

Changing Conversations in Organizations

A complexity approach to change

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1 Changing conversations

- What has 'facilitation' come to mean?
- The legacy of process consultation and organization development
- Conversing as organizing, organizing as conversing
- The value of 'just talking'
- Glimpsing another way of working
- A complexity approach to change

I began to ask myself what kind of work I was doing as an organizational consultant, when I found that from time to time I was being accused, albeit with curiosity, of not being a 'proper' consultant, or coach, or facilitator. Whether in relation to longer assignments or single encounters, the comments often seemed to be in response to what I was *not* doing. I did not write formal proposals for work. I did not prepare detailed designs for meetings, conferences, workshops. I did not develop detailed aims and objectives in advance. I did not clarify roles and expectations or agree ground rules at the start of working. I did not hold back my views or opinions. I did not develop clear action plans at the end of meetings. I did not capture outcomes. I failed to encourage 'feedback' or behavioural contracting between people. I did not 'manage' process. There seemed to be a lot of things that I did not do that most people had come to expect. At the same time, many managers seemed frustrated with the other forms of consulting or with the facilitation of some other meetings they had taken part in. They said *approvingly* that I was unlike most consultants they had worked with, although they were hard put to express more precisely what they valued about my contribution.

What has 'facilitation' come to mean?

In French or Italian, the word *facile* means 'simple, easy, no fuss needed', but in English it is not really a compliment, carrying a sense of something rendered too easy, almost glib. If someone accuses another of

making a facile remark they might be suggesting that significant complexities are being underplayed. Maybe they also feel stung, possibly hurt, certainly irritated. So the implication is that the word ‘facile’ is used when someone is not altogether off track but has reduced or caricatured issues in some way that the accuser finds insensitive, even crass. For me, this sense of the word lurks around some kinds of facilitation intended in a positive sense to help complicated, difficult, conflictual situations of human engagement flow more easily and productively. So how have I developed this uneasy sense of some facilitation and process consultation as facile? Although I still call myself an organization development consultant, I am aware of how much the way I work has diverged from what this term has come to mean. This is not just in relation to fellow consulting professionals, but to large numbers of managers and executives who are asked to become enabling or facilitative leaders.

So my first aim in this chapter is to look at how approaches that emerged as a fresh impetus in organizations in the 1960s and 1970s may have congealed into habitual patterns of response. Yet I also want to keep in mind how the conversations that recreate these habitual patterns also have the potential for evolving novel forms of practice.

Recently I agreed at short notice to help a central marketing group in a large organization that I have been working with for some time. The members of the group were about to meet to discuss a new framework for their *raison d'être* that was being developed by two consultants from a well-known management consulting firm. I was asked to a meeting with the consultants and two senior members of the new team a few days before the strategic meeting of the whole group. The consultants had prepared a set of power-point slides that the manager of the team would be using to provide an introduction and overview of the proposed session. I was taken through the slides, one at a time:

Exercise 1: *Expectations*. Log on flip chart everyone's expectations of the meeting. No right or wrong answers.

Exercise 2: *Unspoken agendas*. Bring out people's issues, fears, obstacles to working as a team. Good to express unspoken feelings but needs to stay within certain productive boundaries.

Team leader to communicate Long-Term Vision and high level objectives. Feedback from group about their roles, where can they add value, their deliverables. Team buy-in.

Exercise 3: *Partner needs*. List and rank in order of importance the primary needs of internal and external partners and customers.

Exercise 4: *Brainstorming*. Conduct brainstorming to identify initiatives that should be considered in first 18 months.

Exercise 5: *Value*. For each initiative identify primary points of value for our partners and customers.

Exercise 6: *Prioritization*. Prioritize initiatives by placing in quadrants of 2 by 2 matrix labelled Business Impact – High/low against Ease of Implementation – High/low. Select short list of initiatives with timings for implementation for next four quarters.

Exercise 7: *Performance measures*. Identify appropriate performance measures for planned initiatives.

Exercise 8: *Value proposition*. For each internal and external partner or customer, list points of value under Functional benefits (rational) and Emotional benefits.

Exercise 9: *Fit*. Explore how to work within SM and Group marketing to create synergy and leverage resources.

Exercise 10: *Rules of engagement*. Determine the rules that will create a positive and engaging work environment.

Review: Deliverables, actions and plans moving forward. Log unresolved issues and possible solutions with clear direction for follow-up.

It was clearly expected that I ‘facilitate’ the group as they worked through this agenda, with some fluidity, of course, around the exact order and timing of the exercises. Perhaps we would not need them all. As I listened, a feeling of dissonance was growing. What seemed strange to me was very familiar to the others. ‘Look,’ I said, ‘I just don’t work this way at all. I don’t really understand what you want me for. You’ve got a very clear structure for the meeting and two consultants to help the group work through this agenda, if that’s what everyone wants to do.’ ‘No, no,’ said the consultants, ‘our role is to help the group work with the business model, not to facilitate the meeting.’ The woman who had first asked me to join the meeting said, ‘Some of the discussion could be charged, that’s what we want you to handle.’

