REFRAMING HOW WE THINK ABOUT ORGANIZATIONS, CHANGE & LEADERSHIP

Organisations as machines

"A network or an institution does not function automatically because of some inner dynamic or system requirements; it functions because people at different points do something, and what they do is a result of how they define the situation in which they are called to act." (Blumer, 1986, p. 19)

In my experience most managers think about, describe and attempt to manage their organisations as either machines or systems. In my view, a chain of assumptions derived from scientific and engineering thinking leads to a causal *if this – then that* view:

1. An organisation is a *whole* made up of various parts (e.g. strategy, processes, systems, infrastructure, people) 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, if sometimes difficult.

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

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

4. 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.

The implications of this mechanical view of organisations for how change happens in them are obvious:

- Cause and effect can be pre-determined
- Pain and 'burning platforms' trigger action and drive change
- Change can be planned with milestones and deliverables
- Managers have the primary role in making things/change happen
- Change can be managed and driven
- Change happens through formal processes
- Change will be resisted and resistance must be overcome

Subsequently, the attention of managers is predominantly focused on…

- Formal structures
- Planning
- Measurement and control
- Performance management
- The individual as accountable and as the main decision maker and actor

For me, these machine and system views can be very beneficial if used as *as if* metaphors to highlight certain aspects of the functioning of an organisation. However, they become problematic if we understand them not as ways of seeing but take them literally and approach the management of organisations as one would approach the tuning of a race car engine or the optimisation of a computer system – in a linear way.

Organizations as processes of interaction

In contrast to the above theory about organisations based on mechanistic or systems thinking, the theory of complex responsive processes of relating defines "them" like this:

Organisations are processes of on-going, self-organising patterning of communicative

interaction of people in their local situation in the present moment. This theory has been developed by Ralph Stacey and several of his colleagues at the Complexity and Management Centre at the University of Hertfordshire in the U.K. (Stacey, Griffin and Shaw, 2002; Stacey, 2003; Stacey, 2005; Fonseca, 2001; Streatfield, 2001; Shaw, 2002; Griffin, 2002; Griffin and Stacey, 2005). Stacey and his colleagues have drawn from the theory of philosopher George Herbert Mead about the emergence of mind and self out of a process of communication through significant symbols (1967) and the understanding of sociologist Norbert Elias of the individual and society as an interrelated process rather than as static, isolated objects (1991). They combined these views with findings of the complexity sciences in particular about the paradoxical patterning of interactions, self-organisation and emergence, the paradox of predictability and unpredictability, and the importance of diversity for the emergence of novelty and creativity. The resulting theory represents a radical refocusing from a spatial to a temporal perspective in thinking about organisations.

Stacey and Griffin argue that using a mechanistic parts-whole approach is appropriate and successful in science and engineering but leads, when applied to organisations, to the "covering over of complexity and uncertainty we actually experience in our ordinary everyday experience of life in organizations" (2005, p. 4). The complex responsive process perspective aims to overcome what it perceives as problematic reductionism by viewing organisations as on-going iterative processes of nonlinear interactions between people in the present. This represents a refocusing from a spatial perspective of understanding the interactions of individuals creating a *higher level* whole or system (e.g. the team, the organisation) towards a temporal perspective in which people's continuous process of interacting with each other in the present simply produces more interactions.

Let me now look at the complex responsive process theory in some more detail. As might have become clear already, Stacey and his colleagues think very differently about organisations. For me, the main points of their *thinking differently* are as follows:

1. *We are all participants*

   An organisation is not a fixed entity or thing but a constant, self-referencing process of gestures and responses between people. You tell me to do something, and I respond in some way. The process of relating, thus, consists of a gesture *(Can you help me, please?)* and a response *(No, I am busy.)* which in turn leads to a response *(But you said you would be there for me.)* that in turn serves as a gesture to the first person to respond to in some way *(Why can't you ever do anything without help?).* People in organisations (and, of course, in society at large) achieve very complex tasks by coordination and cooperation that is possible due to our ability to communicate with each other through language and other symbols (e.g. bodily gestures, writing). Thus, for Stacey and his colleagues an organisation is not a purposeful *entity that enables* this joint action, but the joint action itself *is* the organisation (Stacey, Griffin and Shaw 2002, p. 187).

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

2. *We interact locally in the present moment*

   All of our gestures and responses are personal, embodied experiences that we make in the present moment. We can only experience our relating to each other while we are doing it, we cannot experience it before or after. For Stacey, the present moment, or what he refers to as the *living present,* is not a simple, featureless point in the flow of

time, but an iterative temporal *quantum movement* (my words, not his). He sees our forming of expectations about the future in the present moment as formed by the past and at the same time forming the past that is forming the future in the present moment. In his own, very elegant words, "the living present is simultaneously the reconstruction of past relating and the anticipation of future relating in the present moment of interaction" (Stacey 2003, p. 146). This implies that we can explain our interactions with each other from within the interactions themselves without having to escape to another, imagined *level* of explanation such as *my family, our team, our culture* or *the company.*

3. *Behavioural patterns emerge without a master plan*

   You can neither completely predict nor determine how I respond to your gesture. You can never tell me the meaning I make out of what you do because it only emerges from my response to it. All you and I can ever do is make intentional gestures to each other in the *here and now. Here* in this context refers to each person's local situation from which he or she relates at any moment (the *now*) to another person who in turn responds from their local situation. 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. In complex responsive process theory this phenomenon is called *paradoxical,* referring to a self-contradictory statement about a situation containing conflicting states (e.g. knowing and not knowing at the same time) that cannot be eliminated or resolved, only held in awareness.

