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Taking organisational complexity seriously

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Abstract

Life in organisations is unavoidably messier and more uncertain than the formal strategies, structures, systems and processes imply. And yet most discussions of organisational management and leadership practice remain firmly rooted in mainstream presumptions of certainty, predictability and control. Complexity is too often consigned to the "too difficult" box.

Most managers find it highly liberating to discover why there is a mismatch between their everyday lived reality and what conventional management 'wisdom' suggests *should* be happening. Understanding the complex social reality of organisational life – *arising from their own and everyone else's participation in it* - provides a crucial first step in releasing them from the suffocating grip of the dominant management discourse.

This enables them to reframe their task in ways that resonate much more strongly with their sense of *what's actually going on; and with what they find themselves doing in practice.* And it helps them to participate more insightfully in the everyday conversations and interactions through which organisational outcomes – including those associated with a "progressive leadership" agenda - emerge in practice.

In setting out a view of organisational dynamics that *takes complexity seriously*, and identifying practical ways in which leaders might respond to this challenge, I also suggest that we need to think carefully about using systems-based approaches in an organisational context.

1   The Issue

> "To better manage complexity, senior leaders must recognize how employees at all levels see it, and then learn what's driving it. By doing so, companies can retain the kinds of complexity that add value, remove the kinds that don't, and channel the rest to employees, at any level, who can be trained to handle it effectively."
>
> Burkinshaw and Heywood (2010)

The above extract is taken from an article published on the McKinsey *Insights & Publications* website. In it, the authors confidently set out their recipe for enabling managers to "put organizational complexity in its place". As such, they treat as unproblematic the idea of talking about the inherent ambiguity, uncertainty and complexity of organisational life alongside the suggestion that, for example, appropriately trained employees can "manage whatever value-creating pockets of complexity their companies decide to maintain".

This approach is typical of the way in which many academics and practitioners seek to incorporate the complex dynamics of organisation seamlessly into mainstream management thinking and practice. However, if we are to take organisational complexity seriously, we need to accept that we can't predict and control what is going on in the ways that management orthodoxy suggests that we can – however sophisticated the structures, systems and technologies that we might put in place. It is not credible to say in one breath that the dynamics of organisation are complex and uncertain and then, in the next, to claim that the use of a particular approach to organisational management and people development will assure success.

It is, of course, a natural human desire to feel that we can control the course of events. Or that, if we can't, those in authority have the capacity to do so on our behalf. But it does no favours to managers (or anyone else) to collude with this fiction. Claiming that specific concepts, tools or techniques – and/or a certain combination of personal attributes (in the above case, "ambidextrous capabilities") - will make the unmanageable manageable simply perpetuates the myth. And it fuels unrealistic expectations of what those in formal leadership positions – from CEO to front-line supervisor - can reasonably achieve independently of their relationships with others.

Promising to give hard-pressed managers the ability to predict and control what happens and ensure success is highly seductive, of course. But any such promise is an illusion. It serves only to widen the gap between the currently dominant view of what those in formal leadership positions are *supposed* to be capable of doing and the practical implications of these dynamics for actual leadership practice and performance. And it is this mismatch between the 'real-world' messiness and uncertainty of everyday organisational life and the continued pursuit of the myth of rationality, predictability and control that is at the core of many of the current dysfunctions of leadership, organisation and society.

This also means that, if we are serious in our advocacy of a "progressive leadership" agenda, we must take account of the complex social dynamics of organisation through which the desired ideological shifts will be realised in practice – *or not.* As Collins (1998:195) puts it,

> "… understanding that the social world is inherently complex and difficult either to comprehend or manage, must be the first step to understanding what can be".

In this paper I set out a perspective on organisational dynamics and leadership practice which is rooted in people's everyday lived experience of organisational life. As such, it privileges the ongoing conversations and interactions through which organisation is enacted ahead of the conventional focus on the formal 'trappings' of organisation (such as policies, systems and procedures, etc.). This opens up new possibilities for reframing our understanding and expectations of leadership in ways that resonate much more strongly with what's actually going on.

2   The Complex Social Dynamics of Organisation

The inner workings of the various 'physical technologies' that we encounter each day in our organisations are beyond the understanding of most of us as users or beneficiaries of the increased functionality that these can bring. And yet we can say with confidence that these are *knowable*. Experts within the relevant organisations would be able to explain, with accuracy and precision, how the specific plant and equipment are supposed to work; how the various systems are intended to operate; which processes are designed to do what; and so on. However, when we add people into the mix, we enter uncharted – and *un-chartable* – waters. The process becomes unavoidably complex.

Organisations consist of countless people interacting with each other continuously, both within and beyond the imaginary confines of any formally established 'organisational boundaries'. And people have a habit of not conforming to the machine-like assumptions that still govern mainstream thinking about organisational design, development, management, and operation. That is, they don't participate in these processes in the neatly packaged, predictable and controllable ways that management orthodoxy suggests that they should. Even in what appear on the surface to be quite straightforward situations, such as two or three people interacting together, the ways in which things will turn out can never be known with certainty. And so, if we want to take this complexity seriously, we need a different way of thinking about organisation and the implications that this has for leadership practice.

The 'wiggly world' of organisation

Over 30 years ago, philosopher Alan Watts (2009:59) illustrated the world as a "wiggly" line. On top of this he drew a net, which "… 'cut' the big wiggle into little wiggles." In this way, he argued,

man has sought to impose order on chaos.   We can similarly describe the organisational world as 'wiggly'. That is, it too is *unavoidably* messy and complex. And, sticking with Watts's imagery, the conventional view of the manager's task can similarly be seen as one of seeking to 'catch' this 'wiggliness' in a metaphorical 'net'; woven from the familiar concepts, tools and techniques of conventional management practice.

The implicit assumption in all of this is that managers can choose the optimum way to manage the organisation. And that, having made that choice, the organisation will follow and the sought-after benefits will be realised provided that the decisions are implemented as planned and the prescribed procedures adhered to. In this way, the felt need for clarity, certainty, predictability and control will be realised.

