THE ROLE OF THE CHANGE AGENT

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Introduction

The role of the change agent is itself changing. In this chapter I intend to trace this change, and conclude with my current thinking, based on recent experience of the nature of this role. It is neither an easy nor a comfortable one, but it is intellectually and emotionally challenging. In this work, as I am re-defining it, we sometimes make a real difference, which is extremely satisfying, and sometimes we don't. It is however difficult to know at the time whether we are being useful or not, which is a problem in the face of the prevailing expectation that we evaluate each step in the change process and that we contract for specific outcomes before we have even begun.

I think there are three major shifts taking place in our role, intimately connected with changing perspectives on change itself. The first is from the notion of *intervention* to *participation*. Intervention implies that we intervene as neutral outsiders into an organisation, with an objective to change something from x to y through a series of planned steps. Recent discoveries in quantum physics, that an observer **changed** what he/she observed in the act of observing it, have forced us to re-think our role as objective and impartial observers; rather we **participate** in an organisation, bringing our own beliefs and prejudices and effecting the organisation by our very presence. It is interesting that though this re-think has recently been catalysed by the scientific community, the challenge has been around for some time from thinkers in the fields such as systems theory and ecology (Bateson 1972), but largely gone unheeded.

The second shift is closely related, which is the shift from a *positivist* perspective on social systems, which assumes that they have some intrinsic realities, such as hierarchy, structure, rules, to be 'built' and shaped, to a *relational* view, which assumes that organisations are social constructions which are co-created. The fact that since Taylor we have conceived of organisations as machines has mislead us into the belief that this is what they are. The recent rush to 'delayer', which has

deconstructed the old pyramidal bureaucracies has lead us to the realisation that they are what we make them (at least, to some extent!)

The third and related shift, is from what Gordon Lawrence (1994) suggests is the politics of **salvation**, to the politics of **revelation.** This is politics in the sense of influence. Consultants have traditionally been brought in to solve a problem which the client is unable to solve, or to provide some expertise which the organisation lacks. The expectation is that the consultant leads the organisation 'out of the wilderness' into 'the promised land'. This implies a role for the consultant in which current problems are highlighted, and a better future defined, with the means to achieve it, through a rational planning process that assembles and connects the right parts and the right intelligence. The implication is of active intervention and passive response, also of preconceived solutions, and accompanying methodologies.

It is difficult to let go of the underlying Cartesian assumptions that lead us to this view of organisations as malfunctioning machines that may be restored to regularity through clockwork logic. However, the 'politics of Revelation' allows us to let go of an image of ourselves as crusaders or saviours, and to become participants and designers of opportunities for people to explore the organisation issues for themselves, to make their own meaning and to develop possible solutions. What is there, in our past and our present, which we do not notice, or to which we do not pay attention?

How may we bring in new possibilities, new voices, new mixes and generate information that unsettles, rather than confirms, through dialogue and experimentation? In a world of distributed power, of networks and loose affiliations, influence has to be claimed, not given.

The nature of Objectives in a Change Process

In talking about the role of a consultant in a change process, we are making an assumption that the role is a purposive one. This may appear obvious, but it is not always so. The roles we play in the emerging events in our lives mainly become apparent retrospectively. Harold Macmillan, British Prime Minister from 1957-1963, once famously observed that the problem with politics is that it is frequently overtaken by events, and so it is with organisation life. Organisational outcomes are the result of an evolving encounter between intention and chance, although consultants often speak about 'managing change' in a way that suggests we have much more control over events than we possibly can have. Claims that we can help clients fix on detailed long-term change objectives in a fast-moving and

complex environment are simply no longer sustainable, and the offer of a deterministic, managed (and usually expensive) programme of long-term change is misleading, and probably unethical.

So we have a paradox; on the one hand we know that the future is unpredictable, and so the outcomes of a change programme are equally unpredictable, and yet to initiate change without some sense of purpose or objective is unthinkable. One of our first roles in a change process is to think through this difficult dilemma with our client, recognising that it is as difficult for us as it is for them. I make this last point because it is very easy for us to intimidate and shame our clients by asking them 'good' questions. We ask them "what are your objectives, what are you trying to achieve?", and they stutter for a while and smile apologetically suggesting "you've got us there - we really ought to know that, but we're struggling as you can see". They think they are supposed to know because they are part of the prevailing managerialist paradigm in which managers are supposed to set objectives, allocate resources, monitor, control and evaluate outcomes, and broadly speaking have some answers.