Silently I was already arguing about the whole rationale implicit so far. I did not voice this but turned to the team leader and asked in a conversational tone whether he could keep these slides as back up and start the meeting by talking with the group about how things stood so far, what was on his mind at this point, what he felt needed discussion at this meeting, and so on. The manager, replied that, certainly, he could do that. ‘Then couldn’t we just see how others responded and take things from there?’ I suggested.

4 • Changing conversations in organizations

There was a pause in which I felt I had said something naïve and, embarrassing and, indeed, in a way I had. By using the word ‘just’ I was in danger of implying that there was nothing to be understood in a suggestion that we ‘take things from there’. My aim in this book will be to draw attention to the complex social processes involved in ‘going on together from here’ and to talk about the ordinary artistry of our joint participation in these processes. In the pause I fancy we were all imagining the unknowable particulars of this future engagement, the proposed meeting, and what might flow from it. The question was, how would we approach this uncertainty?

The other team member came in: ‘This is the kind of structure we always use to ensure a productive meeting.’ ‘But look at this item,’ I said: ‘Unspoken agendas. Don’t you think there is something quite funny about having that as an agenda item?’ She looked a little offended for a moment, yet also seeing what I meant. ‘Yes, but that’s your job, to help get out the hidden agendas early so that they don’t get in the way of the meeting later on.’ I recognized this conundrum. We have all experienced the way that, as a meeting progresses we or others may express what we now assume we might usefully have expressed earlier, but didn’t. Surely we can get a grip on this problem. Now that we realize what it would have been useful to know earlier, can’t we ensure that next time we get everything out in the right order!

At that point I relaxed in my seat and again sought an everyday way of expressing myself:

What I’m trying to say is that I can see that this is a crucial meeting. There hasn’t been a central marketing group before, there must be a lot of pressure to succeed, people must be uncertain how best to take up their new responsibilities and how best to contribute to the business. You’ve put aside a couple of days for an in-depth discussion of the issues facing you and how you go forward. There’s been a lot of preparatory conversations and documentation that will feed into the meeting. I would be very happy to join you and help to find whatever form of conversation we need as things develop.

There was a palpable rise in temperature all round. ‘That’s exactly what we want,’ said the manager, looking pleased and relieved.

To me this example shows very clearly what has happened in the corporate world. Decades of a certain kind of business school education and writing; the rise and rise of expensive management consulting focused on packaging ‘best practice’ and promising to provide the

expertise that will ‘deliver’ desired future success; the professionalization of all kinds of human communication into codified behavioural notions of ‘coaching’, ‘counselling’, ‘teamwork’ or ‘leading’ – all these have given us a curiously rational, instrumental approach to ourselves. In the short encounter above, we were moving between different ways of accounting for what goes on between us. The carefully structured agenda initially proposed was a highly systematic account of how we get to grips with ourselves and the world of human action as a logical ‘problem’ to be solved. It is hard to argue against any element of the proposed plan – it is perfectly logical, relentlessly so, I would say. Everyone knows that life isn’t quite like this, so implementing this idealized plan requires engaging someone who might be able to help the group navigate the murky shoals of ‘charged’ discussion so that it stays ‘on track’.

Yet, in the midst of a conversation that constructed how we would work together in a certain way, it was also possible for me to speak into another, more improvisatory way of approaching how we might go on together. We have much practical knowledge and skill relating to the everyday art of ‘going on together’, knowledge that we create and use from within the conduct of our communicative activity. People had a sense of what I meant because of our mutual ongoing experience of the disorderly way order arises and dissolves and reconfigures in human affairs, a process we are never on top of or ahead of despite our inescapable attempts to be so. It is as though our capacity for self-conscious reflection gives us delusions of omniscience and omnipotence. Our sophisticated capacity for observing our own participation tempts us to think we can grasp the whole picture and manage its dynamics to suit our well- or ill-meaning ends.

Most of what managers, leaders, consultants, and facilitators are asked to do is ‘to get ahead of the game’, ‘to be on top of the mess’, ‘to manage the process’, ‘to set the boundaries’, ‘to delve beneath the surface to change the deep structure’. It would seem that we want to think of ourselves anywhere other than where we are, in the flow of our live engagement, sustaining and transforming the patterning that simultaneously enables and constrains our movement into the future. Because we don’t seem to have a way to think and talk about what we are doing in this reciprocal engagement, we have become accustomed to a particular kind of systematic practice that is meant to help us do this. Here is another example.

Not long ago I was invited to join a kind of international think-tank sponsored in part by business, in part by policy units in government and

in part by educational institutions. The project was envisioned to last over two years to explore and articulate approaches to the emerging complex issues of today's world that might guide policy making. Some twenty-five people, academics, activists, scientists and psychologists among others, gathered for the first time in the evening for a three-day meeting. There was a brief welcome by the main business sponsor and the person leading the initiative. Then the facilitator stood up and introduced himself and explained the intended style and process of the next few days. He said that he considered that the role of a facilitator was to help what was trying to happen to happen and then get out of the way. Here is another interesting formulation of what it might mean to facilitate or enable. What did this turn out to mean in practice?