This perceived ability to predict and control outcomes, despite the acknowledged complexity and uncertainty, is further reflected in (*and hence reinforced through*) the language and practices that managers habitually use. Examples of this include such taken-for-granted notions as knowing which *levers to pull* and which *buttons to push*; using *scorecards* and *dashboards* to *steer* the organisation in the desired direction; *driving change* into the organisation *from the front* by using *linear n-step models*; ensuring *commonality* of goals and practices across the diverse areas of the business; designing and building a *shared culture*; identifying and importing other people's *best practices*; *getting the message across* so that everyone is *'on the same page'*; *leveraging* Big Data to *eliminate surprises*; *future proofing* the organisation against disruptive demands; claiming to base decisions on *"if you do this you'll get that" 'evidence'*; *rolling out* centrally determined initiatives to *ensure organisation-wide consistency*; and so on.

And so managers continue to 'weave their nets' in line with this dominant narrative, which essentially positions organisational management as a scientifically rational practice. In doing so, it emphasises approaches that appear to offer accuracy and precision; intellectual rigour; structure and formality; impersonal language; procedural logic; physical detachment; matter-of-factness; abstract models; and a 'global' (e.g. 'organisation-wide') perspective. The basic proposition is that, if we do things better and get them right, the 'wiggliness' (seen through this lens as a sign of dysfunction) will go away – allowing us to get on with our sophisticated management task, free from the unwelcome and disruptive exigencies of everyday organisational life. Taken together, the 'net' that we weave from these various strategies, structures, systems, and procedures, etc. represents what we have come to think of as the 'legitimate', as-designed organisation. And it's on this that managers are encouraged to focus their attention.

But as Watts (2009:59) went on to say,

> "… the real world slips like water through our imaginary nets. However much we divide, count, sort, or classify this wiggling into particular things and events, this is no more than a way of thinking about the world: it is never actually divided."

And nor is organisation. Or rather the *complex social process of human interaction* that we call organisation. This, too, 'slips through our imaginary nets' of carefully constructed strategies, structures, systems and so on. The everyday lived reality of organisation is also 'wiggly'. It comprises people interacting with each other continuously – making sense of what's going on, and acting into the world as they see it. They do so formally and informally; in structured settings and 'in the corridors'; by design and spontaneously; for 'organisationally legitimate' reasons and self-interestedly; with conscious intent and habitually; and so on. Some of these interactions occur in planned settings with structured agendas and people acting out their formal roles and relationships. Most though take place informally. These informal conversations might themselves relate to specific formal events (such as people agreeing positions in advance of a meeting or discussing what they really think about things around the coffee machine, during breaks in the formal proceedings). At other times, they will just reflect the general life of the organisation, such as informal working relationships, social cliques, gossiping, informal networking, political influencing, chance interactions, private one-to-ones, and so on. Although none of these informal arrangements are captured on organisation charts, reported in official documents or referred to in formal meetings, they are equally significant in shaping what actually gets done in organisations, how it gets done, and what outcomes arise in practice.

And so, despite our craving for clarity, certainty, predictability and control, the dynamics of organisation are unavoidably ambiguous and paradoxical, uncertain, unpredictable, and complex.

Organisations as dynamic networks of self-organising conversations

> "Organization is conversation. That is to say, conversation does not just occur about organizations; conversations constitute organizations, Organization is not independent of conversation."
>
> Richard Dunford and Ian Palmer – 1998:218

Everything that happens does so as a result of the everyday (essentially conversational) interactions of *interdependent* people. It's here, in their 'local'[1] conversations that people continually make sense of what's going on and take action (Weick, 1995). And it is through the widespread interplay of these local sense-making-cum-action-taking interactions that 'outcomes'[2] emerge and are recognised as such. This means that the essentially form-*less*, 'wiggly world' of human interaction leads to outcomes that are co-created by all of the people involved - both within and beyond the notional boundaries of the formally recognised organisation.

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[1]   All interactions are local. That is to say, they take place one-to-one or between a small number of people. Such interactions might be geographically widespread (e.g. via a 'phone call or online) but the number of participants is necessarily limited in the moment of people's interaction. It's also important to recognise that these conversations take place throughout an organisation and address a diverse range of themes. The term "local" is not meant to convey any sense of hierarchy. Even those conversations that take place in and around the Boardroom, and which ostensibly relate to 'organisation-wide' matters, take place locally, as the term is used here.

[2]   Organisation is the *ongoing process* of communicative interaction. As such, what we talk of as "outcomes" are simply transient points within this continuous flow of sense-making-cum-action-taking interactions that come to be recognised as worthy of specific recognition and comment.

Some of these outcomes enter the formal arenas of the organisation as formal propositions and eventually emerge as formally adopted strategies, structures, systems, and the like. In this sense, these come to represent the 'authorised version' of the organisational 'story', taking forward into new conversations those themes that have been given this stamp of legitimacy. In this way, the formal themes continue to influence interactions well beyond those in which they were originally formulated; carrying the 'weight' of formality and being 'given voice' (actually or by inference) by those in authority. In practice, the creation of this 'authorised version' of the organisational story is affected more by the complex political dynamics, ideological stances and personal identities of those involved, than by the rational analysis and systematic decision-making that is implied by conventional management wisdom. And, the effect that this formal design has on people's actual behaviour - and therefore on performance - depends crucially on how it is perceived, interpreted, evaluated and acted upon in countless other local interactions. Many of these interactions, and the themes around which people coalesce, remain 'in the shadows' – reflecting people's indifference or opposition to the official story, but without being openly acknowledged.

An important corollary to all of this is that it's not what managers settle upon and announce formally that determines what happens. It's how people *make sense* of what they see and hear, and how they find themselves acting, as they participate in this ongoing sense-making-cum-action-taking process. In social processes such as organising, it's the *meaning* of things that matters, not the things themselves. And meaning is socially constructed in the interactions between people (Luckman and Berger, 1991; Gergen, 2010). Every conversation is, in effect, a co-creation forum. And, as a further sobering thought for managers, the vast majority of these conversations take place in their absence.

