

# A review of “Complexity and the Experience of Managing in the Public Sector”

Edited by Ralph Stacey and Douglas Griffin, published by Routledge ISBN 0415367328 (2005)

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## Introduction

Ralph Stacey and Douglas Griffin write that *Complexity and the Experience of Managing in Public Sector Organizations* is for readers looking for practitioner descriptions of real life experiences managing in public sector organizations, rather than “idealized accounts” of the way life should be in public organizations. After two introductory chapters by the editors, five chapters contributed by managers in public sector health and education organizations provide narrative accounts of actual work in public organizations. A “perspective of complex responsive processes” developed from analogies drawn from the complexity sciences serves as a conceptual framework for the entire book.

Stacey is Director and Griffin the Associate Director of the Complexity and Management Centre at the Business School of the University of Hertfordshire. Both served as editors of a previous six volume series published in 2001 and 2002 entitled *Complexity and Emergence in Organizations* and the book under review here is one of five in a new series entitled *Complexity as the Experience of Organizing*. Although there are references to organizations in North America and elsewhere, virtually all of the organizational experience discussed by the editors and contributing authors is in the United Kingdom and one case originates in Ireland. The layout for this edited book works particularly well. All of the chapters are summarized at the beginning of the book and additional introductory remarks followed by a bulleted outline precede each chapter.

The editors’ unifying conceptual framework merits special attention. In an introductory passage, Stacey and Griffin note that:

*“The perspective of complex responsive processes draws on analogies from the complexity sciences, bringing in the essential characteristics of human agents, understood to emerge in social processes of communicative interaction and power relating. The result is a way of thinking about life in organizations that focuses attention on how organizational members cope with the unknown as they perpetually create organizational futures together.”*

Complexity thinkers such as Brian Goodwin, Stuart Kauffman and Mitchell Waldrop provide much of the groundwork for a perspective of complex responsive processes. In addition, the work of George Herbert Mead and Norbert Elias underlie a good portion of the authors approach to communication and power relations in public organizations.

Thinking about organizations as complex responsive processes and patterns of human behavior has some things to commend it. For example, because an organization does not exist as a system or “thing” outside of and separate from the individuals who are in it, the authors are right to have a problem with dualistic forms of thinking in which individual minds are understood in terms of psychology and organizations are understood in terms of organizational theory. The book provides support for a theoretical perspective that sees the combined total of mutual cause and effect relationships between people as *the* organization.

Still, as one reads on about the editors’ perspective of complex responsive processes, it is difficult not to wish for the emergence of something like a generally accepted common body of concepts and terminology in the complexity sciences. Perhaps some day, rather than a perspective drawn “by analogy with complex adaptive systems”, we will all think about organizations as complex adaptive systems, complex emergent systems, or think in terms of some other well-established metaphor that conveys a complexity inspired vision of organizations.

It is difficult to communicate complexity. For example, Stacey and Griffin write that complexity “refers to a particular dynamic or movement in time that is paradoxically stable and unstable, predictable and unpredictable, known and unknown, certain and

uncertain, all at the same time.” (pp. 7-8) People familiar with complexity theories would have little trouble, but I suspect someone new to complexity would find it hard to comprehend this sentence.

The problem is more evident in a preceding paragraph:

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*“In describing the fundamental aspects of the complex responsive processes of human relating, we have referred on a number of occasions to patterns of communicative interaction, figurations of power relations, and generalizations/idealizations that are particularized/functionalized in specific situations. These patterns, figurations, generalizations/idealizations and particularizations/functionalizations may all be understood as themes, taking both propositional and narrative forms, which emerge and re-emerge in the iteration, in each succeeding present, of the interactive processes of communication, power and evaluation.” (p. 7, authors’ emphasis)*

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The editors point out that the contributors to their book work as leaders, consultants or managers and that each provides a narrative account of actual work in organizations. What is not noted, is each contributor is a very recent graduate of the Business School of the University of Hertfordshire (four graduated with a Doctor of Management in 2005 and the fifth with a Master of Arts) and presumably all have worked with one or both of the editors as graduate students.

There is nothing wrong with this of course, but what is not clear is whether the contributors conducted their research and wrote about their work experience while they were students or after graduation. Whatever the case, all five authors provide well-written, straightforward reflections and narrative accounts of their work in public organizations and personal perspectives of complex responsive processes explicitly inspired by the editors of the book.

So is *Complexity and the Experience of Managing in Public Sector Organizations* a contribution to the literature? Certainly, the chapters by the contributing authors is testimony to the fact that Stacey and Griffin’s perspective of complex responsive processes has helped the authors think creatively about work in public organizations. The contributors’ thought-provoking reflections and ideas about managing public organizations is a clear strong point of this book.

At another level, this book is a bit of a disappointment. How can we build upon the contributing authors’ perspective of complex responsive processes and develop new forms of public sector governance that differ from the ways we have managed public organizations in the past? The contributors’ chapters provide some trace indications of alternative ways to manage public organizations as complex responsive processes, but that is as far as things go in this book.

In spite of some limitations, *Complexity and the Experience of Managing in Public Sector Organizations* is a useful book for managers and perhaps other people already familiar with the complexity sciences. If it is an indication of the level of scholarship in the other volumes in the editors’ *Complexity as the Experience of Organizing Series*, then Stacey and Griffin are arguably on track toward a new vision of management in public sector organizations.