

Engaging The Natural Tendency of Self-Organization

By

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There is a natural, pervasive tendency for all living systems to 'self-organize'. This can be seen throughout nature at all levels of scale from tiny bacteria to large ecosystems. A system is loosely defined here as a collection of similar things, a group. Since these things are similar in some way, there is some kind of shared identity that defines a sort of boundary around this collection of things.

People experience this tendency when they gather together to talk, work and play. This phenomenon is so pervasive and subtle that it's usually not even noticed. Yet it is happening all the time. People self-organize all the time around something that is important to them.

This natural tendency is powerful, yet subtle; it is like the current in a flowing river. Often people join the flow and engage purposefully with this tendency in their myriad conversations, in informal gatherings like family reunions or in high performance work teams. A common experience that many of us who have been managers have had, however, is in trying to impose our will on people through a command and control approach, when we have a specific task to do or a goal to reach. This is non-purposeful engagement with the natural tendency of self-organization. As we strive to get the job done, to complete the task or reach the goal, we bump up against this tendency to self-organize. Using the command and control approach is like trying to take the twists and turns out of a river and make it flow in the way we want. Self-organization exists in organizations of all sorts all the time.

Much of the vast literature on management and leadership is directed at ways that one's will can be imposed on this tendency to self-organize to accomplish the tasks at hand. Most managers crave stability, reliability, predictability and control in their organizations. While imposing conditions like these is necessary for machines like an airplane, the approach suppresses the purposeful vitality, energy and creativity of people in

organizations. Imposing one's will becomes command and control management when it is pushed too far. In this imposing-mode of managing and leading, people in the organizations self-organize in ways that are seen by the organization as non-purposeful becoming lethargic, unresponsive and resistant to change. Such organizations behave as if they are mechanical things that must be pushed and shoved to make happen the things that management actually wants to happen. These organizations behave as if they are *unhealthy living systems: torpid and passive*. There is a growing frustration with this way of leading because of the less-than-hoped-for results, the effort required to keep things moving, the lack of sustainability and the negative, self-organizing behavior that it generates in people in those organizations.

Since the early 1960's, much has been written about teams and how some of them can accomplish extraordinary things. When we read between the lines, we see that many of those teams that do best are the ones that have learned to purposefully engage the natural tendency for people to self-organize. They are called "high performing work teams" because they accomplish so much.

As leaders and managers, we always have a *choice* to make regarding the way we engage this natural tendency for people to self-organize. We can find ways to engage this tendency purposefully or we can try to non-purposefully impose our wills onto it. There are times when the situation is such that one of these choices may be more appropriate than the other one. However, if we can purposefully engage this natural tendency most of the time, we will be in the most sustainable position. This is truly not about "good" or "bad," but rather, it's about choosing the most effective way to lead in a particular situation, at a particular point in time. Leadership is very much a temporal process.

While most managers have learned how to use command and control management and leadership processes, only a few have learned how to use management and leadership processes that purposefully engage the natural tendency to self-organize.¹ Often, this is based on the intuitive sense of leaders who know that the command and control processes aren't very effective over the long term.

Increasingly, we are finding a language and models that are extremely useful in working purposefully with this natural tendency of self-organization (Knowles, *ibid.*). Combining powerful models and explicit

¹ Richard N. Knowles. *The Leadership Dance, Pathways to Extraordinary Organizational Effectiveness*. Niagara Falls, NY, USA. The Center for Self-Organizing Leadership. 2002.

terminology with our intuitive insights provides an effective way to purposefully engage the tendency of self-organization. I term management and leadership processes that purposefully engage the natural tendency to self-organize, “Self-Organizing Leadership[®].” Where we purposefully engage the tendency of self-organization, vitality, energy and creativity increase and intensify and our organizations behave as if they are *healthy living systems*. This way of leading is centered on the way managers and leaders choose to engage and be in relationship with the people in their organizations. The fundamental idea speaks to the nature of relationships as they are developed and expressed in conversations. Ralph Stacey is leading explorations into the importance of conversations in organizations in his work on complex responsive processes (CRP).²

Much good work is being done to help us understand the deeper principles behind the way self-organization unfolds. These theoretical foundations are critical in building a solid groundwork for this important work for leaders. Complex responsive processes (CRP) look at the conversations of leading as temporal events. With the CRP approach, there is direct engagement with people and no separation from what is happening. On the other hand the theory of complex adaptive systems (CAS) looks at systems and organizations as things to be acted upon. With the CAS approach the engagement is with something different from us. Both CRP and CAS approaches are very useful in helping to develop deeper insights as to what is happening in organizations, providing that their distinction is understood and made explicit.

