GIVING REAL CHANGE A CHANCE

Consultants are asked for help when there is a need for change in an organization. Managers see for instance the necessity to introduce different behaviours, resolve conflicts or make the organization commercially more successful. It has been proven, that frequently these change efforts do not to lead the intended, positive outcomes (1).

In our experience, the root cause for this ineffectiveness is the mistaken view that organizations are like machines that can be designed, steered, controlled and optimized from the outside. Due to managers' predominantly technical or financial background and training most of them think about organizations as a whole made up of various parts that need to complement each other and be aligned accurately in order for the organization to function effectively and efficiently. That means, they conceive of their work as developing visions, strategies, systems, processes, and tools that can be implemented in order to ensure the organization's success. Subsequently, their attention is predominantly focused on abstract, mechanical aspects and activities such as:

- Formal structures
- Planning
- Making lists of rules, regulations, values, principles and behaviours
- Measurement and control
- Performance management
- Rewards and punishment
- People as upgradable objects

These mechanical glasses are unhelpful because they disappear the very essence of organizational life, namely people continually interacting with each other which is a psychological and sociological phenomenon. Yes, an organization 'has' things such as factories, buildings, computers and other 'hardware', but it 'is' people interacting and conversing.

We propose a view of organizations that is much closer to what is actually going on. For us organizations are *continuous interactions and conversations between people that produce patterns over tim*e (2). In short, an organization is not a thing, but an activity. This means:

We are all participants

There is no away from the constant process of relating; everyone, including managers, is a participant in it all of the time. Everyone is a part of the constant flow of interacting by influencing it and at the same time being influenced by it.

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The interactions that we have with each other simply create more interactions. They do not add up to a so called 'whole'. There is no stable or bigger thing 'behind' or 'above' peoples' interactions. There is not the company that does something to people, there are only individual people relating to each other.

There is no master plan

Through the multitude of local interactions overall patterns emerge without the existence of a grand masterplan or overall control of the totality of people's local interactions.

One important implication of this is that managers are seen as being in charge 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 uncertain to materialise, requiring them to be ready for whatever emerges. This simultaneous knowing and not knowing of what is happening next can easily create anxiety, particularly in managers who perceive themselves as being in control of delivering specific, pre-determined results..

Our talking is powerful action

Since the organization is the patterns of people's conversations the organization changes as the conversations that people have with each other change. Therefore, what people talk and not talk about in organizations and who is included in and excluded from these conversations is of paramount importance to organizational change.

Differences create novelty

By amplifying or introducing differences, existing patterns are disturbed, and new ones have the possibility to emerge. In this the appropriate amount and type of difference introduced is crucial.

In our experience, organizations and change processes have a much higher chance of success when managers refocus their attention away from mechanical perspectives towards the four aspects that follow from the above theory.

The quality of participation – do people work with what is actually going on in each present moment?

The quality of conversation – do the relevant people participate in the significant conversations in a relevant way?

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The quality of holding paradox and unpredictability – how do people 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?

An abstract way of thinking of and working with change is like confusing the reading of a book about running with actually running. If you don't ever run, you won't ever get better at running. Similarly, if you keep thinking about organizations and change as mechanical phenomena you won't ever be able to truly make organizations better. Therefore, managers need to master the psychological and sociological aspects of organizations as proficiently as they master the engineering, finance and business aspects.

(1)A study by McKinsey & Company found that around 60% of change initiatives did not achieve their intended outcomes. (Organizing for successful change management: A McKinsey Global Survey," The McKinsey Quarterly, Web exclusive, July 2006). Another study from Mutaree Consulting and the Bundeswehr Universität Muenchen (2012) found that 40% of change projects did not at all or only partially achieve their intended outcome objectives. (Retrieved [August 21, 2012] from (http://www.sueddeutsche.de/karriere/veraenderungsprozesse-in-unternehmen-warum-widerstand-zwecklos-ist-1.1443380)

(2)The theory of complex responsive processes of relating that 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).