This is fine when operating in conditions which are fairly close to certainty, that is in the short term when it is reasonably easy to see what needs to be done; for example enlarging the customer base, reducing working capital, or improving product line profitability (although not necessarily easy to do). This is what Ralph Stacey refers to as 'ordinary management' (Stacey 1993).

However, in today's complex organisations, other types of issue, which are often paradoxical and outside anyone's previous experience, such as the pressure to 'globalise', the requirement to innovate in response to shortening product life cycles, or the expectation that companies serve the often conflicting interests of multiple stakeholders, require 'extraordinary' management. Our role is to help them think through *their* role, particularly in relation to the 'leadership' of change.

The notion of objectives is inadequate for this purpose; it is both too specific and too simplistic. I think it is more helpful to think in terms of **intention** or **direction**. Intention combines a sense of will with a recognition that intention shapes and is shaped by unfolding outcomes. It implies purpose with flexibility and responsiveness. Direction connotes a sense of purposeful exploration. I like the analogy attributed to Tom Peters, of going, for example, 'broadly west'. The direction is understood but the terrain to be crossed remains to be explored.

I recently worked with a client in the financial services business who believed that the fifteen or so specialist service areas, which he found himself responsible for under a re-organisation, could combine in some way to establish a more powerful presence in the market. He defined his intention as to 'provide an integrated service'. This was met with much groaning and cynicism from the professional managers in each service area. My role was to support him in sustaining his broad intention, while persuading him to explore with his mangers alternative ways of

interpreting it. In the event his managers suggested a new integrated product and marketing initiative which would be supplied and resourced by a number of the professional service areas, while allowing them to simultaneously retain their separate operations.

I think our role at this early stage is sometimes to work with the individual leader, but preferably with the leadership team as a whole, to release them from the notion of defining the 'change objectives', and work with them to articulate their sense of purpose or direction sufficiently to go to the next phase, that is of sharing, testing and developing this with a wider population.

For similar reasons many clients are uneasy about calling in consultants until they have defined the 'terms of reference', and of course purchasing departments and procedures often reinforce this cultural pressure to define desired outcomes and objectives. This forces them into firming up the terms of an assignment or naming 'the problem' far too soon. The *real* problem is that because of the inherent uncertainty and complexity in working with change, managers often do not know what to do, and how to act in such conditions, and this is what they need help with. I will come back to this later in the chapter.

Diagnosis

The Expert Role

Traditionally, consultants' starting point would be to interview large numbers of organisation members, probably using some diagnostic template, to elicit data, which they would then sort, categorise, and develop, inevitably with some interpretation, into a diagnosis. How this was used would depend on the underlying 'model' of consulting in use. 'Expert' consultants would write the diagnosis into a form of report which would be well presented, usually including recommendations for action. Here the role is one of an 'expert', and the required skills are mainly analytical and presentational. The analytic skill is more than the skill of collecting and ordering data, as a consultant needs to have some understanding of how organisations typically work, and hence have some ready hypotheses about how to make sense of the data. Typically they will only interview a small sample of the population so they will need the ability to infer and to intuit as well as to analyse. Good diagnoses will be informed by a systemic perspective, that is an ability to see the whole from the parts. Effective presentations will also have this capacity, to convey a bigger picture than the members of the organisation have so far seen for themselves.

However, this role is less often adopted these days as it assumes the consultant can know more about their business and organisation than the client. The 'expert' approach tends to leave the members of the organisation feeling like passive recipients rather than active participants, at best admiring of the consultants'

insight and ability to get to the issues and put them across, and at worst feeling exploited, in the sense that they see their own insights purloined and re-packaged as if they were the consultants'. The former response usually gives rise to the expectation that the consultants, having diagnosed the problem so skillfully will be equally skilful at fixing it, while the latter tends to evoke cynicism and suspicion of the consultants' motives.

