PlexusCalls

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Practical Uses of Complexity: Stories from Organizational Leaders

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DARREN STANLEY: --Career with Merck Pharmaceuticals and welcome to you Henri. And last but certainly not least we have Jim Roberts and Jim is on the West Coast with me, although not even in the same country. [tape problems] He is also senior vice president [tape problems] and he is now on board with the Plexus Institute where he is the coordinator for the Plexus partners program. So, welcome to you Jim.

JIM ROBERTS: Thank you. It is good to be here.

DARREN STANLEY: I'm glad to have all of you here. Perhaps to begin off, some thoughts and observations that I've had of late. And now that I've made this little transition to Vancouver, I now suddenly--

__: Darren, could you just speak a little louder.

DARREN STANLEY: Oh, sure by all means. I've had a bit more of an opportunity to go and look into my local bookstores and I guess it just never seems to amaze me as to the number of books that can be found in a number of different sections on management but also on leadership and since our conversation today is going to look at leadership, personal experiences from Dick, Henri and Jim here, I'm wondering if I might throw out the question of your personal senses or notions of what leadership is. And you can take this in no particular order. We can start on the West Coast if you wish and move eastwards. I will leave it open.

JIM ROBERTS: Oh, I think we ought to always start on the East Coast.

DARREN STANLEY: Okay. Then that's you, Henri.

HENRI LIPMANOWICZ: What a simple question, right?

DARREN STANLEY: Well, one would think so.

HENRI LIPMANOWICZ: Well, I will tell you a little story then about my beginning as a leader. I was just a kid, almost. I was 30 years old and I was sent to fill in as the country manager of a small organization and I think I was very lucky in that respect

because it was small and I had to learn and how to do everything. But the major thing in connection with leadership that I learned, because I was in a foreign country, it immediately became very obvious to me how much interdependency there was within the group and I certainly couldn't succeed without the local people participating in the process and that I was quite dependent on them, since I was a foreigner, to be able to accomplish anything.

And I think from that beginning, I decided that my definition of being a leader was, in those days, helping others to be as successful as possible and that, in the process, I felt quite confident if I could do this, I would be successful myself. And that's where it started for me in those days.

DARREN STANLEY: And Dick, do you have any initial thoughts, perhaps, as we begin?

DICK KNOWLES: I think leadership is a word that has many meanings. One form of it is that when I was called a leader in DuPont, somebody planted me with a name and therefore I became a leader. So the title bought that but I didn't have the slightest idea in the world what I was supposed to do. I think if we move more towards self-organizing systems, the kind of leadership Henri describes becomes much, much more real. We help people to be the best they can be. We help to set up conditions and hold conditions so people can talk and share ideas and things become more coherent and effective. To me that's kind of the new role for leaders to be moving into. And they can emerge anywhere in an organization regardless of the title you happen to carry. Almost anybody who is willing to make a difference can step out and become a leader in one way or another.

JIM ROBERTS: I was interested in hearing Henri's story. I have a somewhat similar story in the first role, I guess visible role, as a leader. I was a new public health service officer in the National Center for Health Services Research and came in and there was a grant program that was funding the precursor organization, the PSROs, which are now (?)IOs, regional review organizations and this other guy and I were given seven grantees. We had just come out of our residencies and we knew very little in a formal sense about quality and quality measurement.

And we were asked to put together a conference, the first conference of all these new grantees, and very little idea how you put together a conference and let alone what it should focus on. And I think we came out where Henri came out: the only way that conference was going to be a success and a project was going to be a success is if we

could listen hard to the, in this case, the grantees and understand what they were trying to accomplish, what their goals were and where they were at the moment. And, for me, it pushed me very heavily towards the skill of listening.

You're in a leadership role, maybe a formal leadership role. But the ability to listen intently and persistently while having in mind maybe where things need to go, even that vision thing gets changed as you listen and understand further what's possible and what the dreams of other people are. So, from the very early stages of my career in leadership and the skill to listen was made clear to me because I was in this fire and I had to find some way not to get burned. So that was one strategy I used.

HENRI LIPMANOWICZ: Well, one of the things that I think for me has become much clearer in the later years is the, and I'm pulling(?) on your notion of listening. The single most important thing before doing anything for a group of people is to make sense to what is going on. And making sense requires listening to the stories of the various people that are involved in the experience. And I would think that one of the things that has become much clearer to me through my involvement in complexity is how much we live in the world of multiple realities, that each one of us has a different experience of the same thing. And that the normal thing is for people to have different views and that part of the process of making sense of what is going on is to accept that reality and listen to all the different stories from the participants and use that as the basis for making sense.

