

a simpler way

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emerging organization

Do any of us truly comprehend our organizations?

If we look at our efforts to change them, we see mostly failure. For almost half a century, we've been trying to influence organizations. We still don't know how organizations change; we only know that they do. Many intelligent and good-hearted people have been involved in these quests. Our failures are not due to lack of ability or concern.

When there is so much failure in the hands of such skilled people, it can mean only that we are seeking answers in the wrong place. Collecting more details or enforcing greater rigor still won't reveal wisdom. We have to journey to a different world and see our organizations with new eyes. We have to understand that we live in a world of emergence. When we join together, new capacities always will greet us.

Emergence reveals the heart of organization, the deep processes that spin into form the systems that we see. Like any living system, every organization coevolves. Its character and capabilities emerge as it plays with possibilities. It messes about with others until a workable system appears. This system has abilities and beliefs no one planned. It accomplishes work in ways no one designed. It has relationships no one mandated.

While we worry about designs and structures, tweak procedures and rules, insist on compliance and control, we never succeed in creating an organization by these activities.

Organization wants to happen. Human organizations emerge from processes that can be comprehended but never controlled.

Because we haven't understood organizations, we have hurt one another deeply. We joined together to accomplish a purpose, we spun intricate webs of relationships, and a system emerged. But then, what happened if we disliked what emerged? How did we respond? Usually, we turned on one other. We singled out one leader, one team, a few troubling individuals. We thought that if we changed them, or got rid of them, our problems would be solved.

How many people have been terrorized by this endless search for scapegoats? For all of the terror, how often have we succeeded in changing organizations by changing individuals?

This approach to change is yet another dark Darwinistic shadow. In classic evolutionary thought, change occurs within individuals. Each of us invents our own survival strategies as we struggle against the environment. When we apply this thinking to organizations, it leads us straight to individuals. If a distasteful situation develops, or we don't like where the system is headed, we just pluck out the bad genes. We look for the mutants in our midst and expel them.

Emergent evolution explains systems quite differently. Evolution occurs in many ways, but always from the desire to work out relationships for mutual coexistence. Locale by locale, individuals and groups figure out what works for them. They exchange information; they adapt to one another; they discover symbiosis. From their efforts, a system emerges with its own identity, its own characteristics. Once the system emerges, it can't be changed by analyzing its individual members or by singling them out for removal. We can't change a system by changing individuals.

Systems are fluid relationships that we observe as rigid structures. They are webby, wandering, nonlinear, entangled messes. Because of their webbiness, they are unknowable through traditional forms of analysis. How do we draw a dynamic process? A map can't capture its complex, coevolving, self-transcending relationships. How do we dissect a process? There are no parts to understand.

Systems create pathways, communication flows, causal loops – but these all defy attempts to understand them with any precision. No matter how well we name, count, or note individuals and events, we don't get much useful information. Our skills in drawing, separating, and defining are more diversionary than explanatory when dealing with a living system.

We can't know a system until there is a system. We can't predict the system by looking at the individuals. Systems are unknowable by analysis. They are irreducible.

We can't predict the system by looking at the individuals. Yet we spend long hours analyzing ourselves as individual parts. From quick magazine quizzes to elaborate assessment procedures, we've become a culture fascinated with knowing ourselves. We want to know our styles: our learning styles, our leadership styles, our communication styles.

Many organizations use multiple assessment tools to categorize people. From such information, managers can assemble dream teams by recipe. Two of this, three of that, perhaps one renegade or intuitive to spice things up. We reassure one another that if we combine diverse styles in just the right proportions, we can cook up high-performing teams.

We don't engage in all this assessment because we are curious about the many ways people engage with life. We analyze individuals because we want to control them. We need to predict what will happen. What can we expect from this person as a leader? How will this team perform under stressful conditions? How will I handle the next crisis in my life? We fill out a form, learn our scores, and pretend that we know how life will unfold.

When we realize that the world creates newness in every relationship, we can only laugh at these studied attempts to control. We can't predict at all how we or others will perform together. We can't know ourselves in isolation. Life seeks systems. Systems are full of surprises.

Life is unpredictable. So are we.

A self-organizing system reveals itself as structures of relationships, patterns of behaviors, habits of belief, methods for accomplishing work. These patterns, structures, and methods are visible. We become entranced by their forms. We probe and dissect them down to microscopic levels of detail.

But these material forms are deceptions. They entice us to believe that we can change them by replacing one for another. If we dislike the structure of a system, we design a new one. If we are bothered by a colleague's behavior, we send him or her to training.

Yet change efforts directed at exchanging material forms have not given us the results we hoped for. We need to look past these mesmerizing effects of organization and notice the processes that give them shape. Beneath all structures and behaviors lies the real creator – dynamic processes.

Processes are not changed by focusing on their effects. Structures and behaviors are artifacts. It does no good to rearrange them. We consume a lot of time shuffling them about – redesigning the organization for the umpteenth time, rolling out a new program. But the process ignores us. It continues to produce its patterns of behavior, its structures of relationships. Or it responds to our interventions in ways we didn't expect.

