
Editorial

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Biographical notes: Jos Roemer has a PhD in Theology in 2001. His field of expertise is education from a philosophical and/or spiritual point of view. Since 2001, he combined his scientific work with being a consultant for schools and boards of primary education. From 2002, he studied management sciences, resulting in an appointment at the Open University in The Netherlands in 2012 as a Supervisor and Assistant Program Manager at the PhD School for a special group of students, the so called 'complexity track'.

Todo Cambia

A complexity perspective on change and organisations:

<i>Cambia lo superficial¹</i>	(That which is superficial changes
<i>Cambia también lo profundo</i>	Also that which is profound
<i>Cambia el modo de pensar</i>	The way of thinking changes
<i>Cambia todo en este mundo</i>	Everything in this world changes
<i>Cambia el clima con los años</i>	The weather changes as the years go by
<i>Cambia el pastor su rebaño</i>	The shepherd changes his flock
<i>Y así como todo cambia</i>	And just as everything changes
<i>Que yo cambie no es extraño</i>	The fact that I change is not in the least strange
<i>Pero no cambia mi amor</i>	But my love doesn't change
<i>Por mas lejos que me encuentre</i>	No matter how far away I find myself
<i>Ni el recuerdo ni el dolor</i>	Neither the memory nor the pain
<i>De mi pueblo y de mi gente</i>	Of my country and my people)

It is not very common I think to start an academic discourse on management with lyrics about love. However, the approach of management and leadership that is at stake in this issue does exactly that: it pays attention to human feelings. To be more precise, the writers in this issue are all involved in management practices and what they do is pay attention to what it means to work in organisations. They point at conflicts they are in, the gap between plans and practices they experience, organisational changes that do not work

out, organisational dynamics that end up in exclusion and the feelings and emotions that go with this ‘rumbling on together’ like fear, anxiety, pride, frustration and affection. In short, they pay attention to human relating in organisations.

Organisations are experienced by these authors not as ‘things’ or systems but as processes of continuously reiterated patterns of interaction. At each moment, there is a possibility of change, while at the same time the patterns seem stable.

One could say the winds of change are in organisations, since we change every day.

This alternative view of organisations can help us make sense of many puzzling developments in recent years.

It is not so difficult to make a list of large projects that went terribly wrong (see the article by Groot, this issue). The invasion of Iraq, the Dutch attempt to introduce high speed trains between Amsterdam and Brussels (the Fyra disaster), the Volkswagen policy to establish a reliable brand, the policy of the European Union to manage the refugee issue. How is this possible, when all projects are managed by sensible and intelligent people?

If we look on a smaller scale, say reorganisations, the same applies: most reorganisations do not deliver what was intended (see the article by Bolwerk and Brohm, this issue).

Could it be that all these failures relate to our ways of thinking about management and organisations? A ‘movement’ of management scientists and professionals in management roles believe this is the case. In 2000, a book was published titled *Complexity and Management. Fad or Radical Challenge to Systems Thinking?* (Stacey, Griffin and Shaw. London and New York: Routledge). It was more or less the starting point of a new way of thinking. The authors introduce their ‘project’ as an exploration of “ways of thinking about life in organisations that takes account of novelty and the ordinary daily freedom of human interaction, hopefully leading to less frustration” (p.186). The dominant way we think about management and organisations, they said, has been influenced by the way engineers think: we have introduced concepts of causality, planning and control systems in a world where actually there are not ‘elements’ but persons at work. These persons have their own individual identities, they differ from other persons, have conflicts now and then, try to find ways to work in a constructive way together, and sometimes find surprising new ways of dealing with problems. In short, organisations are not things or systems but continuously iterated patterns of interaction between people, which look stable but have the potential to change at any time and thus are unpredictable. Organisations become what they become on the basis of local interactions that produce recognisable patterns. Small changes in the local patterning of interactions can lead to global changes across the organisation.

The articles in this special issue all share a perspective on management and organisation that pays special attention to human relating and continuous change.

