Organizations as Systems: Presentation Notes
David Kelleher
Royal Roads University

Why is this important?

- As we came to understand social relations in organizations we realized that simple explanations or exhortations like, "pay them more", "be firm but fair" or "try harder" were not enough to explain what seemed to be happening.
- Systems theory hypothesizes that all systems follow common principles; in theory, if you understand one kind of system, you can apply this to other systems as well.

Many approaches to systems thinking—we will look at three related approaches:

- Cybernetics and system dynamics
- Natural systems
- Complex adaptive systems.

Cybernetics and System Dynamics:

- Role of feedback (the thermostat)
- Distance between action and reaction (the idea of delay)
- Patterns occur over and over (individuals change but the dynamics persist)
- System archetypes (Peter Senge).

Natural Systems:

- Complex interdependencies
- Not controlled from the top (panarchy)
- Cycles
- Importance of diversity.

Complex Adaptive Systems:

- Unpredictable within limits
- Examples—stock market, weather, human systems
- Disequilibrium is needed for system growth
- Change requires difference, a container and transforming exchanges[1]
- Growth depends on the dance of chaos and stability
- Advice for managers—long term plans are a delusion, disorder is your friend, stay responsive.

---

[1] Containers may include: strong organizational identity, relationships characterized by trust, clear and fair decision-making structures.

One example of an approach to organizational change from a systems perspective:[2]

The Ecocycle
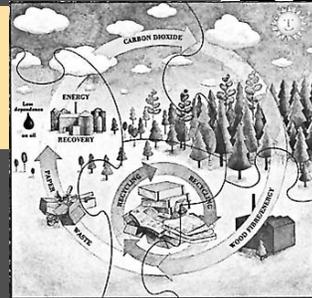
Not only looks at birth and growth, but also the natural and necessary process of destruction and renewal.
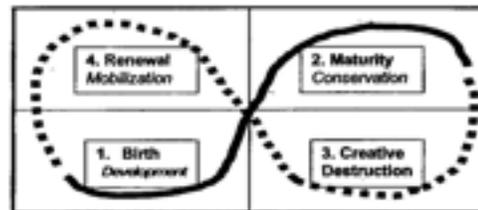
For an organization to be healthy, different parts are in growth while others are in the processes of destruction.

Diversity in different phases of the Ecocycle is crucial for sustainability.

Complex Adaptive Systems self-organize as a result of nonlinear interaction among the various components.
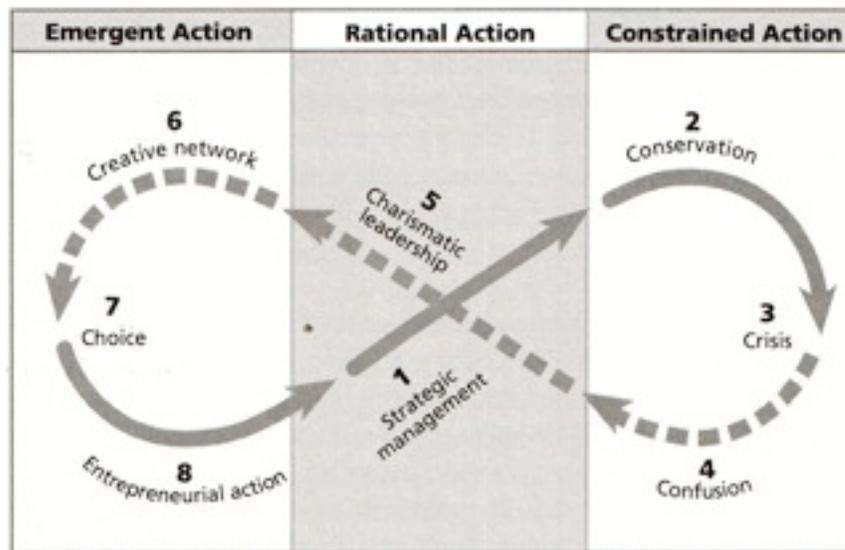
11

The Ecocycle

Paradox: renewal and long-term viability requires destruction.

12

[2] Slides courtesy of Lily Mah Sen of Amnesty International, based on David Hurst, *Crisis and Renewal: Meeting the Challenge of Organizational Change*, Harvard, 1995.

The Ecocycle in Organizations

From, David Hurst, *Crisis and Renewal, p. 103*

Main Messages from Systems Thinking:

- We need to think about individual learning but often it is about system dynamics, not interpersonal ones
- Its less "manageable" than we thought
- Change requires a dance between chaos and order
- Diversity and difference are the sources of change
- It may be more helpful to think of yourself as a force for a particular change operating in a field of other forces rather than trying to "make change happen".

Some Favourite Sources

http://www.powerandsystems.com/

http://www.solonline.org/

David Hurst, Crisis and Renewal: Meeting the Challenge of Organizational Change,

Boston: Harvard Business School Press, 1995.

http://www.margaretwheatley.com/

Frances Westley, Brenda Zimmerman, Michael Patton, *Getting to Maybe: How the World is Changed,* Random House Canada, 2006.

 http://www.partneringresources.com/articles/Lesson1.pdf

www.thesystemsthinker.com

Reading:

David Hurst, *Crisis and Renewal: Meeting the Challenge of Organizational Change,* Harvard Business School Press, 1995.

Edwin Olson, Glenda Eoyang, *Facilitating Organizational Change: Lessons from Complexity Science,* Jossey-Bass/Pfeiffer, 2001

Peter Senge, *The Fifth Discipline: The Art and Practice of the Learning Organization,* Revised Edition, Doubleday, 2006.

Barry Oshry, *Seeing Systems: Unlocking the Mysteries of Organizational Life* Berrett-Koehler, 1996.

Frances Westley, Brenda Zimmerman, Michael Patton, *Getting to Maybe: How the World is Changed,* Random House, 2006.

Margaret Wheatley, *Leadership and the New Science: Discovering Order in a Chaotic World,* 2nd Edition, Berrett-Koehler, 1999.

Also:

www.margaretwheatley.com

www.siliconyogi.com/andreas/it_professional/sol/complexsystems/map.htm

www.powerandsystems.com