He pointed out the carefully designed setting that had been created for the meeting, including various technological aids that he suggested we would do well to familiarize ourselves with now so that we would be able to use them later. First he invited us to approach the terminals placed round the room and type in a comment about the start of the meeting – any comment would do – and then press the enter key. Immediately the screen would display all the other comments that had been entered so far and we could type in a response to any one and, by pressing the key, we could see all the responses. There was a noticeable reluctance to start this activity. Some people typed in a sentence or two, with others looking over their shoulders, but soon people drifted back to their seats.

The facilitator then suggested that we familiarize ourselves with another aid. He gave us all something akin to a mobile phone with a small keypad and told us it was a voting machine. He suggested that it would be very interesting to know about the connections between people in the group as we came together for the first time. A slide flashed up on the wall asking whether we already knew one, two, up to five or more than five people in the group. We were asked to press the appropriate key to indicate our choice of answer. Within a few seconds a bar chart of our responses appeared on the wall. The bar chart told us now that most people in the room knew two others before coming. But who knew who and how and what kind of bearing might that history have for us? At this point someone pointed out that the total number of responses on the chart did not match the total number present. Were some of the voting machines faulty or were some people not responding? We tried again with a similar result. The facilitator promised to check the machines. I imagined some feelings of disappointment as he continued as though what was happening was not what he had hoped might flow from these early activities.

There seemed to me to be a restlessness among those in the room. The odd thing was that the technological aids to our work were doing the opposite of aiding us. I am not making a point about technology as such, but about how the process of enabling was being approached. The machines proliferated messages and statistics in the midst of activities that did little to help us make meaningful connection. The computer screens had flashed up a few dozen messages in a way that confused the sense of who was responding to who about what. The complex temporal and spatial web of human responsive relating was addled so we were struggling with the creative process of constructing the possible significance of our presence here together.

An hour had passed before the facilitator suggested people introduce themselves to one another. He proposed a way we might do this as a start although we were free, of course, to choose any other way. I was struck by the sense that we needed a format for doing this to start us off, as though otherwise we might be at a loss how to begin to engage one another and it would be better to have something to fall back on.

The four corners of the room had been labelled with the four topics of the project and around each corner pieces of paper were stuck on the walls each carrying a few sentences. I realized by recognizing some of my own phrases that these were taken from material we had sent in before the meeting in response to a series of questions. The sentences were not attributed and I noticed that two remarks of mine that had followed one after the other had been pasted at different corners. Again I thought how odd this process was, distributing snippets disconnected from one another and from the author and from the question the author was responding to in the first place.

After introducing ourselves to one another we were asked to choose one of the corners of the room and to discuss our first thoughts with the group that convened there. Again it was assumed that the open space of exploring how we might begin together was just too anxiety-provoking or time-wasting to contemplate. A large board at each corner was marked out with an identical grid for us to fill in. The headings were prompts like: key issues under this topic, positive trends, negative evidence, aspirations for our work in this area, and so on. Again the facilitator assured us that this was just a starting point for the discussion and just a useful way of feeding back to the whole meeting. In the group I joined we ignored the board and then tried to fit our discussion to its constraints, or stretch the constraints to incorporate aspects of our discussion. As

someone from each group ‘reported back’, the presenters followed the format of the grid. I listened to the person from my group give a fluent performance, linking up the words scrawled on the board brilliantly. I thought how well schooled we all are in this kind of process and how little of the tentative exploratory conversation we had just participated in was actually conveyed.

It was an enormous relief to go to dinner where the noise level was high, as many highly varied conversations worked in a disorderly way to start fashioning the links and associations between people. We were evolving the sense of the reciprocal relations between our gathering selves and the endeavour we were gathering for. Despite the facilitator repeating his wish to enable what was trying to happen and to ‘get out of the way’, something about how we were approaching the need to organize ourselves seemed to me strangely heavy-handed.

The legacy of process consultation and organization development

It seems to me that the profession of organization development and process consultation has ossified in ways that have become more inhibiting than enabling. What is this legacy that invites us to understand human processes in particular ways? We could look back at some of the classic and influential texts in the field, such as those written by **Edgar Schein** in the 1970s and 1980s. In his volumes on Process Consultation (1987, 1988) Schein writes about organizations in terms of networks of people and the various processes of interaction between them. Schein’s stated intention is to analyse major human processes, such as communication or decision-making or leadership, and highlight what process consultants, whether as hired help or employed managers, would observe about such processes and what they might do about what they observe, that is, how they might intervene (1988: 13). The importance of human processes is understood thus: the network of positions and roles that define the formal, or designed, organizational structure is occupied idiosyncratically by individual people who put their own personality into getting the job done and who relate to others in their own unique way.