Interestingly, to purposefully engage the natural tendency of self-organization, all we need to do is simply to start having the important conversations about the critical issues facing us and to invite others to join into the exploration. Three areas provide important conversational pathways and allow us to purposefully engage the process of self-organization. These three pathways are:

1. abundantly sharing important, relevant information;
2. building interdependent relationships and trust, and
3. helping people find how they and their work fit into the whole picture—discovering meaning in their work.

These are the fundamental pathways for Self-Organizing Leadership. Authentic conversation, one person at a time, begins to open up the connections that are the medium of successful self-organization.

² Ralph D. Stacey. *Complex Responsive Processes in Organizations*. London: Routledge, 2000.

These authentic conversations must be about the questions and issues that are truly important and critical for the success of the work and the goals of the organization. These conversations may be difficult so it requires courage, concern, commitment and care to stay in the “heat” and find new ground on which we can build. We have to be open, honest and transparent as we do this together. *For transformation to occur we need to be engaged within the processes of the organization and not acting on the organization as if it was some external thing.*

There are a number of ways to open up these conversations. We can just start to share important, relevant information building trust and meaning as we talk and work together. We can engage in dialogue processes. We can ask questions about what we see or sense. We can use story-telling as a way for people to find meaning in what is happening. We can use the Open Space Technology of Harrison Owen³ to explore people’s interests in a particular subject. We can use the Future Search approach of Sandra Janoff and Marvin R. Weisbord to find out what is important to people and who cares enough to carry it forward⁴. David Cooperrider’s Appreciative Inquiry approach is also a great way to open up the conversation in a positive way⁵. Sometimes it is about having the hard conversations like Susan Scott talks about in *Fierce Conversations*.⁶ Sometimes it is using Glenda Eoyang’s approach to explore the difference that makes the difference⁷. The challenge is to keep the conversations open, flowing and authentic over time.

Most people find that developing our relationships by having these conversations together is quite stimulating and exciting. For many, it is the first time they may have been heard or taken seriously in their entire career. New ideas are shared, exciting possibilities discovered and opportunities may open up for significant improvement. Yet the ways to easily document the conversation, to keep the conversational space open, to keep the conversation alive and to carry it forward to others who need to be engaged are limited. It is important to simply and effectively document the critical questions and issues raised in the conversation so that the “space” can be

³ Harrison Owen. *Open Space Technology, A User’s Guide*. San Francisco. Barrett-Koehler Publishers. 1997

⁴ Marvin R. Weisbord and Sandra Janoff, *Future Search*. San Francisco, Barrett-Koehler Publishers, 1995

⁵ David L. Cooperrider, Diana Whitney, and Jacqueline M. Stavros, *Appreciative Inquiry Handbook*. San Francisco, Barrett-Koehler Publishers. 2005.

⁶ Susan Scott. *Fierce Conversations, Achieving Success at Work and in Life, One Conversation at a Time*. New York. The Berkley Publishing Group. 2002, 2004.

⁷ Edwin E. Olsen, Glenda H. Eoyong, Richard Beckhard, Peter Vaill. *Facilitating Organizational Change: Lessons from Complexity Science*. New York. Jossey-Bass/Pfeiffer. 2001.

held open to carry these conversations forward with those who may not have been initially involved.

One way to effectively address and document the critical questions and issues is through a cyclical progression of conversations that develop successively deeper and more coherent insights. In our experience in working in organizations, we have found that almost all the information that an organization needs to accomplish its work is already scattered among the various individuals within the organization. This open, honest progression of conversations provides a way to develop a shared understanding and awareness of all we know for everyone to see and experience. A path for transforming the organization and ourselves opens up as we move forward in the journey towards completeness.

This cyclical progression of conversations can be easily mapped onto a Process Enneagram© map (Knowles, *ibid*) to capture the ideas, to keep open the space for future conversations and to develop a living strategic plan. The progression begins with a conversation intended to collectively define a clear, compelling question or challenge that we are facing. Then we move on to a having a focused conversation about who we are, about our Identity. We then shift to defining our Intention so that we can develop a shared, co-created picture of just what we are trying to do to address question before us. The progression then moves on to conversations about the Issues and Tensions facing us and the dynamics of how our co-created Principles and Standards of behavior will enable us to work together more effectively. Co-created Principles and Standards will profoundly affect our Relationships as well as many of the issues we have already identified. The specific tasks and Work we'll do are the next focus. Then we look at how we will continue to share meaningful Information and Learn and Grow and discover our future together and then, as we complete the initial cycle, we look at how to best Structure and organize ourselves to accomplish the tasks needed to address the opening question. As we carry forward into more and more cycles and widen the conversation, other insights will emerge which can be added to the map we are creating. In this cyclical process we move up a spiral of learning and growth. This cyclical progression of conversations enables the development of a very high level of coherence, purposefulness, sustainability and will for action.