So, whereas much of the focus of management theory and practice assumes that organisations need to be looked at in scientifically rational, formal, structured, impersonal, matter-of-fact, and 'global' terms, outcomes are ultimately determined by the psychosocial and processual dynamics of *real people interacting together on a continuing basis*. These dynamics are unavoidably political. That is, they always embody the differing interests, ideologies, identities, and so on of those taking part. Interactions are never neutral and matter-of-fact. This process is also informal, and much of it is hidden (i.e. not spoken about in the formal arenas of the organisation). Whilst a lot of organisational interactions appear to be structured, most of the significant exchanges occur spontaneously and are improvised between people – before, during and after these 'set-piece' events. And, far from being impersonal, emotion is always in play. So are the personal idiosyncrasies of the people involved. Ultimately, then, what matters are not the facts of a situation *per se* but rather people's interpretations of the situation. And these interpretations are co-created in the moment of people's local interactions.

Crucially, managers can't mandate or control this process. And nor can any other individual or group – however powerful they might appear to be in formal terms. But this does not mean that

people can simply do as they please. *Everyone is both enabled and constrained by their interactions with everyone else*. And these interactions reflect the constantly shifting patterns of power relations that are at play; including, of course, those that are institutionalised through formal role relationships, policies and procedures, etc.

Sense-making as a patterning process

It is also important to recognise that, whilst the detailed interactions and the actual outcomes that emerge are unpredictable, other aspects of the process are more amenable to what Richard Jenkins (2008) calls "everyday predictability"[3]. In particular, there is a generalised tendency for people to think and act in characteristic ways that reflect (and reinforce) the locally established patterns of behaviour and sustain their personal frames of reference[4] (Rodgers, 2006). This helps them to fit in, maintain important relationships, and be seen by personally significant others to act competently and 'play the game' (Culbert, 1996).

In other words, sense-making-cum-action-taking is a pattern-forming and pattern-reinforcing process[5]. This means that the more that we make sense of things in a particular way the more likely it is that we will to continue to make sense in similar ways going forward. This process is self-organising and takes place largely unconsciously. It is, though, crucial to the way in which organisations work – both forming and being formed by people's everyday conversational interactions. This is how organisational 'culture' and individual identity emerge, and how these are sustained and further strengthened.

It is important to recognise that this patterning is not stored anywhere or 'programmed' in any sense – such as in a disembodied 'culture'. Or in "the system". Rather it reflects a *tendency* to think and act in particular ways in given circumstances. This tendency is (re)created, reinforced (and potentially shifted) on each occasion, *in the moment of people's interactions and through the sense-making narratives that flow from them*. Past sense-making-cum-action-taking conversations create expectancy that similar sense-making and action taking will continue into the future. This further reinforces existing patterns of understanding and the generalised tendency for people to respond routinely and habitually to the situations that they face - it just feels natural, with little or no conscious thought, to behave in certain ways within certain relationship contexts.

Without this patterning, we would have to think afresh before each interaction; making what we think of as normal life impossible. At the same time, the possibility always exists for 'pattern-

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3 "This, it must be emphasised, does not imply 'objectively' accurate predictability: it is, rather, predictability for practical purposes and, even more important perhaps, the comforting *sense* of predictability." Jenkins (2008,150) [emphasis in original].

4 Although I refer to this as a "*personal* frame of reference", it is important to remember that this "… is continually formed and re-formed through our everyday interactions and experiences. In turn, this affects the way in which we continue to interact and make sense of our ongoing experiences." (Rodgers, 2006, 122).

5 Analogies can be drawn here from the early work of Edward de Bono on the "mechanism of mind" and the self-organising, patterning nature of the brain.

shifting' to occur and novel responses to emerge, as people continue to construct the future in the currency of their present interactions. The balance of probability, though, is heavily biased towards continuity rather than change. That is, people's everyday interactions tend to reflect – and by so doing reinforce – the existing, culturally acceptable patterns, rather than opening up new possibilities[6]. And this means that pattern-shifting only tends to occur spontaneously when misunderstandings, mistakes, humour or other randomly occurring stimuli provoke new insights.

In light of the dynamics outlined above, nobody can predict or control what will flow from people's interactions, since everyone else is similarly participating in their own local, interactional exchanges and doing so in line with their own intentions, prejudices and assumptions. This is always the case, even though power relations are often significantly skewed in favour of those in formal authority.

To reiterate, then:

- some of the themes emerging from this sense-making-cum-action-taking process enter the formal arenas of the organisation as formal propositions and eventually become adopted as policy;

- others remain 'in the shadows' – stimulating and being taken up in yet more shadow-side conversations, through which people make sense of the world and decide how they will act; and,

- underpinning this process – both affecting and being affected by it – is the ongoing patterning of interactions that become taken-for-granted ways of thinking and acting.

In this way, organisation continues to (re)emerge, in a never-ending, self-organising process of conversational interaction.

3   From talking *in terms of* systems to talking *instead of* systems

As set out above, organisation is, first and foremost, a *relational* phenomenon – a continuously emerging and power-related process of *inter*dependent people interacting together. As they do so, they both enable and constrain each other in ways that facilitate movement in certain directions and inhibit it in others. They do this both routinely and habitually, through the characteristic patterning of their interactions that has emerged over time, and also through their specific, in-the-moment responses to the contingencies of the situation in which they find themselves there and then.

Seeing organisations in these terms wholly encompasses the 'real-world' dynamics of organisation (or, more accurately, the *ongoing process* of organis-*ing*). And, since organisation (and personal identity) is continuously (re)constructed in the currency of present-day interactions,

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[6]   The dominant narrative on organisational and leadership practice is one such pattern – a clichéd response to the complex social dynamics of organisation that I'm setting out to challenge in this paper.

everything necessary to judge what might be helping and hindering current practice and performance is present in those various conversations – or else is conspicuous by its absence.

This recognises that, although certain personal characteristics might well affect the local patterning of interaction, we are fundamentally *social* beings. As a result, 'who we are' and how we behave is largely shaped by the interactions that we have with other people – as, at the same time, 'who we are' and how we behave shapes those interactions (Jenkins, 2004; Lawler, 2008). Christian de Quincey (2005:6) puts it starkly,

> "You cannot *not* be in relationship. It is a fact of life."

