

Provocative Propositions
Systems Thinking
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OD grows out of a conception of social science, which believed that with sufficient knowledge and skill, one could “fix” organizations and solve problems. It believed that being outside and objective was possible and helpful. This has been called a “machine” model of thinking about organizations. As we reflect on the findings of systems thinking over the past thirty years, we feel it is important to affirm that life is not machine-like. It is complex, emergent, and evolving.

We offer the following “provocative propositions” as an alternative way to think about organizations.

1. Change in complex systems can be intentional but it is largely unpredictable
2. Its all about relationship—if the relationships aren’t right, the intervention isn’t going anywhere; coercive strategies can destabilize organizations but change requires negotiation, relationship and learning
3. Power is everywhere and change can begin from anywhere in the system. In complex systems leaders (and consultants) have limited power. It is best to see yourself as a force for a particular change rather than imagining you are “causing” change. Leaders are not as important as we thought.
4. Difference is your friend—although facilitators are generally paid to build agreement; diversity is required for change.
5. Organizational systems, like rivers have fundamental directions that it is wise to understand.