Managing Change - Kotter, Senge, or something more complex?
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Kotter’s (1996, p21) eight-stage change process sounds convincing. It encourages management-led change that sets a clear vision, and uses pragmatic techniques to drive change and make it stick. Change must be pushed towards completion, otherwise (p144), ‘without sufficient leadership, change stalls.’ For Kotter, the leader is outside of the process, and change can be initiated, directed, and brought to a conclusion at a new place of equilibrium.

Senge’s (1990) ‘systems thinking’ challenges the possibility of this kind of local control and looks at the ‘dynamic complexity’ (p72) of interacting components of a system. No longer viewing organizations in isolation, but as acting in ‘circles of causality’ (p73), he suggests how organizations adapt to one another. This ‘learning organization’ model initially seems to open up new possibilities for guiding change through influencing system-wide behaviours (p101), but ultimately, the goal of comprehending the ‘indivisible whole’ (p368) seems unreachable. More problematically when Senge asserts (p10) that ‘teams, not individuals, are the fundamental learning unit in modern organizations,’ he falls foul of Cooke-Davies et al’s (2007) warning:

Research that takes ideas and treats them as if they were objects [...] is built on shaky foundations. Unfortunately [...] there is a tendency in practitioner literature to reify processes, and in literature derived from organizational theory to reify social groupings and organizational units. This results in a blurring between objects and ideas and a lack of methodological integrity.

Developing Complexity-based criteria for organizational change.

Ralph Stacey looks at change in a different way. His work (2007; 2011) on Complex Responsive Processes (CRP) draws on psychological theory to build on a conception of how human beings interact. According to Stanley (2009), Stacey rejects a common Western perspective where people ‘have a tendency to base an understanding of human beings [...] on an abstraction that marks a fundamental distinction and separation between the individual and the collective.’

Philosophically, such a distinction reflects Kantian dualism which, with its subject-object separation of the individual from the social, implies a need to accept alternative modes of causation, dependent on whether one is perceived to be standing inside or outside a social system. Stacey (2007, p245) instead takes as his starting point Hegel’s world of multiple subjects, ‘interacting responsively’ on the basis of ‘mutual recognition’. In this view (p246), ‘the individual and the social [...] cannot be separated. Indeed individual consciousness and self-consciousness arise in the social relations which they are simultaneously constructing’ (the simplest example, perhaps, being an infant’s first experience of self-consciousness, as inseparable from a simultaneous awareness of another self).

Moving from self-consciousness to the ‘consciousness of meaning’, Mead (1910) contradicts the traditional Western view (Lakoff and Johnson, 2003, p196) that, ‘Meaning is objective and disembodied, independent of human understanding,’ and shows how meaning, too, arises in social interactions. He explains (Mead, 1934, cited in Stacey, 2007, p271) how communication involves the negotiation of meaning through a shared reflexive process of gesture and response, and how meaning ‘is created in the interaction’ (Stacey, 2007, p272).
This is Stacey’s (p271) world of ‘ongoing responsive processes’ or Mead’s ‘conversation of gestures.’

Turning to the relevance of this for organizations, Shaw (2002, p11) warns that ‘We think about “an organization” as something that has an existence separate from our own activity, even though often we are uneasily aware that it is not so.’ Stacey’s fundamental assertion then (2007, p277), is that ‘Organisations are ongoing patterns of relating between people,’ visible as ‘conversational processes [centred on] organising themes.’ Following Hegel, he emphasizes (p278) that in a true conversation, ‘all are participants and none […] can get outside the conversation.’ No one directs it, but as Shaw explains (2002, p10), ‘The activity of conversation itself is the key process through which forms of organizing are dynamically sustained and changed.’ Expressed simply by Suchman (2010), one can understand an organization as a conversation.

This primary role of conversation in creating patterns of relating, leads us to establish the foundational Complexity-based criterion for assessing organizational development:

1. **Is there a high value on conversation in organizational processes of relating?**

Further qualification is required to describe the quality of conversation needed.