Control shifts from management edicts and pronouncements to the co-creation of what I term “the Bowl” (Knowles, *ibid*). The Bowl consists of the mission, vision, expectations, principles and standards of performance. The Bowl provides both order and focus for the organization and within the

Bowl people work with a high level of freedom to accomplish the tasks before them.

As we purposefully engage the natural tendency of self-organization in this way, the energy and creativity of people flows and the effectiveness of the organization usually improves significantly—often over 30-40%. Resistance to change almost disappears.

Some Thoughts on Emergence

As leaders engage the people in their organizations, it is useful to look at the sorts of behaviors that might emerge as the mode of engagement shifts. As mentioned earlier, leadership is very much a temporal process, and each moment is new.

In Knowles (ibid., pp 169-176), behaviors emerging from three different leading processes are described. These leading processes are embedded in the Process Enneagram© and each consists of three interdependent ideas (Knowles, ibid. P.30). In actual practice, these are all running all the time, but it useful for this analysis to take a reductionist approach and look at them as if they are separated.

The most basic leadership process is the Self-Organizing Leadership process consisting of the interaction of Identity, Relationship and Information. These conditions for self-organization first emerged for me in a Berkana Dialogue with Margaret J. Wheatley and a number of others in February, 1993.

Identity, Relationship and Information emerge as we engage in dialogue about questions and issues that are very important to us; that is, when we engage with the natural tendency of self-organization in purposeful ways. In reflecting on the importance of these conditions for self-organization I began to look at them from the perspective of their three-fold relationship.⁸ They can be seen and experienced as forces that are interacting all the time. In their interaction new behaviors emerge:

- When we have a clear sense of our Identity and an interdependent Relationship, as new Information becomes available, we can move into *action*;

⁸ Anthony G. E. Blake. *The Intelligent Enneagram*. Boston and London. Shambhala, 1996.

- When we have an interdependent Relationship and an abundance of Information, as we become more clear on our Identity, *meaning* emerges;
- When we have a clear sense of our Identity and an abundance of Information, as our Relationships become more interdependent, *trust* emerges.

Action, meaning and trust are critical to releasing energy, creativity and making extraordinary things happen.

A second leadership process that is embedded in the Process Enneagram is Operational Leadership which relates to the Issues we are facing, the Structures we create to try to address these Issues and the Work that needs to be done to solve the problem. From time-to-time, every organization needs to use this process. If this leadership process is over-used, however, it becomes the command and control process where things are imposed from the top and driven down into the organization; this is the non-purposeful engagement with the natural tendency of self-organization.

When the organization needs to move into the Operational Leadership mode and there has been clarity and coherence developed in the dialogue around the Process Enneagram; people are involved and know what is going on,

- When the Work is focused on fulfilling the Intention, and the Issues have been examined, as the Structure becomes more self-organizing, a *sense of urgency* emerges;
- When the Structure is self-organizing and the Work is focused on fulfilling the Intention, as the Issues are examined, a *clarity of purpose* emerges;
- When the Structure is self-organizing and the Issues have been examined, as the Work is focused on fulfilling the Intention, a *sense of purposefulness* emerges.

When the organization needs to move into the Operational Leadership mode and the management engages with the natural tendency of self-organization in non-purposeful

ways where the level of incoherence is high; people aren't involved and don't know what is going on,

- When the Work is unfocused and the Issues are unexamined, as Structure is imposed *fear and anxiety* emerge;
- When the Structure is imposed and the Work is unfocused, as they address the unexamined Issues *confusion* emerges;
- When the Structure is imposed and the Issues are unexamined, as they engage in unfocused Work *struggle* emerges.

Depending on the leader's choice in engaging the natural tendency of self-organization, vastly different outcomes are experienced.

A third leadership process that is embedded within the Process Enneagram is the Strategic Leadership Process which relates to the organization's Intention, its new initiatives, its Principles and Standards of behavior that are needed to support the new initiative and the Learning and Potential that can come out of their Work.

Depending on the choice of the leader's mode of engagement with the natural tendency of self-organization, very different outcomes emerge.

