Leadership and managing complexity: harnessing the power of a self-organising community

Greg O'Shea

Greg O'Shea is an organisational consultant working throughout Europe, currently carrying out doctoral research into chaordic organisations at Ashcroft International Business School.

Aʟᴛʜᴏᴜɢʜ the terms 'chaos' and 'complexity' have become a regular part of the academic literature in the last couple of decades, this has been primarily in a theoretical sense. It is only recently that people have begun to take seriously the possibility that the idea of chaos in organisations may be developed as a practice, or indeed incorporated into strategy in a way other than its common-sense meaning of 'non-control' or 'anarchy'.

Complexity and chaos to date have been largely academic concepts. From his long-ranging experience as consultant, Greg O'Shea demonstrates that these are not just analytic theories – when harnessed to a shared purpose, they can lead to a balance between creativity and stability.

However, companies and their markets are increasingly characterised by hyper-complexity, unpredictability and uncertainty. As an organisational consultant concerned with developing this notion for many years, I have been pleasantly surprised during this year to see management teams prepared to experiment with different ways of working, founded on insights from complexity theory, in order to cope with this uncertainty and ambiguity. Such ways of working contrast dramatically with the traditional view of the organisation as a clockwork-like machine, with fixed teams of people and pre-programmed work. It has become quite clear in today's turbulent business environment that this traditional model is far too slow in reacting to changes and too rigid to survive, yet alone thrive.

Key concepts in complexity

Let's identify some key characteristics of complexity: first, an understanding that phenomena emerging from human interaction can rarely be forecast – all living organisms are self-steering within certain limits and their behaviour can be steered from the

outside only to a very moderate extent; second, there is a tendency to self-organise under certain conditions; and third, the continuous emergence of new levels of organised complexity within society.

Given these understandings, what might this mean for human organisations and global management? If we assume that human organisations are complex systems, then this implies a huge shift from the strategic planning approach that is taught in many business schools, and means that we have to take into account many different levels of experience in organisms – from the complex human psyche, to the nature of groups, along with the products and services that are delivered.

Can we, either as organisational practitioners or consultants, begin to create organisational conditions in which a large number of individuals are able to interact locally in a dynamic, non-linear fashion so that order and patterns of behaviour emerge rather than being imposed? In complexity language, in this self organised, emergent, intelligent organisation, how can we get 'order for free'? This type of organisation would need to be based on some form of **purposeful self-organising**. For this to take place, we would need to have organisations which support the open expression of ideas and participation in decision-making leading to the release of motivation, experimentation and creativity.

Agile team working as self-organising tools

Much of my work is with teams which are producing software. Of necessity, they have to be continually flexible, adapting to the changes in the environment. When the work is predictable and repeated, then the fixed, hierarchical approach is maintained. But in this swift moving sector, where tasks and objectives are more fuzzy, networked clusters of people need to come together to define the task and negotiate with each other on what needs doing. As consultants, we have developed a system called 'Agile' style teamworking. We help teams conceptualise what is involved if they want to shift to self-organised working. Initially the team is facilitated and coached to agree a common purpose and then to draw up a mutual strategic roadmap. The team then agree on common, important principles or values by which they must all live. Team leaders are asked to give the participants in the team organisational 'space' and freedom to discuss what it is that they need to do rather than allocate goals and timetables.

6 STEPS TO CREATING SELF-ORGANISED TEAMS

1 Give participants in the team some space and help them primarily by constructing a common, deep purpose and creating mutually agreed important principles of how to work together.

2 Encourage members of the community to be self responsible and self dependent.

3 Create small pairs or cells to help learning, reflection and to create a feeling of safety and courage where risks can be taken.

4 Create a diverse team in terms of technical experience and personal work styles.

5 Because the ambiguity and uncertainty of their work can lead to stress and frustration, be prepared to support individuals whilst they are working at this 'edge of chaos' and in a diverse group.

6 Try to ensure everybody's full participation using sensible and sensitive facilitation and problem solving techniques

Team participants then agree their own roles and their own individual and pair goals. The team selects how much work it believes it can perform within a time iteration (a week or two), and the team commits to the work and starts. The team is motivated both by creating mutual responsibility and then for fulfilling commitments that it made for itself. There is no 'manager' in the traditional sense, but every member is considered a leader, leading him or herself.

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There is however a need for new roles such as team coordinators/supporters who focus on helping others make sense of the greater purpose of their work, how it fits with the purpose of the organisation and how they identify with the organisation and how they connect with others in the work community.

In such a working environment, everyone is given a chance to use their full potential and is expected to contribute to the full in order to fulfill the purpose of the team. The team self organises based on its strengths and weaknesses to do the work at hand.

Everyone in the team creates the product, contributing whatever he or she has to what is needed. Each individual has varying skills to apply to the problem and technology domain. It is however expected that each individual also has intelligence, determination, and focus with which they will apply and share their skills. Every day, everyone in the team must coordinate his or her own individual self-organisation with the rest of the team. The important point is that the members must take responsibility and action, helped in this by working in small cells (pairs or threes). They need to be risk positive and move forward into the issue that they are working on in order to learn more . They cannot be directed in the traditional sense.

Can we do without managers?

If the team is assuming responsibility for managing the work, can we get rid of the managers? In short, no. Managers are still needed. Not so much for their planning and controlling ability, but for the important job of interfacing on the team's behalf with the rest of the organisation and connecting the working cells within the team or community. In addition, a team self-organises over time and usually follows a stepped approach to assuming responsibility for self-managing. During this time, the manager plays several important roles, including the incremental letting go of management tasks as the team becomes more adept at performing them. The manager can also help to support members through the bouts of anxiety caused by the constant feeling of uncertainty and the mass ambiguity which is not to be underestimated, and requires a great deal of support. Because members are self-organising, they are likely to produce many possibilities in how to go forward; thus at certain points managers may also work as deal breakers to stop too much analysis and too many ideas or options. It is here that they need to give the authority to a manager to make unsticking decisions on their behalf when they are stuck (rather like a group of friends 'give' authority to someone to referee when they are having a Sunday morning football kickabout).

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The 'enlightenment' moment

We nearly always find, using some of these insights from complexity theory, that a period of 'enlightenment' follows when groups realise that their traditional method was based on a

military model where people needed to follow orders – and that that model is probably only now valid in times of deep crisis when there is little time for a more 'democratic dialogue'. In this moment, they open to a new perspective, and the current hierarchy in their organisation may appear rather strange. This is truly a significant shift, that has both an emotional as well as an intellectual component. It demonstrates to us that complexity theory is not merely a theory, but works in practice.

From hierarchy to self-organised systems

However, even though we have witnessed time and time again the natural 'self-organising' tendencies towards a point called the 'edge of chaos', we still need to bear in mind and accommodate existing structures. This is not a moment of anarchy, but of balance between the old and the new. In this fluid way of working, we are constantly in the process of transforming to self-organised systems, so the energy of this work is maintained through dialogue and action. It is important that we find a way of working that is self-organised for the mutual benefit of ALL participants in the system, and that this does not soon become rigidified into the former hierarchical structures.

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The real barriers to self-organised work organisations are not now a lack of methods, tools or frameworks. Rather they are the challenges to the political status and reward structures which imply that important work (and therefore valuable) is done by a narrow elite who oversee and organise the other participants in the organisation. But if the participants don't need to be overseen and organised – what do we do with the narrow elite?