Firstly, it must be conversation, not presentation; and free flowing rather than constrained. Stacey explains (p277) how turn-taking is a normal feature of relating, and that natural conversations do not typically follow predetermined paths. However conversations are not always natural, and Springer (1998, cited in Stacey, 2007, p282) lists several ‘rhetorical ploys’ that people use to constrain the flow of conversation. Stacey (2007, p282) says: ‘People in ordinary conversation may be using conversational devices to dismiss the opinions of others and close down the development of a conversation in an exploratory direction.’ Likewise in organisational life, Springer’s examples are all too familiar, including blocking moves like: ‘let’s concentrate on the key points’; or artificially induced urgency, such as: ‘there is a short time window.’

Turning to who should be involved in the conversation, in Stacey’s terms (2007, p265), ‘There is no society or organisation at a level higher than human interaction’ and there are no ‘parts inside the system.’ ‘Levels’ and roles within an organisation are downplayed, and instead there is recognition of equality between interlocutors. A CRP model encourages freer interaction between people, regardless of experience or status.

We can expand our “Conversation” criteria, then, to incorporate these points, by asking whether the following are in evidence:

- **Is there free-flowing natural conversation (rather than “presentation” of ideas)?**
- **Is conversation unconstrained by rhetorical devices?**
- **Is there conversation across traditional organisational boundaries and “levels”?**

Building on this fundamental idea about the centrality of ordinary conversation, a second major criterion for assessment of change, centres on how new patterns of interaction can emerge naturally, without external direction. As Shaw notes (2002, p13), in conversation it commonly happens that ‘we surprise one another and even ourselves’ as ‘the conversation makes unexpected jumps.’ And relating this to organisational change, Suchman (2006) says that, ‘The work of organizational change […] consists not of designing new structures but of

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1 All the criteria I develop are phrased as questions, to which a positive response suggests an enabling factor.
introducing new themes into the organizational conversation in the hope that they will amplify and disseminate.’

Looking from a sociological angle, Stacey (2007, p247) affirms Elias' rejection of 'any notion of human interaction as a system and any notion of some 'whole' existing outside of that interaction and causing it.’ He explains (p250) that, for Elias, societal developments emerge through ongoing reciprocal processes involving the interplay of individual intentions, emphasizing (p250) that ‘Elias does not polarise intention and emergence.’ Everyone acts with intention, but, against Kotter or systems thinking, no one can stand outside and control the system because there is no ‘outside’.

The second major complexity-based criterion for assessing potential for organisational change could therefore be expressed thus:

2. Is there recognition, acceptance and appreciation of emergent themes and novel strategies, wherever they originate?

This also needs further exploration, not least because ideas of how emergence might happen differ significantly between a CAS viewpoint and the human CRP model. If the emergence of novelty were a matter of complete chance or practical unpredictability (as in the case of a physical CAS system, where outcomes are dependent on a non-linear but deterministic function), then there would be no hope of constructively influencing a change process. However Stacey (2007,p265) reassures the organisational leader that, 'what emerges does so because of the interplay of what people intend to do, not by chance.'

This continuous interplay can lead to either stability or novelty, as Suchman (2006) explains:

As patterns of meaning and relating are continuously re-enacted, they may exhibit stability (continuity) or they may vary, and sometimes altogether new patterns may arise spontaneously (novelty). The emergence of social patterns in each moment, both stable and novel, is a self-organizing process; the patterns form spontaneously without anyone's intention or direction.

Stacey (2007, p280) affirms that conversations self-organise around themes which are, 'continuously arising in the interaction between people' and, importantly, arising 'in a particular place at a particular time,' and Suchman (2006) says that the CRP approach:

calls attention to relational process—what are we doing together right here, right now? What patterns are we making and how? It catches us in the act of pattern-making, thus giving us an opportunity to be mindful about that process and, perhaps, to change it.

