A review of "The Emergence of Leadership: Linking Self-Organization and Ethics"

Written by Douglas Griffin, published by Routledge ISBN 0415249171 (2001)

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Introduction

In 2001, when I was working on a research project on organizational sub-cultures, financed by ISCE research, the CEO at one of the hospitals where I was interviewing told me that he didn't believe that it was valuable to think in terms of organizational cultures, much less sub-cultures, or as nested systems. I was shocked. My interviews for the research had demonstrated that each of the three hospitals I visited had significantly different cultures, arising from easily understood circumstances in their histories. And the sub-cultures nested within each were just as clear. That was my first contact with the Ralph Stacey school of organizational thought. Even after reading Stacey's *Complex Responsive Processes in Organizations* (2001), I remained confused at the rejection of thinking of organizations in terms of culture or as systems. In any number of online conversations with people who agree with this view, I've tried to understand the contradiction of my experience of organizations and the Stacey school's. Which is why I decided to review *The Emergence of Leadership*, one of the books in Stacey's *Complexity and Emergence in Organizations* series. I'm glad to tell you that I've finally resolved this conflict. As Griffin explains it, what the Stacey school objects to is the *reification* of systems and culture that one sees in so much of in organizational literature. And I agree here. Unfortunately, it seems to me, this school has thrown out the systems and culture babies with their reified bath water.

But before I explore this point, I have to say that for most purposes *Emergence of Leadership* is not a very interesting book. There is a fascinating study lurking within its pages. Unfortunately, this isn't it. Consider Griffin's declaration: "My motivation to write this book emerged over the years while working in global companies." Yet, the book is singularly free of illustration from his experience. He opens the book talking about a popular film and the attitude toward leadership and ethics it illustrates, and he brings that film up again and again. But throughout the book, he almost entirely overlooks specific organizational examples as he discusses his theory of organizations, leadership and ethics. (The index, for example, is littered with the names of organizational theorists and philosophers, but contains not a single name of an organization.) This is particularly upsetting in the one chapter devoted to emergent leadership. What is the *practical* difference between organizations in which leaders use this emergent concept of leadership, as opposed to the traditional one? I guess I'll never know.

And did I say there was only one chapter that specifically explores the topic in the title? Oh, I see I did. The first half of the book is devoted entirely to debunking the "both … and" thinking that Griffin traces to Kant, as it informs the traditional way of thinking about organizations. This thinking, he explains, is even prevalent in much of the writing about organizations based on complexity studies. Not that this isn't important. It is. Very. The conception of "the system" or "the culture" as reified entities determining the behavior of employees, and of the good being defined as submitting to the will of the organization are both hangovers from a mechanical approach that fits uncomfortably in a complexity-based examination of organizations. Still, Griffin points to this "both … and" thinking over and over and over. And over, until my mind's eye glazed over whenever I saw these two words joined. He left me with the feeling that he was trying to convince himself, because he'd already convinced me.

Still, noting the reification of systems and cultures — viewing them as things, rather than processes — is critically important. As Griffin notes, the traditional view sees the organizational system and its culture as things that form the individuals, who must then either submit to it or, as leaders, govern it. For the Stacey school, complexity thinking turns this relationship into a paradox, an evolving process by which the interactions of individuals form the organization and its culture, while the organization and its culture form those individuals, *simultaneously*. Along with their application of current psychology to organization studies, this recognition of the paradoxical relationship between organizations and their agents is what makes Stacey's school of thought so vital to our understanding.

Why, then, do I have a problem with these views? Basically, it's because Stacey doesn't go far enough. Clearly, viewing

organizations as reified systems and cultures, as things independent from the processes that arise as people interact, has no place in complexity thinking. I, however, would prefer to take this line of thinking one step further. A hundred years ago, Einstein's E=mc2 explained that matter is a special form of energy. As a result, the rocks, rats, and raindrops we perceive as "things" are actually dynamic systems of energy flow that can exist only in the context of their environments, which are also dynamic systems of energy flow. But if even physical "things" are energy flows, then it is intellectually misleading to reify them. Given this, reifying phenomena that exist largely, if not entirely, in our minds, such as organizational systems and cultures, must be misleading. Organizations, then, with their systems and cultures, are dynamic, evolving energy flows that organize human behavior.

From this point of view, the Stacey school's objection to thinking in terms of organizational systems and culture melts away. At least for me. And what I find *really* exciting is that this way of thinking about organizations makes the topic of Griffin's book so important, and its execution so very disappointing.

Viewed in terms of complexity, leadership *is* emergent, especially when one incorporates Foucault's (1978a, 1978b) ideas about the microphysics of power. For Foucault, power is a "dense web" of relationships between individuals with different degrees of desire for power, a phenomenon that seems universal through much of the living world. Just as every dog pack has only one alpha male, any human society will have a few people who desire various forms of power — political, intellectual, religious — more than others. In human groups, however, his web of power relations also hardens into institutions (De Landa, 2003). As a result, those who exercise power (one definition of leadership) are those who take power because they want it – e.g., the President of the U.S. – or have it thrust on them because of their social roles, parents or teachers, for instance. Leaders, then, emerge from the social web of relationships. (I explored the connections between Foucault's thought and complexity thinking in more detail at a conference in January, 2006) (Baskin, 2006).

When I picked up *The Emergence of Leadership*, I hoped that Griffin would be exploring ideas more like my coupling of Foucault and complexity thinking. Such an essay could examine a variety of topics that might illuminate how leadership emerges in organizations, especially given the extensive corporate experience he claims. For instance, what are the differences between leadership that emerges before an organization becomes institutionalized (Stalin or Tom Watson, Sr.) and after (Bill Clinton or Jeffery Skilling)? In addition, what are the implications for organizations of Foucault's theory (1978a) that most people *want* to be guided by their leaders, but will revolt if leaders abuse their power? Or how does this emergent model of leadership explain the enormous difficulties organizations with different cultures have when they merge? And in the case of mergers, what sorts of leadership will enable a new organization to emerge most profitably?

These sorts of topics would have made a fascinating book. I suppose it's not fair for any reviewer to rewrite the book he reviews. Still, I would have been satisfied if Griffin had illustrated his own ideas about leadership and ethics with specific instances. It's not like there's any shortage of illustrations to choose from. Instead, *The Emergence of Leadership* remains an extremely abstract, and unfortunately repetitive, discussion of how we think about organizations and the ethical implications of doing so. Perhaps that will be enough for some readers. It wasn't for me.

References

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