Obstacles to Consciousness in Corporations

Pamela Buckle, Ph.D.

School of Business, Adelphi University
PO Box 701, Garden City NY, 11530-0701, USA
buckle@adelphi.edu

Abstract

Managers draw on many information sources to aid in corporate decision making. One source of information usually overlooked is the unintended, self-organized patterning of behaviour that spontaneously emerges in complex human systems.

Typically, managers ignore or misinterpret the unexpected behaviours and paradoxical occurrences that emerge, often repeatedly, in every workplace. However, such behaviours and occurrences reflect a dimension of unintended coherence – of self-organized patterning – within a corporation. Such coherence offers rich insights about previously unrecognized corporate goals, fears, weaknesses, and strengths. When managers fail to discern self-organized patterns in unintended organizational behaviour, such patterns fail to yield the wisdom they otherwise could. In order for managers to make use of this rich information source, they must possess skills in self-organized pattern identification and analysis. Drawing from a grounded theory study of managerial pattern identification and analysis, this article examines forms of evidence of self-organized dynamics that can help people begin to become conscious of these dynamics in the workplace. I also examine obstacles to consciousness of self-organized patterns, that result in managers ignoring or misinterpreting these patterns.

Failing to accurately discern unintended organizational coherence yields unfortunate consequences for corporations. Among them is a fracturing of the systemic relatedness possible between managers and the organizations in which they work. As long as managers fail to understand the language of systemic self-organization, they cannot relate effectively with the organizations in their care. By contrast, learning to discern the unintended coherence that emerges in organizations allows managers to engage in more effective relationships with organizations as the complex entities they are.

Keywords: corporations, self-organization, consciousness, reflexivity

Self-Organization: Unintended Coherence in the Workplace

"Although the specific path followed by the behaviour [of a system]… is random
and hence unpredictable in the long term, it always has an underlying pattern to it,
a "hidden" pattern…. Chaos is therefore order (a pattern) within disorder."
(Stacey, 1993:228)

Managers shoulder responsibility to make decisions, large and small, every day. These decisions can have tremendous impact on people's work activities, their livelihoods, and the survival of the

firms in which they work. Not surprisingly, then, corporations gather and generate volumes of data to aid managerial decision making. Information helps managers to design and maintain organizations that are coherent.

Managers design organizations to be coherent. The coherence that managers envision gets communicated through strategic plans, corporate memos, and departmental meetings. Communication vehicles like these convey the corporate coherence that managers intend to see. However, everyday in organizations, unexpected behaviours, anomalous events, and paradoxical occurrences unfold that have no clear relevance to the coherence that managers design. The confusion – and frustration – that such happenings create signals the meeting of two organizational coherences: one intended and another unintended. Alongside managers' intended corporate coherence, the systemic dynamic Jantsch (1980) called self-organization operates autonomously of the coherent strategies, objectives, and tactics that managers design. Self-organization is one way a complex system displays coherence – unintended coherence.

In unintended workplace behaviours, self-organization expresses an organization's deeply-held (perhaps barely conscious) perceptions about itself. Self-organized patterns reflect a system's collective memory (Cilliers, 1998). Such patterns also reflect a system's beliefs about its identity, including how and to what extent that identity may be under threat (Maturana & Varela, 1980). Such patterns reflect a system's perceptions about the future, which may not be fully recognized by organizational members (Conforti, 1999). Underlying otherwise perplexing organizational behaviours are goals, desires, fears, strategies, traps, developmental stages of maturity, strengths, weaknesses, values, taboos, and unacknowledged cultural characteristics (Mark & Pearson, 2001). Self-organized behaviour is a symbolic language, expressing how an organization subconsciously perceives itself at any given point in time. Self-organization is self-expressive. It offers informative, real-time data about the state of an organization.

The corporate decision making that unfolds every day in organizations often overlooks the valuable insights that self-organization can afford. When managers fail to discern self-organized patterns in unexpected organizational behaviour, such patterns fail to yield the wisdom they otherwise could.

Often, managers ignore unexpected behaviours in corporate settings. Or, when such happenings are too big to ignore, managers typically view them as problematic. Managers' urgency to overcome unexpected challenges that arise in corporations is understandable. However, managers focussed on removing unexpected challenges often mobilize remedies without fully understanding the dynamics driving the behaviour they want to fix. As an analogy, physicians can more effectively prescribe a medical intervention when they know with some precision the health situation a patient is facing. Similarly, managers can better manage and influence organizational behaviour when they understand with some precision the self-organized dynamics driving that behaviour. When an organization's coherence departs from that which leaders expect – when it shifts into self-organized coherence – the management challenge becomes discerning the identity of the unintended coherence and regaining the capacity to influence organizational behaviour.