The Facilitator Role

This role derives from an alternative model of change which comes from the school of 'Organisation Development'. This is based on Kurt Lewin's (1952) notion of an organisation as a 'force field', held in a state of equilibrium by opposing forces, respectively for and against change. This conception is easy to relate to if we reflect on our experience of companies where market forces appear to be pushing in a new direction, while the existing operational practices, procedures and culture act as restraints, and managers are lined up variously on one side of the change fence or the other depending on how they perceive change acting on their interests (this is not intended to be a cynical comment. It seems to me unreasonable to expect people to act against their perceived self interest; what *is* reasonable is for people to be willing to reconsider their perception of their interest. For example a Director in a Local Authority does not immediately see a change in role from being a powerful line manager to becoming an Executive Director of the Borough with strategic responsibilities for a portfolio of activities, as attractive. However the perceived loss may give way in the long run to a sense of influence and interest in a broader range of the Borough's affairs).

The logic of the 'OD' model is that equilibrium must first be 'unfrozen' before change can take place, by reducing the 'resistances' to change, and by supporting and 'leveraging' the forces for change. The overall sequence of events is 'unfreeze - change - refreeze. There are some crucial differences in this role from that of the 'expert', particularly in that the OD consultant focuses on the potential of the organisation to 'resist' change, and sees this resistance in terms of 'natural' human resistance to change, which if unattended to, may overturn the logic of the business imperative.

First of all the **diagnosis,** which is usually carried out through a series of individual and group interviews, pays explicit attention to relational processes, the nature of communication, decision making, group dynamics, intergroup dynamics and to the place of feelings in these processes. In fact the very word 'process' is often used to refer to relational processes as opposed to the 'tasks' that the organisation needs to perform. The OD consultant assumes from the outset that the members of the organisation will be primarily responsible for creating and implementing the change agenda. The consultant's job is to build readiness for

change, to open up communication channels and to mobilise the capacity for 'managing change'.

Here the diagnostic data is used to create some initial discomfort with the status quo. It is usually 'fed back' to a group or groups of people, and the very fact that it raises to awareness and makes explicit relational issues and group dynamics is itself unusual, challenging and anxiety provoking. An OD consultant seeks to raise levels of anxiety sufficiently to disturb the equilibrium and create readiness for change, while supporting and encouraging organisation members to become proactive in the service of necessary change. The phases of a consulting process typically cover: gaining entry, agreeing a contract, data collection and diagnosis, feedback, action planning, implementation and evaluation.

OD consultancy is essentially humanistic in nature. The role which derives from it is generally described as a 'facilitative' one in that it seeks to facilitate a process of change rather than prescribe it. It requires an understanding of organisation as an 'open system', which is internally interconnected whereby a change in one part will have effects in other parts, sustaining dynamic equilibrium with its environment (Miller & Rice 1967); of group dynamics, inter-group dynamics (boundary management), and socio-technical interfaces. OD consultants require as a core skill, high level interpersonal skills.

The practice of OD was in its hay day in the late '60's and '70's. It is comparatively rare these days to find assignments labelled as 'OD' assignments, but many of its phases naturally form part of a change consultant's approach, and the role of facilitator has been widely adopted by most change consultants. At its worst it over-emphasised interpersonal and group process, alienated some managers who were not prepared for the extent of personal exposure that it sometimes called for, and created a separation between task and process which was unhelpful. At its best it created a wide sense of involvement in, and responsibility for the change process, and developed greater emotional literacy and interpersonal competence within client organisations.

An emerging View of the Role of the Change Consultant

Both the Expert model of change and the OD model, though apparently very different are informed by a similar assumption about organisations and hence about change, that is that they are equilibrium systems which, for change to take place require to be shifted from one state of equilibrium to another. The expert assumes that the force of logical argument will prevail, while the OD consultant assumes that some manipulation of the social and psychological forces will be required in order to pave the way for change. As Patricia Shaw puts it (1997) "For a long time now, the classical OD focus on diagnosing the equilibrium dynamics of an organisation has seemed to make sense, sustaining current functioning by seeking to align the various subsystems or attempting to unfreeze, move and

refreeze the system at a new equilibrium.....However, underlying this focus there is an unquestioned assumption that a system can be moved from one dynamic equilibrium to another, by the prior intention of the legitimate system. It is assumed that the existing organisational dynamic came into being through some central purpose, however participatively arrived at, and can be changed in the same way."

