

the  
**Living**  **Organisation**

Planning, Uncertainty and  
Emergence

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A few years ago, I met up with an old colleague. We had worked together as part of a small start-up management team that built a highly successful international service business in four years. It was a great catch-up and we re-told all the old stories. As the conversation developed, I told him that I had often felt highly uncertain in my role as a leader and that I had felt that I didn't know what I was doing. He laughed and said; "I don't think any of us knew what we were doing."

In later reflection, I realized how helpful it would have been for me, if we had been able to have some of that conversation in the team at the time. Whilst our away days included personal disclosure as well as business strategy, uncertainty didn't much feature.

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**He laughed and said;**

*I don't think any of us knew what we were doing.*

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## The Limits to Design Thinking

*"Forecasting is difficult, particularly where it concerns the future." (Anon)*

The industry of leadership, culture, people, change and Organisational Development (OD) has enjoyed massive growth in recent years, evidenced by for example, the spectacular rise of coaching. In modern highly networked business systems, it's true that these "soft" factors are more important than ever, but is there a shadow side to organisational design?

In a quiet, reflective moment we might catch a glimpse of some of our edge-of-awareness assumptions and beliefs that can easily be inherited from the dominant OD technology and mythology:

- With enough smart thinking and design, we can engineer and control what happens
- The work involves defining the problem and choosing an appropriate solution
- Once the solution is chosen, all will be well

This complements many of our stories in business. Systems thinking, which by definition involves uncertainty and unpredictability, is very current, but leadership is still seen primarily as being about providing clarity and simplicity, knowing what to do and being clearly in charge. Uncertainty isn't the pitch.

Technological approaches to OD are highly creative in that they solve the immediate difficulty – the discomfort of wanting change and not being able to guarantee delivery. Thinking, planning and design of complex change strategies provides some relief and a "solution," by supporting the illusion that we are in control. The problem is that this does not address the underlying problem. Real organisational change requires that we acknowledge this discomfort and the accompanying reality that change is a process, not a predictable and controllable equation.

Leaders in complex systems tell us that they often don't feel much in charge at all. And we know that we can never have enough information to make a failsafe decision. Partly as a consequence, uncertainty, anxiety and loneliness often feature in the confidential environment of 1-1 leadership coaching. When these important aspects of the system are acknowledged, the flip side of ease, energy and new possibilities normally emerges. Yet much of OD continues to quietly promise predictability and control.

Business (including OD) needs decisions, action and leadership but at the same time, unpredictability and lack of control are the very essence of systems thinking. How can we deal with this seeming paradox?

# Containment

An important aspect of the work of a coach is to build a “containing,” environment in which clients can if they choose, look more in the round at their experience as leaders, including potentially the “difficult” aspects. There are no easy solutions, and being able to simply say so is one hallmark of the experienced coach, but the difficult stuff tends to lose some of its power when brought out from the shadows. Clearer thinking and better decisions generally result, if we are able to acknowledge the various “bumps” in the road, rather than trying frantically to smooth them out and get rid of them.

There is a link here between the work of leaders and the work of coaches and facilitators. Decisions and action are needed in all of these roles, but for uncertainty (and other “bumps,”) to be acknowledged rather than buried, solid containment is required.

So, rather than seeing the role for coaches, facilitators (and leaders) in all forms of OD work as being about choosing the right technological solution (leadership models, diagnostics, inventories, change strategies, change agents, change champions and x-step change model) the role can be thought of as being about helping lead and adequately contain a structured, bounded inquiry.

Change in organisations comes through people having real conversations. And “systems thinking” is not a function of scale. Structured inquiry approaches whether for leadership formation, change, team coaching or individual coaching help people explore what is actually happening in the organisation now. Paradoxically, engaging with here and now reality, rather than attempting to push (and then engineer engagement with) a conceptual model of how we wish things to be, is what supports movement and change.

In this approach, models, tools and techniques are chosen and adapted in the midst of the action to raise awareness and support the inquiry, rather than being held in our imaginations as solutions that once selected, have the power to shape and determine outcomes.

And “resistance,” is taken seriously as holding important meaning for the organisation, rather than being labeled banished and thus retaining its power.

In my experience, much OD, team and 1-1 coaching, facilitation and change, focusing as it does on “solving the problem,” with models, tools and techniques, does more to avoid reality than to engage with it. In this way, we undermine our own efforts to catalyse change in our organisations.

## Inquiry Questions

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- Given current approaches in your organisation, is it possible to make space for all aspects of reality including the good stuff and the aspects that are deemed unpleasant? How large is the “zone of un-discussable”?
- Are uncertainty, disagreement, poor performance faced up to or are they avoided by implementing a design engineering solution?
- How do you think about change and about changing the “patterns of interaction,” which are the leadership signature of the organisation?

# Structured, Systemic Inquiry

The following gives a basis for this alternative OD approach:

Systemic Thinking	<p>Thinking “deep” as well as “broad.” Systemic approaches involve engaging with a wide range of stakeholders but also paying attention to:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>■ Non-rational as well as the rational</li> <li>■ What’s missing or difficult (for example uncertainty)</li> <li>■ Systemic patterns re power</li> <li>■ The connections between that weave to make up the whole</li> </ul>
Critical Thinking	Examining our own underlying beliefs and assumptions about leadership and change.
Contracting for a Structured Inquiry	<p>Beginning with questions rather than answers and solutions. Avoiding collusion with the understandably powerful demand for (immediate) solutions.</p> <p>Structured inquiry encourages new patterns of interaction to emerge as novel solutions to the challenges of the organisation, rather than trying to dictate what those new patterns will be.</p>
Working systemically and adaptively	<p>Seeing containment (empathic and reality based) as a key aspect of the coach and facilitator role.</p> <p>Supporting people to have real conversations about their work.</p> <p>Focusing as much or more on “making decisions right,” than “making the right decisions.”</p> <p>Teaching skills and approaches for containment to people in the system.</p>
Accepting and making good use of our presence	<p>Seeing ourselves as coach, facilitator or leader as a part of the system, rather than as external observer and “change agent.”</p> <p>An embodied strengths perspective (which has nothing to do with positive thinking) means we can face reality without evoking shame.</p>
Thinking with people rather than about people	The meta skills of working as a coach or facilitator with people are very different to knowledge-based psychology “about” people.