Self-organized patterning as a form of overlooked coherence within corporate settings.   This discussion of self-organized pattern detection draws from a grounded theory study conducted between 2000 and 2005. The study examined the pattern-detection processes of people working in corporate settings. The purpose of this paper is threefold. First, I will present forms of evidence of self-organized patterning that exist in work settings. Second, I will examine

obstacles that managers face in perceiving and understanding such evidence when it arises. Third, I will describe consequences of managers' failure to become conscious of self-organized dynamics in the workplace.

Study Method

The purpose of the study was to identify theoretical constructs and relationships that could inform future research regarding the identification of self-organized patterns in work settings. An initial literature review suggested that existing management research lacked attention to ways in which managers could engage in self-organized pattern identification. To address this gap in understanding, a grounded theory research method (Glaser & Strauss, 1967) guided this exploratory research. Sampling, data collection, and data analysis for this study focused on describing the conceptual categories involved in practitioners' pattern-identification processes.

The grounded theory method encourages data collection from diverse sources to assist researchers in developing clearly-described conceptual categories. Accordingly, I collected 60 incidents of pattern identification from 23 practitioners who live and work in North America, South America, Europe, and Australia. In their organizations, these individual held roles including industry analyst, consultant, entrepreneur, managing partner/owner, vice president, and CEO. Study participants applied their pattern identification skills within an array of industries including health care, education, social services, manufacturing, construction, investment, the judicial system, international diplomacy, the arts, and the public sector. All participants had a reputation for being able to detect self-organized patterns where others in their workplaces tended only to see problematic "chaos," "mistakes," or "counterproductive behaviour"; hence, in this article I refer to study participants as pattern analysts. I interviewed pattern analysts in person or by telephone. I also gathered data about pattern detection processes as a participant observer, in a group of individuals who met periodically between December, 2000 and July, 2003 to discuss self-organization in corporate and other settings. In total, this study generated 21,560 lines of transcription (from tape recorded interviews) and field observation notes, which were entered into a qualitative research software analysis tool, ATLAS.ti, for initial coding and analysis.

In accordance with the grounded theory method, examination of the literature unfolded concurrently with data collection and analysis. As I identified conceptual themes in the interviews and field notes, I turned to organizational literatures that addressed such themes to compare and contrast my study findings with that of other researchers. Where possible, I focused my literature review on top tier management journals [1]. However, it became quickly apparent that systemic self-organization – and how organizational practitioners make sense of it – has received scant treatment in mainstream management literature (Buckle, 2005), reaffirming the argument that consciousness of self-organization in workplaces has been under-studied. I was able to identify sufficient management literature to legitimize this research. However, examining that literature concurrently with data collection and analysis had another impact on this study. The literature itself became another source of data that enabled the development of conceptual categories. [2] Repeated iterations of data collection, data analysis, and literature review clarified and refined the conceptual categories that emerged through this study.

I sought to validate study findings in a number of ways. The grounded theory approach itself acts as a quality-control mechanism for the findings it generates, by encouraging the collection of data from diverse individuals and other sources. By purposely seeking a sample of

individuals working in widely diverse industries, the conceptual categories generated in this study can be assumed to have explanatory power in a broad variety of contexts (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). I also sought to assure internal validity through enlisting several study participants to read and comment on early drafts of the study's findings, as per the advice of (Maxwell, 1998; Yin, 1998).

In the following pages, I will present what this study uncovered regarding evidence of self-organized patterns in corporations, and the obstacles that practitioners face when attempting to become aware of self-organized workplace coherence.

Evidence of Unintended (i.e. Self-Organized) Coherence

Self-organization, by definition, involves the emergence of unplanned, unintended dynamics. However, corporate life does offer specific clues that self-organization is behind puzzling behaviour. In this section, I will present three categories of evidence of unintended coherence used by corporate pattern analysts: *anomalies*, *paradox*, and *repetition*. Pattern analysts report that the emergence of such evidence can act to alert them to the presence of self-organized patterns in the workplace.

