

It requires managers to develop a habit of **reflecting** on their experience, out of which emerges some **'hypotheses'**. A hypothesis is a tentative idea about 'what might be going on' in the particular situation. Based on this hypothesis, and with the help of the group, he/she comes up with some different options or experiments. If an experiment leads to a more desirable outcome, she/he integrates the new behaviour into his/her practice as a manager. This is how adult learning works in principle, but of course it is not quite as neat and tidy in practice; learning for managers is hard because it involves constantly challenging oneself and questioning what one is doing, but it is the only way to develop.

It is a form of 'just in time' learning, where the material is a manager's everyday experience and challenges; the things they need to learn how to do, now and next. It is not designed, like much conventional learning, for knowledge or skill acquisition, but for deep reflection on assumptions, habits of thought, patterns of behaviour, interpersonal skills and impact. It tends to be most useful for managers who have been on all the courses, but now have to deal with the unpredictable and messy realities of everyday organisational life.

SOME PRACTICALITIES AND LOGISTICS

- An Action Learning ‘set’ size is ideally composed of five or six people
- The set comprises sufficient, but not extreme diversity
- It is inadvisable to have people in reporting, or other close relationships in the same set
- The set meets six to eight times at six to eight weekly intervals
- The facilitator role is crucial in the early stages to foster the Action Learning discipline of ‘client’ focus and group work in support of the ‘client’s’ learning
- There are two main formats; one has an individual learning focus where each member brings a personal issue or problem; this can be either ‘in-company’ or multi company, which of course increases diversity, but can reduce perceptions of relevance of one individual’s issue for other members. The other is a group project focus where all participants are members of a project team, where learning is both team and individual. This is likely, for obvious reasons, to be in-company.
- In-company programmes need to think through how to treat confidentiality, and emergent organisational issues
- Where the set is in-company, the ‘culture’ of the organisation is likely to be manifested. This presents a great learning opportunity but it can also reduce the creativity of the set if it is allowed to operate at an unconscious level.

FOSTERING CONDITIONS for learning

For Action Learning to be successful, a number of conditions need to be created. The facilitator can foster the learning process by taking these conditions to heart and by checking with the Action Learning team members if all conditions have been met. The six conditions discussed below form the acronym FOSTER, which makes them easy to remember and therefore easy to check regularly with the participants.

1. Freedom

Action Learning has been evolved over a number of years to create a form and an environment in which leaders/managers learn from each other rather than from experts in classrooms. They come to learn because they want to, and because they recognise that leading is a ‘practice’ that requires continuous learning. They also understand that leading emerges out of specific contexts; that there is no formula or set of competencies that fit all situations. Leading can also be lonely and leaders benefit from the support of colleagues who are reasonably detached from each other’s context.

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It is imperative that leaders participate voluntarily in Action Learning. They should agree among themselves what kind of issues get dealt with and to what extent they become involved with their colleagues' issues. The facilitator takes 'freedom' to heart by checking the commitment of participants, and by making sure that participants will not abuse their position or dominate the session, limiting the freedom of others.

2. Openness

Action Learning is an open invitation to reflect and learn. An openness to share issues and to engage in the issues of colleagues is a minimum requirement for action learning. This initial openness to the process should be sustained in the exploration of issues, the questioning and the giving and receiving of feedback and suggestions.

3. Safety

It is important that participants experience the atmosphere and the conversation as sufficiently safe. Submitting an issue to the scrutiny of one's colleagues makes one vulnerable. Participants increase the level of safety by refraining from normative, denigrating or judgmental remarks. Action Learning aims to help participants to take responsibility for their learning development as leaders.

The composition of an Action Learning group is important in a number of ways; participants tend to feel safer with people of similar level and experience; they do not feel safe 'exposing' themselves to people they see as either junior or senior to themselves. Having people in a line management relationship, particularly a boss-subordinate one is usually a bad idea.

4. Trust

During Action Learning, participants share issues they struggle with in the workplace. This always involves personal factors, such as professional background, knowledge and expertise, skills and approaches, attitudes and values. Participants must be able to trust that they can share issues without negative consequences for their job.

The facilitator takes 'trust' to heart by establishing an appropriate confidentiality agreement. This usually entails all participants agreeing that what has been discussed in the group will not be shared with others outside the group; that while an individual may discuss their own leaning with colleagues, no reference to others will be made.

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5. Expectations

Especially when a new Action Learning group is formed, it is useful to take some time to share mutual expectations. It is important that participants are aware what each person hopes to get out of the meetings, and what they expect of the facilitator. Meeting those expectations is important. Key expectations include how participants expect to benefit from a session, how they expect the group to work, commitments to attend and be fully available, and commitments to action following the meeting.

Other expectations to keep in mind are:

- The number and frequency of the meetings,
- The length of the meetings,
- The location, the room
- (Acceptable) reasons for not turning up,
- The procedure for rescheduling sessions,

6. Relevance of issues

Participants should have some idea of the range of issues they can bring to Action Learning. That range is very broad: organisational, role-related, personal issues – from long-term projects to concrete and difficult situations – can all be appropriate.

However some issues are a lot less suitable:

- Very detailed and complicated ‘puzzles’, as they will usually require the help of experts or close colleagues, and may take a long time and some pre-reading to familiarise other participants with the level of detail required.
- Out-dated problems. What happened several years ago may have been very important to the participant himself; however, if it no longer affects him in the moment it is not appropriate.
- Hypothetical questions or issues raised in order to ‘contribute something’, are a waste of precious Action Learning time.