So what about the formal 'trappings' of organisation – that is, the strategies, structures, systems, facilities and so on mentioned earlier, which become formally adopted as official policy? Where do these fit in? To begin with, these, too, are products of local conversational interactions, both formal and informal. As outlined earlier, these represent generalised and idealised statements of what those with formal authority have endorsed as the 'legitimate' way to proceed – '*imprints' of the past conversations through which such decision-making was carried out*. But people always make sense of these and make use of them (or not) in the specifics of their own local situations. As such, these affect what happens only to the extent and in the ways that they are perceived, interpreted, evaluated and enacted by people in the currency of their local interactions – wherever, between whomever, and for whatever reasons these take place.

Although many of the formal artefacts that emerge from this process will survive over time, it's their perceived meanings and *felt materiality* that are important to what happens in practice, not the fact that these continue to exist physically. Such meanings are similarly constructed within the currency of people's ongoing, local interactions. They are not embodied in the 'things' themselves, but rather in the ways in which people take-up these 'imprints of past conversations' in their current conversational exchanges. It is in this ongoing negotiation of meaning that we find the essence of organisation.

As John Searle (1996:36) notes,

> "It is tempting to think of *social objects* as independently existing entities on analogy with the objects studied by the natural sciences… In the case of social objects, however, the grammar of the noun phrases conceals from us the fact that, in such cases, process is prior to product. Social objects are always … constituted by social acts; and, in a sense, *the object is just the continuous possibility of the activity*." [Emphasis in original]

All of this means that there is no aspect of organisation (a "social object") that exists in any way 'outside' or separate from people's ongoing, local interactions (their "social acts"). There is no higher-level "system" determining what happens in the here and now of today's real-world exchanges. Nor is it necessary (or credible) to imbue such imaginary constructions with the capacity to act in some way independently of those formative interactions in order to explain the more widespread dynamics. Reifying and anthropomorphising "the organisation" or "the system"

can easily divert attention from the dynamics of what's actually going on by providing the illusion of control (when things appear to be going well) or of impotence (when things go wrong).

A corollary of this is that it is not possible to take action on "the organisation" (or "system") "as a whole" – a reality which runs counter to one of the central presuppositions of organisation development (O.D.). As outlined above, change and performance emerges from local conversational interactions. And these lead to much more fragmentary patterns of response to formal statements of intent and formal interventions than is presumed to be the case in mainstream OD practice. Nor, in terms of organisational dynamics, do individuals act as 'parts' of a system. The fundamental dynamic is one of *interdependent* people interacting together on a continuing basis.

On a similar basis, there are no separate 'levels' of existence – such as the individual, the group or the organisation – that have the capacity to act as independent entities. As James Taylor and Elizabeth van Every (2000:171) note,

> "There is no ontological difference between the macro and micro levels of organization…"

Individuals' identities are continuously formed and re-formed in the same process of ongoing conversational interaction in which teams come to be recognised as such, and through which (the ongoing process of) organisation emerges.

Drawing on his extensive development of George Herbert Mead's social conception of mind, Ralph Stacey (2012:99) similarly emphasises the "irremovable" *inter*-dependence of individuals:

> "Individual selves are thus essentially social selves; the individual is the singular and the group or society the plural of interdependent people."

The taken-for-grantedness of 'systems thinking'

Those who view organisations in terms of systems take a contrary position, of course (see Bill Tate's, 2011 CPL White Paper, for example, for a well-constructed systems-based view). Not only managers, academics and consultants but also journalists, politicians, inquiry chairmen, and other commentators regularly refer to "the system", or "systemic failure" when pronouncing on events that hit the headlines. So seeing organisations as systems, which have the capacity to act in some way separately from the actions of ordinary people, appears natural and straightforward.

As a recent example of this, we can look at the public inquiry into "conditions of appalling care" at the Mid Staffordshire NHS Foundation Trust in the mid-2000s. In his covering letter to the Secretary of State for Health, which accompanied his report, Inquiry Chairman Robert Francis QC mentioned the word "system" or "systemic" 15 times. The existence of "the system" is taken for granted. And readers are left in no doubt as to his view that it played a central role in the events that occurred. In the Executive Summary he offers a damning indictment of its inadequacies:

> "Healthcare is not an activity short of systems intended to maintain and improve standards, regulate the conduct of staff, and report and scrutinise performance. Continuous efforts have been made to refine and improve the way these work. Yet none of them, from local groups to the national regulators, from local councillors to the Secretary of State, appreciated the scale of the deficiencies at Stafford and, therefore, over a period of years did anything effective to stop them."

And yet, despite what he sees as the abject failure of "the system" to ensure high quality patient care, Francis's systems-based view of the world clearly remains undiminished – and probably unquestioned. The overwhelming focus of his recommendations remains on the introduction of yet more standards, rules, regulations, and mechanisms for controlling and scrutinising the actions of hospital staff. Also, despite his statement in the Executive Summary that the NHS is "a service staffed by thousands of dedicated and committed staff and managers", his response to the localised wrongdoings in Mid Staffordshire is to recommend that his proposals be applied universally across the NHS. This is a classic systems-based response. According to Tate (2013:14), systems are:

> "… mental constructs, practical ways of thinking about things in order to understand and talk about what is happening at a higher level than individuals and to engage in redesign."

Consistent with this formulation, Francis recommends that the relevant authorities associated with the functioning of the NHS similarly engage in redesign of "the system".

Earlier in the same paragraph, though, Tate seeks to address one of the central criticisms of systems thinking. That is, the idea that "the system" has properties and the capacity to act independently of human interaction. He explains,

> "When we speak of a system embodying a position or taking action, we are using shorthand for *an aggregation of unidentifiable individuals dynamically engaged in something, the details of which are usually unclear in terms of individuals and who is saying or doing what.*" [My emphasis].

What I find most interesting in these two statements, taken together, is the parallel that I see with the opening extract from McKinsey. At one and the same time, there is both an explicit recognition of the complex dynamics at play ("unidentifiable individuals" who are "engaged in something", which is "unclear") and also a conviction that this continuously emerging social process can be conceptualised in some way as an integrated system that makes it amenable to rational "redesign".

From a systems perspective and in popular discourse, the emergent patterning of day-to-day interactions and behaviours is thought of as being determined by "the system", which acts in some way 'over and above' the day-to-day interactions of individuals.

