

# **Creating ethically reflective organisations**



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**T**HIS story begins around my interest in the ideas from complexity theory of self-organising organisations. Firstly, can this happen? Is it really possible that participants in an

**Much organisational theory has been inspired by ideas of complexity and chaos theory. However, does this really happen in practice? Greg O'Shea argues that, to maintain these principles, we need to be able to dig deeper into what is happening so that organisations do not revert to power structures. Periods of self and group reflection need to be built in.**

organisation have the personal space and freedom to allow structures to emerge? And secondly, what actually does emerge? This interest was inspired by the ideas from Hoch in the 90s who created the notion of the 'chaordic organisation'. This is an organisation that emerges on the basis of both chaos and order. In theory, this would free the individual from compelled

and conditioned organisational behaviour, and really open up creativity in organisations. Following these questions has lead me down some unexpected, but perhaps not unsurprising, pathways, as I explored this interface between the theoretical map and the organisational reality. I was to discover that the theoretical map needed to be far more complex, and shaped by the psychological and emotional actions of the people at work, if the ideas were not to remain at best as idealized 'nice-to-haves', at worst as confusing rhetoric that denied the reality of what was happening. We need to be able to integrate in practical ways, or rather 'embodied' ways, the practice of what we preach or aspire to.

Given my interest in self-organising organisations, I was very fortunate to be in contact with two organisations in Helsinki, Finland which were on the whole positive about the freedom of this form of non-structure. My initial research mapped out some of

the principles of self-organising organisations drawn from complexity theory to see how this related to the actualities of the workplace. Despite appearances and assumptions, however, drilling below the surface, the reality was that the participants in the organisation had struggled with the concept of the ‘freedom’ of being able to self organise (as opposed to being told what to do in traditional organisational structures). Further, they found it difficult to believe that such a free system could exist and prosper in a world dominated by organisational systems that are completely opposite. Though both organisations had begun life with a set of values, purpose and modes of working that were open – favouring self organisation, freedom and emergence – some form of ‘colonisation’ (as the philosopher Habermas might suggest) had eroded these ways of thinking and being and replaced them with elites, inequalities, control through systems and a restricting of freedoms and a commercial mindset that then encouraged internal competition instead of support and collaboration.

Both organisations had begun with the positives of an ‘open space’ organisation which can be inspiring and motivating. My research also highlighted the practical difficulties of such open space: it was frustratingly ambiguous, psychologically and commercially unsafe, selfish, stressful and inefficient. Over a period of a few years, these two ‘free’ organisations adopted structures that effectively turned them into more traditional forms of organisation. Elites emerged who sought to control and supervise. A strongly commercial thinking also emerged which drove internal competition and perceived selfish behaviours. Participants became polarised and a sense of aloneness and anxiety replaced the feeling of community.

### **Can we change these patterns of hierarchy and control?**

*‘The possibility of an increase in the real liberty of the subject depends not in a continual compromise between individual rights, but in a continual attempt to remove limitations which are non-automatic, that is to say, do not proceed from what we call the laws of nature.’* (Clifford Hugh Douglas, 1933)

I wanted to initiate an attempt to question whether the limitations in these organisations were non-automatic – were

these hierarchical structures, controls, checks and inequalities created by us as humans, part of the laws of nature, or could we actually do something about them?

This began the second part of the project. I set up an action research project to inquire into these hierarchical tendencies and see if we could not somehow offset them and thereby contribute to the increased well-being of the people in these communities.

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Could we more consciously develop a self-organising model of organisation where the individual is still largely free from controls, but which could provide a commercial, working alternative to hierarchical, command and control organisation?

So what we set up between us was a series of action learning groups for participants to inquire into what was emerging from their self-organising processes, and to see

if there was a possibility of transforming these. In a sense, given that this journal is about the divide between theory and practice, what we did was to set up a constantly reflecting process between the group and the individual, between the theory (in this case ideal) and the practice. This way, we managed to incorporate participants’ views as part of the process, rather than simply objectifying, observing or measuring them.

### Setting up action learning circles

This was a particularly difficult process since it was difficult to capture conceptually how the two organisations worked and therefore what was happening as a result of their work. Fortunately, my model of self organising helped at first to make some sense of how they self organised and then, crucially, of **what really emerges** from their self organisation.

In order to help the groups reflect on what was happening I introduced some ideas taken from Critical Organisational Theory concerning notions of emancipation, freedom, power and wealth. We used these concepts to discuss why the emergence process had produced hierarchies and inequalities. Having such carefully constructed and well-grounded hunches or hypotheses proved essential to the success of the whole research project and subsequently for the participants. This gave me and subsequently them

some strength and confidence to question the seemingly unquestionables of power and wealth distribution in their organisations.

I tried to help them conceptualise and ‘explain’ the product of emergence by using the metaphor of colonisation (drawn from Habermas). We made great use of the concept of attractors in chaos theory to search for the unconscious or hidden attractors which shaped their emergent behaviours and their emergent structures. That is to say, we tried to find what it was that led us back to traditional ways of organising. Through a combination of sessions with myself and as part of their internal work counselling sessions, we tried to combat this colonisation process by learning to question taken for granted assumptions about how organisations ‘must’ work in the way that they chose to structure themselves and also in very practical ways in the form of the way that they conducted and thought about internal meetings. We saw that these hidden attractors were the conditioned organisational practices and assumptions – both within the organisations and with their clients. By placing these questions on the table in front of the group, the hidden attractor could be brought to the surface and counterbalanced through this group reflective inquiry, hopefully stimulating different emergent processes.

These reflective meetings had to be self organised separately from ‘normal’ business meetings. One of the organisations soon adopted a practice of having weekly/periodical results-based meetings (‘single loop’ meetings), monthly/periodical operational improvement meetings (‘double loop’ meetings) and then monthly/periodical work counselling meetings (‘triple loop’ meetings) in which they learnt to question any taken for granted assumptions.

### **Developing trust: mutual god-parenting**

Another method that helped the participants cope with anxiety and uncertainty in their self organising processes was mutual god-parenting and support which sought to share advice, knowledge and work and reward opportunities. This god parent would be like a ‘corporate’ priest, a critical friend who encourages reflection on an individual’s identity, how it overlaps with the organisational purpose and principles and identifies how to nurture support and sharing. This was a truly difficult thing to organise in a group of entrepreneurs operating in a commercial world of work

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which actively discouraged this kind of support from fellow work colleagues. Being able to do this was based on a very different level of trust to that which work colleagues would see and expect in conventional organisations. This level of trust was a huge step into the unknown and it was felt that this mutuality and sharing required some form of special training in how to trust.

### Did we succeed?

As with all action learning projects, there is never really a final end. However, I do think that each of the organisations opened up to deeper levels of trust, and thereby to deeper levels of inquiry. The conceptual frameworks from complexity and chaos theory, and critical management theory provided some 'safe' validated structures which allowed us to take our inquiry deeper. It would have been very difficult otherwise to have approached these underlying questions of power and wealth. In terms of the theory/practice divide, action learning circles provide a useful method,

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and also help bring about a dialogue between the ideas and the actual practice. This way, research is both a mirror and a shaper, or reflector of organisational practice. My research led me from a role as observer into that of counsellor or therapist. This raises issues and questions for both business research and organisational practitioners.

Researchers need to descend from their ivory towers, and practitioners need to create time for dialogue and action to take place. This way, we can inquire into and remove the taken for granted assumptions that close down freedom and ethical action.