Anomalies as Evidence of Self-Organized Coherence

A theory of self-organized pattern identification must have a place for workplace anomalies: behaviours that are unexpected and unintended by managers and employees alike. In this section, I will examine the meaning of anomalies in corporate life. Based on interviews and observations of corporate pattern analysts, I will discuss the meaning and value of anomalies for managers seeking to understand self-organized dynamics in the workplace. I will also offer examples of anomalies identified by some of the men and women who participated in this research.

Undoubtedly, demands for efficiency pressure organizations to behave in routinized, predictable ways. However, unusual behaviours occur in corporate settings. What is unusual behaviour? Experience ingrains in managers a familiarity with normal or typical workplace behaviours. *Unusual* behaviour, by contrast, refers to abnormal or atypical happenings that unfold within an organizational system. For the purposes of this study, *behaviours* include people's micro-level outward actions or demeanours, and also macro-level phenomena, such as workplace circumstances or events, corporate performance, and prevailing moods or cultural climates (deGreene, 1997). Corporate pattern analysts observe anomalous workplace behaviours in many shapes and sizes. Often, unusual behaviours emerge merely as atypical, outliers in the normal curve of expectable events and behaviours in daily organizational life. One pattern analyst described her response to an organization exhibiting slightly unusual behaviour this way: "There is a pervading sense that something just doesn't fit… There's not congruence in everything." Workplace anomalies generate in corporate pattern analysts this sense that "something doesn't fit."

Two forms of workplace anomalies signal to pattern analysts that unintended congruence (i.e. self-organized patterns) may have emerged in their midst.. A pattern analyst offered an example of a workshop participant who was operating out of role, differentiating himself from other participants with peculiar behaviour:

> He was making lots of disruptions…. We had a writing exercise and he didn't have his own paper, and somehow in the process of writing, half of his pages got torn in half and crumpled. And this whole time he was sitting there with his briefcase huddled to his chest… very clearly uncomfortable.

Another pattern analyst reported an example of a regional symphony that hired an Executive Director who did not like classical music. One pattern analyst has noted that corporations regularly operate out of role identity in deciding to purchase sports stadiums – commonplace occurrences, but behaviours falling outside the realm of the business in which they are operating (Patrizio, 2001). These examples have in common a person or entire company acting outside those behaviours commonly understood as central to their key business functions. A second form of workplace anomaly I call *intense reactions*. One pattern analyst found herself cued to particularly strained dynamics at a worksite in this way. After each visit to this location, she would "leave the office feeling like I'd smoked two packs of cigarettes. It's very uncommon for professionals to smoke in this region but nearly everyone does in this particular office." Another pattern analyst described an encounter where, "soon after the meeting began, tension was really high in the room. If these two staff members had had bazookas, they'd have been killing one another". Unusually pervasive stress-coping mechanisms and unusual anger both constitute intense responses to organizational dynamics that, on the surface, do not seem capable of instigating such reactions.

For many corporate pattern analysts, the process of pattern detection begins when they notice behaviours that differ from the intentionally-organized patterns of behaviour that managers orchestrate in order to lead organizations. Managers involved in this research who sought to detect self-organized patterns in the workplace view anomalies in a company's behaviour or performance to be important. Conceptually, this makes sense. If self-organization represents an unintended form of coherence in a workplace, it stands to reason that unintended activities, events, or performance can act as clues to understanding such patterns. Developing a keen attention for anomalous behaviour can be a valuable first step toward detecting self-organized workplace dynamics.

Organizational Paradoxes as Evidence of Self-Organized Coherence

If unusual behaviours represent one form of evidence of self-organized dynamics involving anomaly, paradoxes are a facet of organizational life not anomalous at all. For pattern analysts, paradoxes bring intended organizational coherence and unintended coherence into sharp contrast. Here, I will define paradox, provide examples of it from the management literature, and offer examples of paradoxes noted by corporate pattern analysts that helped these individuals to detect autonomous, self-organized patterns that had emerged in organizations where they worked.

In her survey of organizational paradoxes, Lewis (2000) described them as encompassing perspectives, demands, and findings about organizations that appear conflicting, opposing, or seemingly illogical. Eisenhardt) (2000) noted that paradox represents the simultaneous existence of two inconsistent states that strikes us as absurd or irrational. Paradox represents a moment of discovery of contradictory yet related thoughts and actions in corporate settings. In their paradoxical behaviours, organizations reveal the existence of "simultaneous conflicting truths" (Lewis, 2000:761).