We can therefore expand our “Emergence” criteria and ask whether the following desired aspects are in evidence:

a. Are conversational themes un-predetermined, and expected to arise within a local and temporal context?

b. Is mindful attention given to the creative potential of our intentions and interactions in the present?

Suchman (2006) also notes two other properties of these ‘reciprocal interactions’. Firstly, emergent novelty depends on the ‘amplification of small differences,’ where a small new gesture (phrase or behaviour) elicits a new kind of response, which may eventually lead to the establishment of a new conversational theme or behaviour – in other words a much larger effect. Secondly, ‘the emergence of novel patterns of meaning or relating requires both diversity and responsiveness in the interaction.’ Explaining the implications for organizations, Suchman (2010) says:
An organization’s diversity – the multiplicity of perspectives arising from differences in roles, personal histories and professional backgrounds – seeds novelty; it is the main source of serendipitous disturbances that instigate new patterns, provided, of course, that individuals feel safe and supported enough to risk bringing their differences forward.

This directly suggests a third important sub-point, within our “Emergence” criterion, asking:

**c. Is there appreciation and deliberate inclusion of diverse conversational inputs?**

Turning to who, if anyone, should be guiding change; if intention is part of every conversational gesture then, consciously or not, all parties contribute to the pattern of interaction. In the CRP model, human contributions to this reciprocal social game are genuinely innovative, but no individual can dictate the direction of emergent change. Stacey puts it strongly (2007, p250-251):

> This notion of emergence presents a serious challenge to the dominant discourse on strategy and organisation, which assumes that leaders [...] can directly change some whole system [...] in an intentional manner. The whole notion of planned global change programmes ‘rolled’ down organisations begins to look rather like a fantasy.

Stacey et al (2002, p137) argue that ‘it is unnecessary, as well as impossible, for individuals to take control,’ and so the outstanding question is whether or not there remains any special role for a leader. The answer seems to be that all are equal, but some are more equal than others. Top executives and junior clerks must both resort to the same mechanism – that of intentional gestures, but nevertheless, some gestures are stronger than others. A leader’s input is as valid as anyone else’s, and usually more influential.

We can therefore propose this third main criterion:

**3. Is leadership conceived of as participation within a collaborative sense-making process (rather than a separate sense-providing function)?**

This is a corrective to top-down views of leadership, but we need to elucidate how the person we call a leader should function.

Leaders mediate constraints, and while we have tried, though our earlier criteria, to free conversations from rhetoric, other valid constraints come in many guises. Suchman (2010) mentions ‘psychological, social, financial, regulatory’ constraints, noting that some are ‘absolute’ while others are ‘more susceptible to change.’ He suggests that in most cases there is some degree of freedom to respond within the bounds of the constraint but, giving the example of standardized medical procedures, notes that ‘there are situations where new patterns are undesirable and where a high degree of control and consistency is essential, [especially] situations with technical solutions – in which what needs to be done is already known.’

Within organizations, corporate values, vision, strategies, and budgets, could all qualify as constraints on what is possible to explore in the conversation. Taking this a step further, leaders not only mediate such constraints, but also deal with conflicting constraints, which interestingly, Stacey et al (2002, p155) see as ‘essential to the emergence of novelty.’

Related to the above, we can now suggest additional points under our “leadership” criterion, asking,

**Are our nominated leaders able to...:**

**a. ...describe and explain factors that constrain local conversations, and can they differentiate the degrees of freedom associated with each constraint?**
b. ...hold in tension, and facilitate conversation about, the effects of conflicting constraints, and “expect the unexpected” in terms of solutions that may emerge?

c. ...identify particular situations where strict procedure does apply and emergent novelty is not desirable (while considering these situations as the exception rather than the norm)?

