Living with Complexity: Lessons from Open Space

By Meg Salter

Are we living in crazy times? Absolutely! Are you overwhelmed with information and deadlines? Are you or your friends overworked and stressed out, or conversely maybe underemployed? Welcome to the land of paradox, a land of both stress and strain and a gateway to new ways of looking at work and living with complexity.

Paradox

Paradox is defined as self-contradiction, or something that seems unbelievable, but is in fact true. Normally, we don't perceive paradox, because our minds are so oriented to one perspective that we literally do not see contradictory information. The opposing "facts" may be so pervasive as to be invisible. Paradox begins to surface when we perceive two factors that aren't supposed to exist together, and yet do! We begin to suspect that the opposite of a great truth is not a falsehood, but perhaps another truth. Here are some paradoxical statements from organizational life that illustrate the point:

- Empowering another is impossible. If I empower you, or give you some of my power, it is still mine to take back and so the power does not truly reside with you.
- Praising people does not motivate them. If I praise the behaviour I wish to see, I am exerting a subtle form of manipulation and control of the individual, perhaps akin to training a dog! I am not making room for what truly motivates that individual to emerge or be acted on.
- Managing change is an oxymoron. If a radical change or change of state is required (or is happening anyway), then you cannot see the end position, and therefore cannot manage or plan your way to it! Incremental improvements within an existing system or paradigm can be managed and controlled in the usual way.
- The more important a relationship is to you, the less skill matters. You don't take a course to tell someone you love them!
- "Be spontaneous" or "be creative!" are impossible directives. You can't order another to do or be that which springs from their inner, natural self.

- Buying into change can be a poor bargain for many people. In many change initiatives, such as quality, re-engineering or mergers, employees are asked to work harder and smarter, while benefits accrue to shareholders and executives, not themselves!

Paradox and the Creative Space

It these paradoxical statements make sense for you, then you are living in the creative space. Complexity theory tells us that complex adaptive systems are creative when they operate in the "space for novelty, or creativity". This is a phase transition at the edge of chaos, or at the edge of system disintegration. This state is inherently paradoxical, in that it is both stable and unstable at the same time, driven by contradictory dynamics such as competition and co-operation, exposure to and protection from creative tension. It is a process of self-organizing creative construction and destruction. Perennial wisdom and folk traditions also tell us the same story; this is the realm of the gods of birth, death and re-birth, the twilight zone of both terror and imagination.

In the creative space we are entering that dissipative, fertile zone between random chaos and rigid rules, that place from which new, radical forms at higher levels of organization may emerge.
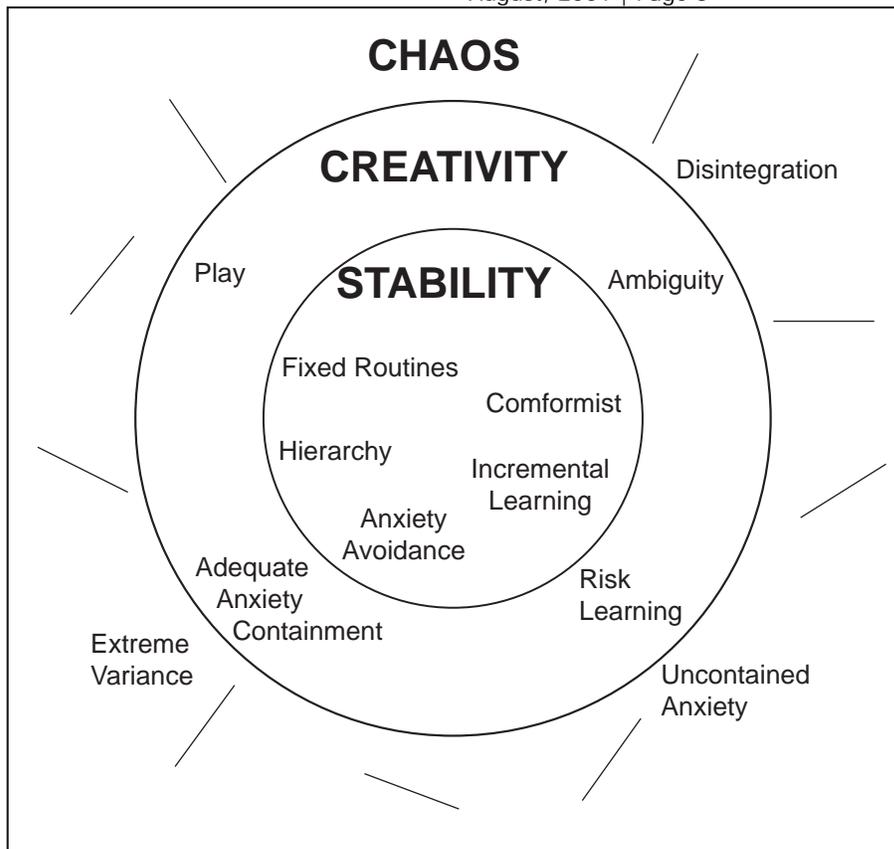
Assumptions

Paradoxes are seen as contradictions when we look at the world through certain lenses, based on certain assumptions about truth and reality. Change the assumptions, or shift the frame and the apparently paradoxical resolves itself into common sense. For example, in the early 20th century in North America, the assumption was of a minimally educated workforce, many of whom could not speak a common language (English). We can therefore better appreciate the "hired hands" (and not brains) mentality of business managers and owners.

