

An Introduction to Complex Responsive Process:
Theory and Implications for Organizational Change Initiatives

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Complex Responsive Process: A complexity theory of human interaction

Over the past 5 years, Ralph Stacey and his colleagues at the University of Hertfordshire's Complexity and Management Centre have been developing a new way to make sense of human interaction (Stacey et al., 2000; Stacey, 2001). Drawing on sources in sociology, psychoanalysis and group analysis, the theory of Complex Responsive Process (CRP) is the first complexity theory written specifically about human thought and communication (in contrast to other complexity theories which are based on natural or biological sciences and applied to humans by means of analogy or metaphor). It offers a powerful new account of how patterns form in the thinking, feeling and behavior of both individuals and groups, and how both continuity and novelty emerge spontaneously in those patterns as a result of self-organizing processes (that is, without anyone's intentional design or control). In this paper, I will briefly describe the theory of CRP, discuss its implications for organizations, and derive from this theory a set of questions for reflecting on organizational change initiatives.

How patterns of meaning form in conversation

Given my background in communication, I find it easiest to ground a description of Complex Responsive Process in the commonplace experience of ordinary conversation.¹ Let's imagine that three friends – call them A, B and C – are talking with each other about a movie they have just seen. Person A makes a comment that elicits a response from B, which in turn provokes a new idea for A. A's new idea resonates with something C had been thinking about but thought no one else was interested in, so C now joins in, taking A's idea even further, and on they go. Through their continuing interaction, new patterns of perception and interpretation arise that did not exist for any of the participants before their conversation took place, and that none of them would have created on their own. Thus, their conversation exhibits the capacity to generate novelty.

¹ The account that follows is a retelling in my own words of the theory proposed by Ralph Stacey, Doug Griffin and Patricia Shaw (Stacey et al., 2000). I have added to their account by considering in closer detail the individual cognitive, emotional and social processes of creating and evaluating associations and forming responses to gestures on which complex responsive processes – in both private and public conversations – depend.

Over time, a pattern of perception and meaning that emerges through conversation can take any of three general paths. First, it can reinforce and perpetuate itself. For example, hearing that each other's first impressions of the movie are all negative, A, B and C might rapidly form a shared understanding that the movie was "bad." That theme may then shape their subsequent conversation by directing their attention towards the identification of additional flaws, further reinforcing their negative opinion in a circular and self-fulfilling manner. Second, a pattern can evolve gradually. For instance, if after the initial negative reactions C then comments about a nice bit of acting, the conversation could take a different direction; the others might then begin to notice other positive qualities in the movie even as they still retain their perception of its flaws, and eventually they might come to a more moderate judgment. And finally, a pattern can exhibit sudden dramatic changes, or discontinuities: a comment by B on an unrelated matter might spark the sudden realization for A that the movie was a satire rather than a serious drama, leading to an abrupt reinterpretation of all the preceding perceptions and to a new conclusion that the film was brilliant – a sudden shift to an entirely new pattern of interpretation and judgment.

Patterns of meaning and relating in each moment of the conversation arise from the interaction of the themes that were present in the immediately preceding moment and from other elements that are also present such as themes from A's, B's and C's other conversations and life experiences, or themes introduced from the immediate physical, temporal and cultural environment (e.g., an advertisement on a billboard across the street from where A, B and C are conversing, a major news story or a current topic of public political discourse).² As they interact, some of the themes cohere to constitute a new pattern of meaning; this coherence can be likened to a rag rug in which bits of whatever material happens to be available are woven together. The new form combines intention and accident, consistency and novelty, order and mess, and results in something recognizable yet also unique and irreproducible. Human interactions, as complex

² Curiously, my selection of the billboard as an example instantiates exactly this point. The week before I wrote this, I saw a production of Shakespeare's *Two Gentlemen of Verona* that situated the action in modern Italy. The stage set consisted of a few ramps in front of a giant billboard. This striking visual image was available to me for integration at this particular moment of writing because of its recency and salience. Writing at a different time, I would almost certainly have used a different image here. The billboard image was conveniently available in my environment.

responsive processes, weave together sensations, feelings, thoughts, memories and patterns of interaction into coherent clusters of meaning, but unlike the rug, there is no fixed finished product. What we experience as reality – our individual and collective aggregations of themes, patterns and meanings – is continuously under construction “in the living present,” with continuity and novelty endlessly emerging as each moment flows into the next (Stacey, Griffin, & Shaw, 2000).³

The description we’ve just developed of interpersonal or public conversation – in which an ever-changing coherence of meaning emerges continuously through the ongoing iterative interaction of individuals – applies equally well to the private conversation that constitutes the human mind. Mind represents the internalization of conversation; it depends upon language – symbols that make possible the ability to hold, manipulate and communicate meanings in the absence of that which is signified (Mead, 1962). The private conversation of one’s thinking is constituted of the same self-organizing processes as public conversations – iterative interactions of symbols in which patterns of meaning emerge, propagate, evolve and/or transform.