And very often I think one of the important roles of the leader is just to help in that process because in many situations, after you've made sense of what is going on, quite often, it is almost obvious what to do, not always but in many situations. That is the most critical step. And I think it is an important thing to emphasize because there is so much of a tendency to go directly into an action mode, to start immediately discussing, "What are we going to do?" and skipping the most important step, which is listening to each other, listening to the story, and making sense of what is going on before even talking about where does one go from there.

DICK KNOWLES: I think that is really good and it really relates to an experience I had in West Virginia when we were making a big conversion on our control computers and I had decided we would not run parallel but rather we would, to save time and money, work together and tear out the old system and put in the new one, which was a bit risky. And it was just like you're saying, Henri, there is a lot of listening but there was also an environment where people could really tell the truth as they saw it and be okay. And people could feel safe in doing that. And then we listened at a level were we had to

go beyond just what people were saying because we had some people in the room in the conversation who didn't have a high school education and we also had Ph.D.s.

The guys without the Ph.D.s and the gals would be talking about what they knew from experience and it was hard for the Ph.D.s to listen to what they were really saying because often the technical language was not correct. So if we listened deeply, we learned together, and then we could do as you said, a lot of things just about became self evident.

JIM ROBERTS: This sense making thing-- You know, there seems to be a lot of conversation about that and sometimes what I hear in those conversations is, it's the leaders job to help, to make sense for other people and one goes about that by gathering opinions and perspectives and so forth and then you sort of make sense. You declare what sense is to the people you're leading and I wonder whether that's really it or is it more that you're setting up a process where the various points of view are heard and the sense making gets done by the team with the leader's help, obviously, but--

HENRI LIPMANOWICZ: You just change one word in what you were saying, and you're much closer to it. Instead of making sense 'for' other people, it's making sense 'with' other people.

JIM ROBERTS: Yeah. Yeah. Recognizing we all come with different perspectives and we make sense from those perspectives, and all the perspectives bring different truths. We need to have that sense-making together so we can hear and listen and begin to get that picture of what the whole situation looks like.

HENRI LIPMANOWICZ: And my personal observation is when you have the conversation with a group of people to try to make sense of what is going on, you can never know, you can never anticipate where the contribution will come from and in what from. It is really kind of a group process.

DICK KNOWLES: It's been my experience as well.

HENRI LIPMANOWICZ: And if it is not a group process, then you end up with probably the wrong interpretation if you don't have-- We're talking about one of the roles of the leader. I think one of the roles of the leader is to help making sure that the right people are involved and that you don't get into process that exclude too many people that are essential to figuring out what is going on but also to implement whatever is going to be decided. And so the role of the leader as somebody that helps including others is important.

DICK KNOWLES: Yeah, I agree with you entirely. And each time we get together we need to ask, "Do we have the right people here? Who needs to be here?" And coming into this conversation in a leadership position I began to realize it was much more effective for me to have questions than to try to come up with answers. And the answers would come, as you say, Henri, from almost any place. And if I came in with answers, I shut that all out.

DARREN STANLEY: Dick, I wonder if the question, "How does one know who needs to be involved," make sense in the larger context or what might it mean if not an individual labeled as a leader saying, "I need this person, this person, this person."

DICK KNOWLES: I think in the business context, which has been my experience, when we come together around some particular task or issue and, in that regard, if it's a customer service problem, the question becomes, "Who are the people who are interfacing with customers," and it's not necessarily those identified on the organization chart. And it may be someone that the top person, like me, setting up the meeting has missed. So we need to be open to the question, "What is the system we're having a conversation about and the system needs to have its voice in the room from the different perspectives.

With me a lot of times it was neighbors, in the chemical plant, bringing in people from outside the community to talk about some of these things. Where in Niagara Falls here, last week when we got the major developers in the city together with the mayor, we invited a reporter in from *The Niagara Gazette*. That was another part of the system although everybody was a little bit on edge having a reporter in the room.

JIM ROBERTS: Yeah, I'll bet. How did it go?