In short, it is important that issues are truly relevant to the client at this point in his career. The facilitator may question the relevance of an issue, or help the issue holder to find a reformulation to make the issue more relevant for present-day practice.

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THE ROLE OF THE FACILITATOR

Who takes the role of facilitator, and developing others

Any experienced member of an Action Learning group **can** take the role of facilitator. Usually however, Action Learning groups get started with the help of an experienced external facilitator who introduces the process and the ways of working. After two to three sessions, the external facilitator may take a 'back seat' for part of the session to allow another member of the group to facilitate. It is always useful to spend a few minutes at the end of the session to look at the quality of facilitation, and this is particularly the case for new facilitators. The external facilitator will therefore take some time to review the performance of the 'trainee' facilitator, and in doing so coaches the group towards further independence.

Experience suggests that the quality of Action Learning benefits from one person holding responsibility for the process. Participants are usually very busy with the issue that is being dealt with. They tend not to focus on how the conversation is going, whether the issue is really and fully on the table, how time is being used and whether the structure of the meeting is helpful, although they are vital for the quality of Action Learning.

Here the facilitator can offer real added value: whilst the Action Learning group is dealing with the content of the topic, issue or problem, the facilitator pays attention to **the process**, what the atmosphere of the session is like, and what kind of 'group dynamics' may be emerging. It is hard to pay attention to content and process at the same time. You can train yourself to regularly shift from a content to a process focus.

The Practice of Facilitation

1. Preparation

- Consider the room and other requirements such as refreshments, a flipchart or whiteboard with pens.
- Go through your notes of any previous session and 'bring to mind' each member of the group and try to recall the themes, issues and what they intended to try back at work.
- In some situations, it may be worthwhile to send a note to participants reminding them to spend some time reflecting on what was important to them from the last meeting, and to think about what they want to bring to the upcoming session.

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2. Getting started

Before the conversation about any issues can begin, it is useful to touch base with some preliminaries:

- Start with a ‘check in’. This is an invitation to say a few words about what is going on in their lives; what preoccupations may need to be ‘parked’ so that they can bring their full attention to the session. Ask for mobile phones to be **switched off** and put away so that they don’t act as permanent distractions; agree the structure of the day, so that they know when they can attend to messages
- How did those who brought issues in the previous session fare? What impact did the Action Learning have on them and on their issues?
- Which issues would the participants like to bring to this session? What kind of ‘urgency’ is attached to those issues?
- How would the group like to work: how many issues, in what order? It is good if everyone has a turn, but not absolutely necessary. It is better to work with a few

This preliminary conversation is a form of ‘contracting’ through which participants ‘bid’ for time to be the ‘client’ of the group while other members act as ‘coaches’ working together to facilitate the client’s learning. This conversation structures the day.

For most participants, a day of action learning has a very different atmosphere from their normal, activity driven days, and for some this is welcome, while others may take a while to wind down and enter into the spirit of reflective listening. To signal this shift, some facilitators like to start with some form of exercise, like a short listening exercise, or a meditation to create this culture. Others like to get straight into it.

Either way, the first piece of work tends to set the tone of the day, so it is useful to start with someone as client who is keen to work, **and** appears to have a reasonable feel for the process. This may not be the extrovert who talks loudest! Often people will say something like “I could go if you want”. The answer to this is to say gently that we are not here to please anybody or to perform for each other, but to work on something that is currently important to us in our work.

Another opening gambit is to say “I am not sure whether I have got anything important, or urgent to work on”. A response to this is to say that the problem does not have to be a ‘big’ issue; it can be as ‘small’ as a difficulty you may be having with one of your team members, but these everyday problems are what all managers have to deal with, and we can all learn from them

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3. Presenting the issue

The Action Learning process starts with the client presenting the issue, by outlining the context, and indicating what kind of responses he/she is seeking, for example she may be looking for affirmation that she is doing the 'right' thing, or she may feel stuck, or she may want to generate options. You can help here by:

- Reflecting back what you are hearing
- Summarising the issue, or inviting the client to give a summary of the problem she wants to work on.

It is important to pay attention to the way the client presents the issue, listening to language, metaphors used, feelings expressed or invoked, energy flows, and implicit assumptions. The way the client presents the issue may tell you something about the nature of the issue, or her relationship with the issue itself or the people involved.

4. Facilitating

There are a number of core skills that need to be practised by the facilitator and modelled for other members:

- Paying attention to the **client's role or part in the problem**; we all like to project the problem outside ourselves without being curious about how we are creating or sustaining it
- Paying full attention and stilling our own agenda (desire to be helpful, to be clever, to offer opinions, to give advice etc)
- Reflecting back and paraphrasing; in busy organisations there tends to be more broadcasting than listening, more advocacy than inquiry. This is a rare opportunity for the client to be really heard.
- Summarising; some people only find out what they really think by speaking and having what they are saying summarised back to them. This helps to focus and structure the issue and create a sense of movement.

These are core facilitating skills and they are listed in the Action Learning guide. One of the facilitator's main tasks is to encourage set members to develop these basic skills as they work with each other; they are, as a matter of fact, core skills for leaders intent on developing others and facilitating change.
Professional facilitators may want to extend and develop their skills through dedicated workshops and development programmes.

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One of the main traps for a facilitator is to do all the work with each client. It is useful to ‘model’ a way of working (as above) but longer term the group becomes effective when all members start to practice these skills and work **together as a group;** it is, to use other language, a form of group coaching.

The facilitator’ main task therefore is to develop and enable the group to take on this shared role. Once this is achieved, he/she can turn his or her attention to the group process, and the continuous, stimulating and rewarding process of becoming a learning group is under way.

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