

Two Complexity Theory Concepts:

Keene (2000) reflects on the role of leadership in managing complexity. She notes that “Leadership in an environment of complexity will be that person who facilitates and creates an environment which makes it possible for the elements within the system to interact and create new forms of reality, guided by the overarching vision and rules.” Using facilitation skills such as “the ability to listen, communicate and participate in dialog which allows groups to surface and understand their assumptions about each other and their notion of reality as opposed to that of others.” (p. 17), effective leaders create a space for co-creation in organizations. Facilitative leadership provides an opening for a complex set of viewpoints to flourish.

Values play a critical role in aligning a complexity of viewpoints within organizations and leadership plays a critical role in bringing values to the forefront. Dolan (1999) notes the need for values and values based management in an age of complexity. “Values will guide people’s behavior and work conduct into achieving the desired results, just as do the attractors. There’s a strong analogy between organisation values and strange attractors; both lead a system to its aimed status.” (p. 30) Values help guide an organization through complex, turbulent times. Under the broad umbrella of values, Dolan categorizes values into to groups: final values (existential objectives) and instrumentals (ethical referring to conduct and competence referring to control or development oriented). Dolan notes that “true leadership of a progressive 21st century

company must operate through values...values are the framework of this structure; they are the glue that holds an organization together when confronted with chaos and the need for change.” (p. 34). Interestingly, Block (2001) echoes this sentiment when he writes, “the challenge of values is not to negotiate the importance of one over another, but to act on them.” (p. 27/335 ibooks).

OD Issue Application:

I’m fortunate to have had the opportunity to support the facilitative leadership of a manager who intentionally brought values to the forefront as part of a planning process. I was invited by a manager of a collaborative change initiative working to improve health outcomes to help facilitate a ten-month planning process to develop new three-year goals (Long Beach Building Healthy Communities, funded by the California Endowment). Collaboration adds an added layer of complexity as multiple organizations with different cultures and priorities met on a regular basis to find common ground.

The manager of this collaboration created an environment where members of the collaboration co-created its future. Working together, we served as facilitators of the planning process, which consisted of monthly meetings for different work groups. Together with members of the collaborative, we designed a decision-making process and clarified what decisions needed to be made. We helped groups understand their assumptions about each other through relationship building at each gathering. We also designed an engaging process that mixed large group dialog with small group conversations in a variety of formats.

In one of the first group conversations I facilitated, I asked the group what criteria they would use to decide. Early on, the group decided to use its existing values as a key

criteria for its decision-making, with the encouragement from the collaboration's manager. Throughout the remainder of the planning process, we brought these values, which resulted from an earlier planning process, to life. These values included

1. Leadership by people most adversely impacted: Throughout the planning process, the decision-makers met this criteria and the organizations they represented primarily included people impacted by the issues the collaboration addressed. Using Dolan's definition, this is an example of an ethical value, which "refers to the conduct, the means that are justified to achieve the final values" (p. 30).

2. Reaching new networks and connecting communities: The final goals chosen all served as strategies to build a stronger, healthier community. This is also an example of an ethical value.

3. Meaningful vision, risk taking and action: The goals chosen represented some risk taking for the collaborative. For each goal, they developed a detailed action plan. This is an example of a control oriented competence value, "necessary to maintain and bring together the various organisational sub-systems." (p. 32)

4. Deeper collaboration: The entire process strengthened relationships and created investment in working to ensure the goals would be implemented. This is an example of a development oriented competence value, "essential to create new opportunities for action" (p. 32)

Each of these values served as guide posts for the collaboration to self-govern and prioritize a set of goals moving forward. The collaboration's manager helped keep these values in front of participants throughout the process, as we referred to them at

various meetings. This included writing the values down on flip chart paper for all to see along with more detailed handouts.

Towards the end of the planning process once the group had prioritized potential set of goals for moving forward, we spent an entire meeting asking whether or not each of their potential goals met one of the collaboration's existing values. We facilitated this process using a "World Cafe" methodology, which gave all participants the opportunity to review and refine the goals developed. This helped strengthen the collaboration value because in addition to each group seeing some of their own goals vetted by the larger group, they too had the opportunity to shape goals championed by other organizations. Not all the ideas met all of the criteria, but because participants jointly agreed on the criteria, they understood the process served them to pick the right set of goals. Ultimately, participants prioritized a set of goals that met each of the values criteria. The planning process also reflected their values, putting them into practice.

Complexity's Contribution to my Understanding of Issue:

The complexity lens gave me additional appreciation for the role facilitation plays in creating an engaging process that nurtures an environment of co-creation. While the external environment continually shifts, an additional layer of complexity exists for collaboration by having perspectives of multiple organizations in the same room. Values serve as that guidepost to inform decision-making at all levels of the organization (or in the case of my example, a collaboration among organizations). If an organization and collaboration can find and follow their values and engage its members to use these values as criteria in their decision-making, then organizations are more likely to thrive in a chaotic environment.

Given the multitude of information bombarded to and from participants in the process of collaborating for change, special effort is needed to ensure values stay at the forefront. If not championed by a facilitative leader, essential direction setting values could vanish into the background. Leadership needs to include time on the meeting agenda to bring values to the forefront.

Framing collaboration as a complex system helps my understanding of how fluid it can be working with various organizations on the same issue. There are multiple points of power, each with a different perspective on reality. Attempting to control collaboration as if it were a traditional hierarchical organization will not work. The facilitator doesn't have formal control, but does have a major influence along with all of the other players. Even if someone works full time in the role of a facilitator for a collaboration, they still won't have a total understanding of the complexity they serve. What facilitative leaders can be certain about is the role they can play in creating a space for participants to move forward using values as a guide.

References

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