DICK KNOWLES: It went quite well. It was a lot of good exchange and people were able to begin to speak up around what they're doing, where's the progress. They had questions for each other. I worked very hard to keep it from becoming a session where everybody would beat up on the mayor, which is our pattern of behavior here. Got a little hell from the newspaper because I had been trying to keep people purposeful and talking together and not letting it degenerate just into a gang(?) session. So that was an interesting little piece in the editorial. That was the first time I made the editorials in the paper. I wouldn't play the game for the reporter.

HENRI LIPMANOWICZ: Well, one of the important ideas that complexity reminds us of is that we are all connected. So when you ask the question, who should be involved, if I look at the way I was thinking some 30 years ago and the way I am

thinking now, I think that the traditional way of answering this question is to try to figure out the minimum number of people that you need in order to get something done or to figure out something or whatever. So the traditional way of answering the question is to look at, "Who is it that I absolutely have to get involved in this and who are the right people?"

When you start thinking from a complexity perspective, you approach it from the other end. You start from saying, a priori, everybody should be involved. And now I have to justify who should not be involved in the process and why? Why is it that I can proceed with whatever it is that you're dealing with without involving everybody that is part of the structure or whatever. And that's a pretty striking difference for me.

DICK KNOWLES: Yes, it is. And that's why, each time we have to ask the question, "Who needs to be here," because it keeps evolving and other insights can come out about who needs to be here.

JIM ROBERTS: How do you deal with a situation where it looks like at least, and maybe truly is, there has to be a decision made quickly and how do you deal with this tension between the need, or apparent need for a quick decision, and the importance of involvement to create a better solution and more support for that solution?

DICK KNOWLES: Where I come out on this is, there are times when we need to make a quick decision and that might be quite legitimate. If we're centered around self-organizing leadership and that's were we are most of the time, now and then people will understand if we have to get quite operational as you are talking about there. I watch the city manager here in Niagara Falls do that beautifully one day in a leadership meeting. We were in the middle of doing the budget and there was a lot of fur flying because we were having to cut a lot of money out and jobs were at stake. And there were a lot of people who were stabbing each other in the back and back talking.

...(Inaudible) in our leadership meeting, "I don't want anybody talking about another department head in your own department. Just stop the rumor mill." And then he said, 'But I want to go back and look at the model we've developed around self-organizing leadership and I want each of you to speak about that model in terms of this edict and why it makes sense." And they were all able to connect it back in. And that was, I thought, quite an elegant thing that he had done there, to recognize it.

When we go to that operational mode from time to time, we pay a little bit of a price in terms of people being shut out. If we overdo it we degenerate into command and control type of mode, which many organizations are caught in. That 's why I call it

the dance. And it takes an awful lot of careful consciousness on the part of the person who is leading this thing to pay attention to what is going on and what we need to do and how do we keep this thing in balance.

HENRI LIPMANOWICZ: My comment about speed is that: most decisions-- A decision doesn't become a real decision until things get done. So what one needs to look at is how much time is it going to take to actually be implemented? So you can have a quick decision made at some top level. It's not real until something actually happens and something gets done with it. And so if you look at what goes on in organizations, very often quick decisions are made at the top without involving the right people. Actually, it takes forever to implement or it will never get done. People get concerned always about efficiency; what is important is effectiveness.

And if you have the traditional cascade of going from top down through the layers of the organization, particularly if you are talking about a global company, where you have different countries, it can takes weeks and months. So you've made a quick decision on the top but it's going to take a long time before it actually gets into the frontline and by the time it gets there it may have nothing to do with what you have decided at the top.

JIM ROBERTS: That's good. It is like learning isn't learning until you apply it. It's only information but it's real learning when you actually apply it. A decision isn't a decision until something actually happens.

HENRI LIPMANOWICZ: Exactly.

DICK KNOWLES: And in Henri's example there, the quick decision is often the long answer. If we can restrain ourselves and have more conversation up front, implementation often goes like gangbusters and can be very, very fast. And so your total elapsed time is shorter even though you spend a little more time up front talking.

HENRI LIPMANOWICZ: Well, we can pick up on the example that you were talking about, budget cuts. Those are the kind of things that happen in every company at some point or another. There is some bad period, some bad year or whatever and expenses have to be cut. Well, the traditional way of doing that, which is supposed to be efficient, is to allocate the cuts so you start at the top and you say, "I need that much money," and then you break it down proportionately to the units below that. The next level of management does the same thing for what is below them. And people are given a target at each level. This is the cascade process.

