

Blog Series:

Leading Organizations Series

Part 1: How the Right Metaphor Changes Everything

20th century novelist Robert Shea once described organizations as powerful “machines constructed of people.” We’re probably all familiar with that metaphor. This post is about how the machine metaphor has failed companies the world over and how a new way of understanding organizations could mean the difference between success and obscurity.

My Unexpected Path to Thought Leadership

I have been richly blessed to have practiced, learned about, and studied leadership in a variety of settings. I have worked extensively in the corporate sector as well as health care, but now have a leadership role in an Evangelical seminary.

For some that may seem an odd arrangement. But I hold to Parker Palmer’s notion that you “let your life speak.” If I look back over my life, I see a continuing thread of adult education: I love to teach!

I was blessed to have found, been accepted to, and completed a PhD in Leadership and Change at Antioch University, so late in my career I was able to frame my experiential learning with solid theory and a finely-tuned research mind.

Avoiding the Rut of Inaccurate Beliefs

Over the past 35 years, I have seen a massive shift in the way we think about leadership that is underpinned by a shift in our beliefs about what constitutes a “well run” organization.

Let me explain what I mean.

We have moved from a belief that machine-like precision, standardization, and managerial expertise was the key to success (a fascinating topic I unpacked in an earlier post).

Now we’ve moved to an understanding and acceptance that the reality of life is just far messier than that.

So, it's little wonder to me that leaders are increasingly frustrated by the fact that their carefully thought-out strategies and linear expectations are continuously thwarted by the daily realities of constant, often highly disruptive change.

The Right Metaphor Can Change Everything

More and more, leaders are finding that a more organic metaphor helps them describe and navigate the realities of their world today.

Organisms or ecosystems, if you like, are constantly adapting and changing. There are very real “eco cycles” of birth, growth, decline, death and renewal.

Outcomes are highly unpredictable and often delightfully surprising and people seem to have an innate capacity to organize themselves, rather than waiting to be managed or directed from above.

Your Turn

What would you say is the predominant understanding of how an organization should run? Do you agree or disagree? You can leave a comment below.

Part 2: Why Control is Over-Rated

Our leadership of complex organizations has to go beyond intricately detailed strategies and linear expectations of growth if we expect them to thrive. More and more, leaders are finding that understanding organizations as living organisms, rather than machines, helps them describe and navigate the realities of their world today.

Every Organization Has a Life of Its Own

Unlike machines, organisms - or ecosystems, if you like - are constantly adapting and changing. There are very real “eco cycles” of birth, growth, decline, death and renewal. Here, outcomes are highly *unpredictable* and often delightfully surprising.

Perhaps the most counter-intuitive aspect of organic organizations is that people seem to have an innate capacity to organize themselves, rather than waiting to be managed or directed from above.

The Science Behind Organizational Leadership

This organic metaphor is causing more and more organizational leaders to examine the possible benefits of understanding complexity theory to their understanding of how to be more effective.

Born in the hard sciences of mathematics and physics, complexity theory (early on described as chaos theory) soon found resonance in other sciences, including biology, economics, and statistics.

Not surprisingly, organizational theorists such as Margaret Wheatley, Ralph Stacey, Brenda Zimmerman, Glenda Eoyang, and many others began to see enormous opportunities to rethink how we view leadership and change.

When Everyone's Committed, You Don't Need to Control Them

Complexity theory invites us to see our organizations as adaptive systems. In adaptive systems, order emerges when the system has the space for self-correction and when change and compliance are self-generated, based on clearly defined "simple rules."

This leads to an ethic of commitment rather than command-and-control rigidity. It also leads to the reduction of quick-fix solutions as people learn to listen much more closely to the system.

Your Turn

As a leader, how much autonomy and self-organization do you foster with your team? How is it working out? You can leave a comment below.

Part 3: 7 Signs Your Organization is Resilient

Complexity theory invites us to see our organizations as adaptive systems rather than machines we control and command.

When we understand organizations as eco-systems, or living organisms, this leads to an ethic of commitment rather than command-and-control rigidity. It also leads to the reduction of quick-fix solutions as people learn to listen much more closely to the system.

Here are the 7 key elements of an organization that is adaptive and resilient in the midst of change.

1. Interconnectivity

Your organization is a system that consists of a large number of diverse components, referred to as agents, which may be tightly or loosely interconnected. Any change in one agent's behaviors has an impact on all other agents, which then has an a resulting impact on the original agent.

Bottom line: Relationships are key!

2. Autonomy

Agents within your organization are not centrally controlled; they have a degree of autonomy, but their behavior is always subject to certain laws, rules or norms.

This does not mean that there is no role for leadership, but it is dramatically different from the old command-and-control perspective.

3. Emergence

Global behavior of a complex system emerges from the interaction of agents and is therefore unpredictable but not random; it generally follows discernible patterns.

A key role for leaders, then, is to gain altitude in order to notice and make sense of these emerging patterns.

4. Nonequilibrium

Global behavior of a complex system is far from equilibrium because frequent occurrences of disruptive events do not allow the system to return to the equilibrium between two such events.

5. Nonlinearity

Relations between agents within your organization are nonlinear, which occasionally causes an insignificant input to be amplified into an extreme event.

This phenomenon is popularly referred to as the "butterfly effect".

6. Self-Organization

Your organization is a system capable of self-organizing in response to disruptive events. It is highly adaptive.

Self-organization may also be initiated autonomously by the system in response to a perceived need.

7. Co-Evolution

Your organization irreversibly co-evolves with its environment. A complexity approach challenges the foundational principles on which many organizations have built success in much simpler times: strategic planning, transactional leadership, and a focus on short-term outcomes.

Your Turn

Do you identify with any of these elements? How would you rank your organization? You can leave a comment below.

Part 4: Has the Church Become Too Rigid?

In the last post of this series on Leading Organizations, we looked at the 7 factors that contribute to highly resilient organizations - all based on a complexity approach to organizational leadership.

Different sectors seem to embrace this approach at very different times. Dee Hock, the founder of VISA, was one of the first in the corporate sector. His book, *The Chaordic Organization*, stands as benchmark for new ways of thinking. Health care, arguably one of the most complex systems ever conceived, began to explore the implications and opportunities in the mid-'90s.

What About the Church?

Sadly, there is virtually nothing in the literature or in practice to suggest that the Church has yet begun this exploration.

The irony to me is that the theory and ideas behind complexity are incredibly biblical, supported by the multiple organic metaphors that Christ uses to describe the Kingdom of God.

Far too many in the church continue to embrace a mechanistic view that is characterized by rigid leadership structures, a focus on outputs, and programs, and unwillingness to really allow people to self-organize.

We Can Be Part of a Better Story

At Tyndale, we are determined to be part of a new story. In our DMin in Leadership, we offer a course called "Leadership and Systems Theory" which invites participants to look at their ministry through a complexity lens.

These same thoughts are presented in many of our other leadership courses in the Seminary. Gary Nelson, President of Tyndale, and I have just completed a book called *Leading in Disorienting Times: Navigating Change in the Church and Organizations*. The book is due in May, 2015, which we hope will spark further discussion about a new way of thinking about ministry and leadership.

Your Turn

Do you agree that the Church is too rigid, hierarchical, or program-focused? Have you experienced a church that did things differently? You can leave a comment below.