Novelty, responsiveness and associative capacity

I’d like to focus in more detail on how novel patterns of coherence form. The emergence of new patterns in a conversation depends first upon the responsiveness of its participants: their capacity to be aware of each other’s ideas and emotions and to have that awareness influence (constrain) their responses. Self-organizing conversation constrained by mutual awareness gives rise to an interaction in which there appears to be a thread of connection between each act of communication (between each gesture and its response, in the language of Mead (1962)). It could scarcely be considered a conversation if the participants were acting totally without awareness or consideration of each other’s gestures – there would be no true responses. Nor would it be a conversation if the participants were fully aware of each other but enacting a prescribed, predetermined sequence of behaviors without any flexibility to adjust or modify their gestures (following a script, for example). Thus, responsiveness is a precondition for novelty.

³ I should point out here that it is not necessary for the elements woven together in our coherence of meaning to be internally consistent. Our realities are filled with contradiction, ambivalence and paradox..

The capacity of the participants to form new associations between themes also affects the emergence of novelty. Although a gesture originates in a particular meaning and intention on the part of the gesturer, the way it is perceived and interpreted depends upon much more than the nature of the gesture itself. Characteristics of the responder such as personal history, aesthetic sense, responsiveness, concreteness, imaginative capacity and current psychological and emotional state affect the associations that will form in the complex responsive processes of his mind. Although there are an infinite number of potential associations that could be formed around any given gesture, only a few actually emerge. Patterns and themes already established in his thinking may favor associations that fit into the existing patterns and contribute to their stability, but it is also possible for new associations to be formed. The response, in turn, can reflect back on the original gesture and modify its meaning – *even to the gesturer*. The response will also influence the meaning of all subsequent gestures and responses, and, potentially, of the whole conversation.

A third factor affecting the emergence of novelty is diversity. If everyone in a conversation holds similar views, the conversation will be free of conflict, but it's unlikely to produce any new patterns of understanding. The wider the variety of themes that can be introduced into the conversation, the greater is the opportunity that exists for new associations to form and propagate into new patterns of meaning. Differences of age, personal background, and experience can provide for more diversity in the perception and interpretation of gestures. However, there is often a tradeoff between diversity and responsiveness. The more widely divergent the views or backgrounds of the participants in a conversation, the harder it may be for them to hear or understand one another.⁴

There are also limits to novelty: to be acknowledged and evaluated, the emerging response must have some recognizable degree of connection with meanings already present. Lacking that, a response would appear to be nonsensical or wouldn't be recognized as a response at all; it would not be propagated.⁵ Physiologic reactivity,

⁴ This is a matter of group identity and its role in anxiety modulation. See Elias (1991) and Smith (1999).

⁵ We might adapt Vygotsky's term "zone of potential development" (ZPD) for use here (Holzman, 2000). Although he was referring to the range of potential possibilities into which an individual might be about to grow, we can apply the same idea to a set of possible associations and meanings that might next emerge,

preference for the familiar, themes from personal histories and other factors can constrain the novelty in an individual's associations, just as responsiveness constrains novelty in a public conversation.

Unpredictability, reciprocal influence and constraint

The gesturer cannot predetermine or control the ultimate meaning of the gesture. Instead, she acts with an intention and then observes and responds to the response her gesture elicits. The response itself evokes the gesturer's own idiosyncratic perspective (the gesturer is now the responder to the responder's gesture). Over the course of the interaction, patterns of meaning form in the iterative interactions of gesturing and responding. The original gesture helps to form the pattern, but the pattern also establishes or completes the meaning of the original gesture.⁶