Now, that process, to start with, is very, very quick and very efficient. But the net result of it is that it is usually very destructive and it is a process that turns into, that takes a crisis and makes a worse crisis out of it because everybody starts scurrying and starting to find ways to deal with it. And it's very divisive. It is very ineffective from an organizational point.

__: You often don't get as much as you might have gotten--

HENRI LIPMANOWICZ: Whereas the other way would be to start from this, "We have a problem. We are in trouble," and get everybody involved. "Let's work together to figure out how we are going to deal with the situation," getting people from the front line up, making it a bottom up exercise and sysing, "What are the ideas that you have that could improve efficiency, that could reduce waste, that could save money, that could postpone things, and so forth and just getting people in groups working together. And within a couple of days you will have not just valid information but you will have-- The people who are going to have to implement this will have been involved in the process and will be onboard and will know what to do and will have worked together so you have transformed the crisis into something else, that gets people closer to each other working together. And it's a very, very different way of looking at things.

DICK KNOWLES: We were having a problem at our plant with ...(inaudible) de murage(?), which is the rent we pay people for their tank trucks sitting at our plants until we could empty them. And we had been running about $800 thousand dollars a year, which is an awful lot of money just to throw away. And I'd been carping at the organization for months, totally unsuccessfully. And after we had gone to teams, and we didn't even have first line supervisors in the plant, running the operations, the operators got into it and they said, "Well, we can fix that."

So unbeknownst to me they began to fix it. And all of a sudden I saw the de murage numbers coming down. I inquired what was happening and they told me the operators were going to fix it and to stay out of it. And by the end of six months, they cut that bill from $800 thousand to $100 thousand and we were able to maintain it at that kind of a level. If I had imposed a goal on the organization, I would have said, "Well, let's cut out half of it," and everybody have moaned and groaned and we wouldn't have gotten that. But because they had the information, they knew what we were needing to do and we had reasonably good working relationships and the operators said, "Well, we can fix it." And my only job in the whole thing was to call a manager of traffic in

headquarters and ask him to move the truck when the operators called him up and told him the truck was ready to move.

JIM ROBERTS: You know, one of the things that complexity has helped me with it how I think about agendas. And leaders, wherever they are in the organization, often exercise leadership through control of agendas, meeting agendas, team agendas and so forth. And I have moved much more, I guess, completely away from agendas where things are timed and the expectation is you'll do it in the order listed and the timeframes laid out in the agenda to a much more open, exploratory, at the most, let get the issues we want to talk about written down so people know, generally, what territory we are going to cover.

But take away that control and I've gotten kind of mixed reactions to it, particularly initially with a group who find comfort in knowing exactly how long we're going to spend on things. But those kinds of meetings are not very inventive; not much emerges from those kinds of meetings. The ones with more openness do. I just wondered if you guys have had similar transitions in your thinking about the use of agendas.

DICK KNOWLES: I think that my experience is quite like yours. It is really key to come in with the questions and the issues that are relevant for everybody and then just open it up. But the conversation needs to keep connecting to work that is important for the organization. If this doesn't, people can go off on all kind of tangents, doing what you tried to do there, with the way that you bring them into the room with that things that are important, Jim, the way to keep it focused.

JIM ROBERTS: But you may not know what those questions are, right Dick?

DICK KNOWLES: Sure, but you can start with those and ask, "Are there any others we ought to look at?" Just open it up.

JIM ROBERTS: Or let those questions emerge--

DICK KNOWLES: Sure.

JIM ROBERTS: --From the discussion, right?

HENRI LIPMANOWICZ: I've gone through a similar evolution and with the same difficulties that you describe, Jim. I think where I am right now is, I've come to the conclusion that in order to be comfortable with this, one needs to have had a number of experiences of what self-organization is and what happens when you let a group self-organize. And one needs to experience emergence personally, not as a leader but as a member on a number of occasions. And I think the other people that you are working

with need to have a similar experience in order to develop the comfort that it is okay to go through this messy transition and disorganized period in order to get to something that looks like order or in order to get to a new idea or in order to get to a new insight or in order to make progress that otherwise wouldn't happen as a result of the interaction among the people.

But you need that confidence and the confidence can only come from experience because inevitably when you have this sort of agendless type of meeting or loose thing, you go through periods where your stomach turns around a few times and you sort of say, "Are we going anywhere? Is this going to work or not?" I mean that's my feeling.