Many of the current programmatic approaches to change, epitomised by 'Business Process Engineering' derive from these fundamental assumptions about organisation and change.

As I indicated at the beginning of this chapter, there is an emerging view of organisations as complex adaptive systems, which are essentially non-linear in nature, and in a state of permanent flux. Structures are temporary manifestations, which like photographs can at best only convey a sense of the underlying movement and dynamic possibility. From this perspective, change is *inherent* in the system, rather than a transition state between two equilibrium states, which fundamentally challenges the notion of 'managed' change, and hence the consultant's role as a proponent of the need to manage change.

It also challenges the conventional view that organisations are controllable, from the top or centre, through structures, procedures, prescribed sets of values, and the like, and likewise susceptible to future planning through the techniques of environmental scanning, forecasting, mission creation, strategic planning etc. Ralph Stacey (1996) suggests instead that social systems can be thought of as complex adaptive systems, in which individuals and groups interact in co-evolving sense-making and action contexts, in ways which are inherently unpredictable. He further suggests that organisations are formally understood in terms of an ordered network consisting of its hierarchical structure of roles and responsibilities, its official policies and espoused ideology which he refers to as the 'legitimate system', and informally known through what he refers to as the 'shadow system', that is all those informal, self-organising networks and connections which by-pass, subvert or otherwise maintain the formal processes and procedures.

Intuitively we can understand this idea of a formal or legitimate part of an organisation setting all the policies, rules, performance standards etc. and an informal system in which people politic, pursue their own ends, find creative solutions, often despite the formal procedures, or ways of getting things done which short cut or by-pass the rule book. We also know form our experience that what goes on in these informal networks is both collaborative and competitive, never one or the other - they are essentially messy, somewhat chaotic processes, which are formally discouraged and their existence, at least in public is frequently denied.

What is intriguing is the proposition that they are the source in organisations of novelty, and that the possibility of innovation and evolution arises in the paradox

and tension of operating in both the formal and shadow systems. Richard Pascale's (1990) very title "Managing on the Edge" captures this idea, as do other writers, Morgan (1986) and Wheatley (1992).

I will summarise with a short definition of complex systems for the sake of completeness. For those who want to pursue this perspective, the references, particularly Stacey suggest some possible reading; otherwise the rest of this chapter elaborates on experience and ideas which are in wide circulation, which, while broadly informed by ideas about the nature of complexity , do not require a detailed understanding of the theory in order for them to be entirely accessible.

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 non-linear 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.

There are two characteristics of complex organisations which are crucial for consultants who are interested in working seriously and effectively with organisational change, and they are *self- organisation* and *emergence*. I will address the implications of these for the role of the change consultant in the next section.

Self-Organisation and Emergence

Before I understood a little about complexity theory, I knew from my experience of 'facilitating' management groups, that in certain conditions, if I left the group with sufficient space, they would organise themselves perfectly well to do whatever it was that needed to be done, often in a lively and creative way, usually redefining the task I had suggested to them. Conversely I also knew that if I 'managed' or controlled the group too much, it would become comparatively quiet, and I would feel that I had to energise it, to drive it forward, usually ending up with the outcome I wanted but with the group in a mood of either passive compliance or latent hostility. When the group 'self-organised itself an outcome 'emerged'. The difficulty for me was that it was not what I expected, while the group members felt enlivened by the process, and had a high degree of ownership

of the outcome. Intuitively I knew that what had emerged was more innovative and relevant than what I had intended, even though we might be faced with some difficulties in having it accepted by other managers not present at the meeting.

I was learning to be less controlling in my consulting in order to allow the relevant issues to emerge and to be worked with. I noticed that when I allowed this self-organising process to develop, in time I could participate in the dialogue, contributing my experience and external perspective without over influencing the process, without resuming control. Now, a difficult questions presents itself; how do I create the conditions in which this self-organising can occur?