These processes of relating to others have a decisive influence on outcomes and must themselves become objects of diagnosis and intervention if any organisation improvement is to occur. Paradoxically, some processes recur with such regularity that they become virtually part of the structure. . . . Structured processes (i.e.

observed regularities of behaviour) are very much the domain of the process consultant.

(ibid.: 17)

The expertise of process consultation is ‘a good deal of knowledge of what to look for, how to look at it, how to interpret it, and what to do about it’ (ibid.: 19).

As will become clear, Schein’s idea of process and of participation are very different from mine. He talks about his work in terms of sitting in with people at various meetings. ‘Not only have I observed my own communication with the client so far, but I can now observe how different members in the client organisation communicate with each other’ (ibid.: 21). Schein’s analysis of patterns depends on observing in terms of the regularities of behaviour of the different individuals present, including himself, and the way those regularities impact others in ways that also produce regularities of behaviour between them. In other words, he is observing what is stable and repetitive in the way people relate. He explains his practice in terms of his experience in identifying these patterns, bringing them to the attention of clients in a timely fashion and, with them, diagnosing their consequences for good or ill. Collaboratively he then helps people to institute patterns that they consider more useful. Thus the process consultant intervenes, and helps clients themselves to learn to intervene, in their own stabilized patterns in order to establish new ones. Schein’s practice is that of a participant-observer. What is never questioned in his work is this account of how change occurs in patterns of relating. On the one hand he encourages reflection on the patterning that emerges over time in human relating, a patterning that is self-organizing; that is, a patterning that cannot be understood as intended by any single person or group. On the other hand he suggests that people can introduce new patterns that they do intend. The explanation for past patterns is different from the explanation for future patterns. At no time is there any indication in his writing that there is any contradiction in this. We participate, we pause, we observe and assess ourselves retrospectively, we make adjustments and we continue. The assumption is that in the process of reflection we can learn to design with increasing self-consciousness the patterns that it will prove useful to find ourselves in next time we pause to reflect. This is largely how collective learning is understood in organizations.

No wonder facilitators, consultants and managers informed by this tradition work as if they must propose well-designed patterns for all interaction in advance of interacting, as though that is what being

enabling entails. Thus they fill the looming openness of the future with exercises, frameworks, structured agendas, matrices and categories as though, without them, there will not be a useful structuring of interaction. However, as this need to design the form of communication is apparent on the one hand, on the other hand the sense that unwanted patterns will continue to arise remains. Thus there is an ongoing need for process facilitation to keep things on track. This account of change in patterns remains within the cybernetic tradition of using feedback to keep a system from drifting off course.

So how might we begin to think differently about the way the patterning of human interaction patterns further patterning of human interaction?

This is a book about the way we humans organize ourselves conversationally. The title, *Changing Conversations in Organizations*, is intended in several senses. I want to suggest a change in the way we often think of the part conversation plays in organizational life. We currently take it for granted as a background to more important activities through which we design and manage our organizations, as though conversation is carrying or transmitting the thing we should be focusing our attention on. Instead, this book will work with the assumption that **the activity of conversation itself is the key process through which forms of organizing are dynamically sustained and changed. Our habits of thought and speech tend to blind us to the sheer flowing ubiquity of the communicative dance in which we are all engaged.** Instead we focus mainly on the tangible products of conversation – the organizational designs, performance profiles, business models, strategic frameworks, action plans, lists and categories with which we seek to grasp the reified complexities of organizational life and render them ‘manageable’. We spend much time extracting and generalizing from our lived experience and then trying to apply the abstractions as templates for shaping the future *as though we uncritically believe that this is how our future comes to have shape*. How often have you found yourself in meetings where ‘tangible outputs’, ‘concrete results’ and ‘solid outcomes’ is a constant pressure and concern? Without this way of thinking we fear that we will be literally ‘at sea’, awash in formless transience, without a rudder. Must it be so? On the contrary, this book will continue the argument of this entire series in suggesting that this fear is a consequence of a way of thinking that has become habitual in corporate and institutional life. We seem to lack a capacity to articulate the nature of our participation in the activities which give evolving form to our organizational experience.

Conversing as organizing, organizing as conversing

We think about ‘an organization’ as something that has an existence separate from our own activity, even though often we are uneasily aware that it is not so. The phrase ‘in Organizations’ in the title of this book is a further concession to the habit. In fact, I will not be writing about conversations that take place ‘in’ an organization, but about *conversing as organizing*. I will be describing and illustrating conversation as a process of communicative action which has the intrinsic capacity to pattern itself. No single individual or group has control over the forms that emerge, yet between us we are continuously shaping and being shaped by those forms from within the flow of our responsive relating.