The concept of change is clarified by these authors in its double meaning as a transitive and an intransitive verb. I can change my hair, while at the same time my hair is changing. I can as a manager intend to change the organisation, while at the same time as a participant in the organisation I am changing.

This perspective on organisations borrows from the complexity sciences in its metaphorical use of natural dynamics like the weather (the well-known butterfly effect) and the process of boiling water (chaotic turmoil, turning into clear and stable patterns of molecule movements).

Viewing organisations as processes of human relating rather than controllable systems has led members of this ‘movement’ to pay particular attention to the quality of conversation. They notice how trust, conflict, cooperation and power emerge, and they study the rhetorical devices that people use in trying to influence a conversation. They inquire into ‘stuckness’ of interaction, contrasting it with ‘free flowing conversations’ and ‘genuine communication’.

This perspective, usually referred to as ‘complex responsive processes of human relating’, had its origin in the Business School of the University of Hertfordshire (UK) and has spread from there to universities in other countries like Norway, Denmark, The Netherlands, Germany and the USA, where research continues to draw on this scholarly approach.

This special issue displays some fine examples of the offspring of this new perspective. They show what happens when the ‘dominant discourse’ (a frequently used word in complex responsive processes literature) is challenged – that is, taken-for-granted thinking about managing organisations, which is based on mechanical ways of thinking which privileges planning and control.

We have organised the articles into three groups. The first contains articles that address the academic value of this new perspective. The second group is written by practitioner academics, who reflect on their work. The third group reflects research conducted by PhD students.

The academic world reacted to the challenge put forward by Stacey and others, first by ignoring the new statements and then by opposing them, be it on a personal level (see Homan and also Groot in this issue) or in the form of theoretical discussions. The first category of articles is concerned with this academic discussion. The article by Zuijderhoudt discusses the objection of Stacey to systems thinking. “Stacey is over-dogmatic!” he states. What Stacey fails to see, he argues, is that complexity cannot be understood within the logic of cybernetics; we have to move on to the logic of synergetics and genetics. “Stacey proves to be imprisoned in Bouldings third level (...). The curious qualities of the complex adaptive system, implying both cybernetic (un)certainly and emergence and evolutionary probability are not recognised”.

Homan offers a fundamental reflection on the rightful place of the complex responsive processes approach in traditions of theorising on organisations. He goes into the epistemological and ontological presuppositions of this new approach and discovers that their claims can be legitimised. As to the question what the value is of this new approach he points to several communities that can benefit from it: besides academics he also thinks of communities of practitioners (managers and consultants), communities of readers (the texts may have ‘performative’ effect), researchers, within or outside academic institutions, colleagues within the ‘movement’ itself and ‘the community of silent voices’: “Not only the voices of the powerful but also those who are silenced and marginalized. So this aspect of the research, one could say, is the emancipatory element, opening up attention for silencing and marginalization”.

The second group of contributions comes from practitioners. This issue contains three articles written by professionals who became well versed in the theory of complex responsive processes by completing the doctoral programme at the University of Hertfordshire. Their articles clearly show in what way this change of perspective has affected their work.

Groot, who has held senior positions in management of large companies for quite a number of years and who was appointed professor in the field of management and complexity in 2010, stresses the importance of reflexivity for CEOs and other powerful individuals. “Without any reflection, powerful individuals can make the same mistake over and over again, without realizing their dependency on others in the organisation”. He gives some illuminating examples of individuals who took advantage of this insight (e.g., the mayor of Bogota) and of individuals who ignored the value of reflection (e.g., General Browning, World War II). He also offers an insight into his own personal reflections through the use of a narrative account of his experiences: “It [investigating the role of the powerful individual and what drives him or her personally] only works if the CEO shows some of his or her vulnerability and uncertainties to others, but at least to him or herself”.

A creative contribution is by Donaldson, who took Kafka’s novel *The Castle* as a source of inspiration. The book offers numerous instances, she says, of the written word being used to block genuine communication. The author is a professional writer herself and co-author of the book *Communities of Influence: Improving Healthcare through Conversations and Connections*. From this background, she offers a critical perspective on writing and thinking about writing. She points to the numerous instances where emails are used as a substitute for conversation but most of all she shows us how bureaucratic processes can lame an entire organisation. She criticises the sender-receiver model of communication and then goes on to provide several examples of how writing can help make visible what is going on in an organisation. She concludes that “fiction makes it possible to express things that are hard to speak or write about directly”.

Warwick, a senior lecturer at the University of Chichester who has much experience as a policy advisor in the British health ministry discusses the phenomenon of ‘routines’ in working relationships. He points at longstanding working relationships that inhibit the noticing of group norms and assumptions. Although routines can make work easier, they can hinder innovation. Warwick describes an innovation process that spanned two years in UK’s health ministry. “This innovation was not radical or surprising, yet over a five-year period it led to an increase in organ donations by 50%”. He shows us through three narrative accounts what it can mean to reflect on one’s experiences.

A third group of contribution to the current issue comes from professionals who are researching their own practice and are preparing to defend their thesis in front of examiners. All three entail narratives of personal experiences in three very different areas: public management, manufacturing and project management.

In the article by Bolwerk and Brohm, we ‘witness’ a reorganisation in the municipal office of a large city in the Netherlands. We see a process that does not work out as it should, but “the lack of results can be covered up by imitating successful change through artefacts like milestones, blueprints and change scenario’s. ‘Change’ becomes a reality on its own through discourse!” The authors plea for more attention to ‘value rationality’ (why does the organisation exist at all?) as a counterweight to the dominance of ‘goal rationality’ (what are the rules we have to follow?). “The neo-liberalist assumption that governance should have a limited role becomes justified as the public sector is increasingly unable to voice its ‘raison d’être”’. The concept of ‘rituals’ offers an interesting perspective on reorganisations, which will ring a bell with most of us.

Steevensz discusses the seemingly undisputed value of customer orientation in manufacturing organisations. He shows that this is not common behaviour. Stating this value in a mission statement is one thing, practising it on a day-to-day basis is quite

another. Steevensz gives us his personal experiences as a salesman in a project that was set up to produce an innovative technical concept, suitable for series production at competitive cost. On a very detailed level he shows how customer orientation emerges in ordinary daily organisational life. He concludes, after reflecting on an extended narrative, that keeping a customer satisfied has to do with the interplay of intentions, identities, power relations and the role of management, in short: with the quality of the relations between the persons involved. "This narrative shows that human interaction is imperfect communication between persons generating misunderstanding". If we really want to be customer oriented, we have to take this feature of human relating into account. Having the intention does not suffice, we have to invest in ongoing communication.

The article by Bouwman and Brohm reveals a high level of vulnerability in writing a narrative of personal experiences and reflecting on it, taking the case of a large-scale infrastructure project. The narrative can almost be read as a thriller. The authors' starting point is that the practice of project management lacks coherent theoretical underpinning. Most theories on project management show substantial shortcomings when put into practice. The authors make a plea for enriched reflection, where complexity, ambiguity and uncertainty are addressed. They introduce the Aristotelian concept of 'phronèsis'. "In what way was this a phronetic act?". The practical use of this concept becomes very clear in their contribution. "As such there is virtue to be developed in sensing the subtleties within project management praxis and becoming a 'good' project manager by keeping in mind the good of the polis".

All the articles in this special issue reveal a different attitude towards working in organisations. It is not the attitude of the engineer, who looks at an organisation as a system of elements. Rather it is like the attitude of a shepherd, who looks at his flock. Or better, the attitude of a person who realises he/she works with other people and who has a strong tendency (a virtue?) to be aware of the quality of working relations. In the end, everything changes but not the love of the 'good' manager for his/her people.

This editorial was written with Douglas Griffin in mind, who died in December 2015.

Notes

- 1 Lyrics by Mercedes Sosa (1984).