Management scholars have identified examples of common organizational paradoxes. (Trevelyan, 2001) has written about ways that a single managerial decision can have,

simultaneously, both positive and negative effects on external stakeholders. (Fiol, 2002) has examined how, over time, a hard-won organizational asset can also act as a liability. (Miesing, 1984) has examined how innovative and responsible corporate planning systems can, not uncommonly, become unreflective routines. In the paradoxes these scholars describe, we can perceive realities that contradict common organizational beliefs and intentions, discovering that those beliefs and intentions cannot account for all that unfolds in organizational life.

Paradox offers corporate pattern analysts an opportunity to recognize the co-presence of intended and unintended truths about a corporation. Three examples illustrate this point. One study participant noted that a national social services charity awarded the most funding to the country's most affluent regions, not the most impoverished. Despite an espoused religion-based value system, offices in this organization had to strategize against one another to attract needed resources. The study participant noted that this charity self-organized around a pattern of fierce competition – a pattern with considerable influence over the behaviours of its members. A second pattern analyst reported a case wherein a company sought to fill a clerical job posting. The job description for this administrative support position contained a substantial emphasis on advanced-level coaching skills. Even if the company found a person whose skills encompassed the desired skills, the combination of administrative support and leadership responsibility (without authority) would likely sabotage anyone's possibility of success in the role. Without realizing it, the organization had designed this position to fail. I offer one final example of paradox. An employee working at an actively "family-friendly" workplace noted that his managers regularly scheduled off-site, mandatory training meetings in the evening. This scheduling compelled most of the staff members to scramble to find alternate child care arrangements (Laiken, 2003). Inherent contradictions in each of these examples of paradox demonstrates some of the elaborate and pervasive configurations of behaviour in companies that operate autonomously from the configurations of behaviour that managers intend to yield productive results. Corporate pattern analysts become attuned to such paradoxes, recognizing them as examples of intended and unintended coherence operating simultaneously within a company.

Paradox, unfortunately, is common in corporate life (Quinn & Cameron, 1988). However, participants in this study commonly cited paradoxes as useful clues to pattern detection efforts. I turn now to another common clue to the presence of self-organized dynamics in the workplace: commonality itself, in the form of repetition.

Repetition as Evidence of Self-Organized Coherence
The definition of *pattern* – "an arrangement of repeated or corresponding parts" (McLeod, 1984) – points to repetition as a category of evidence useful to corporate pattern analysts. Here I offer both definitional and theoretical arguments that unintended organizational behaviours tend to repeat themselves. In fact, oftentimes, repetition of perplexing behaviours is what makes them recognizable to pattern analysts. In this section, I explore the use of repetition in corporate pattern analysis.

Theorists in various disciplines have observed that unintended dynamics often repeat. Carl Jung theorized that much human behaviour in contemporary times unwittingly follows ancient, archetypal patterns that people unconsciously re-enact (1959). [4] Freud hypothesized that people keep their fixation on such patterns unconscious as a primitive human defence against acknowledging truths about their past; people repeat behaviours as a way to avoid consciously remembering them (Conforti, 1999). The complexity literature notes that repetitive dynamics

are characteristic of self-organization. In business, for example, specific behavioural dynamics that occur at the industry or organizational levels will often "echo" at the business unit, work group, or individual levels (Thietart & Forgues, 1995). Theoretical arguments such as these suggest that people unconsciously repeat certain patterns of behaviour.

The relationship between patterns and repetition is a fortuitous one for people who want to discern self-organized workplace dynamics. As a self-organized dynamic repeats, the likelihood of its detection increases. Often a person must encounter a particular dynamic repeatedly to be able to discern the patterned nature of that dynamic (Johnson, 2001).

Participants in this study intuitively understood the connection between patterning and repetition, and they used this conceptual link to detect self-organized dynamics in the workplace. To the question, "how do you detect a self-organizing pattern in your workplace?" one study participant replied that his ability to discern and understand the nature of any particular self-organized dynamic increased with its reoccurrence: "The pattern gets clearer when you see the pattern keep repeating." Another pattern analyst explained, "I look first of all for something that repeats itself. That's the critical moment. Then I look for the context in which it's repeating itself too – across multiple contexts… Are there common variables that would contribute to this repetition?" Other pattern analysts used the repetitive nature of self-organized patterns to aid their powers of prediction. Once those analysts had a fairly clear idea of the nature of a particular pattern, they made predictions about the organization's future behaviour then waited to see if their predictions would unfold. As one analyst said, "[Patterns are] predictive about what will happen next. I won't necessarily know with a guarantee what will happen next.… [But I know with] high probability what might happen next, and also where to look for what might happen next."