In an ongoing looping process of reciprocal influence, gestures and responses form and are formed by each other. The iterative interactions of this dynamic create the potential for small differences, disturbances or accidents to be amplified rapidly into new transformative patterns; all large patterns once began as small differences or disturbances. Which small changes are damped out, which are amplified, and what patterns they will give rise to are all entirely unpredictable. But the newly emerging patterns are also constrained. In the case of our three moviegoers, the themes may evolve unpredictably but the conversation will not suddenly shift into a language that A,B and C do not speak; physical movements that emerge as part of the conversation will still be subject to limitations of physiology, anatomy and the law of gravity; and there are strong neurochemical and social constraints that the conversation may not violate. Thus we see in conversational process two properties - the amplification of difference and bounded

given what is already present – what “becoming” is possible given what is currently “being.” Both the development of an individual self and the formation of thoughts and shared patterns of meaning represent continuous processes of coherence emerging from non-linear, iterative responsive interactions. ZPD could thus refer to the set of imminent new patterns of coherence that are capable of emerging at any given moment. Potential patterns outside that zone are not capable of coming into being at that particular time.

⁶ The same associative-aesthetic process that shapes the interpretation of single gestures and enactment of responses could also be at work in determining which new potential patterns of meaning actually emerge from the sequence of gestures, which appear briefly and are then discarded, and which are never expressed in the first place.

instability – that are the hallmarks of non-linear dynamics or complexity, and we can now appreciate the meaning of the term Complex Responsive Process.

Intentionality and paradox

The individual participants in public and private conversations are usually unconscious of the process by which meaning emerges – the way in which themes are organizing their consciousness awareness. The conversation of A, B and C – and their emerging understanding of the movie – can take its own course, without any deliberate monitoring of or intentional efforts to direct the process. However, this is not always the case. Individuals may consciously and intentionally seek to influence the evolving pattern of meaning, to direct it towards a pattern they desire. Here arises a paradox: although they may perceive themselves as acting upon the process from outside, they are always within it – it can never be otherwise. But by the same token, the understanding that the very urge to act in this way is itself a product of the complex responsive processes in which the individuals are participating does not alter either their experience of having and acting on that urge, or the potential of those actions to actually influence the process.⁷

In the complex responsive processes of a conversation, themes are self-organizing;⁸ the conversation's course is not planned, directed or pre-determined, but neither is it random. Self-organization and the emergence of both stable and novel patterns occur at the boundary of order and disorder. The disorder is present in the form of diversity and the idiosyncratic and unpredictable nature of responses to gestures (for all the reasons discussed above) and unanticipated disturbances in the environment. The order (or constraint) is provided by implicit (and occasionally explicit) underlying “rules” of interaction (which themselves are patterns of relating propagated from earlier moments in the conversation into the present). There are general cultural rules and conventions of conversation (e.g., use of the grammar and vocabulary of the language, etiquette, conventions for the expression of aggression, and so forth) and local rules specific to a

⁷ This calls to my mind M.C. Escher's famous image of two hands emerging from an artist's tablet to draw each other.

⁸ Note that it is the themes, that are self-organizing not the individuals. This is one of the salient differences between CRP and Complex Adaptive Systems as theories of human organizations.

given subculture (in our example, this particular group of friends). Both sets of rules shape and are shaped by the power dynamics and role structures embedded in the relationships between participants, and have important implications for the degree of diversity and difference that can be expressed within the group. The rules of interaction are thus important constraints on the conversation, so changing the rules of interaction significantly alters the potential for what new patterns of meaning and relating can emerge.

We've now considered some of the basic elements of the theory of Complex Responsive Process. We've seen the dynamics of non-linearity or complexity in the reciprocal feedback loops of iterative interactions as gestures evoke responses, and at the same time, responses alter the meaning of gestures. We've seen how patterns can propagate themselves, and also how small differences can be amplified to become transformative patterns. And we've seen how responsiveness, diversity, associative capacity and the rules of interaction are all critical attributes affecting the flow of conversational process and its potential for producing novel patterns of meaning.

Working in and with organizations

Let's now consider what implications this theory has for how one works in and with an organization.⁹ Let me reiterate three key points that will be relevant to our present consideration of organizational consultations:

1. The capacity of a conversation to form novel patterns of meaning and relating depends on the participants' responsiveness – the degree to which they perceive each other's gestures and affective states (consciously or unconsciously) and modify their own responses accordingly.
2. The potential for novelty to emerge in a conversation depends on the originality and breadth of associations made by participants (the "associative richness"). Associative richness, in turn, depends on the diversity of gestures and other stimuli available to the conversation (the substrate from which associations are

⁹ I've written this in the language of consultant/consultation, but it applies equally well to a change initiative undertaken by a leader, manager or group member.

formed) and on the extent to which the participants use them to form, publicly offer and retain new associations (their associative capacity).