JIM ROBERTS: What is an example of that, Henri, from your personal--

HENRI LIPMANOWICZ: An example of?

JIM ROBERTS: Of a meeting where you just let it go without a lot of structure to it.

HENRI LIPMANOWICZ: Well, I think that a lot of my experience in recent times have been in the context of work that we've done at Plexus Conferences, some participation I've had in some Open Space meetings, attending a meeting of the group of people that are practitioners of Open Space and seeing the richness of the conversations that materialize when people create their own agenda and then break up into small groups to discuss the thing where they have a common interest and how quickly people arrive at resolutions.

Some of it has been in the connection of me arranging this with some groups and seeing how people who have never done this made progress on some issues in an hour, and hour and a half, issues that had been floating around the office for months without any resolution or any progress.

DICK KNOWLES: I think the that couple of points that need to be really clear are issues that have been floating around the office. You come in-- There is some kind of a focus and it is related to questions that are important to participants. Those kinds of meetings I've found a little bit different than some of the things like a Plexus meeting where you get a group of people together and different things come out. But in both of them it can be messy and both of them you don't know quite where it is going to go. But if you know and get some confidence in the process through experience or having worked with people who had the experience, you begin to learn to trust the process.

If you stay with it, if you keep listening and you keep trying to understand each other, keep focused on the issues that are before you, you begin to work things through.

And stuff(?) maybe all of a sudden comes out of the woodwork and it all comes together. Or sometimes it might take over night. I remember in many of the dialogues with Meg Wheatley, these were two and a half days, and at the end of the second day, everybody is uptight over something. But then, overnight, things seem to sort out and people come back in, in the morning and be all right. I've seen this in some of the workshops I've led around safety, where at the end of the first day everybody comes up with some really neat ideas and then the cynics come forward and say, "But nobody is going to do that." There is a lot of unease and you begin to wonder whether people are really going to be back the next day and they all come back and something has happened overnight. Sometimes you can't rush it.

JIM ROBERTS: What do you think has happened?

DICK KNOWLES: I think that people have reflected on what's going on. I think people have been chewing on an issue, which is important. The issue has got to be important to the people. If it's bland, there is no stake in it. If there is a stake, like, "How do we stop hurting people," or when we were working with a big school board, "How can we begin to take some of the unproductive garbage out of the system with all the recycling and all that. People struggled overnight and they said, "Okay, we're willing to try. Let's do something different." But they came to that themselves. And it's an invitation. You open it up and say, "This is possible. Is this what you would like?" And people usually will come.

HENRI LIPMANOWICZ: My image of what happens in situations like that is you have a group of people that gets together around a common interest and that is the force that is pulling them together, if you want, like the centripetal force, if you want to use physical terms. And then you have diversity of views so that all the voices are heard that are relevant to what needs to-- And this is where the richness comes from. But it is also what pulls people away from each other. So you need a balance. You need a strong enough interest to keep people together, even though you are going to have very diverse reactions.

But what happens is, because of the diversity, you start having a creative exercise that takes place through the interaction between the people. And they get somewhere that is different from where they started, with all the voices that have been heard and everything that has been considered. So by the time you end up somewhere, after this sort of messy disorganized thing, you are somewhere where everybody is comfortable because everybody sort of has heard everybody else and sees where

people come from and what their views are and have been part of the process of generating some recommendation at the end and some action.

DICK KNOWLES: In the old way of leading there is a lot of resistance to change. But my experience has been that doing the kind of things that Henri and we have been talking about, there isn't hardly any resistance to change because people are creating the change rather than have it stuffed down their throats and the suction then become thunderous. We are plotting the rate of change from our plant in West Virginia. When we first started we made three or four big changes a year; it was really a big deal. After a few years of this we were doing two or three a month and they were getting on me because I wasn't moving fast enough.

So I think that if it's important and if it's purposeful and people see that there is something in it for them as well and why it's important and have a burning desire to do things, creativity and energy just pour forth.

JIM ROBERTS: Darren, you want to remind people of the email address.

DARREN STANLEY: Oh, by all means, yes. For those of you who are listening today, if you have any questions for Jim or Dick or Henri, you can send them in by email. Just send them into plexuscalls@plexusinstitute.org. Jim has kindly agreed to pass this on to us today. Do you happen to have a question, Jim?

