Editor’s Note (3.2)

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Dr Michael Lissack

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This issue of Emergence can be relabeled the boundaries issue. Our authors all concern themselves with questions about boundaries, how they are drawn, how rigid they may be, and what purpose they serve.

In “Complexity science: A ‘gray’ science for the ‘stuff in between,’” Richardson, Cilliers, and Lissack attempt to derive some actionable knowledge. As they put it:

despite the promise indicated by various authors within the field, complexity science has thus far failed to deliver tangible tools that might be utilized in the examination of complex systems. By illustrating the inherently problematic nature of boundary selection, complexity science warns of the risks of employing off-the-shelf perspectives, and the need to partake in an intra- and interparadigmatic negotiation to facilitate the development of shared (by those having a vested interest in the outcome), context-specific representations of perceived reality. In a way, dare we suggest it, complexity science provides a modernist argument for affirmative postmodernism. Boundaries are constructed for convenience.

Dennis Moberg picks up this theme, in his “Diagnosing system states: Beyond Senge’s archetypes,” and applies it to the types of boundaries drawn most carefully by Senge and his disciples. He notes, “It does not naturally occur to most people to think in terms of symptoms, assumptions, patterns, and boundaries.” Since it does not occur to people to think that way, it also does not occur to them to question the assumptions underlying the patterns and boundaries that they do recognize. Moberg stresses the need for permeable boundaries.

Douwe van Houten’s “Complexity in a varied society: Diversity and disability management “ takes a hard look at a boundary that society has made less permeable than we might think: the world of the disabled. As he notes, “Life with a disability is a very complex matter and in many respects society is not organized in such a way that this complexity can be easily handled.” Instead we respond with a very complicated, structured, and patterned manner of compartmentalizing this complex life. We impose boundaries such as “biographical arrangements, including professional support, social support, financial support, self-esteem, empowerment, networking, and the like. All of these entangle you in your disability or impairment.” Douwe van Houten uses complex systems thinking to argue for what he calls a “varied society” or for what Moberg would term permeable boundaries.

In her “Reframing mental obstacles to sports performance: The perturbation of a complex adaptive system,” Joan Ingalls takes another tack on the notion of boundaries, here in the world of sports. When confronting a proclaimed problem, Ingalls guides her client athletes through what she calls “reframing,” the appreciation of an unwanted behavior as a misguided attempt at “solving” a problem. The boundaries here are mental ones, but the notions of questioning those boundaries and rendering them permeable and varied resound.

Barry Stevenson and Marilyn Hamilton’s “How does complexity inform community, how does community inform complexity?” tackles the issue of boundaries from the perspective of inside and outside—What is a community and how is it maintained? They write wishfully of community as “an emergent organization that retains its identity while co-evolving with a rapidly changing complex environment. Community is also seen by many as an emerging process … It is not in the ‘things’ that we see community; it is in the spaces (i.e., relationships) between the things that we create community.” Boundaries are but obstacles to variety and inclusiveness. Yet, boundaries seem necessary to community. It is suggested that complex systems thinking sheds light on the implicit paradox.

The notion that complex systems thinking can shed such light is itself examined in Steven Sheard’s “Slain god: A symbolist perspective on the new science and related management theorization.” Sheard relates to the new sciences as modes of management analogy and myth making. He examines the boundaries between management as action and as story, as symbol and as force. The lessons about gray space from the opening article are brought forth in an examination of the nature of metaphor and its claims to knowledge. The metaphor and its claims are those of new science analogies deployed as management exemplars or models of best practice. Sheard writes:
The broad thrust of complexity theories and related symbolism can be perceived as a re-emergence of the symbolist movement. That symbolism is something of a ‘Rosetta stone’ to which we have ascribed a mythic key. To the extent that a theory of the new science establishes in social terms a metaphoric symbolism; this regulates the implicit assumptions that underlie the analogical applications of the new science in organizational contexts. The symbolic discourse tends to suggest ancient patterns of psychological explication (creation myths) as a solution to very modern problems in management thought.

Clearly, these stories dominated the mythology of the dot-com bubble. Sheard provides a detailed guide to how and why they have permeated the mainstream business press.

In “Bracing for the future: Complexity and computational ability in the knowledge era,” Arnold Wytenburg argues for the overthrow of some boundaries.

Traditional approaches to designing, managing, and operating business organizations must be radically altered or, in many instances, completely redefined. To prevail, corporations must act to transform their most basic notions of organizational thinking and behavior to accommodate the complex, volatile, unpredictable, and unfamiliar socioeconomic environment characterizing the unfolding knowledge era. As daunting as this may be, the task presents an even greater challenge than seen at first glance: a reliable model for corporate success under such circumstances does not yet exist … survival and success are not about doing change successfully. Rather, they are about being change successfully. Few corporations existing today have developed this capacity.

The challenge for the readers of Emergence, both academics and practitioners, is to make use of these boundary discussions—to create what the first article calls “actionable knowledge.” If complexity-based perspectives on management are to have value, this is the place. Actionable knowledge is the name of the management game, and one of the key purposes of our journal.