But, as Ann Cunliffe (2009:59) points out,

"…it's a bit of a cop out when organizational members say they can't change things or deal with problems effectively because it's 'the system'. What is *the system*, who creates it, and who keeps it going? We talk and act 'systems' into being, and maintain their existence in our talk about them. This requires a shift in thinking, because it means seeing the world in social interactions and relationships rather than in structures and systems."

Let's return briefly to the case of the Mid Staffordshire NHS Trust. Patient care - whether good, bad or indifferent - is provided by clinical and support staff in the course of their everyday relationships with each other, the patients themselves, and others (such as managers) with whom they interact. The *non sequitur* in systems thinking is to maintain that, if you don't accept the notion of organisations as integrated systems, all that you're left with is a collection of autonomous or atomised individuals acting independently. This is not the case at all. As outlined above, people are social and relational beings. They are unavoidably interdependent; enabling and constraining each other, as they seek to go on together and to find their way forward into a future that is emerging from their own and others' in-the-moment actions and interactions.

John Shotter (2012) talks of this in terms of "wayfinding" and argues,

"Instead of simple cause-and-effect processes working in terms of rule-governed 'impacts' occurring between objective entities, we need to think in terms of processes working in terms of tendencies, of incipiencies that 'point' towards future states of affairs which do not yet exist, that have their beginnings in events which are not yet fully realized, actualized, or finalized."

Rather than conceptualising organisation as an imaginary system of objective entities and seeking to act on imaginary wholes, we might choose instead to focus on the complex reality of the conversations and interactions in which we and everyone else are actually engaged. These are both products of, and contributors to, the contingent circumstances in which we find ourselves in the present. And these are also continuously influenced by our *re*-membered recollections of the past; our presently constructed expectations about the future; and the habitual patterning of our thinking and behaviour that reflects our past sense-making-cum-action-taking conversations.

And so, in formulating his recommendations on the Mid Staffordshire NHS Trust, Francis might have chosen instead to take his "thousands of dedicated and committed staff" comment seriously. A better response might then have been to encourage, assist and enable those involved to explore their current experience of their individual and collective practice: the situational specifics and taken-for-granted patterns of thought, feeling and behaviour that are organising that practice and which might tend to undermine the dedication and commitment that has long come to be associated with "the caring professions".

This is neither to ignore the personal accountability of individuals to behave ethically as they participate, nor to deny the impact of formally adopted policies, systems and procedures on the ways in which people construct their role. But, as outlined above, practice is a relational endeavour. And it's in the detail of those (inter)relations that ethical practice is established and

sustained – or not. And it's through those same interactions that people perceive, interpret, evaluate and act upon (or not) the myriad policies, systems and procedures that formally circumscribe that practice. Simply 'adding more hairs' to "the Giant Hairball"[7] of third-party rules and regulations that are already choking 'the patient' deflects attention away from those human-to-human interactions in which "conditions of appalling care" (Francis, ibid) rather than the virtues of humanity have become the norm.

Similar dynamics are at play, and parallel conclusions can be drawn, in the various "scandals" that dominate the press and airwaves at the opposite end of the private-public spectrum of institutions, such as in the Banking industry or other high-profile corporations.

Although failures in "the system" are similarly cited as contributing to the problem, the focus here usually shifts to the high-profile individuals involved. Responses focusing on either or both of these two 'poles' – the 'first person' individual or 'third person' system – again fail to recognise the relations (i.e. complex social) nature of human dynamics. As a result of a number of recent reports, the pressure is on to apply substantial financial penalties and criminal prosecutions to those directors who are in post when their organisations are judged to have failed.

Given the high salaries that senior directors tend to be paid for their supposedly single-handed orchestration of an organisation's success, such a draconian response to their perceived "incompetence" when in charge might well be considered to be fair. It is certainly a popular proposal. If you're prepared to take the money when your leadership brings success, then you should equally be prepared to lose it (as well as your job and, in some cases, your career) if and when your decisions cause the enterprise to fail.

But therein lies the rub. All of this is predicated on the basis that the success (and by inference failure) of a business or public institution can be attributed to the decisions and actions of a single individual within that organisation – or to those of a small cadre of senior people. And this exposes the poor grasp that many of those sitting in judgement seem to have of the complex social dynamics of everyday life, as set out in this paper.

There is rarely anything in their analyses or proposals that suggests that they recognise these dynamics. Arguably it's their failure to understand the implications that these have for leadership practice, policy making and governance that might justifiably warrant the terms "incompetence", "self-delusion" and "toxic misjudgement" (to appropriate just three of the phrases used by the Parliamentary Commission on Banking Standards (2013) to describe the actions of the three ex-HBOS directors). "Everything," as Duncan Watts (2012) says, "Is obvious – when you know the answer".

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[7] Gordon Mackenzie (1998:32) introduces the Giant Hairball metaphor to describe a corporate world which is "honeycombed with ... established guidelines, techniques, methodologies, systems and equations." These, he argues, create an "inexorable pull of Corporate Gravity ... toward the tangle of the Hairball, where the ghosts of past successes outvote original thinking."

In his initial Easter message, the new Archbishop of Canterbury, Justin Welby (2013), commented on the folly of the "hero culture", which he claimed was setting people up to fail. And his comments fit well with what has happened here. Not so long ago these three 'villains' of the piece were lauded for their supposed accomplishments and abilities, which were considered to be exceptional. Andy Hornby, for example, who was CEO at the time that the bank was taken over by Lloyds TSB, once came top of 800 students in his MBA class at Harvard (surely a good enough reason to ban MBA graduates from holding office!). At the time of his appointment, he was gushingly described – by politicians, financial insiders, and media commentators alike - as "The Golden Banker". And it is fair to say that amongst all of those who are currently taking a 'holier than thou' stance on the affair, he was lauded as a model businessman. The same goes for the others 'in the dock'. They were considered to be stars of their profession.

So how can it be that these one-time heroes of the financial world now merit such public denigration? How indeed?

Yannis Gabriel (1999:288) echoes the Archbishop's comments when he suggests,

> "We must recognize that, like the rest of us, managers are most of the time confused, erratic and irrational – they deserve neither exorbitant praise for success nor total vilification for failure."

