

Engaging The Natural Tendency of Self-Organization

By

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There is a natural, pervasive tendency for living systems to self-organize. This is seen throughout nature at all levels of scale from tiny bacteria to large ecosystems.

People experience this phenomenon in gathering together to talk, work and play. This tendency is so pervasive and subtle that it's often not noticed or paid much attention to. Yet it is happening all the time.

This natural tendency is powerful, yet subtle; it is like the current in a flowing river. Sometimes people join the flow and positively engage with this tendency in their myriad of conversations, as in informal gatherings like some family reunions or in some high performance work teams.

But at other times, a common experience many of us have often had when we have a specific task to do or a goal to reach, is trying to impose our will on people through a command and control approach. While striving to get the job done, we bump up against this tendency of self-organization as we strive to complete the task or reach the goal. This is like trying to take the twists and turns out of the river and make it flow the way we want it to. It exists in organizations of all sorts.

Most of the vast literature on management and leading is directed at ways one's will can be imposed on this tendency of self-organization to accomplish the tasks at hand. Many managers crave stability, reliability, predictability and control in their organizations. While imposing conditions like these is fine for machines like an airplane, this approach suppresses purposeful vitality, energy and creativity of people in organizations. Imposing one's will can become command and control management when it is pushed too far. In this imposing-mode of managing and leading, people in the organizations become lethargic, unresponsive and resistant to change. The organization behaves as if it is a mechanical thing having to be pushed and shoved to make the things happen that management wants to actually happen. The organization behaves as if it is an *unhealthy living system*.

There is a growing frustration with this way of leading because of the less-than-hoped-for results and negative behavior that it generates in people in organizations.

Since the early 1960's more and more is being written about teams and how some of them can accomplish so much. In reading between the lines, it seems that those teams that do best are ones who have learned to engage with the natural tendency for people to self-organize. They are often called "high performing work teams" because they accomplish so much.

As leaders and managers, we have a *choice* to make regarding this natural tendency for people to self-organize. We can find ways to purposefully engage this tendency or we can fight and resist it. There are times when the situation is such that one of these choices may be more appropriate than the other one. This is not about "good" or "bad" but rather choosing the most effective way to lead in a particular situation in the present moment.

While most people have learned how to use command and control management and leadership processes, only a few have learned how to use management and leadership processes that purposefully engage with the tendency to self-organize.¹ Some of this is based on the intuitiveness or intuitive senses of leaders who know that the command and control processes aren't very effective for the long term.

As our thinking develops, we are finding a language and models that are extremely useful in working purposefully with this natural tendency of self-organization (Knowles, *ibid.*). Combining these with our intuitive insights provides a powerful way to purposefully engage with the tendency of self-organization.

Management and leadership processes that purposefully engage with the natural tendency to self-organize are called "Self-Organizing Leadership©." Where there is purposeful engagement with the tendency of self-organization, vitality, energy and creativity are seen and felt; the organization behaves as if it is a *healthy living system*.

This way of leading centers around the way managers and leaders choose to engage with, to be in relationship with, the people in organizations. The fundamental idea lies in the nature of the relationships in their conversations. Ralph Stacey is leading explorations into the importance of conversations in organizations in his work on complex responsive processes.² Much of the vast work on complex adaptive systems relates to

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

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

how things unfold and develop out of the self-organizing way people interact in organizations. Much good work is being done to help us understand the deeper principles behind the way self-organization unfolds. These theoretical foundations are important in building a solid ground for this important work for leaders.

Interestingly, to purposefully engage with the natural tendency of self-organization, all we need to do is to simply start having the important conversations. Three conversational pathways into purposeful engagement with the process of self-organization are through:

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

Authentic conversation, one person at a time, begins to open up the connections.

These authentic conversations need to be about the questions and issues that are truly important and critical for the success of the work and the goals of the organization. It requires courage, concern, commitment and care. We have to be open, honest and transparent as we do this together. We are *engaged within the organization* and *not acting on it* as if it was some external thing.

There are a number of ways to open up the conversations. We can just start to share important, relevant information and build trust and meaning as we talk together. We can engage in dialogue processes like those used by Meg Wheatley and Peter Senge. We can use story-telling as a way for people to find meaning in what is happening. We can use the Open Space Technology of Harrison Owen to explore people's interests in a particular subject. We can use the Future Search approach of Sandra Janoff and Marvin Weisbord to find out what is important to people and who cares enough to carry it forward. The approach of David Cooperrider with Appreciative Inquiry is also a great way to open up the conversation in a positive way. Sometimes it is about having the hard conversations like Susan Scott talks about in *Fierce Conversations*.³ Sometimes it is using Glenda Eoyang's approach to explore the difference that makes the difference. The challenge is to keep the conversations open, flowing and authentic over time.

Most people find these ways of coming into relationship in these conversations together, quite stimulating and exciting. For many, it is the

³ Susan Scott, *Fierce Conversations, Achieving Success at Work and in Life, One Conversation at a Time*. New York. The Berkley Publishing Group. 2002, 2004.

first time they may have been heard or taken seriously. New ideas are shared, exciting possibilities discovered and opportunities may open up for significant improvement. Yet the ways to easily document the conversation, to keep the conversational space open, to keep the conversation alive and to carry it forward to others who need to be engaged are limited.

It is important to easily and effectively document the critical questions and issues raised in the conversation so that the space can be held open to carry these conversations forward with those who may not have been initially involved.

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

This cyclical progression of conversations is mapped onto a Process Enneagram© map (Knowles, *ibid*) to capture the ideas, to keep open the space for future conversations and to develop a living strategic plan.

The progression begins with a conversation to get clear about the question we are facing. Then we move on to a conversation about who we are as we have come together, our Identity. We then move on to the Intention so that we develop a shared, co-created picture of just what we are trying to do to address in the opening question before us. The progression then moves on to conversations about the Issues and Tensions facing us, the dynamics of how our co-created Principles and Standards of behavior will enable us to more effectively work together, to identifying specific tasks and Work we'll do, to how we will continue to Learn and Grow, discovering our future together, and how to best Structure and organize ourselves to accomplish the tasks needed to address the opening question. As we carry forward and widen the conversation, other insights will emerge which can be added to the map we are creating. In this cyclical process we move up a spiral of learning and growth. This cyclical progression of conversations enables the development of a very high level of coherence, purposefulness, will for action and sustainability.

Control shifts from management edicts and pronouncements to the co-creation of the Bowl (Knowles, *ibid*). The Bowl consists of the mission,

vision, expectations, principles and standards of performance. The Bowl provides both order and focus for the organization and within the Bowl people can work with a high level of freedom to accomplish the tasks before them.

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

Conclusion:

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



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