3. The themes in the conversation about the conversation itself – what can be said or done by whom, and to whom – constrain the conversation. This aspect of conversation (sometimes referred to as “process communication”) consists of themes about the here-and-now state of relationship and power, and is expressed predominantly in the language of non-verbal behavior rather than in words (Cohen-Cole, 1991; Silverman, 1998).

Thus, the theory of Complex Responsive Process highlights qualities of responsiveness, associative capacity, and diversity as crucial to the emergence of novelty. As we re-examine these qualities specifically in the context of organizational conversations and organizational change, we can make several observations.

First, the quality of responsiveness in an organization reflects the ability and willingness of participants to perceive and respond to each other; to be present to one another and express themselves more authentically; and to invite and attend to each other’s gestures.

Second, the degree of diversity present in an organization reflects the heterogeneity of the people who participate in it *and* the degree to which they make public their individual differences rather than conceal them, thus making their diversity available to each other and to the organizational conversation.

Third, the ability and willingness of people participating in an organization to create and articulate novel associations in both their silent and public conversations depends upon their inherent creativity, the breadth of their gaze (that is, how narrowly or broadly their attention is focused), the criteria by which they and others evaluate potential associations, and the anticipated social consequences of expressing something new.

Finally, the responsiveness, diversity, and associative capacity in an organization are themselves themes forming and formed by the organization’s conversation about the nature of its own conversation and patterns of relating. These are themes about such issues as: “can you trust people around here or will they stab you in the back?” “Is it okay to talk about feelings?” “Can longstanding policies and procedures be challenged?” and “Are you allowed to disagree with the boss?” Such patterns of relating are often referred

to as organizational culture (a reification) giving the impression that the organizational conversation takes place within the milieu of a culture. But in fact, the culture *is* the conversation: self-organizing patterns of power relations and meanings that are continuously created and recreated in the living present. These themes organize the experience and behavior of the participants who, themselves, form these themes, and whose physiology (genetics, neurohumoral states, etc.) constrains their emergence.

These principles derived from Complex Responsive Process have practical implications for understanding the purpose, methods and assessment of organizational change consultations. These will vary according to the nature of the intended change.¹⁰ If the goal is to reduce change – to increase consistency in a process – the theory of Complex Responsive Process suggests that one should reduce responsiveness, diversity and associative capacity. The ultimate fulfillment of this goal is automation – the removal of human beings from the process altogether. It is difficult and unpleasant for human beings to perform repetitive tasks without variation; conversation, one of the most fundamental activities of our social species and an activity that cannot help but lead to novelty, must be stifled.

Of primary interest and relevance for us are organizational change processes in which change is desirable, particularly changes that lead to increased engagement, collaboration, flexibility and creativity. This kind of change is supported by the core factors of responsiveness, diversity and associative capacity. But here we encounter a problem. Complex Responsive Process is an empty theory in that it can tell us how continuity and novelty emerge in patterns of meaning and relating, but the patterns can as readily be evil as good. So as we act on our attention to foster ‘good’ organizational change (whatever that means in a given setting), we need more than just a theory of relating; we need an ethics of relating.

¹⁰ I want to reiterate here the paradox inherent in holding an intention to form that which one is being formed by. The intention itself arises within the conversation and not external to it. In the midst of the processes of relating, as a participant, one can reflect on one’s surroundings, make interpretations and judgments, act on that basis, and have one’s actions have some effect. Nevertheless, the fact that intentions can sometimes be realized – albeit unpredictably and rarely in the form that was originally envisioned – does not imply that one should expect to be able to direct, design or control the change process.

Towards an ethics of relating: three views

Griffin (Griffin, 2001) characterizes ethics as “a matter of our accountability to each other in our daily relating to each other,” and adds that “what is ethical emerges as themes that organize our experience of being together” (p 163). So ethics form and are formed by our interactions in a specific situation and context – they are socially constructed. Griffin is careful to avoid any statements of principles or ethics that would be context independent, that is, grounded in anything other than the complex responsive processes of relating in the living present. In his view, the ethics by which an organizational consultation is judged are a set of interpretations and meanings that emerge in the same processes that create the intention to change the organization in the first place (and that create the roles and identities of consultant and client). So even as we find ourselves embarking upon a consultation, an ethical framework will already be forming in the constructed meaning of gestures in the organizational conversation in which we participate, and that framework will be further developed as the conversation continues.

