A Review of "Complexity, Organizations and Change"

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Introduction

In an unassuming manner, no claim is made on the author's part to be an expert in complexity theory or the research that is underway in the field. Instead, her stated goal is to pull ideas and theories from the mainstream of the new sciences and relate how they might be understood by the practitioner (p. 4). As such, this reader found the material engaging from cover to cover with a long list of ideas that merit either further investigation or trial. As explained below, the only want might be for more detail bridging theory to practice, but that could have shifted the book too much away from its management focus.

The second chapter is by design, a brief overview of the core elements found in complexity studies. As such, it can easily be skipped by those already familiar with complexity or a scan of section headings is probably sufficient to confirm a passing familiarity with the terminology. The audience for this chapter is the reader new to complexity and needs this level of understanding before taking on the material presented later in the book. In this way, the chapter is necessary in foundation laying.

This overview of complexity then shifts to a review of the history of scientific thought and its impact on the study and management of organizations. This reader originally thought this third chapter to be filler material, but later saw the wisdom of not dismissing the chapter too quickly. While much of this chapter will be review for those who have reflected on the implications of changing to a complexity paradigm, there comes a point in reading where this reader was hit with the notion that the older paradigm is in fact still having some influence even when consciously working within a complexity paradigm. This revelation hit when reading about some of the newer organizational concepts and structures with the illustration that there are still elements of linear cause-effect assumptions underlying the ideas in how they are discussed and implemented. Suddenly, this reader had to stop and make a notation to further evaluate personal beliefs on organization structure and change for possible bias remaining from many years of living in the old paradigm. McMillan (p. 54) summarized these thoughts by saying "sadly the proponents of these ideas believe at the conscious level that they have discovered new ways of thinking and behaving yet, in my view, their language indicates quite the opposite." Crafting the language we use to describe organizational complexity to others is a challenge both in clarifying our beliefs and in using the words that will get attention while not being misleading to those new to the study of complexity.

The fifth chapter moves into the application of complexity in organizational change and provides a reasonable overview of some of the major writers in this area. What is interesting is the degree to which the author relates key elements of complexity to organizational change. Other writers often start explaining the concept at a basic level and then jump right into its application without clearly showing how the concept at a biological or physical level can be related to an application in an organization. Each principle of complexity is given one to two pages that leave the reader better understanding how complexity can be understood in a social setting. Some examples include the butterfly effect (no two organizations exactly the same), strange attractor (leadership and work being performed similarly, but not the same way each time), fractals (shared values and dialogue), edge of chaos (life-work issues and innovation), and self-organization (unconstrained work flows). This is not an exhaustive list, but a flavor of some of the ideas covered and the connection made between complexity and applications in organizations. Each section could still benefit from more examples and applications, but this attempt is already better than what has been done by many writers.

Once the introduction to complexity is accomplished, the author eases into a case study and personal reflection of a change process undertaken at the Open University. To a large extent this is an insider's analysis of a change initiative that was built on elements of complexity theory, some of which were recognized in hindsight and others purposefully employed once underway. As a facilitator, the author was in a position to influence the course of the change process and did so in conjunction with others.

However, this was not a carefully planned exercise based on complexity theory since she had only recently become familiar with books by James Gleick and Ralph Stacey, which makes a point that you don't have to be an expert in complexity theory to take advantage of the fundamental principles. Instead, "they did not follow any predetermined plans but responded to emerging situations and events in a spontaneous way. But although they may not have worked to any predetermined plan they had a strong sense of what they were trying to achieve. They wanted to change the way the OU [Open University] did things, and this purpose informed and guided their actions" (p. 145). The work undertaken during this change initiative also changed the life of the author, leading her to a doctorate degree and further study of complexity theory and its practice.

When reading parts of the book, one can't help but think of all the instances where complexity is seen at work in hindsight or where an accepted management or change practice starts to make sense once it is juxtaposed with complexity theory. In bridging between theory and practice the reader is left with a better understanding of the interrelationship between the two perspectives. Too often, authors will place greater attention on theory without clearly relating it to practice or will focus on practice in isolation from theory. While the linkages here is not always that explicit, the reader is still left with the feeling that the practices that were tried and what emerged did so because of the underlying theory in action. However, the practitioner is left to complete the picture by having to build their own summary of these linkages so the ideas can be put into practice easier without having to reference large parts of the book to locate a specific application. In this way the book might have been improved with a summary of theory in practice with reference to specific parts of the case study.

In examining the accomplishments during this four year period, it is clear that much of the success can be attributed to individuals becoming voluntarily involved and moving toward a shared vision. It is equally clear that there was significant encouragement and leadership from key people high in the Open University. However, issues arising from university funding and top leadership shifting its focus both had a negative impact on the sustainability of continued change. This is not to say that the changes were not sustainable but that the momentum for still more change was lost. To a large extent this matches common wisdom for large scale change initiatives. McMillan (p. 10) said "in my view, without support from those who are powerful at the top of the organization the process will be short-lived. Further, continued powerful support and the right environment are needed if the process is not to slow down and fade away." The case study shows a slowdown in the momentum for change once clear leadership support was lost, but pockets of change continued though in a more local environment. What is not known is whether these local cells of change are sustainable and to what extent multiple grassroots actions are self-organizing for larger scale change. This is an interesting question that is provoked from this book, but not answerable without a later epilog. What would be interesting though is an analysis on what the critical factors were between change leadership at the top and the development of a shared vision for change and how they might have reinforced each other. This would have added to the analysis of the case study and may not be possible from a single case study even though there were multiple changes underway as part of Open University's larger change process. But it does get to the greater issue of how much top leadership or the grassroots can do alone without the other. Further, what might we learn on how to influence all parts of the organization to better understand how organizational change comes about and how an organization might approach change with less resistance and pain? This will be left for other researchers and authors to consider.