Conversation is enhanced by depth of relationship and trust, and Suchman (2010) offers advice to those seeking to increase opportunities for emergence of new patterns:

In situations in which new patterns are desirable, it is helpful to notice how much diversity is present and what could be done to bring more of it into the conversation and/or enhance its expression. This might mean seeking participants with more varied perspectives and/or using appropriate facilitation methods to help more people to say what they are thinking.

As more inputs are welcomed, and the conversation becomes more relaxed, not only is diversity and novelty enhanced, but also a shared story unfolds (Pye, 2005) and the direction of influence becomes more ambiguous. The idea that this is conversation, not presentation, affects the notion of leadership too.

These points suggest further additions to our list of “leadership” criteria:

d. Do our nominated leaders have the relational skills needed to foster trust and to facilitate involvement in the conversation, to the fullest extent possible, by all participants?

e. As trust develops, is there a positive expectation that leadership will become an increasingly mutual exercise involving a shared experience of story?

f. Are leaders able to hold anxiety, and help others do so, when ambiguities are unresolved?

It is unrealistic, however, to expect that every emergent idea will be in harmony with the intentions of the leader. Themes emerging in local conversation, must inevitably at some point challenge established thinking, and often those new conversations may need to be hidden. Stacey (2011, p 403) says that, ‘Organisations are patterns of relationships between people, and these relationships impose powerful constraints on what it is permissible to say, to whom and how, if one is to be included rather than excluded.’ Likewise the inclusion or exclusion from groups is one basis for Stacey’s (p404) legitimate and shadow themes. Official organizational ideology shapes and supports legitimate themes and established power relations, but (p404) ‘when people engage in shadow conversations, they [...] do so on the basis of some unofficial ideology that makes it feel natural and justifiable to talk as they do, but this time secretly.’ Stacey emphasizes that these shadow conversations are ‘not illegitimate or illegal’ and may even support existing power relations. However, sometimes they may introduce other narratives that undermine them. Although at first sight this subversive activity sounds threatening, Stacey asserts (p406) that,

The distinction between legitimate and shadow is important, because the tension between the two is the potential source of the diversity that is critical to the capacity to change spontaneously in novel ways.

Deviant themes and power relations may encompass ‘the despicable and the destructive’ or ‘the heroic and the creative’ but Stacey believes that ‘creative potential arises from the subversion of legitimate organising themes by shadow themes,’ leading to, ‘shifts in power relations.’ Shaw (2002, P70) agrees that this entirely normal way of ‘jointly constructing our
future [...] involves an everyday paradox of subversion that shifts legitimation.’ Shadow themes can become legitimized, but the process is, by definition, outside the control of any leader. As Shaw says (p171), ‘our interaction, no matter how considered or passionate, is always evolving in ways that we cannot control or predict in the longer term.’

If Shaw is right (p172) the sense-making we do together ‘is not a steady move towards a unified “we” constructing consensus and common ground for joint action,’ then what can we hope for? Our treasured “snapshots” of organizational design are what Stacey (2011, p418) would call simplified abstractions of the rich detail of real local interaction. Therefore our strategic plans may turn out to be (p442), just ‘social defences against anxiety’ rather than documents that actually cause something to happen. In fact Stacey insists (p468) that, ‘Strategy is the evolving narrative pattern of organisational identity,’ and urges us (p476) to focus our attention instead on the ‘quality of participation’ in local interactions – which the criteria already developed above, seek to do.

We cannot rescue a strategic planning role for isolated leaders. Weick (2001, p93), cautions that, for future leadership, ‘there will be more humility and less hubris,’ and, agreeing (p97) with Shaw’s emphasis on improvisation, he notes that the admission, ‘I don’t know’ actually triggers all the essential ‘conditions for sensemaking.’ But improvisation demands one more quality of participation, highlighted by Western (2008, p195): the ethical responsibility ‘to be accountable for your own actions.’