One important implication of the paradoxical nature of organisational life is that managers are seen as being *in control* and at the same time *not in control*. From this perspective, managers act on the expectation of an outcome, at the same time knowing that this specific outcome is very unlikely to materialise, requiring them to be ready for whatever the outcome will be. The Tennis metaphor is probably trite in this context, but I still think it illustrates this point rather well. As every tennis player will know, when you serve with the expectation that your ball will land in the opponents left hand service corner, you can never be totally sure that it actually does, requiring you to be ready for wherever your service will actually land and subsequently for whatever your opponent will do as a consequence. This simultaneous knowing and not knowing of what is happening now and might happen in the future can easily create anxiety, particularly in managers and consultants who perceive themselves as being *in charge* and responsible for delivering specific, pre-determined outcomes.

4. *Our talking is powerful action*

Conversational relating in organisations organises itself by narrative themes that appear in a multitude of different forms (e.g. rituals, rumours, discussions, presentations, visions). 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 not talk about in organisations and who is included in and excluded from these conversations is of paramount importance to organisational change. Power and intention, for example, are themes that emerge out of our conversational relating. No one simply *has* power or intention; both emerge in the process of our relating. Some of the themes that organise people's conversations in organisations are seen as *legitimate* themes (e.g. the company vision) that are talked about openly, others are seen as *shadow* themes (e.g. why the CEO is useless and should be replaced immediately) that are only talked about in confidence between people that trust each other.

However, conversing and relating does not exclusively happen *publicly* between people, it also happens silently. Stacey draws on Mead when describing these private conversations that *are* the individual mind as being the equivalent to the conversations between people. The individual mind from the perspective of complex responsive processes is thus seen as a silent conversation "of voices and feelings, more or less hidden from others…(that)…arise in relationships between people, while being experienced in their bodies" (Stacey, 2003, p. 330 - 331).

5. *Deviance creates movement*

If we all had the same view all of the time then nothing new would emerge. If we would have the same conversation about the same theme based on the same view, we would most likely never discover anything new. We would simply go around the same circle again and again. Novelty emerges from diversity. Complex responsive process theory, therefore, places a high value on diversity and at the same time sees too much diversity as counterproductive to any kind of joint action.

I like to visualise diversity as difference in elevation. A river only flows if there is a difference in elevation of the landscape through which the river flows. If there is no difference, you have a lake, not a river; you have stability, not movement. But at the same time, if the elevation is too steep or too abrupt, you have a waterfall and not a river. In other words, if the differences are too big, no constructive joint action is possible. By amplifying or introducing differences, existing patterns are disturbed and new ones have the possibility to emerge; however, which new ones cannot be predicted.

The implications of this process view of organisations for how change happens are then…

- Managers are in charge but not in control.
- Leading and following happens between people.

- By amplifying or introducing differences, existing behavioural patterns are disturbed and new ones have the possibility to emerge, which ones, however, cannot be known.
- Managers need to get connected, work with what is actually happening, and bring themselves to their work.

The shift from seeing organisations as on-going interactive processes suggests that managers focus their attention on the following five aspects.

- The quality of presence – the ability of managers to work from "within" each present moment

- The quality of participation – who participates in the significant conversations within the organization?

- The quality of conversation – how are the legitimate conversational themes within the organisation sustained as well as how are shadow themes are made legitimate?

- The quality of holding unpredictability, paradox and anxiety– how do managers cope with not knowing and not being in control while being responsible at the same time?

- The quality of diversity – how are different views, approaches, ideas, backgrounds etc. used to disrupt existing patterns and create fresher ones?

Main implication for managers: The practice of *leading live*

I am convinced that the process view of organisations is a more useful perspective for managers because it describes much more closely than the machine view what actually goes in our lived experience. An important implication of the process view is that the continuous, self-organizing social processes have neither pre-determined, inevitable steps nor final or ideal end-states, but *are* simply constantly arising and disappearing transitory manifestations.

That means the changing from emerging moment to emerging moment is only partly conditioned by what has gone on before and by what is anticipated in the future. That in turn implies for change *of* individuals and organizations that for our habitual, interactive patterns to not develop into or get stuck in repetitive or *going-through-the-motions* patterns, but become and remain alive and real, 'free-flowing and flexible' (Stacey, 2003b p. 364), it is essential for us 'to train ourselves in a new "attitude" (…) toward our surroundings (…) [and] to relate or orient ourselves in a new way' (Shotter, 2011 p. 218, his emphasis).

