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Corporate Culture and Complexity Part 3C: It's Not as Simple as It Sounds
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"We all know the moment when we overreact to something a person said. We assume that we know exactly what he or she means and we simply can't stand the position they have adopted. In reply, we assert our own opposing point of view and inevitably an argument arises."
— John Briggs and F. David Peat, **Seven Lessons of Chaos: Timeless Wisdom from the Science of Change** (1999)

Recall the oversimplifications described in the last issue of *InfoMine*. What would these look like if we honoured the complexity of the system in organizations?

- Instead of operating as if we know, we appreciate that we can only understand the partial system, and that the stories we tell about the reality we experience cannot be completely accurate representations of reality.

- Instead of believing that there is only one way to work within any system, we act as if the system were dynamic, so that we can learn as the system changes. Our learning changes the system, and creates new rules.

- Instead of believing that there is only one truth, and that we can know it, we see truth as an emergent and dynamic property of a system. We know that we cannot know absolute truth, because the stories and narratives on which truth rests are socially constructed.

- Instead of believing that the stories we tell about the reality we live are accurate reflections of reality, we realize that these stories do not reflect reality. We are aware that the stories we tell create our reality.

- Instead of believing that all knowledge can be used in similar situations across a wide range of different contexts, we believe that knowledge develops as a result of local, situated action, and that all knowledge is modified within and for each different context.

- Instead of believing that we can reduce and simplify complexity, we accept and inquire into complexity by realizing that complex systems need ways of thinking that work within that complexity.

To work within complexity, we must change our view of organizations, and the people within organizations, from an *industrial* model to a *systemic* model. In this view, an organization is not a machine, but rather a *living system*, because the people and their relationships within the organization are what make the organization *live and thrive*. When we operate from an industrial model, we tend to pay attention only to what we know, and we do not seek out *what we do not know*. However, human systems are not linear. In fact, because these systems and their elements are highly interconnected, they are highly complex and difficult to predict. In reality, seemingly linear systems may actually contain feedback loops of which we may not be aware. What we think is a linear system is, in fact, a non-linear system that is often dynamic in nature. This means that human systems are in a constant state of change and movement.

Unlike linear thinking, a systemic approach assumes that situations are complex in nature; so complex, in fact, that it is impossible for us to know everything about the system itself. That is why we need a different way of thinking that can help us to think about complex systems in ways

that help us to deal with them as complex systems, rather than as simple systems. In our daily work, we face more and more complex and challenging problems and dilemmas. Focusing on their manifestations only scratches the surface. To get closer to what is creating problems and dilemmas, and to decide what we can do about them, we need to become more conscious, curious, and empathic about the systemic patterns that we are examining. This requires us to think of problems and dilemmas *relationally*; to think of them as connected to the relationships in which they are embedded.

Problems are an expression of systemic patterns, and they are often the most visible and audible element. To focus only on *the problem,* however, is to focus too narrowly. We need to widen our gaze, and examine how we are dealing with problems, how we are making choices when faced with dilemmas, and how our thinking and actions affect the underlying relationships. You may notice that people would often rather fix something over and over again than to spend time exploring the underlying complexity that is creating the problem or dilemma. Often, the explanation given for not pursuing such reflection, is "We have no time!" This story we tell ourselves is often misguided, and, more often than not, leads to *fixes that fail*.

Why do we continue our over-reliance on *simple problem solving methods* even when, at some level, we know this method often does not do the job adequately? When we encounter problems, we look at what we assume is our reality, feel it to be complex, and then attempt to

simplify it in order to deal with it. Of course, our daily life requires us to manage the complexity of information we are faced with, and to take short cuts. However, a core problem that can arise from the pervasiveness of the *industrial model* is the use of the *strategy of polarization* to simplify. Like a photograph capturing a point in time, this strategy captures reality at one point in time, over-simplifying it, and creating a *fixed reality*. This creates a closed perspective on anything that may challenge this fixed reality.

When we work from a belief that we can and should know how to think and how to act, we tend to see uncertainty as problematic. It is an easy next step to become seduced by the temptations of a right/wrong or good/bad universe. This *either/or thinking* characterizes non-systemic thinking, and creates a fixed reality that is closed and narrow. Simplifying complexity through polarization and creating a fixed reality lures us into a false sense of confidence that we can *figure it out* and *fix the problem*. This strategy is so much a part of our thinking and acting that we are not aware of the impact it has on the relational system as a whole. We simply continue to operate as if we know what we are doing, and are confused when things do not work out as we planned. At times, this either/or approach works well (e.g., a situation of life or death). Most of the time, however, this either/or approach gets us into trouble, because we really need to be mindful of the underlying complexity.

The industrial approach is an artificial model that is linked to the ways in which machines and assembly lines work. It is artificial because it fragments parts of the system, then attempts to deal with these parts in isolation, as if nothing else exists.

The way in which we often solve problems today is a direct result of the influence of the industrial model on our thinking. We solve problems by fragmenting them into their parts, and dealing with only those parts that we think are important. Often, the part that is left out of the equation is the human system itself. The dynamic nature of human systems compounds the uncertainty and unpredictability that we face. If we do not take care with our ways of simplifying this complexity, we may be serving to make our situations even more complex, and our problems more unsolvable.

"Suppose we don't move so quickly to take up a position but instead stay with the original statement [that someone has said] and explore the possible inner complexities that lie beyond the other person's abstractions. It could well turn out that the other's abstractions mean something subtly different from what we thought they meant. Or, for that matter, different from what the speaker thought they meant."
— John Briggs and F. David Peat, **Seven Lessons of Chaos: Timeless Wisdom from the Science of Change** (1999)