Two more change criteria can therefore be offered to reflect this appropriate loss of expectations of control:

4. **Is there a recognition of the importance of the informal, and even shadow, aspects of organizational conversation?**

5. **Is there an organizational acceptance of “not knowing” and a willingness to act anyway, with personal ethical accountability?**

From a Christian perspective, another aspect of engaging in the “living present” may be to acknowledge that the primary way God chooses to interact with us is relational rather than propositional or prescriptive. Christian organizations publically legitimize conversational themes about prayer, often with connotations of spiritual correctness. However, CRP may suggest an even more dynamically relevant place for prayer. Whereas a dualistic systems picture leaves God in an awkward place (is he acting within the system, or operating upon it?), the fundamentally conversational CRP model seems to offer a very natural explanation for Christian experiences of transformative encounter and guidance. Engaging in prayer, not as duty, nor as remote request, but as conversation, seems an entirely natural way of inviting truly diverse input and influence, based on loving intention.

I therefore offer one final change criterion, appropriate for some contexts:

6. **Is there a natural expectation of relating to God through prayer (in the “living present”) within routine organizational patterns of conversation?**

Consistent with the CRP model, and without any sense at all of trying to “play the God card” to escape from a dead end, this may genuinely enable us to face Stacey’s stark comment (2011, p469) that ‘there is no guarantee of [strategic] success,’ and embrace with optimism Shaw’s tactic (2002, p172), of improvising with imagination in the present moment.
Critiquing my own assessment process

CRP theory itself militates against prescriptive measures, and so developing Complexity-based criteria to evaluate a change process, as I have done here, is paradoxical. As Suchman (2010) notes, ‘Checklists and protocols focus conversation along relatively narrow channels and constrain the behavioral patterns that can emerge.’ Therefore the application of my list of criteria needs to be done loosely, in conversation, recognising that they too are gestures rather than rules. In expressing these criteria I have tried to be descriptive and exploratory, rather than prescriptive, but others must judge whether they are still too constraining.

Other authors, including Houchin and MacLean (2005), attest to the empirical difficulty of applying complexity concepts to a social system. Partly, their objections stem from using CAS ideas rather than CRP, but even Suchman (2010) allows that some strict constraints do come from outside our conversations. Noting this, my assessment criteria may attempt to apply CRP too idealistically and fail to explore adequately how valid organizational directives apply. More thought needs to be given to the relationship between leader intention and gesture on the one hand and organizational directive and constraint on the other.

Citation Reference List:


Additional Bibliography:


**Biographical Background**

A final motivation for preferring Complexity approaches, relates to my own experience of change within a highly fluid Ethiopian context where any hope of adequately understanding even a modest part of a ‘whole system’ seemed unrealistically optimistic, and where interfacing with institutions invariably meant relating to individuals, not groups. Developments, such as welcoming in our first Ethiopian members, or transitioning to our first Ethiopian Director, came about neither by attempting to drive change, nor through a comprehensive grasp of an interacting system, but simply because of a willingness to participate within it. This required acting without complete knowledge; relating to individuals consistently, with integrity; and exploring possibilities even when the context was ambiguous.

From these experiences I resonate strongly with Stacey’s (1995; 2007) Complexity perspectives. Therefore, in developing criteria for assessing change, I will draw greatly from Stacey’s ideas (2007; 2011) about Complex Responsive Processes (CRP), which are based on psychological theory about human interaction. (I intentionally avoid analogies with Complex Adaptive Systems).

My choices of criteria reflect personal values and my own desires for change. Some of these, I can externalize:

- A belief that our current perception of the task before us, as an organization, must inevitably be modified as we relate to others. Related to this, is a desire to control less and explore more.
- A belief that it is no longer appropriate for Western expatriates to design and control programmes in many of the countries where we serve. Related to this, a desire to recognise the natural decision-making authority of people we partner with.
- A desire that we become less individualistic, less task-oriented, and more relationally focused.

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