Well in principle I cannot be sure of manipulating the process to ensure any outcome; I do not have that kind of control, which is a difficult lesson for us all to learn. However there are some conditions in which it is more likely to occur, and I can influence these dependent on the context. Let me take two contexts in which I often find myself operating most frequently.

Facilitating Events

At various points in a change process, off-line events are convened. The type of event ranges from forming a change steering group, taking a team away to address some particular issues, which may include how it works together, to having a large group event. In these cases we have two broad roles, one being to design the event, and the other to facilitate it. The design provides some sense of purpose and structure, but should be as minimalist as possible to provide the necessary space mentioned above.

A Training Institute with a dispersed, largely self-employed membership felt the need to get together, and my first job was to help them articulate what turned out to be four purposes: connecting with each other; reviewing the relationships between different departments; information giving from the management team, and a review of the trends in the profession of which the Institute was a part. I started by providing one hour in which people could connect with each other by forming themselves into groups of four or five and sharing their current concerns, interests, saying how connected or disconnected they felt from the organisation and what support they needed. I then largely kept out of the way, except to sense how much energy they had for this, and how much time they needed. After about forty five minutes I judged they were ready to move on, and asked them to move into their departmental groups. I gave them some carefully prepared questions to address, and said that people could change groups if they felt affiliated to more than one department. This piece of work generated a lot of liveliness and interest, and I had to be firm in bringing it to a halt.

My purpose in giving this example is to demonstrate the significance of the design role, and the importance of firmly and sensitively negotiating the ‘boundaries’ throughout the event. This requires being permanently tuned in without becoming

intrusive; it is likely that there will be a microcosm of the whole in many situations, which will enable the consultant to get some sense of the whole through many fragments of dialogue. This view, albeit partial of the whole in flux, enables him/her to modify the design in response to the emergent process. This is extremely demanding and, consultants are well advised to work in pairs or more.

I also find that it is usually necessary to state clearly the purpose of each session and give a good set of briefing questions. This provides some sense of purpose and stability within which self-organising can take place. I find that I do very little facilitating in the traditional sense, which can feel quite uncomfortable if we are at all concerned with being *seen* to add value.

On another occasion, with a colleague Patricia Shaw, I was working with a newly formed Division of a multi-national, which was geographically distributed, on a conference design where a small steering group had been unable to agree on an agenda in advance of the meeting. Given the diversity of the Division, this merely reflected the reality that six people could not possibly know in advance what 50 people, of different nationalities, dispersed across different countries, working in different functions would want to talk about - such is the nature of complexity. Of one thing they felt fairly certain, that this group **did** need to get together. They recalled that at most conferences the formal sessions, dominated by slide-based presentations in darkened rooms were pretty turgid and of little use, the real value always coming in the informal exchanges and the ensuing networking. How then to create two days of informal exchanges and networking became the task of this group.

We achieved this by meeting for lunch, hiring a stimulating speaker, and then leaving people at their lunch tables (in groups of six or seven) to decide what they wanted to talk about over the next two days. We rigged up a networking board, and asked people to post the issues they wanted to talk about, show who was involved in the discussion and where in the building it was taking place. As the discussions evolved new issues would emerge around new configurations of people, and all we asked was that they kept the networking board up to date so that people could see what was going on and make informed choices about what to join and what to leave. We pointed out that all the decision-makers were in the room and that therefore any problem or issue which arose could be progressed.

I could say much more about this example, and there are similar experiments going on elsewhere under headings such as ‘future search’ or ‘open space’ conferences. What I am seeking to show is how we attempted to enable the processes of self-organisation and emergence by providing the minimum of structure. Our temptation in our role as ‘consultant’ (I would we could find a better word) is to over-control in the interests of minimising our own anxiety, and maximising our visibility, by imposing too much structure too early.

In my experience, excessive attempts to manage or control organisations reduces their innovative capacity, but we have been brought up to believe in the myth of managerial control. Hence, when the conditions for self-organisation occur, this gives rise to both excitement and anxiety. Our role is to name and normalise these two natural responses to the ambiguity of freedom and responsibility, and hold a sense of the possibilities in the emerging situation. This requires some understanding of the psychodynamic processes which occur in organisational life which allow us to recognise what is going on.