JIM ROBERTS: No, an email question, not yet, if this thing is working right.

DARREN STANLEY: I have faith in the system. I did have maybe a comment and a question for the three of you. I've been having some conversations with a number of people and a number of weeks I suddenly found myself making an off-handed comment, which led me down into a very rich conversation. And it had to do with a biking experience that I had a couple of months ago where, back in New Jersey, I was cycling along the canal and it was just the time of year when the Canadian geese were out and their babies were out with them and I found that as I cycled along the canal every morning, that the adult geese would hiss at me and it gave me a bit of consternation.

And, for whatever reason, this led me to think about flocks, once again. And in the context of a related topic about how do organizations come together, how might they begin and how to they evolve over time, and it seemed to me, although it might be somewhat simplistic but, although it would just be a model, that there were some things that could potentially be learned by flocks of birds. And I go back to Craig Reynold's model of boids and had given a slightly different interpretation. And what I've heard in

our conversation today are three points that seem to resonate fairly well, and we just talked about shared interests within an organization and I've interpreted that as being coherence, sort of, things that pull an organization together and that is certainly one of the principles in Reynold's model, birds have to be close enough together.

And yet, second principle, the birds have to be far enough apart from one another. In other words, there has to be enough space for the birds and for the organization as a whole to do their thing. And through that I interpret that as being, as Henri you may have mentioned, an expression of diverse interest. Now the third principle, and the last principle for a flock of birds in Reynold's model is the notion of shared direction and I've come to think of this now, after our conversation here today, as being leadership, as being self-organizing leadership.

And I'm wondering how, after I've just articulated all this, if maybe using those three principles of coherence or shared interest, of Open Space or diverse interest and self-organizing leadership, if these might be very helpful rules, if you wish, for driving an organization and perhaps I will throw this towards Dick and maybe ask you if you could comment a bit more on self-organizing leadership.

DICK KNOWLES: I think those are very, very good points to put together. However, taking all these things like boids with a bit of a grain of salt, because they aren't organizations, but they do raise questions and possibilities that help us to reflect on what is really happening. And working with Meg Wheatley's group, we came up with the three conditions required for self-organization and they are similar to yours but stated differently.

One is, what is your shared identity and individual identity of the group? Who are we? Another is sharing of information. So we get the diversity. We get the shared sense of information ...(inaudible) some direction. And then we also have the relationships. So we are willing to have diversity. It's okay to have different perspectives. It's okay to speak up. We're going to try to tell the truth rather than to fluff over things. By the way, telling the truth is not a license for being mean but it's talking about what you see and as honestly as you can.

I think there are lots of places here where simple rules can be very, very helpful. I stumbled across some in Shanghai and the traffic of the streets just jammed with people. And the simple rules there, I began to realize, were that the condition is the traffic never stops during daylight hours. The rules are it all goes about the same speed. People join and leave depending on their own decisions and everybody agrees not to hit

anybody. And so if you cross the street, you just walk straight through it like you are walking through a river and, darn it, everybody goes around you. It is kind of a stunning set of observations.

These may be more like tendencies rather than hard and fast rules. But, you know, what is going on? And I like to look at things in groups of three, just as you have here, Darren. And the process for self-organizing leadership is one I described with Meg Wheatley. When we were in the operational mode, the three things we are doing are paying attention to problems, tending to solve them with structural solutions, and imposing the work on the people to do it. We move the players around in different chairs. If that gets overdone, we go to command and control. So I think looking at groups like that is very helpful and powerful and what can we learn.

JIM ROBERTS: I've got a question, an email question, from Peter ...(inaudible) from up in your territory, Darren--

DARREN STANLEY: He's at St. Paul's Hospital.

JIM ROBERTS: Yes. Here's Peter's message. "I am enjoying the conference call, especially about the notion of listening more and letting innovation and improvements emerge. In practice, how do you reconcile the importance of staying focused on the main objective of an organization and the importance of Open Space meetings and allowing new ideas and innovations to emerge? So, it's that twin focus of staying clear to the objective of the organization, but allowing a lot of Open Space and opportunity for emergence.

DICK KNOWLES: My experience around that, Jim, has been it's always a tension. It is not a nice, simple answer. It is one that continues to evolve. For an organization to keep a focus is important otherwise you can have a whole bunch of well-intentioned people going off in a bunch of different directions and you unravel. So the challenge is, at the beginning of the meeting I find, "Here's the things we need to be talking about today. Are you all okay with these things?" And we've already developed some ideas about where the organization needs to go and what the shared intention is.

