

Managing change in dynamic non-linear systems

Basic points to remember

1. Newtonian 'machine' framework and systems/non-linear framework are different paradigms – ways of seeing the world differently
2. Dynamic systems approaches are not like a "heavy engineering" project, laying down railroad tracks with a clear ground plan and idea of our destination. They are more about being open and attuned to the realities and subtleties of your current environment, and being able to work well with others to (i) construct shared understandings of the present, (ii) design responses, and (iii) act carefully
3. Complex-adaptive approaches assume that you are working within a messy, unpredictable reality, requires us to abandon command and control approaches, embrace 'emergence' and push ourselves into deliberate disequilibrium. So you need to find some sort of solid ground to stand on, an leaders need to identify this
 - clear and widely-owned sense of purpose and identity
 - high quality relationships and trust

Sensitivity to initial conditions

Try to see and understand your work and practice (not how you describe it, nor your budgets, nor your plans – but what is really happening, what is working, what isn't; what are the patterns and the key challenges; what is emerging, what is changing, and why?).

Involve as many people as appropriate in discussions about current work and practice, the realities of change, and the possibilities of change

Try not to overanalyse, but rather aim for an intuitive picture of the whole (using metaphors such as vehicles, animals, soap opera or biblical characters; heroes and villains; drawings and sketches, objects) – cf my 'kite' sketches

Bringing about change - butterfly theory

Small inputs -> big results; act carefully, slowly, locally

If we want to understand how our attempts to change things turn out, we need to start small. Watch, learn and adapt. See what "catches fire". Allow that to be picked up and developed elsewhere. Don't try to roll it out across the whole organisation.

'Postmodern conditions usually require small steps towards renewal rather than elaborate plans.'¹

'Great visions from great people ... are in short supply at the "end of history". It is up to us to light our own small fires in the darkness.'²

'Change comes from small initiatives which work, initiatives which, when imitated, become the fashion.'³

¹ Bergquist, *The Postmodern Organization*, p. 14.

² Charles Handy, *The Empty Raincoat* (New York: Random House, 1995)

³ Handy, *Op cit.*

trojan mice www.trojanmice.com

Much change is of the 'Trojan horse' variety. At the top of the organisation a decision is taken to introduce a strategic change programme and consultants or an internal team are commissioned to plan it down to the very last detail. The planned changes are then presented at a grand event (the Trojan Horse) amid much loud music, bright lights and dry ice. More often than not, however, a few weeks later the organisation will have settled back into its usual ways and rejected much of the change. This is usually because the change was too great to be properly understood and owned by the workforce.

trojanmice, on the other hand, are small, well focused changes, which are introduced on an ongoing basis in an inconspicuous way. They are small enough to be understood and owned by all concerned but their effects can be far-reaching. Collectively a few trojanmice will change more than one Trojan horse ever could.

Emergence – how do you develop strategy in dynamic, non-linear systems?

Classic, scientific/Newtonian approaches to strategy are based on the assumption of predictability – we can see ahead clearly enough to be able to construct a plan which we think has a fair chance of success in the unfolding future.

Complex-adaptive approaches to strategy start from a different assumption – the medium-term future is unpredictable and unknowable to an extent that makes classic forward planning untenable.

Have to reverse the usual process – rather than establishing a future target and working back to what to do now to achieve it, you concentrate on the immediate issues.

Be prepared to work with what is emerging; don't persist with approaches and models if they are no longer appropriate (i.e. go with the flow / river metaphor). There is a basic tendency in change agents to overdo the testosterone.

“You don't make strategy by some kind of Moses-like process where you walk down from the mountain and present the tablets, with everyone else running around to implement it – you make a strategy by trying something, and testing it, and changing it” (Henry Mintzberg)

Richard Seel suggests the following steps can predispose an organisation towards emergent change (i.e. it makes an organisation “change-ready”)

1. ensure there is connectivity within the organisation (with key hubs/nodes)
2. promote diversity of opinion
3. let information flow freely (i.e. don't constrain things on a “need to know” basis)
4. provide clear boundaries about what is / is not expected (and state what is required, not how it is to be done)
5. be positive (emphasise strengths, not weaknesses)
6. watch and pray (don't over-force the issue)

Leadership as an “attractor”

Leadership in dynamic, non-linear contexts is not about being in control, micro-managing from the centre. It is about being an “attractor”, around which the system self-organises:

- hold up and support certain values (e.g. my own - “try and fail is better than not trying at all”, “it is easier to get forgiveness than permission”, “1% improvement, 100% of the time”, etc)
- set broad boundaries and allow space for others to lead, and for diversity and initiative to flourish within those boundaries
- build and maintain trust throughout the organisation
- develop effective communication and connectivity within the organisation

Responsiveness to emergence – new patterns of organisation and new possibilities emerge over time as part of a self-organising dynamic, sometimes despite our best intentions that things should go in another way. To see, allow, and work with emergence are important capacities for leaders in dynamic, non-linear contexts.

Complex-adaptive approaches to leadership require us to use our time differently as leaders. We need to give time to:

- learning in and from our work
- to building relationships
- to developing good communication and connectivity
- to building a deeper understanding of how change is unfolding in our organisation and in our environment

Challenges our over-organised, activity-centred worlds. Requires us to work slowly and deeply with issues to get a depth of understanding. Rewards our humility over our conceits.

Summary

Classic/scientific

Attempts to control
Tries to predict
Seeks certainty
Changes what people do
Manages the parts
Organises
Looks for the best way
Seeks conformity

Complex-adaptive

Looks for the pattern
Adapts to the environment
Seeks opportunity
Changes how people see things
Influences the whole
Self organises
Encourages many ways
Seeks variety