

Review for AMED Journal O&P, May 2004, *Changing Conversations in Organisations – A Complexity Approach to Change*, by Patricia Shaw, Routledge, 2002. isbn, 0-415-24914-7

This is a valuable and challenging book for consultants who want to be effective in the complex world of the 21st century. Here is something new, which offers fresh insights into the dynamics of change.

The central theme is “How do we go about changing complex organisations?” If we believe the best metaphor for organisations today is **not** the machine, nor even the metaphor of the living system, but an open ended drama (because humans have choices yet the choices are limited by the choices of others — the paradox of being free and not free at the same time), what are the implications for leaders and our practice as consultants? What if we accept the new thinking about chaos, complexity, and self-organising systems in which uncertainty, diversity, paradox, plurality, emergence, “communities of practice” (a pretentious term?), politics and interdependence all play an important part? How does change actually take place and how can it be fostered? These practical questions have exercised my mind for some time.

Patricia Shaw questions and challenges almost everything I was ever taught about consulting: the classical exponents of process consultation and OD developed in the Sixties and Seventies; the systematic models of change and frameworks and structures for consulting they provided, derived from an engineering mind; the traditional role of the facilitator as someone who does not get involved in the content but contributes as a collector and synthesiser of data, who designs and manages a process, observes, reflects and questions.

From having studied and used them herself, she provides useful summaries and insightful critiques of the processes that have successively excited me over the past 25 years or so — the only one not mentioned is Action Learning. Most, to varying degrees, are derived from that same engineering mind-set, though gradually progressing towards embracing whole system and living systems thinking. The learning organisation; Gestalt; Open Space Technology; Future Search; living systems; dialogue; communities of practice. Some seemed like passing bandwagons, answers, religions, cliques, that we need because of our frailty.

She expresses many of my doubts, some I found too disturbing to even allow myself to think – like, those idealised practices really deny the dark side of human nature. But for how long is this possible before the dark side emerges, to the consternation of the facilitator? As Westerners, we tend to think in terms of duality. We need to transcend duality. She notes the frustration that often occurs in events based on systematic processes. Clients, perhaps at first helped by them, get fed up with the restraints. Events that seem so successful at the time, often fail to deliver. Like me, she recoils from all those grandiose, top down, cascading initiatives that cause such cynicism.

The book made me uncomfortable at first. Sometimes, it is quite challenging to understand. Then it excited me more and more. It kicks away my security. Is my own approach far too structured and controlled – reflecting my fears of letting go and

encouraging things to just flow? What are you left with if you do not have the disciplines that took such time and money to acquire? Without them, how can you call yourself in any sense expert or professional? Horrifying. Perhaps part of the answer is using them differently and more of **yourself**. How liberating that could be.

When I reflect on her critique of many somewhat “idealised” or structured processes, maybe they have a place. At times they may be exactly what is needed. I come back to the idea that we really do need ways of combating the darker side of our nature and they are indeed valuable so long as we do not kid ourselves and acknowledge how destructive we can be. She does not think anyone has the choice to be destructive or not because we are not in control of the meaning that is evolving from what we are doing together. Nor are good intentions enough for ethical action. Having the courage to speak out is vital. Being ethical is to keep our eyes open to both the possibility of constructive evolution from what we are doing but not relying on good intentions.

Her touch of cynicism and irreverence appeals to me. I hate being a follower. I dislike “products”. I like to learn from innovations, especially the underlying principles, in developing my own unique evolving practice – which, in its own way, may limit me too. I hate orthodoxy or restrictions and always end up rebelling against them as a control I am not prepared to accept – like expressing my own opinions instead of focussing on process, questions and observations. All orthodoxies have a value but their opposites are also true.

What does she offer instead?

She advocates a discipline that focuses attention on the emergence, out of a web of conflicting choices, between people in communicative processes in which meaning is always being constructed and negotiated. We make the choice but do not know what will come of it. It is not that she suggests throwing out all the disciplines we have learned. She argues that different motivations, intentions and activity are emerging socially and being experienced individually through the self-organising patterning of these processes. She reorients us towards some of our existing disciplines and answers differently what might be going on when we are using them.

The essence of her process is conversation — and herself. The core of her practice is “ordinary conversations” that may start with a few people and gradually spread in a self-organising, almost “subversive” way that changes how people see things and generates energy and innovation. A new awareness or consciousness emerges from conversations and that brings about change. It is like a “virus” spreading through the organisation. This sounds like how change actually takes place. It reminds me of how I helped in Royal and Sun Alliance and more recently in other organisations. However, she challenges a humanistic perspective of OD, that we “trust the process”. Clearly what emerges from a process can be bad.

She illustrates her process by telling a fascinating story of real work with an Italian company. She does without contracts. She speaks of working on “the edge of chaos”, so fundamental in creating a new order. She goes with the flow and adopts an emergent, rather than systematic, approach. She follows the energy in the organisation for change.

She makes and encourages connections between people who want to bring about change in a fortuitous, unpredictable way, eg spotting opportunities in cancelled appointments. Ultimately they become an informal network of change agents. Accidental happenings are turned to advantage. She works with intent but not with clearly defined objectives so that she is open to possibilities. She talks of messy, sense-making conversations that shift constraints. Important parts of her process are her feelings and observing and reacting to the real dynamics of human communication: “inclusion-exclusion”; “mutual constraining-enabling”; power relationships; “co-operative-conflictual” at one and the same time. She participates, interrupts, acts on intuition and impulse, shows her reactions, says the unsayable and shares her feelings – Heaven forbid! This seems real, healthy and liberating. It takes a secure, grounded person to do it.

She speaks of leadership being in charge but not in control. This notion seems essential to work in the complexity and chaos of today. Her approach is completely in accord with this. Leadership need to “bless” and encourage the kind of emergent process she describes and not fear it.

It seems we are journeying to understand how to work with the complex world of the 21st Century. Part of our process is absorbing and moving on from the successive innovations in practice that have emerged since the sixties. Hers is another practice, at last based in chaos and complexity. At last we have something that really takes on board new thinking about organisations. She has disturbed my comfort in my current way of doing things, freed me to think again and given me a new understanding. She has given me an exciting strategy to consider in deciding how best to help my clients. I am keen to try it and may have an opportunity to do so shortly.

I am not going to throw away all my old ways of working. Rather I now have new insights into how to use them more effectively and another strategy in my repertoire.

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