And if we can keep that kind of broad container, I call that a bowl, then within the bowl we can explore all kinds of things, all kinds of leadership has downsides. The operational one, the downside is command and control. If we do totally unfocused, self-organizing stuff and don't connect it to real work, the organization will unravel. So, we've got-- All these positives and negatives, that's why I call this thing the leadership dance.

HENRI LIPMANOWICZ: I will take advantage of Darren's flock metaphor to sort of see if we can make use of the metaphor to address that question. One of the things that Darren said when he was talking about the flock, I think the third condition was shared direction. And that is valid. But what is important to observe, if you look at a flock of birds or you look at a school of fish, that direction is not necessarily the same all the time. In fact, it can change very dramatically, as a function of what is going on.

So if you think in terms of focus and Open Space, the focus is staying together and the Open Space is what gives you the freedom to absorb all the information about what is happening in your environment, in order to decide whether the direction of the focus can continue to be the same of needs to be modified, either a little or a lot. Then you have sort of an image to kind of maybe help get a sense of what are the two things that need to be done.

DICK KNOWLES: So the role of the leader in that situation is one that is very conscious of what is going on and being able to help move with all of that and be okay with it. If you are a leader who is just sitting there waiting for the meeting to be(?) over(?) like some of the Dilbert cartoons, you get slaughtered in that kind of an approach.

JIM ROBERTS: Another question from Don Sorenson, at Methodist Health Center in Dallas. He wanted to know, "Can you speak specifically to how complexity and leadership in healthcare is made visible? How can we respond better to complexity in our complex industry and use it to our benefit? Healthcare is so hierarchical. It often seems impossible to allow answers to emerge." And that's connected back to Peter's question, isn't it? In an industry that is quite hierarchical and, in some ways, proud of the distinctions that exist between professions, how do you create this opportunity for emergence, create Open Space, open time, open minds, so that new ideas emerge?

DICK KNOWLES: it seems to me if we have been in the conversations about what is it that is really important that we are trying to accomplish in our particular healthcare system, and we all share that, and we also have some principles of behavior about being honest and open and doing things in the best interest of the patient, etcetera, etcetera, then if we're all working towards that, we can put down some of the hierarchical stuff. An army at peace has values around everyone looking good, saluting, marching in rank. An army at war, the whole team shifts to effectiveness.

It seems to me in healthcare, we need to begin to shift to how effective can we be rather than getting too hung up on all the trappings of the profession like titles and whatnot.

JIM ROBERTS: One of the things that I've had some interesting and I think positive experiences with is the creation of communities of practice. These are either groups of teams, like patient safety teams that may be from different institutions but have a common purpose. Or they may be medical directors or patient care executives, quality improvement folks who have similar roles either within the same organization in different spots in the organization or across organizations. And the ethic within these groups is, "We are all learners and we're all teachers."

And having a fairly similar set of responsibilities and a common purpose, general purpose, around those responsibilities, these groups share very practical experiences around common challenges, like I helped create a Director of Nursing Services community of practice within the long-term care system. And the meetings of that group, and this was a regional group, drawn from several institutions, changed from structured agenda around things mainly that the central office wanted to talk about but it was all kind of, "Shut up and listen," to one where the participants drove the agenda.

The agenda, interestingly enough, was always on issues and challenges they faced because people are problem solvers and innovators and if they're given the opportunity to share their experiences and innovations with each other in the context of openness and honesty and a shared purpose, an awful lot of stuff emerges simply because they are in there in the same space together and they've been given the chance and the respect, importantly, the respect that says, "You are an innovator, you do know some things and have some experiences to show." And it is a very tangible way to show those in charge of the hierarchy that troops really do know something and have an awful lot to offer in getting done what the organization and it's leaders want to get done.

So, communities of practice I've found to be, either intra-organization or across organizations, to be a very powerful tool for innovation as well as for, in a broader sense, breaking down this notion that all wisdom comes from the top.

DICK KNOWLES: That's a great example to illustrate the kind of points I was trying to make. Jim, you touched on the principles on how you are going to be together. You work together as colleagues rather than in hierarchy. And my experience is, whenever you can get people together like that, extraordinary things happen.