McNamee and Gergen, social constructionists *par excellence*, seem to flirt with a universal proposition in proposing their ethic of “relational responsibility”:

We hold relationally responsible actions to be those that sustain and enhance forms of interchange out of which meaningful action itself is made possible. If human meaning is generated through relationship, then to be responsible to relational processes is to favor the possibility of intelligibility itself – of possessing selves, values, and the sense of worth. Isolation represents the negation of humanity. (McNamee & Gergen, 1999) p18

As social constructionists, they recognize the “historically contingent” nature of “beliefs about the world and self, about worthy and unworthy actions” (p 20). But they also suggest that “relationally responsible actions” are “those that sustain and enhance” relationship to enable the construction of meaning, values and identities, implying that it is irresponsible to do otherwise. Relational responsibility as a value would thus seem to be outside of and prior to discourse. Their argument culminates in non-linearity and paradox: values sustain community and community sustains values. “Individual

relationships stabilize the real and the good” and at the same time create the potential for the real and the good (and the relationship itself) to be transformed. They appeal for a “multivocal inquiry” that appreciates the stabilizing function of values but also recognizes that values cannot be universal; “...‘there is no getting it right.’ Certitude walks hand in hand with eradication of the other” (p 20).

McNamee and Gergen’s formulation of relational responsibility resonates with the concepts of responsiveness and diversity that we have been exploring, but their notion includes more – it includes an attitude. Their version of responsiveness includes a commitment to maintaining a state of relatedness and an openness to being transformed – a belief that the creation of meaning and values (that relationship makes possible) is good, and that not engaging in relationship is inhuman, or bad. This clearly goes beyond our earlier formulation of responsiveness (“perceiving the other and modifying one’s responses accordingly”) which is a description, not an injunction. Similarly, their version of diversity explicitly *values* it – something to be sought and embraced – and does not merely note its consequences. Thus, a relationally responsible approach to organizational change would encourage relating, responsiveness and diversity because they are necessary for the creation of meaning, values and personal identities.

I take a simple, pragmatic approach to ethics, one that resonates with aspects of both of the perspectives above. Mine is an ethics of participation and enlightened self-interest; it amounts to honoring the Golden Rule: “Do unto others as you would have them do unto you,” or following Gandhi’s injunction, “Be the change you want to see in the world.”

These aphorisms take on new significance in light of Complex Responsive Process. We can rephrase Gandhi’s quote in the language of this theory to read, “Gesture repeatedly and authentically in accordance with your identity and intentions as they are emerging in conversation.” So I act with the mindfulness – and the hope – that the themes I add into the conversation might be propagated and amplified, contributing to the formation of the kind of reality I want to live in.

As a specific example, during organizational consultations, I often find myself experiencing an emerging intention to make undiscussable things discussable – feelings, for instance, or the dynamics of relationships between people right there in-the-moment.

I then begin to talk about my feelings, or about my experience of what's happening in the conversation. And so my feelings are introduced as a theme, and at the same time I've also introduced a new theme in the conversation about the conversation itself, namely that "this is a conversation in which feelings and relationships can be talked about directly; self disclosure is an option." Similarly, by my behavior in acting upon my beliefs of "trust the process" or "value diversity," I have introduced those themes into the conversation about the conversation (or reinforced them, if these themes were already there). In each moment, we can try to observe the themes that are organizing us and then act with the intention to either reinforce or change them.

One gesture will rarely be enough to change the conversation (although it does happen sometimes). Like the metaphor of the sand pile (not knowing which grain of sand dropped from above will cause an avalanche in the sand pile below), I cannot know which – if any – of my gestures will be amplified. Nor can I know if my gestures will end up eliciting a paradoxical response, driving the conversation farther away from the discussion of feelings, or whether in the next moment my identity and intention will be suddenly transformed such that I no longer think that talking about feelings is a good idea. These things are not knowable. But for as long as I feel a given intention, I can continue to act on it consistently and repeatedly, to live it. It brings me fully into the conversation; it's the most powerful thing I can do.