There is no way to truly influence a process except to dive into its dynamics, those forces that give it life and that propel it to its present forms. Living systems take form differently, but they emerge from fundamentally similar conditions: A self gets organized. A world of shared meaning develops. Networks of relationships take form. Information is noticed, interpreted, transformed.

From these simple conditions emerge boldly different expressions of organizational forms.

A system needs access to itself. It needs to understand who it is, where it is, what it believes, what it knows. These needs are nourished by information. Information is one of the primary conditions that spawns the organizations we see. If it moves through a system freely, individuals learn and change and their discoveries can be integrated by the system. The system becomes both resilient and flexible. But if information is restricted, held tightly in certain regions, the system can neither learn nor respond.

Information feeds the local explorations that keep a system viable and stable. A new idea may appear because someone in the system reacts to information that others had ignored. Or a team changes its work based on information only they have perceived as important. With information free to move, possibilities can sprout up anywhere in the system. Each idea or solution is unique to its creator, and each one is important to the system.

No one knows what information an individual will choose to notice. This is why structuring, gatekeeping, and censoring threaten people's ability to discover something new. They also threaten the vitality and stability of the entire system.

When we shrink people's access to information, we shrink their capacity. They will still tinker to find what works. They will still invent responses. They will still self-organize. But why make this process difficult? Why starve people who want to create organization?

Systems are relationships that we observe as structures – but these relationships can't be structured. The dense webs of a system develop as individuals explore their needs to be together. Explorations are messy; what takes shape can't be predicted. Relationships spin out as individuals wander, negotiate, and discover the connections vital to their work. In this way, people create the structures for accomplishing the work of the organization.

Relationships are another essential condition that engenders the organizations that we see. The forms of the organization bear witness to how people experience one another. In fear-filled organizations, impervious structures keep materializing. People are considered dangerous. They need to be held apart from one another.

But in systems of trust, people are free to create the relationships they need. Trust enables the system to open. The system expands to include those it had excluded. More conversations – more diverse and diverging views – become important. People decide to work with those from whom they had been separate.

Systems that open to relationships also change their beliefs about information. They realize that there is greater value in circulating information than in protecting it. The system becomes focused on discovering what works. It stops defending itself from its people. Information that had been categorized as too incendiary to entrust to certain groups becomes the means for finding solutions together.

It is astonishing to see how many of the behaviors we fear in one another dissipate in the presence of good relationships. Customers engaged in finding a solution become less insistent on perfection. Colleagues linked by a work project become more tolerant of one another's lives. A community invited into a local chemical plant learns how the plant could create devastating environmental disasters, yet becomes more trusting.

These changes in attitude and behavior are not the result of any imposed program or a new company values statement. Structures and behaviors emerge from our relationships. They emerge from decisions about how to belong together.

A system lives in its own world, a world whose meaning it has made. It becomes who it is by what it has chosen to be. Every system takes form from the self it has created.

Identity, then, is another essential condition for organization. It is the self of the system that compels it toward particular actions and behaviors. It is the self that defines meaning. It is the self that invites people to change or compels them to resist.

Organizational structures emerge in response to these imperatives of identity. Identity is at the core of every organization, fueling its creation.

Rigid identities give rise to rigid organizations. Initial clarity about direction becomes hard certainty about everything. Such organizations feel unapproachable. They know the way the world works; they know who their customers are; they know the future. They stand in their certainties, suppressing disturbances, shooting messengers.

Many of us have been in these organizations and felt deeply frustrated. Why can't they see what's going on? Why aren't they listening to us? But they see through a self that admits no differences, no doubts. They don't wish to be disturbed.

Rigidly certain organizations die early. They collapse from the weight of the structures they've erected to hold themselves up. If, as individuals, we rigidify ourselves, we suffer the same fate.

But there are other organizations with identities that are clear but curious. They explore the world by understanding who they are but inquiring about who else they might be. Such inquiring organizations take form differently. They do not turn rigid. Structures are more temporary; they come and go to fit the demands of the present. Teams form for a reason, and disband when their work is finished. Relationships are not prescribed; they emerge depending on need. Information moves through the organization with its own life, sparking insight and contribution in unusual places.

Clear at their core, curious about their future, these organizations develop expansionary range.

In a world of emergence, new systems appear out of nowhere. But the forms they assume originate from dynamic processes set in motion by information, relationships, and identity. The structures that we work within, the behaviors we live out, the beliefs that we cherish can be traced back to what is occurring in these three domains. How we treat one another, how we work with information, how we develop our identity – these conditions generate all varieties of organization.

Organizations spiral into form, cohering into visibility. Like stars on winter nights, they fill our field of vision and enthrall us. But organizations emerge from fiery cores, from richly swirling dynamics. This is where we need to gaze, into the origins that give rise to such diversity of form.