I also want to notice a shift in the form and character of conversations that occur when people meet to talk about strategy, change, organization, culture and so on at meetings of one sort or another. Organizational meetings have acquired peculiarly unhelpful constraints on the mode of engagement that is judged effective and productive, even though, in most organizations I work with, people’s frustration with meetings nearly always runs high. Again the way this frustration is understood tends to lead to a greater emphasis on managing meetings better, improving the pre-read, managing the agenda, managing the time, managing the discussion, polishing the presentations, capturing the outputs, identifying actions and managing the follow-up. Do people find this leads to more satisfying meetings? I do not think so. In this book I want to look at how we could approach the art of gathering and conversing in ways more conducive to the emergence of meaningful action, creative endeavour and differentiated identities.

Above all I want to propose that if organizing is understood essentially as a conversational process, an inescapably self-organizing process of participating in the spontaneous emergence of continuity and change, then we need a rather different way of thinking about any kind of organizational practice that focuses on change. The main focus of this book is practice, in other words the way we make meaning of the activities of any of us who may be explicitly charged with ‘leading change’, ‘managing change’, ‘planning change’ or ‘facilitating change’. This book is not about systematic change methodologies based on abstract models of organization, rather it explores how we might make sense of our experiences of working with continuity and change day to day.

The question for us all is what do we think we are up to, how are we to account to ourselves and to others for the activities we initiate, support or discourage? How are we to explain what we do and don't do? How are we to think about our contribution? In other words, how are we to practise?

The value of 'just talking'

Let me continue by recounting an episode that occurred many years ago in the early 1990s when the issues that motivate me in writing this book first began to excite and trouble me.

I was sitting in the office of the Managing Director of a European Business Centre within a large global corporation. Imagine an airy, top-floor room with plate glass windows giving a far-reaching but dreary view of a London satellite conurbation. We sit, just the two of us, at a round conference table and are brought coffee by the MD's secretary in pale china cups. In this atmosphere of corporate privilege and power we are talking about the delicate issue of not knowing. What is this senior executive to do when he believes some kind of initiative is needed, but precisely why he thinks something is needed and what form that something should take eludes him?

We did not start here, of course. The meeting had begun crisply with the MD's intention to repeat the occasion of the previous year's strategic management meeting which had inaugurated the new European Business Centre. I had helped to design and facilitate this meeting of some eighty managers held in the Château of Chantilly in France. The MD tells me that, although business results have been satisfactory, the potential benefits of a more co-ordinated approach is not being realized in key accounts across Europe. The different businesses that have been brought together under the umbrella of the EBC remain, he feels, surprisingly intact, reducing communication and collaboration across related areas. This is despite implementing all the agreements made at the meeting that had inaugurated the new EBC, agreements that were intended to help cross-cultural and cross-functional communication. The MD shows me copies of the EBC newsletter produced monthly, to which all parts of the EBC send in progress reports and information. He also shows me the elaborate system of management briefing notes and feedback forms cascaded at regular intervals up and down the hierarchy. He describes the management tours he has twice conducted around all the sites in Europe,

meeting and talking to groups of staff about business models, strategic plans and key priorities.

There is something very familiar to me about his concerns. He wants to act as a leader to improve the situation and is struggling to find ways to think about this. He has decided to organize another management meeting in the coming autumn to try to further rally the EBC and establish more effective patterns of working. He wants me to design and facilitate a meeting along similar lines to the last event (Where are we now? Where do we need to be? So how do we get there?), which he still sees as very successful.

I might once have accepted this proposal. Instead, the conversation has taken its currently more ruminative turn because I respond differently than I might once have done. I ask, who else is he talking with about the sense he is making of the situation? Who shares his concerns? What sense are others making? How has the idea of another large management meeting emerged? I ask how sure he feels about the value of such a meeting. I admit that, although I have often helped to create such meetings that are deemed to be very successful, I am left with nagging questions. Why do we always think that getting everyone together in one place at the same time to agree on a desired way forward is the best way to change things, especially when the nature of the change needed is subtle – a variation of the unending themes of better communication, better co-ordination, more initiative and more innovation? Why is it that these sessions always seem so successful at the time and yet fail to ‘deliver’ the kind of future people hope for? Does it make sense for the two of us to sit here designing outcomes and structures for a meeting to tackle something as pervasive and intangible as ‘unrealized potential’?

As we explore these questions together, the clarity about exactly what we are doing and our respective roles in the conversation begins to dissolve. This is rather unsettling. No longer are we discussing a proposed future initiative, we are very much in the midst of things, talking about what kind of sense we can make of our experience. The quality of our communication changes. Unrehearsed expression replaces familiar and polished phrases. We surprise one another and even ourselves. We begin to speak about vague doubts each of us has, glimpses, half-formed ideas, intuitions that we clothe in words for the first time. We relate stories and anecdotes about previous experiences and conversations. We pay close attention to one another, listening carefully, yet the conversation makes unexpected jumps as each of us associates to what the other is saying.