This much of my pragmatic ethics is consistent with Griffin's view of ethics as a situated and emergent coherence of themes, arising in the living present. But I am also in sympathy with McNamee and Gergen's assertion of a non-situated, overarching, ethical claim for relationship and responsiveness, for which I unabashedly use the term "love." To love or not is a choice we all make in each moment; there is nothing deterministic about it. But I believe that love precedes and makes social construction possible, and its goodness is a universal value that constrains social construction rather than arising from it (although the way we think and talk about it is very much subject to social construction). As evidence, I would cite the convergence of contemplative practices of many independently evolving traditions on the principles of service, profound interconnectedness and the ultimate unity of all things. Love as a basic organizing theme may have a biological basis (the opioid system or some other neurohumoral process) or it

may be mystical – a theme present in the universal conversation introduced from a source and in a manner that is beyond my fathoming.

In the practical context of my work as a consultant, the debate over situatedness or universality of ethics is moot; the values of respect, collaboration and creativity are already present in the conversations that lead to my engagement; they are why I get hired. The Institute of Medicine has identified good communication and relationships as an essential (and frequently lacking) factor in healthcare (Committee on Quality of Health Care in America, 2001). Fostering responsiveness is part of my brief.

Practical questions for reflecting upon consultations

From the foregoing consideration of theory and ethics, we can proceed to a more detailed consideration of organizational consulting. My goal here is to develop a set of questions that call attention to those aspects of the consultation process that the theory of Complex Responsive Process highlights as being particularly important. The questions can be used to reflect on a consultation while it is in progress, or to assess it after it is completed.

- 1) How do the consultation methods help the participants learn to attend more closely to what they are experiencing and how they are behaving – to what is actually happening in the organization? And conversely, in what ways might the methods be diverting attention elsewhere?

These questions resonate with the theme Ralph Stacey articulates in the last chapter of *Strategic Management and Organisational Dynamics* about noticing what is actually happening in organizations (Stacey, 2000), and with Ron Heifetz' conceptualization of adaptive work, facing (rather than displacing attention from) conflicts within the organizations, for example, between factions, or between stated versus actual values (Heifetz, 1994).

- 2) What effect do the methods have on the organization's capacity for fostering genuine presence and authentic relationships?

This question bears on the degree to which individuals will make themselves and their diversity available, and the freedom they will feel to

offer novel associations. It also has implications for the degree of relatedness, which affects coherence and (according to Self-Determination theory) the adoption of new behaviors (Ryan & Deci, 2000).

- 3) How do the methods improve the capacity of the organizational conversation to hold diversity and uncertainty while maintaining relatedness?

These capacities are directly related to conversational quality. Diversity is a substrate for the emergence of novelty. A greater acceptance of uncertainty may reduce anxiety (particularly on the part of leaders) and help people avoid premature closure on important questions strictly for the short-term comfort of having an answer.

- 4) How do the methods support or inhibit the kind of personal transformation that is required to move from a control to a relation orientation, from linear to non-linear thinking, from reductionism to awareness of context and interdependency?

This question reflects my longstanding interest in the personal growth involved in learning to let go of control – a change in one’s source of grounding and security. As Etienne Wenger puts it, “...there are few more urgent tasks than to design social infrastructures that foster learning.” (Wenger, 1998)p.225. I would include personal growth as a kind of learning, and suggest that there are important social implications involved in how organizations affect personal growth: the degree to which they foster development of a mature perspective on interdependence, or foster maintenance of a more immature perspective of absolutism and dependence.

- 5) How does the consultation help the participants become more aware of and comfortable with the idea of self-organizing process?

This is a refinement and narrowing of the foci of question (1) on awareness of individual and group process and question (4) on personal readiness to embrace unpredictability and relinquish anxiety-reducing fantasies of control.

- 6) How does the consultation foster opportunities to explore power issues?

This question draws more explicit attention to issues of power within the scope of question (1).

7) How does the consultation address issues of anxiety in the organization?

This question also expands the scope of question (1). Tom Smith has pointed out the central role of anxiety reduction as a core organizing principle of self-organizing social process (Smith, 2001). Applying insights from psychoanalysis and group analysis to organizational dynamics, Ralph Stacey describes how anxiety can disable thinking, but it can also engender interest and excitement (Stacey, 2000). There is some overlap of this new question with the focus of question (3), but anxiety is not the only issue influencing approaches to diversity and uncertainty, and diversity and uncertainty are not the only sources of anxiety.