While our individual assumptions may vary, for many of us working in contemporary organizations, the commonly found assumptions are based on the value and necessity of control and expertise, e.g.

- You can control your fate, plan change, work hard to get what you want
- The future is knowable, although maybe currently unknown (just get more data!)
- Good actions are based on some knowledge of their outcomes
- Leaders have the answers because they are the experts
- It is possible to manage and control other people

But if we are drowning in complexity, overloaded with data and the best laid plans of experts are not working out as anticipated, maybe it means that these assumptions no longer reflect the emerging reality?

Translation vs. Transformation

Change your assumptions and you change a lot! This represents a 2nd order change, or something that comes from outside of and disrupts the existing mindset or system, transforming into something creatively new. 1st order change translates within the existing mindset or set of assumptions. It helps the organization or individual cope better within the current environment by developing incremental improvements and modifications.

It is my contention that the reason so many of us are feeling so crazy is because we <u>are</u> doing crazy things; we are trying to cope with 2nd order change going on around us with 1st order change methods. We are trying to "manage change" in an environment where we truly cannot predict the endstate. This is like the biblical analogy of putting new wine in old bottles! To get beyond craziness, we need to let go of assumptions around control, technique and expertise.

This is very tough to do, as it involves not only working against most standard organizational streams, but letting go of our basic notions of self-identity, self-worth, and purpose in life – the very anchors of our being. How do we let go of old assumptions, and the inevitable ambiguity and anxiety that result? Before we go into a story that illustrates, what does Open Space Technology mean?

Open Space Technology

Open Space Technology is a powerful meeting methodology that enables individuals and groups to become more effective in environments that are rapidly and constantly changing. Developed by Harrison Owen, a USA based consultant, it is now used around the world to enable organizations to learn and achieve beyond their expectations with a simple, even playful approach. Based on clear principles and values, leaders can "open the space" to enable an organization to utilize the potential of all its stakeholders, to inspire performance and to learn to use chaos for you rather than against you.

As a participant in an Open Space meeting, you would be invited to attend a meeting (one to two days in length) with the meeting theme clearly outlined, but no agenda provided. The meeting room would contain chairs arranged in a circle, with pens and paper in the middle of the circle on the floor. The meeting sponsor welcomes everyone, outlines the theme and purpose, the parameters for action and what will happen to the output after the meeting. The facilitator opens the space by explaining the principles and methodology. The agenda is created by the people in the room, who are asked to declare an issue or opportunity within the theme that they have passion for and for which they are willing to convene a breakout group. Each breakout group captures their conversation and posts it prominently in the central room. Passion and responsibility are the keys to a

successful meeting. Where appropriate, the meeting ends with convergence, prioritization and action planning.

A Tale from Open Space

Working with organizations to improve their effectiveness and capacity for performance, I am always looking for methods to help them cope with ever increasing complexity and demands. It is my experience that Open Space Technology provides one such transformative tool.

The Canadian division of a global pharmaceutical group had recently been acquired by a competitor. As part of post-merge change work, I was asked to support the Customer Service Group, which had shipping, service and credit management responsibilities. The nature of the work is detailed and operational. They were experiencing significant stress; a much heavier than usual workload, poor morale, employee anxiety demonstrated through sniping and backbiting, a new Director replacing a previous "golden boy", and performance issues. It was a tough, stressful situation.

The Director and Managers knew they had to address both task and team (process) issues, but were uncertain how to do it. They knew they needed to go offsite, were accustomed to traditional guided facilitation meetings with well-structured agendas, yet were leery of "just another meeting" where nothing gets deeply resolved. Over the course of three planning meetings, we laid out the meeting goals, and the pros and cons of guided facilitation vs. an Open Space approach. The leadership team was quite anxious. They recognized that an Open Space format would gave greater opportunity for people to truly "speak up", yet could not clearly visualize how self-organizing could work. They could not escape their mental models of a "designed" day.

Called in as an Organizational Effectiveness "expert", I felt that I could not sell one specific approach. I felt deeply that Open Space would be the best option for this group, yet had to honour their intentions and uncertainty. My personal challenge was to live with the paradox of ambiguity and clear intent, i.e., my best intentions for the client, my conviction that Open Space would truly be helpful, and then "letting it all go", with the client making the choice. The Director and his leadership team selected Open Space, but with considerable misgivings.

Then what a surprise! The Director met a casual acquaintance at a social gathering, who turned out to be an experienced Open Space facilitator! This person was able to provide full assurance of the process, without having any vested interest in it. The Director was able to develop more trust in the process (and maybe in this strange consultant he had just hired – me!) and to let go of his need to control.

At the final planning meeting, we carefully reviewed the theme, and the givens; the tasks that have to be accomplished, the broader organizational context that must be respected, budget latitudes, and the leaders' various roles in opening up the meeting.