We interrupt each other, interpret, misunderstand. The more we talk in this exploratory way, the less urgent the need to decide on an action becomes. The more we acknowledge that we do not know exactly what to do, the more slowly time seems to pass, or rather we become oblivious to it, as neither of us pushes for closure. In this kind of conversation the quality of risk and anticipation alerts my senses. I can recall the taste of coffee, the quality of light as the MD gazes out of the window at one point, the way the thick carpet absorbs sound and smells of some chemical cleaning fragrance. The outcome that emerges is our decision to continue this rather odd but intriguing conversation with an as yet unknown group of people in the EBC. This is not at all the kind of outcome either of us had in mind when we first started talking and, compared with a detailed plan for a strategic management meeting, scarcely seems worthy of two hours' discussion. We would have been hard put to summarize the conversation, yet it felt significant.

The MD agrees to write an open note to all his managers attempting to articulate his concerns and his sense that the potential of the new EBC is not being realized. Would a management meeting be useful? Who should attend and what form should it take? He will invite people to think and talk about his note and ask those who want to take an active part in taking the inquiry forward to contact his secretary, so that a meeting to discuss this further can be arranged in the next few weeks. I suggest that he does not set a limit on the numbers who might become involved nor indicate what part of the business or what level in the hierarchy they may come from. We would see what response the note produces. I imagine each person reading the note and making a different meaning. The response will not be random; the grouping that will meet will emerge out of a web of relationships and conversations in unique but relevant ways.

Eight people respond to the note and we meet in a conference room in early June. The MD welcomes the group, thanks people for responding to his memo and says he would like to leave people to discuss their views and will return in a couple of hours to hear their thoughts. I am not expecting him to go, but guess he is acting on the assumption that a fuller discussion may take place in his absence. The others look at me once the MD has left. We are all wondering how to start. There is an ambiguity about this gathering that disturbs routine behaviour and I wonder if the MD was relieved to leave us to it. I'm not sure how to begin either but I suggest that we hear what has prompted people to respond to the MD's note and what we all made of it. I am quite surprised by what happens next. Nearly everyone focuses immediately on the MD's suggestion for

another large management meeting and voices doubts about it. How could such a meeting justify the costs, especially at the present time? What would be the outcomes? How could the merits of such a meeting be 'sold' to the rest of the organization? After about 45 minutes of this, there seems to be an atmosphere of gloom pervading the room. I ask whether the point of this meeting, as it turns out, is to inform the MD that his intuition that such a meeting would be useful is misplaced, or at least not shared by other managers. In this case, would it not be best to ask the MD to rejoin us to address this directly and look for other ways to approach his concerns? The gloom palpably intensifies. I ask whether people are reluctant to tell the MD that this is their collective view. Instead of an answer the discussion about why a meeting cannot be justified starts up again.

Puzzled, I try another tack. I ask them to put aside for a moment the need to justify and identify useful outputs from a proposed management meeting. How many of them feel there is important conversation to be had amongst their colleagues around Europe? One by one they all admit that on their own account, yes, they very much need such discussion, that was why they wanted to join this meeting today – a chance for some face to face time with colleagues before and after the official meeting.

So, I say carefully, the difficulty is that there is something unsatisfactory about the kind of discussion that goes on at a strategic management meeting? However, there is a kind of discussion that would be very useful, but they do not know how to justify this? Yes, said a Dutch manager, the coffee breaks are very useful, but the rest of the time is a poor return on the time invested. Suddenly the room becomes animated with anecdotes about this perennial problem, what is important is always discussed off-line.

I suggest that maybe the solution is a meeting designed as a prolonged coffee break. There is amusement, but I ask them what would happen if they take my remark as the seed of a serious idea. I speculate aloud about the self-organizing nature of ordinary conversation and wonder if this does not help to explain the effectiveness of coffee break discussions. Here no-one has overall control over who speaks to who about what, and yet patterns of response to the issues being addressed (or not!) in the formal meeting seem to emerge speedily.

Slowly, but with increasing interest, the group begins to play with this notion, the noise level rises considerably as the outline of an actionable proposal begins to take shape. When the MD returns a slightly more

sober rendering of our discussions is summarized for him by the German manager present. Several others lend their support. The MD asks the Human Resources Manager for his views, who replies that he thinks that an unusual but interesting and workable idea has been generated during the meeting. ‘Fine then,’ says the MD, turning to me, ‘I suggest you make a summary of the proposal and present it for discussion at the next Management Team meeting. If accepted I suggest this group becomes the design team for organizing these meetings.’ I remember thinking that something about the spirit of what was happening was just about to be lost. I feared that it would be hard to stop my ‘proposal’ congealing into a familiar formulation. All my instincts were to keep this conversation moving. I ask the group if they would be willing each to jot down and send round their own understanding of our discussions, not just the outcome, but the nature of the shift in thinking that has taken place. Perhaps one or two of them could join the Management Team meeting and perhaps recreate the kind of shift that has emerged here? They agree happily to this and two managers offer to attend the meeting.

I left the meeting aware that whatever kind of work I was now engaged in, it certainly did not lead to a nice little package of agreed consulting days.

This conversation produced some interesting reflections by the managers. Here are a few examples taken from the emails they sent around. For most of them, English is not their mother-tongue.