When the organization needs to move into the Strategic Leadership Process and they have purposefully engaged the people in the organization and the level of clarity and coherence are high; people are involved and know what is going on,

- When the people are open to learning and the Intentions are clear as they engage in co-creating the new Principles and Standards *hope* emerges;
- When the people have clear Intentions and their Principles and Standards have been co-created as they are open to new learning *growth and potential* emerge;
- When the people have co-created Principles and Standards and are open to learning as their

Intentions become more clear *new possibilities* emerge.

When the organization needs to move into the Strategic Leadership Process and management has engaged the natural tendency of self-organization in non-purposeful ways where the levels of incoherence are high; people aren't involved and don't know what is going on,

- When the learning is imposed and the Intentions are unclear as confusing Principles and Standards are imposed *cynicism* emerges;
- When the Intentions are unclear and they have confusing Principles and Standards as the learning is imposed *frustration* emerges;
- When they have confusing Principles and Standards and the learning is imposed as they address unclear Intentions, *resistance to change* emerges.

Therefore, if leaders purposefully engage with the natural tendency of self-organization, the people in their organization will tend to exhibit a mixture of behaviors like,

- a sense of urgency,
- clarity of purpose,
- purposefulness,
- hope,
- growth and potential and
- openness to new possibilities.

On the other hand, if leaders choose to engage with the natural tendency of self-organization in non-purposeful ways, the people in their organization will tend to exhibit a mixture of behaviors like,

- fear and anxiety,
- confusion,
- struggle,
- cynicism,
- frustration and

- resistance to change.

The choice is simple, but the execution can be difficult.

Some Examples:

The first example relates to a crisis like a fire, power outage, or major storm. When I experienced a fire, it was interesting to see just how people behaved. They self-organized around getting it out, cleaning up and getting back into production. People did extraordinary work together in teams that formed and re-formed as the tasks changed. There was a lot of energy and creativity in all they were doing. The management was so busy with all their tasks that they were not able try to do everything so the people stepped forward to do what was needed and did it quite successfully. However, once the crisis was over things reverted to the normal command and control management approach. Energy dropped, and creativity moved back underground.

You may have had this experience yourselves in those times when you were living through a crisis. I expect that there was a lot of self-organization going on during the big hurricanes in 2005, but what was reported related to the problems around the command and control efforts used by the Federal, State and Local governments.

Another example from the work-place will help to illustrate these ideas. When we began the project to convert from pneumatic to electronic process control systems at our DuPont Plant in Belle, WV, we involved the people deeply in the communications and planning processes. We intended to convert to the new chemical process control systems without maintaining parallel systems for transition and backup; rather we needed to make the conversions with no back up systems in place. This was a high-risk approach so we knew that all the people needed to be involved in the weekly project status reviews, planning sessions, design meetings, etc.; many of the operators and mechanics were sent to Honeywell School for computer training. All the information was shared on a continuous basis and interdependent relationships were developed. There was a lot of give-and-take in these meetings as everyone tried their best to make the project a success. At the

end of the project, the unit was started up without incident and made quality product in record time. This approach cut the costs and time in half from the original estimate of \$6,000,000 in investment and two years to implement. Then 15 more projects were successfully put into place in record time and at lower than forecast investment with out running any parallel processes clearly showing the success of these involvement processes.

In a third example using engagement processes like these, the Niagara Falls, N.Y. Leadership Team worked together with the Mayor in a way that resulted in cutting out \$15,000,000 from a \$62,000,000 budget over a 4-year period. This was the first time in the City's history for the Leadership Team to have worked together this way, and to have saved so much money in the process. Sharing information, building interdependent relationships and getting very clear on our mission to make the City as strong as possible were keys in this success.

Surely, most of you reading this paper can think of examples where well intended projects with high expectations were started from the top of the organization with little employee involvement, and the people resisted the changes, slowing things down to the point to where the organization lost energy and interest, just giving up in the effort. This has been an experience similar to many of the quality improvement efforts over the last 20 or so years. It's not the poor quality of the technology, but rather the lack of deep involvement of the people.

Conclusion:

As leaders, we have a choice to make about how we encourage and engage the natural tendency to self-organize. While historically leaders and managers have tried to impose their wills and resisted this tendency (and there will still be a few occasions when we still need to do this), we are finding that purposefully engaging the natural tendency to self-organize produces vital, coherent, energetic, creative, highly effective and more sustainable organizations. Self-Organizing Leadership provides pathways for leaders to effectively and purposefully engage the natural tendency of self-organization.