Joining Meetings

As part of most assignments, I negotiate to join meetings which are already established. For instance at a London Borough, my colleague Patricia Shaw and I negotiated to join five change task forces which had been set up to address such issues as 'Devolution', Communication, etc. Here we had no prior role in designing the meeting; we joined these groups as they worked on their immediate business. Our work as we saw it was to provoke the groups to examine and question the assumptions they were working with, the structures of meanings they were creating in the organisation by their actions, and to help them modify or re-frame their role and what they were working on as their view of the context changed. This is hard and frustrating work, but it is where our impact is at its most realistic. The effect of set-piece events is much exaggerated, and I think we rely too much on them. Change is more a consequence of a myriad of low-profile actions and events rather than a few high-profile ones. Here I think our role is to **participate** rather than facilitate, with a view to disturb, to challenge and to support people in the mess and chaos of change.

Meta Change Processes

I fine it easier to think of my role in terms of some meta change processes which are neither linear nor sequential, but do give some sense of purpose to my role at various stages in an assignment. These are: **enquiry, experimentation** and **integration,** all consistent with the politics of revelation.

The early stages of an assignment are characterised by enquiry. The idea of enquiry seems to be less instrumental than the notion of diagnosis, and more congruent with the conception of organisations as complex systems. Furthermore I believe in conducting participative or collaborative enquires as advocated by Reason and Heron (1995), which engage the members of an organisation in jointly uncovering the issues to be addressed. As I suggested at the beginning of this chapter the enquiry will probably be conducted within a broad framework of intention, which will inevitably be revised in the light of the enquiry.

What emerges from the enquiry, which is itself a form of experiment, will be a focus on change priorities, and various configurations of people will form round these issues for the purpose of taking action. Too often these groups collapse into task forces which make recommendations, rather than change initiatives which experiment and risk, and it is a key part of our role to encourage and support people to experiment and take risks. These change initiatives are also engaged in an enquiry process but the emphasis is on **action** rather than discovery.

Integration is a phase of temporary stability, a pause during which people reflect on what they have done and what they have leant, when some of the experiments are consolidated into the formal processes of the organisation, and people take some satisfaction from what they have achieved and also rest for awhile. The concluding example is a kind of integration of this chapter.

A case study

I was working with some colleagues from Ashridge Consulting, for a reasonably large engineering company, which had grown by a series of acquisitions and needed to respond to some of its large 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 hold an enquiry, through dialogue, into 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 solving problems incrementally, but 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.

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 concerned that the emphasis on releasing innovative potential, might diminish the importance of incremental improvement in the engineering, project-based culture. He therefore 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.

Throughout this assignment, my role was to work with the Board to support them in the leadership of the change process, and to help them review their role both as individuals and as a team.

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 'whole' organisation. Within some broad parameters we invited them to enquire into the issues of becoming global, as opposed to giving them a diagnosis and asking them to work on the problems **we** had identified, and we enabled 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 in the light of unfolding circumstances (emergence).

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.

Choice and Influence in our Role

As you read this chapter, the sense you make of it will be profoundly influenced by your own deep rooted assumptions and habits of thought. In this concluding section I would like to draw our attention to the way in which our own assumptions influence our role, and how we can interpose, perhaps unthinkingly, a particular 'problem' framework.

If for example we tend to see organisations in terms of politics and power, using this as our 'lens' we may choose to define the problem as the quality of leadership, believing that ultimately leadership have the power to bring about change, or we might focus on creating greater equality of opportunity, believing that over concentration of power is the 'problem'.

If our lens is a 'communication' lens, we might focus on programmes of communication to 'get the change message across'. Morgan's (1986) work on the 'images' or 'metaphors' which inform our way of seeing organisations, expands on the number of ways in which we conceive of organisations and their implications for how we might approach change. Our metaphors, unexamined, lead us to focus on particular phenomena while ignoring others, and we are inclined to exaggerate their explanatory power. They also tend to structure the way in which we see relationships.

We need to be aware of our own preferred metaphors and careful in our use of them, because not only can we become their prisoners, but we can use them to tyrannise others. It is I believe an essential part of our ethical stance as consultants that we hold our theories lightly, recognising their partiality, their contingency and their temporality.

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