The meeting, in Open Space format, proceeded; a brief evening session and dinner, followed by one full day. In the evening, we all sat in a circle, and everyone told a story from work about an incident that made them sad, mad, or glad. This set the tone for the session (surprisingly positive) and the story telling and reliving of memories began the grief and letting go process. The next day, Director and Managers spent considerable time setting the theme and context, then space was opened. Participants "got it" right away, topics were raised, discussion groups were held. No one wanted to talk about task issues, or "getting the job done", so the Director raised this as a topic. The session was well attended, lively and productive. We did an end of day convergence and prioritization, and yes, to the Director's relief, doing the task did make it to the top four topics!

At our de-brief the following week, managers were ecstatic. People were behaving in unheard of ways – volunteering ideas, speaking up, taking accountability. Months later, morale is still high, goals are being successfully met, and the management team is beginning to explore how they can incorporate this new way into their daily operations.

Lessons from Open Space

Open Space events such as this one provide peak experiences for many of new ways of conversing and working. What is it that is at play here?

- *Chaos is harnessed, not suppressed:* Open Space Technology works best when the conditions for the creative state are met. The theme itself represents a pressing concern for participants, and so there is a *real drive for improvement*. A broad range of participants means that there is *high degree of diversity. Information is free flowing* with breakout groups that form, expand and close as they see fit, then post their results right away. People go where their passions take them, so *interpersonal connections are rich*. Within the circle and conversation groups there is *limited rank or status differentials. Anxiety is real, but contained* within the principles and rules of Open Space, and the conduct of the facilitator.
- *New rules*: Different rules of behaviour are introduced to the group, and different assumptions around control. The leader sets the theme, poses the question, and outlines the parameters and latitude for movement. For many leaders, the difference is radical. They do not have an answer that they are

trying to get the troops to "buy into". They do not have a detailed process based on expert knowledge and the latest techniques. They have let go of a lot.

- *Letting go of old rules:* Letting go of control is NOT talked about, but is actively modeled by the two power figures of the sponsor and the facilitator. The sponsor/ leader must decide what outcomes can be let go of, and what cannot. Typically, some or all of the task outcomes (the what) remain as a given; much of the process or how (especially interpersonal issues) can be let go. The facilitator does not take on a visibly active or expert role, but sets the rules and the tone, gets out of the way, and then models calm acceptance throughout the day. They may not DO a lot, but they are nevertheless engaged with their full being throughout the event.

- *Bridging the gap - trust:* Letting go of control requires living with ambiguity and with often-tremendous anxiety. This is not a situation that many of us voluntarily seek; we are usually forced there due to necessity – no other options are working. It requires some element of trust or confidence. This can be gained from prior reputation or hearing about the methodology, from prior personal experience, or as in this case, from a trusted 3rd party.

- *Bridging the gap – readiness and scope:* Here is where the role of the facilitator can become critical; judging when and where a situation and group could benefit from transformative vs. translative techniques; gently helping assess the degree of openness and the appropriate "givens"; demonstrating compassion for the anxiety and uncertainty involved in a leader letting go of reliance on certain kinds of competencies

- *Facilitator as role model:* If a leader is to take a transformative step into the unknown, the facilitator must not just show the way and the rules of the new game (new ways of doing), but be able to speak from personal experience of transformation (new ways of being). Their own letting go of control, their own experience in living with ambiguity, their own personal experience of transformation can evoke similar possibilities in others.

- *Being and doing:* Ultimately, as we let go of control, we move from the realm where our expertise and competence in doing creates skillful outcomes, to the realm where our depth and openness in being, and our compassion and clarity with others, creates skillful outcomes. No amount of logical training or intellectual brilliance will help us here. This is the area of transformative practice and goes by many names, including personal healing, practice of presence or spiritual practice. (For what it's worth, my own experience is that a steady meditation practice offers a vehicle for personal opening, a container for anxiety, and a pathway toward creative insight.)

Conclusion

And so we are back to the beginning. Laugh or cry or scream, we become aware of the paradoxes that surround us. We can do nothing to resolve them, for they

are beyond logical resolution. We have to live with the anxiety they create. We have to find a container for that anxiety, until the contents bubble over in creative resolution. And Open Space provides one such transformative technique, with the clarity and radical simplicity of new rules of (non-) doing, and (ideally) the compassion and respect modeled for the process by the facilitator. My experience with this client, and others is that it has a unique depth of transformative power both for specific interventions and as a model for how we work in an Internet enabled, information and connection rich world.

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Biography

Meg Salter is the principal of MegaSpace Consulting, a firm that focuses on creating the enabling conditions where individuals and groups can experience new and more effective ways of achieving organizational results – fast! MegaSpace Consulting works with clients in diverse sectors, including public, not-for-profit and private (medical technology, pharmaceutical, packaged and consumer goods, aerospace, financial services and oil and gas). Meg has more than 20 years of international experience in management and consulting. With bilingual capacity (French/English), Meg has an MBA from the Boston University of Brussels, a BA from the University of Toronto, and has studied in the UK at the London Business School She is a speaker on group process facilitation, change management and best practices benchmarking.

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