

Change Management and Complexity Theory

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Most who work within one would readily agree that organizational life is complex, but few take the further step of applying complexity theory to organizations and organizational behaviors. Many of the ideas within complexity theory stand at odds with the typical structures and practices common to many modern organizations. The idea that reality is co-created and the idea that complex reality is chaotic but created from simple rules are two such problematic concepts. These ideas have implications contrary to traditional views of an organization, the traditional structures of organizations, and frustratingly even the traditional ways that organizations change themselves. Change management is by now perhaps a common concept for modern organizations, but its implementation still often reflects a point of view that is not very dynamic. Applying the two complexity theory ideas of co-created reality and complexity emerging from simple rules will illustrate some of the problems with traditional change management in traditional hierarchical organizational structures.

The co-creation of reality that complexity theories describe starts with a denial of objective reality and an embracing of a subjective one, or rather a subjective many. These subjective realities are the ones created through interaction of everyone and everything who participates in them (Keene, 2000) and it does not work in one direction. The traditional organizational hierarchy is implicitly threatened by this notion (Wheatley, 2006) as it is based on the idea that ideas, direction, and resources flow down the org chart from top to bottom. Even when the organization decides to change, the change program will work its way down the hierarchy from top to bottom.

A change management effort in an organization might start with an executive committee discussing the core values of the organization and deciding on an interpretation of what this

means they should do next or do differently. From this, a new organizational alignment might be implemented to best pursue the new directions. New incentive programs or job descriptions could be created to make sure everyone will be aligned with the new direction. Then an extensive training campaign would likely be undertaken and implemented tier by tier through the hierarchy until everyone had been educated as to the new direction for the organization and how to execute it. This appears sound from a certain point of view but is problematic because of important ways in which it does not correspond to reality. This type of change management program relies mightily on an assumption that the executive committee chose the correct new direction. Similarly, it presumes a full knowledge of the reality of the organization and an ability to plan for it. Lastly, it presumes an ability to control just about everything in the organization including the implications and the roll-out of the change program. These assumptions have no place amongst the complexity theories.

Complexity theories tell us that control is not something we can rely on across complex systems. Rather, they state that complex systems will lie between chaos and order and that their complexity is emergent on just a few simple rules. This suggests that all the careful planning of a traditional change management program (Griffin, 1999) not only bears the risks of being wrong, it also limits the possibilities of being right. Angelique Keene (2000) uses the evocative image of the water in a river; following only the rule of gravity pulling it to the sea and yet taking infinite and complex paths to fulfill this rule. From this advice, an organization would have been better served to just share out the values utilized by the executive committee to all members of the organization. Let them follow these values to propose dozens and hundreds of small and large ways to create with others a new reality rather than presuming vainly to know and control all things. In addition to getting more and better outcomes, this approach avoids ignoring the human

element that in ways that managerial strategies risk according to Dr. Gary Mangiofico (Margolis, 2012).

In a way that fits with complexity, fully acknowledging even one of these ideas from within the complexity theories unveils a vast network of repercussions demanding reexamination of ideas and frameworks taken for granted due to their familiarity. To consider co-creation of a subjective reality calls into question the power and authority of anyone in a hierarchical organizational structure and recasts what was considered control as just relationship (Griffin, 1999). Similarly, notions of control and organized change become ripe for re-evaluation in light of the notion that complex systems are governed by simple rules. This demands an effort to simplify structures intended for command and control rather than expand them, in the process annihilating the illusion that either command or control was ever possible. Despite the possible destructive implications of the ideas of complexity, it seems that embracing and understanding them will also allow the next level of organizational achievement to emerge as they are comprehended more widely.

References

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