The process of walking across a thin wire high up in the air, often without any kind of safety belt or net, as for example Frenchman Philippe Petit did in August 1974 when he walked across a steel cable connecting the Twin Towers of the World Trade Center in New York City takes a lot of skills, experience, courage, and above all presence in each moment of being on the wire. To stay up on the wire and perform demanding acrobatics requires concentrating for instance on your feet touching the wire, your breathing, your hands, and the tension in your body while at the same time being aware of the swaying of the wire, the movements of the people with you on the wire, the objects, the wind, and so forth. It is of vital necessity for high wire artists if they want to prevent themselves falling (and in Petit's case, dying) to be present in each moment. When using the expression *being present* I am making an important differentiation between *doing something in the present moment* and *being present*, that is, working live. My fundamental assumption is that there is no other moment than *this* very moment…and *this* one…and *this* one…and *this* one…and so forth. Living happens NOW. Whatever we do, we do it now because 'if anything that exists is in some genuine sense temporal (…) then its foothold in reality is to be found in that present within which it not merely was or will be but effectively is, in a full and categorical sense' (Mead, 2002 p. 11).

However, the fact that we are always embodied and situated in the present does not automatically mean that we are present, that is, consciously aware of this very moment. In my view, the degree of 'presentness' (Stern 2004 p. xiii) to every emerging instance of now-ness and at the same time to the overall patterning of the past interactions that at this very moment gives rise this particular transitory *micro situation* are the fundamental

differentiators between simply *doing something in the present moment* and *working live.* When working in this way with 'feelings and actions taking place in real time, in the real world, with real people, in a moment of presentness' (Ibid.) then 'you and the rigging will become a single body, solid as a rock. You will feel yourself a thing of balance. You will become wire' (Petit, 1985 p. 22).

I am calling this way of being and working *leading live* and see it as a conscious embodied improvisational moment-to-moment activity of choicefulness and at the same time spontaneity and intuition because the transitory outcomes of our individual and collective moves can neither be controlled nor predicted, but can significantly impact people and the world at large.

I often hear managers say that they find it difficult to put the above insights into practice. I recently worked with a group of 30 senior managers on what they personally would have to do to improve their practice of leading. They discussed this question in several small breakout groups and after the groups had presented their findings to each other we had lots of different behaviours posted on cards on one wall of the room we were working in. The identified behaviours included "listen with the willingness to understand", "involve people", "do what you ask of others", "be authentic", "ask questions that encourage reflection". Pointing to the cards, one of the managers seemed to capture the mood in the room by saying, "What we have identified here is so simple and obvious, and we have known it for ages, so why don't we get better? Why is there so little improvement in our leadership practices?" Good question, I thought. Why, indeed?

I think the answer is surprisingly simple: Only deliberate practice improves your practices. In other words, you only become a really good tennis player, if you regularly work on your tennis practice. Just thinking, reading, and talking about it is not sufficient. That of course applies to the practice of leading, too.
However, most managers do not seem to regard leading as a personal practice or craft they can develop over time like, say, tennis. Many still regard leading as either a personal characteristic they have or a position they hold, but not as a conscious, personal moment-to-

moment practice. And even those who do see leading as a personal practice seem to believe that reading articles or books about it is sufficient to get better at it. To me, this is like believing that after reading a book about tennis you can actually play tennis when in reality all a book on tennis (or on leading, for that matter) can do, is help you to understand what you *would* have to practice *if* you really wanted to become a better tennis player. But unfortunately, becoming really good at something is not as simple as reading how-to instructions (including this one).

All great actors, athletes, musicians, painters, writers, saddle and watchmakers and other "craftsmen" hone their craft constantly and consciously. For them, there is absolutely no substitute for daily practice. Consequently, the first crucial step for managers towards improving the quality of their practice of leading is to treat it as a personal craft and to, therefore, understand that developing a rigorous practice discipline is essential.

The second crucial step is to work out what and how to practice. The *what*, of course, depends on what kind of person and leader you want to become, and what you want to lead on in your organization. As the senior managers referred to above proved to themselves clearly, they knew *what* they would have to practice. However, the *how* to practice, I believe, is a much more important question. It is more important, because for most managers the answer is contrary to traditional wisdom that holds that by accumulating leadership experience you will automatically learn, develop, and improve. There is no doubt that through the accumulation of leadership experiences you can develop a certain level of proficiency. However, to become a great, or at least, a really good leader, accumulating experience is by far not sufficient – developing a habit of conscious reflective leadership practice is essential.

You might have been a professional engineer or finance specialist in the beginning of your career, but if you want to have real impact in the paradoxical process of leading (and following) in the moment, you need to become a craftsman in whatever your leadership intention and practices are. Leading and following are not assigned responsibilities or

predetermined tasks but improvised, embodied activities that happen within and between people from moment to moment.

Developing robust personal leading live practices, in essence, means that if you reflect rigorously and regularly on yourself, your leadership intention and your subsequent leadership practices, you will be able to more deeply understand your world-views, patterns of thinking, feeling and behaving, and you will, therefore, be able to see, experiment with and practice alternative ways of being and leading. To borrow a quote from Michael Jordan, the American ex-basketball player, "It's not about the shoes. It's about what you do it them."

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