HENRI LIPMANOWICZ: I would hope that the level of the individual institution, like a hospital or healthcare organization, one or the other, that one of the things that should be possible in all cases, provided some people take it upon themselves to make this happen, and that is, if one creates the conditions for conversations to take place, the people working within that environment to talk about what their common goal is and then to start having conversation about what is happening and what their problems are and what is getting in the way, sort of, open conversation, I would expect that, given time, that there would be recognition automatically of where the common ground is and how to make progress on what is going on, simply by providing the opportunity for those open exchanges and the--

Something needs to happen to create different forums than the traditional ones that are functioning on the basis of the existing hierarchy.

DICK KNOWLES: It's all around the conversation you've been able to create in those communities of practice, or whatever you want to call them.

HENRI LIPMANOWICZ: One of the things that has been a great example for me to become more familiar with in the context of our Plexus meetings is the various processes we have used in our meetings in order to get people to talk to each other in a different way than they are used to by creating small group conversations. We have done conversation cafes where you just have four or five people sitting around together and having a conversation. We have processes that involve, that start with one-on-one conversations, where people tell stories to each other about some particular topic and then gathering groups together, going from large groups to small groups and so forth, and by creating occasions where those various processes are being used creatively you get absolutely every single person from the shyest to the most extraverted to participate and contribute.

And the kind of information comes out and a tremendous amount of recognition of what the common ground is, what the common interest is and ideas automatically come out of that.

JIM ROBERTS: And the mindset that has to underpin that is that, in fact, everybody is a problem solver and innovative--

HENRI LIPMANOWICZ: Absolutely.

JIM ROBERTS: --And all innovation does not come from the outside but most of it can come from the inside if that opportunity is made available.

HENRI LIPMANOWICZ: I would go further than that. I would say innovation never comes from the outside because the outside doesn't know what is really going on. I mean that's the problem with experts. Experts are people with solutions without knowing what you problem is. They come with their solution. And I think if you really want solutions that are adapted to the problems of a particular organization, it has to come from them. They are the only ones that can actually solve their own problem because they are the ones who are going to have to do it.

JIM ROBERTS: That has been my experience as well. And my belief is that all organizations have essentially all the information they need in them already, but it's in different people. And if we can get a conversation like you are talking about, Henri, going, it comes out.

DICK KNOWLES: It is also true that although there are ideas floating around outside the organization that are worth hearing about--

HENRI LIPMANOWICZ: Absolutely. But the best way to get to those ideas is by getting the people inside to go and look for those ideas rather than to shove them down their throats.

JIM ROBERTS: Exactly.

HENRI LIPMANOWICZ: So, nobody is suggesting that any organization should become insular and not pay attention to everything that is going on elsewhere. That's not the point. The point is, who do you put in the driving seat? Who is going to be, in a way, in charge, if you want, of what is going to be done? It has to be the people that are inside the organization and the consultants may not be happy to hear that but that's-- There are many different ways to be a consultant, too. You can be a consultant on the same premise, meaning that your job is to help the people inside to solve their own problems.

__: I like to use the word guide rather than consultant because of that difference, Henri.

DARREN STANLEY: Well, we've been going away here, happily for the last few minutes and I have the task of drawing things to a closure here. So I want to thank everybody for phoning in today and listening to our conversation. And even more so, I would like to thank our conversationalists today, Dick Knowles, Henri Lipmanowicz, and Jim Roberts, I want to thank you three for coming in today, virtually speaking, I guess, and sharing with us your stories on leadership and I certainly enjoyed listening to all of your thoughts and insights and wisdom. So, a personal thank you to all three of you.

DICK KNOWLES: Thank you for the opportunity, Darren, I appreciate it.

DARREN STANLEY: It's a pleasure. And just as a final little reminder, August 8th is our next Plexus Calls. So pleasure join us and we will be speaking with Glenda Eoyang in conversation with Rita Saenz and Bruce Waltuck. Glenda will be speaking on, "The Intelligent Agent: Shaping Conditions for Self-Organizing."

Special Thanks

Plexus Institute wishes to extend a special thanks to Marcelle Bastianello for her kind and generous work to make Plexus Calls available to our members by providing transcripts of our conversations. Marcelle is President of Innovative Systems Associates in Newton, MA where she does consulting work and research primarily for business organizations. She also has been at the heart of pulling together members from the Plexus community and beyond to form our New England Plexus Fractal group. She can be reached at isaco@rcn.com.