8) What emerged from the consultation that was unexpected?

This question reminds the consultant (or whoever else is reviewing the consultation) that the consultation itself is a self-organizing and emergent process, and to keep the focus on complexity from itself becoming rigid.

9) To what extent do the methods of the consultation arise from the consultant's participation in the organizational conversation (as contrasted with being imposed a priori, as part of the consultant's usual *modus operandi*)? To what extent does the consultation allow sufficient opportunity and flexibility for group to find its own direction?

This question amplifies the spirit of question (8) and draws attention to the self-organizing nature of the consultation itself. Given the agenda of the consultation to increase conversational capacity and recognition of self-organization, the consultation will be all the more effective to the extent that it embodies those characteristics itself.¹¹

¹¹ I once had the opportunity to inspect the facilitator's guide and participant's workbook from a workshop series on leadership skills for managers conducted by a prestigious global consulting firm. The content was specified ahead of time (the educational deliverables, as it were) and format was tightly structured. The program's message of encouraging creativity and flexibility – the “empowerment” of subordinates – was entirely undermined by the heavily controlling format of the program, which gave little room to participants to shape their own learning. When I expressed this concern to one of the program's sponsors in the client organization, she acknowledged the irony, but said the consultant wanted to ensure the consistency of content across workshops to several hundred managers, given by multiple facilitators.

10) How was the consultant changed by the process of the consultation?

By virtue of participating in the emergent process, the consultant herself will be changed. New themes will be introduced and new patterns of coherence will be forming in her inner conversation. Tracking the nature of such changes can reveal important information about the nature of the consultation process; a lack of any identifiable change might be evidence of a low level of responsiveness and participation.

These questions call attention to the communication and relationship processes that are at the heart of creative emergence, according to the theory of complex responsive process. They focus on two levels simultaneously: within the organization in its everyday activity and in the consultation/change process itself.

Comment

The theory of Complex Responsive Process gives a strong theoretical rationale for attending to processes of communication and relationship as the central activity for improving organizational function. Such a focus on interpersonal process in organizations is certainly not new – this has been the central concern of the field of organizational development since the 1960s, if not earlier (Weisbord, 1978). But much of the work in this field was – and still is – based on the notion of experts (leaders and consultants) knowing and teaching the correct methods to participants, and on a machine metaphor for organizations with its implication that managers and consultants can step outside the organization and design it. The new perspective that complex responsive process brings is that the organization is not designed to any great degree; it emerges as patterns of coherence from the iterative interactions of all of its participants. Leaders cannot design and control organizational process (notwithstanding many common expectations of, projections on to and fantasies about leaders), but they can influence the process by the nature of their own participation in it, and by their ability to help raise the skill and awareness of others (Suchman et al., 2002). Ultimately, it is the capacity of the consultants and leaders to not-know and to be open to being changed themselves that

allows them to hold open the space for transformation and emergence in their organizations

CRP encourages us to pay careful attention to patterns of communication and relationship – how we are present in each moment - and reminds us that most of what we take to be “reality” is actually reified social process that is created anew in each moment. It calls attention to the possibility of change that is latent within every moment, and that small changes can propagate to become major changes; indeed, major change does not happen in any other way (notwithstanding our habit of retrospective storytelling that makes it seem like it was planned all along). For this reason, I find it a very hopeful theory (although CRP accounts for the emergence of destructive patterns, too), but at the price of having to come to terms with our fundamental lack of control, a matter to which we will return momentarily.

CRP provides a strong theoretical foundation for the practice of relationship-centered care (Tresolini CP and the Pew-Fetzer Task Force, 1994) and relationship centered administration (Suchman et al., 2002), which have heretofore been based largely in practical experience. It provides deeper insights into the nature of communication, group process and human experience.

Perhaps the most important practical contribution of complex responsive process – and, indeed, all of complexity science – is to offer legitimation for and remove the stigma of shame from our lack of control (Streatfield, 2001). Efforts to assert control, or at least to maintain the illusion, have led to untold waste and suffering. Embracing a complexity perspective involves focusing less on trying to assert control and attending instead to improving relational process (Suchman, 1998). By reducing anxiety, enhancing awareness of context and relationships and fostering greater receptivity and openness to being changed, a complexity perspective helps to increase the resourcefulness, flexibility and adaptability of an organization – the very characteristics that have enhanced survival and success of organisms and species throughout the ages.

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