The transition to the EBC and what it means regarding managing our businesses has not yet been understood fully by the EBC management. And this will not be the last change – continuous change will be the normality in future, requiring new management styles. This creates a strong feeling of discomfort, which needs to be addressed. However the traditional rules of the corporation don’t fit properly with this situation. Although we feel the need to meet and discuss, we can’t justify the meeting with a proper agenda and expectations regarding the results. As we don’t know exactly what the problem is, we can’t solve it and this makes us feel uncomfortable again. To get out of this mess we have to be aware of this feeling of discomfort, use it as a driving force, don’t try to replace it by an artificial harmony. The feeling only that a meeting is needed is justification enough to have one.

This meeting must offer freedom instead of structure, it should have no other purpose than to find out where we are, what needs to be done, what will be our role in future, how do we manage a permanently changing situation.

We need to allow meetings which develop their own momentum and results – without driving them into a certain direction.

If there is facilitation and a certain structure this must be to help the meeting develop its own dynamic – not to hinder it.

These meetings should not be a follow-up of last year, but a first step to create a new management network in the EBC, which can cope with future challenges.

In the current day and age, and most likely also in the future, none of us working in organisations like this will have a quiet day again. This means that the managers need to feel comfortable in a constantly uncertain situation. This requires considerable resilience, getting to know one another, flexibility, ability to cope with people from different cultures and backgrounds. In order to arrive in such an atmosphere whereby the managers almost naturally would ‘emerge’ into a state of networking, we suggest a meeting/session whereby, contrary to company culture, very little would be organized beforehand, since in many of our meetings, most gets accomplished in the so-called coffee breaks or informal, non-organised get-togethers. We all generated quite a bit of excitement as to having such a session.

I was undecided and not committed to ‘another’ meeting either as a follow-up to last year or as a programme report on the EBC. However, if viewed as a method by which the EBC could grow in effectiveness by changing the way we communicate, then there is a benefit, and what’s more – an immediate benefit.

Current ‘regional’ networks are being reformed, and EBCs are still forming networks across businesses and across regions/cultures/ languages. An acceleration of this process would build the effectiveness of the EBC.

We need to develop skills of open discussion, covering sensitive issues that all too often get pushed aside by formal agendas. The format should be informal, using each other as sounding boards; increasing communication across businesses and functions as people share concerns. Not just the management but we should invite others who we feel are in a position to aid this process.

We must increase UNDERSTANDING of the EBC and how we can contribute to its business success. We need to enhance CONFIDENCE between managers. We need to learn to work in the ‘TENSION’ between the EBCs and Regions. We need lots of informal discussion to find and resolve issues.

We should have a meeting which is not a follow up to last year in Chantilly. No detailed agenda, the topics should be created through

the interaction of the questions and intentions of the attendees. We should try to experience change. We felt very uncomfortable to have another Chantilly, but came to the conclusion that a more informal exchange of experiences and questions amongst self-organizing groups of managers would be of outstanding help and importance. It was very interesting to see how the group's opinion changed during the meeting and I personally felt very comfortable with the results.

Glimpsing another way of working

Looking back I now see these episodes as the beginning of a major shift in my practice as an organization development consultant. Coloured as it must be by my experiences over the last decade I would pick out certain themes in this story that intrigued me even at the time.

The invisibility of ordinary everyday conversation

These mature and experienced managers did not believe they could justify an explicit investment in the free-flow of open-ended conversation despite their conviction that this kind of conversation was precisely what they needed. It was not that they did not create opportunities to engage in such conversation, indeed they were adept at finding many ways to do this, but the dominant way of thinking about managerial effectiveness that they subscribed to did not render this legitimate. Their ways of thinking together meant they could not take an aspect of their experience seriously. In order to justify meeting, you had to know in advance exactly what the topics for discussion would be and what the outcomes of discussion should be. The more uncertain and ambiguous their situation, the more they wanted to meet and talk, yet the less legitimate the expense of doing this became. In order to justify the expense they felt bound to organize the kind of meeting that would not serve them. Catch 22!

Acting into the unknown

The managers' language was littered with references to continuous change, turmoil, discomfort, uncertainty and tensions. It was not obvious to them how to make sense of their situation, how to lead, how to act in particular

circumstances, despite all the business models, strategic frameworks and key priorities that served as ‘shared’ representations of the organization’s activities. It was not that they disagreed with these models, they found them useful, yet ‘implementing’ them was far from straightforward. They believed they needed a structure of thought which made sense of acting prior to taking action. They would often say things like, ‘We know the problems, we can see the solutions, but we can’t make the delivery mechanisms work.’ They had excellent ways of discussing organizational strategy as idealized templates or blueprints for change, but they did not have ways of thinking about the unpredictability and ambiguity of their daily experience. It was not that they did not know themselves to be competent – they did work effectively in the midst of uncertainty, but it was as though they could not articulate what they were actually doing. In a way everything was clear and known and yet their experience was of acting into the unknown moment by moment. The world they inhabited and the world they presented to and discussed with each other seemed, at best, tenuously connected. There did not seem to be a way to talk about this officially other than to continue tinkering with models and implementation plans. Surely, they argued, either we know what we are doing or we don’t.