A variety of evidence presents itself to managers interested to identify the self-organized dynamics that emerge in corporate settings. Insofar as self-organization is unintended, organizational anomalies offer clues to its presence. Insofar as self-organization is a dynamic that is organized and autonomous, organizational paradoxes bring into focus elaborately interconnected behaviours that serve goals quite unrelated to those managers consciously espouse. Insofar as self-organization is patterned, it echoes and repeats over time and throughout locations within a corporate system, much as the fractal forms identified by Mandelbrot (1982a; 1982b) in both natural and social systems. None of the pattern analysts I interviewed or observed could detect a single instance of anomaly, paradox, or repetition, then instantly grasp the nature of a self-organized dynamic. Nonetheless, such occurrences acted as evidence that, over time, yielded consciousness of unmistakeable coherence in otherwise perplexing organizational events.

The theory of self-organized pattern detection emerging from this study suggests that *anomalies*, *paradoxes*, and *repetition* are conceptual categories that are readily identifiable by workplace practitioners. While each of these categories makes self-organized pattern detection achievable, this study also yielded discoveries about impediments to pattern detection. I turn now to discuss these obstacles.

Obstacles to Awareness of Self-Organized Coherence

I have argued that self-organized dynamics offer important, although often unrecognized, information about the corporations in which these patterns arise. I have discussed evidence that

allows some managers become conscious of self-organized patterns. Now I wish to examine why such consciousness can be difficult to achieve. In this section, I present four conceptual categories obstructing such consciousness: *viewing organizations as tools, the "problem" label, the stance of expert,* and *entrainment*. I will show how both academic writing and laypeople's assumptions about the purpose and appropriate behaviour of organizations collude to create obstacles to awareness of self-organized patterns.   I will argue that the tendency to characterize unintended organizational events as "problems" impedes understanding of self-organized patterns. I will examine how a pattern analyst's self-perception as "expert" in the management and understanding of organizational dynamics acts as an impediment to self-organization pattern detection. And I will explore why pattern analysts themselves fall prey to self-organized dynamics, making it difficult to recognize the patterns in which they've become ensnared. These obstacles to awareness of self-organized dynamics act as unfortunate impediments to consciousness about such patterns in corporate life.

Obstacles to Awareness of Self-Organization: Viewing Organizations as Tools
Commonly-held assumptions about the purposive nature of organizations impede people's ability to detect self-organized patterns in the workplace. To support this argument, I refer to an academic argument that organizations are a social technology. I argue that the view of organizations as tools has permeated practitioner thought and language. My intent is to show that *viewing organizations as tools* to achieve managerial aims tends to result in self-organized patterns remaining unnoticed.

Humans are a tool-making species (Oakley, 1964). The modern world possesses an unprecedented variety and quantity of technology. *Technology* usually refers to inanimate tools or machines. However, scholars (e.g., Hickson, Pugh, & Pheysey, 1969; Perrow, 1967; Pugh et al., 1963) use the term to mean "the organization of knowledge, people, and things to accomplish specific practical goals" (Winston, 2003):1). Contemporary workplaces, then, are examples of "a technology for producing a subset of the objects and artefacts that society demands" (Hatch, 1997:128). Organizations pervade our society. They are, perhaps, the most potent tool humans have ever created.

In popular thought and metaphor, organizational practitioners understand organizations as machines built for human use (Morgan, 1997). Evidence of this view emerges in language such as "management tools," "change levers," "driving change through a corporation," "building solutions," and "reengineering companies for peak efficiency" (Wheatley & Kellner-Rogers, 1996). Many a practitioner and scholar alike believe that the machine-like nature of organizations is what enables them to produce ordered activity.