However, this view has no place in the popular narrative on leadership, which has been constructed and subsequently buttressed by powerful voices in academia, politics, the business press, the major consulting firms, and practitioner institutions.

4   Implications for Leadership Practice

The central theme of this paper is that, however well – and in whatever way - managers formally seek to plan, organise, co-ordinate and control events, it is the widespread patterning of people's everyday conversations and interactions that will determine what happens in practice. And that helping managers to recognise the complex and uncertain reality of organisational life is an important first step in releasing them from the suffocating grip of the dominant management discourse.

Surely, it might be argued (and often is!), by denying that there are objective entities on which we can confidently act to bring about change and realise desired performance objectives, we are neutering managers. According to management orthodoxy, position-based leadership[8] is about working to optimise current performance; set out the required conditions for future success; and deliver the intended benefits. And this requires leaders and others to be able to act in line with

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[8]   I'm making no distinction here between leadership and management, or between leaders and managers. I tend to agree with Henry Mintzberg (2011:8), who says, "Frankly I don't understand what this distinction means in the everyday life of organizations. Sure, we can separate leading and managing conceptually. But can we separate them in practice? Or, more to the point, should we even try?"

evidence-based prescriptions (as they might reasonably do if they were dealing with the non-social world), seemingly secure in the knowledge that their practice is in line with the best available.

However,

> … if self-organisation just happens (even in a so-called "command and control" regime) and this is not within the gift of managers to 'switch on and off' at will

> … if concepts, tools and techniques cannot guarantee particular outcomes – even when managers 'do the prescribed things better and get them right'

> … if the formal trappings of organisation only meaningfully exist to the extent and in the ways that these are taken up in people's everyday interactions, and

> … if outcomes are determined primarily by the themes that emerge and become widely taken up in these local conversations…

> > Where does this leave us in terms of leadership practice?

Helping managers to 'see better'

In my own consulting practice, I don't find that managers are fazed by this at all. In my experience, they find it highly liberating to understand why there is a mismatch between their everyday lived reality and what conventional management 'wisdom' suggests *should* be happening. When prompted, they recognise it as normal that they are both 'in control' (i.e. formally in charge and having the authority to command certain things to happen) and, *at the same time*, not in control (either of the shadow-side conversations or of the outcomes that ultimately emerge). This raised level of awareness then opens up new ways of understanding their practice. It helps them to make better sense of *what they're invariably already doing.* And it enables them to reframe their task in ways that resonate much more strongly with their sense of *what's actually going on*.

If I'm speaking for the first time to managers about the complex social dynamics[9] of organisation (whether CEOs or first-line supervisors), I begin by helping them to recognise and reflect on this fundamental paradox of leadership practice. This sometimes comes as an uncomfortable realisation for them, given the conventional view of leadership as one of being 'in control'. But this feeling is usually quickly supplanted by an expression of relief that what they understand intuitively, and how they operate in practice, actually makes sense. It legitimises their lived experience and gives them a way of talking about it in a meaningful way. We then go on to talk about how they might actively engage in these ongoing conversational dynamics with the

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[9]   As a point of detail, I never feel the need to refer to the "complex social dynamics" of organisation in these situations. What we're talking about is the everyday conversations and interactions through which whatever happens, happens.

intention (though not the certainty) of bringing about beneficial changes in performance. They are, of course, unavoidably participating in these interactions – even if they do nothing. So this is more about them participating in a deliberate, informed, and aware way.

Nobody has seen this as a counsel of despair! Or taken it as an excuse for inaction. On the contrary, they recognise that their leadership contribution, individually and collectively, is crucial to what happens in practice. At the same time, they come to see this contribution differently. In particular, for leaders, talk *is* action (Rodgers, 2006:53). Or, as I tend to say these days, the conversations *are* the work (after, Kelly, 2007). This suggests that those in formal leadership positions, from CEO to front-line supervisors, would do well to:

- Shift the emphasis of their communication towards more active and informed participation in the local sense-making-cum-action-taking conversations through which outcomes emerge. That is, providing *real* vision - helping people to 'see better' (Rodgers, 2006) in the light of actual events, rather than viewing their role as one of "getting the message across".

- Recognise that, in their formal leadership roles, they can't *not* communicate. That is to say, everything that they say and do – *as well as everything they don't say and don't do* – sends 'involuntary messages' to people about what's really important, how to behave, and so on. These 'messages' provide powerful inputs to the dynamic network of self-organising conversations through which others make sense of the world and decide how they will act.

- Accept that, while they can act with deliberate intent in pursuing a particular agenda, everyone else will be doing the same in relation to their own needs and understandings. What happens in practice will therefore emerge from the widespread interplay of these myriad intentions. And this means that neither they nor anyone else can predict of control the outcomes that will result.

This reframes the role of "the effective leader [as] a skilled participant in the ongoing ordinary politics of everyday life" (Stacey, 2010a:xi).

Enabling performance

In relation to day-to-day practice, the focus is on today's conversational interactions through which organisation is enacted – both in terms of the current reality and people's present construction of the emerging future. The emphasis is both on actively participating in joint sense-making conversations around important emerging themes and on seeking to understand the dynamics of those interactions in which the leader is not directly involved. In the latter case, important questions would relate to how well-connected the leader is to the natural conversational networks; how tuned-in he or she is to the themes that are organising the conversations within them; and how his or her own behaviour is being interpreted and acted upon by others.

Enabling others through conversation is about jointly making sense of the whys, whats and hows of performance in the midst of its emergence. These are *ongoing, 'work-in-progress'*

conversations: Sometimes planned, at other times spontaneous. And the sought-after 'outputs' are not action plans but rather people who have been so immersed in the process that they are better placed to anticipate and respond to events that actually emerge, rather than to those that might have arisen if the real world had been kind enough to conform to the planning assumptions.

Conceptualising organisations as dynamic networks of self-organising conversations carries with it the recognition that the conversational process (and hence organisation) is boundaryless. That is to say, the conversations through which *organisation* is enacted are not limited in any way by the formally established structures and arrangements that conventionally define the scope of companies, public institutions, associations, and other such legal entities.

In their HBR article, Larry Hirschhorn and Thomas Gilmore (1992) talked about the then popular *design notion* of "the boundaryless company". In response, they argued that psychological boundaries would need to be constructed in place of those that had previously existed in the formal structure. Although I'm suggesting that boundarylessness is a *natural dynamic* of organisation, rather than a design choice, the 'psychological boundaries' to which Hirschhorn and Gilmore draw attention have some practical merit in the context of the complex social dynamics of organisation:

> "These new boundaries are more psychological than organizational, And instead of being reflected in a company's structure, they must be 'enacted' over and over again in a manager's relationships with bosses, subordinates, and peers." (Page 5)

In brief, the boundaries that they suggest as being important are:

- the **authority** boundary – *"Who is in charge of what?"*

- the **task** boundary – *"Who does what?"*

- the **political** boundary – *"What's in it for us?"*

- the **identity** boundary – *"Who is and isn't us?"*

Towards more informed participation

The focus, then, is on what is emerging within people's ongoing interactions; what habitual and contingent themes are organising these conversations; and how the leader is participating in them. It's here, in the specific local context, that practitioners can research and develop their own and others' practice in the midst of their ongoing interactions - drawing out the contextual factors, dominant conversational themes, prevalent behavioural patterns (both characteristic and unexpected), and governing assumptions:

- that are organising people's interactions, and enabling and constraining their practice;

- out of which local and more widespread outcomes are emerging; and

- which point to potentially beneficial shifts that might be made in their current sense-making-cum-action-taking conversations.

This recognises that all that anyone can ever do is to 'act into' the future as it is emerging - facilitated by a reflective and reflexive approach to their own individual and collective practice. As Douglas Board and Rob Warwick conclude (2012:13) in their CPL White Paper on the social development of leadership and knowledge,

> "Developing the practice of leadership needs to be done within the experience of practice. Abstract ideas of leadership traits, models and stories of great people have their place, but these are secondary to what people do in the dilemmas that they face as they work within a context that deeply matters to them."

To do so requires the application of what Stacey (2012) calls "practical judgement" or others (such as Keith Grint, 2007, and Bent Flyvbjerg et al, 2012) call "practical wisdom", after Aristotle's notion of phronesis. This (again using Aristotlean terminology) is in contrast to the usual focus of leadership development on episteme (universally applicable, context-free and scientifically derived knowledge) and techné (reflected in the tools and techniques of management practice). Phronesis is about pragmatically applying expert judgement in the specific circumstances one is facing, as derived from practical experience.

As Chris Mowles (2011:265) sums up this general position,

> "… there is nothing more practical for a manager to be doing than to pay close attention to how they are working with others in everyday work situations; to find time to reflect with colleagues on how they are working and thinking, and to have the courage to stay engaged with each other as they negotiate how to go on together."

5   Shifting the Patterns

If the themes set out in this paper better reflect people's actual experience of life in organisations, why is it, as Stacey (2010a) asks, that we continue to talk, explain and prescribe on an intellectual basis which completely contradicts that experience? And, against this background, can anything be done to 'shift the patterns' to ones which might be more helpful?

First of all, this messy reality means that there are no simple, if-you-do-this-you'll-get-that formulae (Rodgers, 2010). Nor, despite the rhetoric, is it possible for consultants and others to provide evidence which demonstrates that a generally applied approach will 'work' at this *specific time*, in this *specific situation*, with these *specific people*. Inconvenient though this might be, in a world that craves clarity, certainty and proof, the craving does not make these socially complex and uncertain dynamics of everyday interaction disappear (Rodgers, 2011).

And so, if we're interested in the emergence of "progressive leadership" practice, which also takes seriously the complex social reality of day-to-day organisational life, we need to pay attention to the everyday conversations and interactions through which organisation is enacted and through which ideologies emerge, become established, and – potentially – change. As *active participants* in this self-organising process of conversational interaction we might then seek to stimulate the emergence of informal coalitions of support around new ideas, new perspectives and new ways of working.

The following brief statements attempt to identify some of the different patterns of talk and action that might become evident, if the currently dominant conception of leadership practice was to be supplanted by one which more closely reflected the complex social reality of organisational life:

From elite practice to emergent property

Leadership would be recognised as an emergent property of *people in relationship*, not as an elite practice confined to those at the top of organisations (and of wider society). That is, it would be understood as a complex social process enacted by many people in the normal course of their everyday interactions; rather than as a rational, scientific endeavour practised by a few gifted and formally appointed individuals.

As Sven-Erik Sjöstrand et al (2001:16) put it,

> "Leadership [is] a kind of flow or flux in people's variously patterned relations and interactions."

This is not fundamentally about a manager formally delegating or distributing leadership throughout the organisation as a design choice. It is a natural dynamic. Collective action is 'mobilised' through the coalescing of people around one particular construction of events rather than another. This mobilisation' would be the emergent outcome of actions taken by many people through their local interactions - actions intended to initiate, support, frustrate or overthrow new ideas, new perspectives and changes in practice.

From controlling to contributing

As Yiannis Gabriel (1999:284) points out,

> "While politically and culturally expedient, the myth of management control, like all illusions, fulfils vital psychological needs – fulfilling in fantasy wishes that cannot be fulfilled in actuality and reducing anxiety."

However, those in formal leadership positions (and those who judge and comment on their performance) would not seek to fuel this myth. They would understand that no individual or group – however powerful they might be in formal terms – is able to predict or control organisational outcomes. As powerful participants in the ongoing process of social interaction, they contribute to those dynamics and outcomes in important and influential ways – whether intentionally or not.

But they are not *in control* of them. Their position would be recognised as one of contributor to, rather than controller of, overall performance.

From certainty to curiosity

The search for, and expectancy of, certainty and predictability would be replaced by the valuing and practice of curiosity. This suggests a preference for leading through questions, rather than a presumption that the leader's role is to provide all of the answers; the capacity to embrace uncertainty and ambiguity, and to accept a position of 'not knowing'; a focus on noticing and exploring underlying patterns of thinking, feeling and behaving; and the ability to articulate these in ways that resonate with relevant others.

Helping people (including themselves) to overcome the anxiety of not knowing and to go on together despite the complexities and uncertainties would be another exemplar of good leadership practice. As Stacey (2010a:216) again says,

> "The leader is recognized as one with the courage to carry on interacting creatively despite not knowing."

From diagnosis to dialogue

The currently dominant view of leadership practice is based on a rational-scientific model of organisational dynamics. This assumes that strategic and operational challenges are best dealt with via expert diagnosis (the leader's own and that offered by specialist advisors).

Acceptance of the complex social reality of organisational life would see this as problematic. Diagnostic surveys, investigations, and related techniques are based on "if you do this, you'll get that" logic and objective analysis of 'the facts'. And thinking and doing are thought of as separate and sequential acts. But knowledge in a social process is co-created through the everyday conversational interactions that take place locally – between specific people, at specific times and in specific circumstances. Such interactions always reflect differing interpretations, ideologies, interests and identities, etc. And thinking and (inter)acting are intimately interwoven, in what I call "sense-making-cum-action-taking". So dialogue is as much about what people *do* as it is about what they *think*.

Encouraging and participating in meaningful conversations around such questions as, who we are; what we are doing; how we are going about it; why we think that we are doing what we are doing, and in the way that we are doing it; what this might mean; and what we might usefully be doing instead, would become the focus of everyday leadership practice. Formal, structured diagnosis of issues relating to the various 'technologies' that might be helping and/or hindering what is going on would still have an important part to play in the broader meaning-making process. But organisation is enacted through *people in conversation*. It is a 'contact sport'. It can't be reduced to an arms-length task - using questionnaires; dashboards; scorecards; systematic, step-wise processes; and other diagnosis-based tools and techniques.

From standing out to standing in

Today's conception of organisational leadership assumes that this is provided by someone (or a cadre of people) with outstanding ability - individuals who 'stand out' from the crowd in terms of their intellectual capacity, charisma, vision, courage, risk appetite, or whatever the particular perspective prescribes. It is supposedly exercised by standing apart from the minutiae of the action, to see and address the "big picture" from a position of objectivity. Instead, a central element of the formal leadership role would be seen as one of 'standing in' – that is, "actively participating in the conversations around important emerging issues" (Stacey, 2010b). This means paying attention to what's going on in the detail of the day-to-day conversations and interactions *that comprise the organisation*. The aim would be to seek to shift the patterns and content of interactions in ways that were judged to be organisationally beneficial from the perspective of involved participant rather than external, objective observer.

From individual dynamism to interactional dynamics

 "Success" and "failure" would be recognised as emergent properties of the complex social process of people interacting with each other in the normal course of everyday organisational life. Those in formal leadership positions would contribute to these perceived outcomes by actively participating in those interactions and seeking to influence them in organisationally beneficial ways. But the notion that organisational performance could be attributed to the dynamism of all-powerful individuals would no longer be seen as credible.

This realisation would also have usefully called into question the ways in which those in formal leadership positions (and, especially those 'at the top') are recruited, remunerated and developed. In particular, it would have replaced the current preoccupation with the traits, styles, competencies and so on of individuals who occupy formal leadership positions (i.e. on the so-called 'best practice' attributes of individual actors).

From colluding to confronting

There would be an increasing tendency for leaders, other employees, developers, and commentators to confront rather than collude with the basic myths that sustain current management orthodoxy.

A central illusion, that an organisation's fortunes can be assured if managers take action in line with the latest 'recipe for success', would be less in evidence than at present. The tendency instead would be for people to confront rather than collude with policies and practices that run counter to their lived experience. And this would also extend to the surfacing and exploration of other shadow-side themes and behaviours that were organising people's everyday conversations and interactions – including the contribution that they themselves were making to the patterning of thought and action that was emerging.

The real challenge for those in formal leadership positions, and those who advise them, would be seen as one of encouraging, assisting and enabling people to survive and thrive in a world that is - *unavoidably* - socially complex and uncertain.

From evidence-based practice to practice-based evidence

It would be recognised that you can't put an organisation in a test-tube! It isn't possible to link specific interventions to organisational outcomes - either before *or after* the event. Nor is it possible to carry out 'experiments' in limited settings and expect the repeatability and/or scalability of these to be unproblematic. The complex social dynamics of organisational life make the relationships between cause and effect untraceable. And these also place a premium on the *unique* contextual factors (i.e. interactional dynamics) that are 'in play' at any time.

Deciding the validity and efficacy or otherwise of a particular action (whether a formal development initiative or an aspect of everyday practice) would therefore be understood to be a subjective and interpretive task. That is, it would rest on such questions as:

- What is it that we think we are doing? And why do we think that we are doing it?
- Does what we and others are doing seem to make sense - and does it 'feel right' - *at this time*, *in this place*, and *in these circumstances*?
- What evidence of 'success' and 'failure' are we seeing in our *actual practice*, as the patterns of our actions emerge over time?
- How does what we and others are doing *in practice* 'stack up against' what we thought we were setting out to do?
- What novel and/or repetitive themes are evident in our ongoing interactions, as we move forward together - opening up new possibilities and/or constraining movement?
- Does what we are doing appear to be useful to us *at this time* and *in this situation*?
- And what do we think that all of this means in terms of what we might continue to think and do going forward?

In the social context of organisation, it would be accepted that the success (or otherwise) of such interventions would only become evident as 'outcomes' emerged and came to be recognised as such. And that, even then, what constituted "success" or "failure" would be a matter of interpretation and social construction. In essence, that the 'evidence' of the worthwhileness or otherwise of any changed way of working only emerges in the midst of its practice.

6 Can such a shift be achieved?

My aim in writing this paper is to get managers, other practitioners and those who judge and comment upon their practice to take complexity seriously. And, in so doing, to challenge the assumptions of rationality, predictability and control on which conventional management 'wisdom' is based.

If a sufficiently powerful coalition of support were to grow up informally around themes such as those set out above, these might emerge from the shadows and enter the mainstream. If not, the

tendency would remain for current patterns of behaviour to persist – and, with them, the

dysfunctions of leadership that the Centre for Progressive Leadership is seeking to address.

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Acknowledgements

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