Organizing the unorganizable

As they reflected on their experience of the way a certain open-ended quality of conversation generated purpose, meaning and innovation, the managers repeatedly referred to this as being non-organized, or not organized in advance, not designed, not managed, not driven. They referred to structures, leadership and facilitation which hindered a meeting from ‘developing its own dynamic’. But at the same time, they experienced themselves individually as intentional, purposeful and strategic. Things were either organized or not organized. They were bemused at the prospect of trying to organize an unorganized meeting.

Wanting to capture knowledge

At the close of both my meeting with the MD and the subsequent meeting of the group of managers, a very satisfying sense of being able to go forward emerged. Yet, in both cases, most people were anxious that unless something – our ideas, our learning – was ‘captured’ in a report, a proposal, a summary, the satisfaction would prove illusory, would escape

us, dissolve, cease to exist and, worst of all, that nothing further would happen. And yet my sense was that the conversations had changed things – our perceptions of ourselves in our situation – subtly but irrevocably. We could not easily undo these shifts, even if we wanted to.

The themes I am drawing attention to all involve paradox. What I began to glimpse as this and other assignments continued was that there could be a way of working, a form of organizational practice, that did not collapse or avoid these paradoxes but rendered them intelligible. I began an active search in the urgency of live assignments for a way of working with executives, managers and other consultants, that focused explicitly on all that I had begun to feel was ignored in the well-accepted approaches to organizational change.

A complexity approach to change

At the time of the assignment I describe here, I was excited by the potential of the so-called complexity sciences for offering fresh insights into the phenomena of organizing. A new language was appearing as scientists attempted to describe complex dynamics in which phenomena were no longer perceived as either ordered or disordered, either stable or unstable, either organized or disorganized, but could paradoxically be both *at the same time*. The concepts of self-organization and emergence offered the beginning of insight into the conundrums I outline above. It is the implications and possibilities of this idea that leads me to talk of a complexity approach to change.

This series is developing a particular way of thinking about self-organization as emergence in the world of human action. We draw analogies with some of the scientific work, and locate this in streams of thought in philosophy, psychology and sociology which seem to us to be pursuing similar insights. We develop a way of thinking which emphasizes the self-organizing patterning of communicative action in complex responsive processes of human relating (Stacey, Griffin and Shaw 2000; Stacey 2001). It is a way of thinking that invites us to stay in the movement of communicating, learning and organizing, to think from within our living participation in the evolution of forms of identity. Our blindness to the way we participate in fabricating the conversational realities of organizing is compounded by the difficulty we have in *thinking from within, in thinking as participants, in thinking in process terms, above all, in thinking paradoxically.*

Another way of thinking about the issues raised by our participation, our interdependence and our contextual embeddedness are tackled in recent developments in systems thinking, particularly second-order cybernetics, soft systems methodologies and living systems theory. In this series, we have argued that to think systemically usually means to deal with the paradoxes of human organizing by thinking in terms of *both/and* complementarities. This is a powerful advance over thinking in terms of simple either/or dichotomies, but it leads us to think about the conundrum of our capacity for self-conscious reflection in particular ways. This series explores a different way of thinking that stays in the tension of paradox as the movement of the sense-making process itself.

There are different complexity approaches to change, which can seem at first confusingly similar because they all bring a new attention to conversation, participation and the way we organize and are organized as we communicate. One aim of this book is to explore how this new emphasis on complexity and conversation plays out differently in practice. I will explore the difference between a systemic change practice as advocated by the majority of influential writers and practitioners in the field of organizational change and a participative practice that understands itself without recourse to systems thought. I will ask whether the differences matter and how and to whom?

In Chapters 2 to 5 I will describe my practice by telling stories that echo repeatedly the themes of complexity and emergence while emphasizing different aspects (the names of people and places are often changed). The way each story or practice narrative is told illustrates again and again the kind of sense-making at work, as I work, and as I speak about the work I do. I will relate my experiences of organizational change without seeking to extract universally applicable prescriptions. On the contrary, my intention is to convey an appreciation of ‘form’ from within the narratives. They are intended to be instructive accounts. As you read the stories I hope you will notice how I am asking you to think about organizational change, how I am encouraging you to shift your attention to particular aspects of your experience of organizational life. I will also keep asking myself reflexive questions: How am I thinking about what is going on? How am I making sense of my own and other’s participation?

Chapters 6 and 7 act as a counterpoint to the earlier chapters by looking first at the legacy of organizational development and then at the approaches of other organizational practitioners who embrace

22 • Changing conversations in organizations

conversation and participation as keys to their work. How do they describe, illustrate and account for their practice? I will look particularly at the recent interest in concepts such as Open Space Technology, Future Search conferencing, the Learning Organization, Dialogue, and Communities of Practice. How do these practitioners appear to be thinking about what they are doing? Where do we share similar concerns and where do our interests diverge?