However, like any machine, organizations sometimes surprise us. We design organizations to gain control of scarce resources and transform them into wealth. Although we design organizations for this purpose, organizations, like other tools, often behave in ways we neither intend nor expect. "Technologies exhibit superfluous efficacy or polypotency in their functions, effects, and meanings" (Sclove, 1995:20). Despite our best planning and implementation strategies, organizations' actions generate unexpected consequences (Selznick, 1953). Despite designers' considerable intelligence, organizations' behaviours and impacts can differ widely from their creators' plans or members' expectations. Dynamics of self-organization are one of the unintended consequences of organizational life. We attribute considerable power to our organizations. However, their unpredictable polypotency renders them considerably flawed instruments of human intention.

Management theorists acknowledge that unintended consequences can arise within organizations. However, the conceptualization of organizations as tools to achieve managerial goals remains a compelling ideal to theorists and managers alike. Such a conceptualization is limited, tending to leave little room for awareness of the spontaneous self-organized patterns that emerge autonomously from the behaviour an organization is designed to produce.

Obstacles to Awareness of Self-Organization: The "Problem" Label

A limited understanding of the nature of organizations is one impediment to consciousness of self-organized dynamics in a workplace. I now examine what gets labelled a "problem" in organizations. *The "problem" label* is another impediment to consciousness of self-organized patterns.

Labelling unanticipated behaviours, paradoxes, and repetition as "problems" is common corporate practice. In this section I argue that this practice obstructs the identification of self-organized patterns. I make this claim because, even if a pattern analyst notices evidence of self-organized dynamics, problematizing that evidence obstructs the analyst's ability to understand that evidence as coherent; problematizing obstructs one's ability to see a pattern amidst the anomalies and paradoxes of corporate life.

According to *The New Collins Thesaurus,* synonyms of the noun *problem* include a "can of worms," "trouble," and "delinquent" (McLeod, 1984). Labelling unexpected organizational behaviours or paradoxes as problems characterizes them in terms of their failure to be predicted, desirable, or good. When people classify any organizational behaviour as a problem, this assessment affirms their commitment to their existing understandings of how an organization and its members should behave. Any behaviours departing from this understanding, by default, become problems. Rather than describing unusual behaviours or paradoxes in terms of what they are, labelling them problems categorizes them in terms of what they are not. They are "cans of worms," "trouble," or "delinquent" because they failed to meet expectations.

Examples of this labelling style abound in workplaces, in comments like, "This was a problem trainee." Employees complain that individuals, departments, or entire organizations "are not doing their job" (a description that implies the presence of one or more problems). The problem label generally refers to a situation external to the person making this characterization. And, the label may often accompany a distressed inward reaction. For example, one pattern analyst involved in this study recalled, "I used to get really upset – distraught – when things went 'wrong.' I felt like, 'They haven't behaved properly! Somehow they tricked me!' It was a big thing." The problem label is common in organizations. However, for self-organized pattern detection, it is, well, problematic.

True, organizations rent workers' experience and expertise, in large part, so those workers will detect and correct problems. The problem label can be useful when it initiates actions designed to get a system back on track and return it to behaviours that lead to desired performance. The problem label works when the achievement of performance via predetermined means is the goal. However, labelling unusual behaviours or organizational paradoxes as problems acts as an impediment when people want to identify self-organized patterns in workplaces.

By definition, self-organized patterns are not predetermined. When understanding the dynamics of such a pattern is one's goal, problematizing unanticipated occurrences interferes with successful pattern analysis. Fundamentally, the label classifies behaviour in terms of what it is not, or how it is wrong. Characterizing behaviours as problematic fails to help us understand

what pattern *does* govern that behaviour, or how that behaviour *is* accomplishing some unrecognized purpose well.

In organizations, people tend to characterize unexpected behaviours as problems. However, remaining open and curious toward organizational surprises is an important attitudinal strategy for understanding self-organized dynamics. Such openness is a radical cognitive stance in organizational life. That knowledge workers would permit themselves an honest encounter with surprise runs counter to what management literature would leave us to expect. [5] This literature conveys the unequivocal message that surprises are unwelcome in corporate life. To management scholars, surprises are undesirable discontinuities or disruptions (Ansoff, 1975; Erlenkotter, Sethi, & Okada, 1989) to be shielded against (Lampel & Shapira, 2001) or otherwise actively avoided (King, 1995). This literature assumes that managers are, or should be, positioned against surprise for two reasons. First, surprise implies the failure of a company's forecasting techniques to eliminate surprise (Ansoff, 1975; Watkins & Bazerman, 2003). Second, managers do or should position themselves against surprise because it represents a threat to an organization's continued survival. (Consider descriptions of organizations "that cannot afford" surprises in the workplace [Coutu, 2003], and the linking of surprises with organizational "crises" [Ansoff, 1975].) Much management writing recommends that managers and theoritst have a responsibility to help organizations avoid being surprised (King, 1995; Weick & Sutcliffe, 2001). In short, surprises have a reputation as bad news. While some exceptions to this message do emerge in the literature (i.e., Louis, 1980), rarely do they treat surprise as a helpful, or even neutral, emotion resulting simply from a difference between anticipated and actual experiences in workplace settings. The management literature characterizes surprise as a problem.

Self-organized pattern detection may redeem surprises from this problematic fate. People skilled in corporate pattern analysis view surprise as a valuable emotion in service of self-organized pattern detection. One pattern analyst commented,

> A client of mine just the other day said, "It always amazes me how you don't get all upset about something going wrong." Well, that's the issue, she things of it in terms of something "going wrong." Instead of speaking that way, I ask myself, "What's the real pattern here?" Have I really been honest about what's going on here? Am I really paying attention to what's actually happening?

As this analyst's reflections suggest, surprises represent opportunities for destabilizing preconceived assumptions about how members of an organization should be behaving, and discovering new understandings about what patterns govern how members actually are behaving. "There's a tremendous gift in things that don't fit, I think. When I come up against them I have to rethink some of my assumptions," commented one study participant. *The "problem" label* is an obstacle to consciousness of self-organized patterns. Reframing organizational problems as potentially informative surprises is a way to overcome this obstacle.

Obstacles to Awareness of Self-Organization: The Stance of Expert

How we – management researchers and practitioners alike – problematize unintended workplace behaviours acts as an impediment to discerning unintended coherence in organizations. Who we train to lead and work in organizations presents another impediment.

An irony emerged during data collection for this study. When pattern analysts met to analyze perplexing cases of unexpected organizational behaviours or paradoxes, those people with expertise in a business setting like the one being analyzed typically could not detect patterns in

the evidence that was presented. In this section, I argue that the tendency for people in organizations to behave as experts impedes the ability to appreciate unexpected behaviours, paradoxes, or unexplained repetition as patterned. I will examine why people behave as experts in corporate settings. I will examine why business training often does not help one understand self-organized patterns, and I will explain analytic techniques used by pattern analysts to overcome the obstacle presented by their business experience and training.

Expertise is prized by organizations and those who work in them. Business students pay tens of thousands of dollars in tuition to learn to evaluate better business administration from worse, effective corporate performance from ineffective, and appropriate courses of managerial action from inappropriate. Normative judgment about managerial action and business behaviour is, perhaps, the central skill that business schools and management training programs transmit. Employers prize this expertise, as reflected in the increased salaries awarded to MBA graduates (Page, 2003). Several organizational studies (e.g., Alba & Moore, 1983; Burt, 1983; DiMaggio & Powell, 1983; Kadushin, 1968) have helped researchers understand people's deeply ingrained tendency to behave as they believe people in their positions should behave. People working in business settings try hard to act like business experts.

A confident ability to apply expertise in the face of business problems is reassuring to corporate shareholders. However, this study suggests that *the stance of expert* impedes one's ability to understand self-organized patterns. The logic of business differs from the logic of self-organized patterns. Understanding patterns operating according to logic that runs autonomous from business logic requires corporate pattern analysts to engage in analytical techniques that run counter to the business acumen that their organizations sanction.

To detect and understand self-organized dynamics, corporate pattern analysts must learn to temporarily bracket or suspend their business expertise. This is a tremendously difficult technique for corporate pattern analysts to master. It requires them to distance themselves from the very ways of thinking whence they derive their corporate reputations, power, and control (Argyris, 1976). "Turning off" one's "expert mode" enables a pattern analyst to engage another analytical technique: taking the counterintuitive stance that every unexpected or paradoxical action, decision, emotion, and behaviour an organization displays is entirely appropriate to whatever self-organized pattern is operating in that system (Kaufmann, 2003). By "appropriate" I am not suggesting that self-organized behaviours are acceptable – often, they cause corporations considerable damage. Rather, bracketing one's business training and experience is an analytical technique helpful to pattern analysts. It enables pattern analysts to use a technique of viewing even perplexing organizational behaviours as appropriate, accurate expressions of some unknown pattern. