

## **The Ordering Forces of Change: the Invisible Dynamics of Human systems**

A talk given at a local government workshop

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For organisations to flourish, and for organisational change to be effective, much has to be in place in order not to create drag. The process, put simply, requires working with the right ideas, the right plan, and the right people in the right place. In other words, it's largely about relationships - the people, the human underpinning that will be required for you bring about an innovative breakthrough. We are going to look at the, often invisible, human dynamics of change. We call these dynamics The Orders of Organisational Change.

The human side of change is composed of thousands of separate little actions undertaken by people; you me, the people you will need to influence to bring this change about. Each of these actions, quite apart from what else they do, have an impact on us at a *felt* level; they either make us feel good or bad, innocent or guilty to a lesser or greater extent, and almost inevitably a mixture of both. To the extent that our feelings about a proposed action are either positive or at least a balance between positive and negative, we will undertake it. Obviously, if our overwhelming felt response to the suggestion of this action is negative, we are much less likely to undertake it. Or we will create debate and conflict.

At one level, these feelings are simply a response to whether or not we think the proposed action is a good idea. However, because human beings and the social systems we create are complex and constantly changing, our reactions are not purely a function of the quality of the idea itself. These reactions are often strongly influenced by the individual and the social systems that they are part of. The Orders of Organisational Change look at the invisible ways in which social systems profoundly influence these feelings and responses.

These feelings are influenced by something we all have which we refer to as "*conscience*". In the context of the Orders of Organisational Change, conscience means something more than a sense of right or wrong, a part of you that either makes you feel guilty or innocent. In this context, conscience refers to a deeply structured sense of survival. It is like an unconscious monitoring system that is hugely sensitive to your survival needs and the survival of your participation in that social system. It manifests itself in these feelings and reactions. It fulfils this role by acting as a watchdog over those aspects of the social system that most support survival. It is these aspects that support survival that we refer to as the *Orders of Organisations*.

These orders relate to our fundamental, biological concern with certain key issues - belonging, exchange, hierarchy and place, and history. To the extent that what we do

aligns these orders, it is likely to be successful and increase the flow of energy and creativity. To the extent that what we conflicts with them, we are likely to put in a lot of effort without really achieving anything sustainable. It is therefore important to think about any organisational input within the context of these orders, to ensure that some critical issues are not overlooked. And the word 'thinking' doesn't quite cover it, because the way we relate to these orders seems to rest more on what you could call a 'felt sense' than on rational thought. Constellations, for example, use people's bodily experiences to move towards clarity of relational dynamics. Bodies and minds are not always aligned or in good relation to one another. But let's begin by thinking; let's have a more detailed look at each of these orders, beginning with belonging.

## Belonging

At a deep level, we are all aware that we depend on one another to survive. No one survives alone. We are therefore always monitoring the extent to which any of our actions will either strengthen our belonging to the groups we are members of, or weaken it. For example, you are at a residential event. Perhaps you are feeling guilty about being away from your family, but conscientious (innocent), in relation to your commitment to the Centre for Leadership. You feel positive about your commitment to the purpose of your building of a great leadership centre but guilty about your day to day work which is not being attended to while you are here.

Another example might relate to your relationship to certain styles of working or innovation. You will have developed an ease and commitment to some practices. Perhaps you feel comfortable with certain kinds of leadership style, certain ways of making things happen, such that you might initially feel uneasy, even threatened, by the introduction of another kind of process – perhaps one that relies more on co-creation. But, at the same time, you may feel innocent, in relation to this programme because that is what the programme is asking you to do! Guilt and innocence always hold hands. Civil servants are asked to put down their (big P) politics during the day. For some this creates a similar uneasy flow between betrayal (guilt) and conscientiousness (innocence). The executive and councils of management within local authorities may have a similar issue.

Our sense of belonging is therefore not straightforward because we belong to so many groups, some serially and some simultaneously. We are constantly attending to the trade offs between the different groups of which we are members. What is right from one point of view is wrong from another. How do we do this? It seems to boil down to the *felt experience* of actions that, at some deep level, you perceive either contributes to your survival or endangers it. It doesn't rest on rational considerations alone.

How can this sense of belonging be strengthened by the work you undertake? What does it illuminate about the issues in local councils?

## The balance of exchange

All organisations deal with exchange. A council provides resources and it gets back confirmation and growth. It meets needs and provides added value for the community. From the community and the government it receives resources to meet these needs again. The inflows and outflows are many and extremely complex, and not all measurable in money. However, unless the exchange is balanced over time the system is voted out, dries up, goes bankrupt, or collapses. In a purely commercial system, if you price something correctly, the customer and the organisation are both satisfied and this satisfaction creates sustainable relationship and loyalty. However, the systems you work in do not have such a clarifying financial interface even though it is clear that this exchange is going on.

The experience of countless units of giving and receiving is actually what builds belonging. It creates loyalty. So if you work with a system that is not using direct financial exchange, is not directly tied to market forces, it is even more important to attend to this overall matching of exchange so that guilt and obligations do not undermine belonging and relationship over time. People who receive too much often don't just act grateful, and people who give too much don't always complain. They may undermine the system more indirectly. They engage in politics! Their positions are influenced by these feelings of guilt and innocence, of debt and obligation, of rights and responsibilities, of feeling superior or too little, and so on. A welfare service or a charity always has this as a central concern.

How can you make sure that in whatever you are offering, the balance of exchange feels equal? How can you attend to this within the council's agendas?

## Right place and hierarchy

People at work feel at ease, comfortable and able to contribute their best when they feel they are in the right place doing their right work. Conscience is therefore hugely sensitive to hierarchy. What we mean here by hierarchy is not just a single ladder of status or power, but rather it attends to what is the right structure for the current situation. This has several key components.

Firstly: functional hierarchy. This relates to the importance of the work we do as a function of the overall purpose of the system. It enables a flow of energy, power and resources to support the function of the organisation. When it works, people do not get in the way of one another; they have what they need from above to pass on to the next layer down all the way to the customer. This kind of hierarchy responds best to purpose rather than ideology.

Then there is a hierarchy according to time. People who have been in the organisation longer naturally carry more weight. There is another that relates to age; older people carry more weight because they have lived longer. (You realise how complex this is when a new younger leader arrives and tries to establish authority over long standing members of the team, or when someone who is not in the hierarchy has the ear of the leader. People say, "who does he think he is?" It breaks our innate sense of the rules of how things get done.)

Being sensitive to these hierarchies can save a lot of energy. They contribute to, or detract from, an ease about "how things are done around here" - the invisible culture of the social system we are a part of or seeking to influence. They are often in conflict with one another and need serious attention.

What are the hierarchies both visible and invisible that you need to attend to in your project?

## History

The final order of Organisational Change is history, the power of the past. Past events are held in individual memories of course, but it seems, from our research and experience, that social systems themselves, as well as the participating individuals, have a conscience with regard to history. Forgotten history, past mistakes that are unacknowledged, losses of personnel that have been unjust, suffering within the community and so on, continue to affect the behaviour of the people in a system. They affect the flow of energy and willingness to engage with it, even when the individuals do not directly know the history. For example, if something has happened in the past that has not been resolved and which people have stopped talking about, for whatever reason, it is almost bound to create a drag on the system. We have worked with local councils who have not dealt with the impact of a death of a child in their care, for example, or with the sense of insecurity caused by outsourcing. These undigested bits of history set up an unhelpful undertow, a pull under the tide that impedes all attempts to make forward progress despite putting large amounts of energy. If, as another example at the team level, someone has been made redundant, the rest of the team, or a particular person, will often take on the feeling of being a victim (as opposed to the person who has left). Until these feelings have been surfaced and dealt with, it will be very difficult for the team to move forward. In local authorities and government as a whole, legal matters impede the acknowledgement of responsibility, make saying sorry financially dangerous, and appear to weaken political direction. History is often what feeds the slogans of the opposition, rather than being seen as unfinished business that need careful attention.

Is there anything in the history of the local authorities you are involved with that might influence the success of your work?

We are asking you to consider these orders in relation to the councils you work with and the other systems you work alongside. They are equally important to consider for your own organisation.

*How can you make sure, in whatever you do, that the balance of exchange feels equal?*

*What are the hierarchies, both visible and invisible, that you need to attend to?*

*Is there anything in your history that might influence your effectiveness?*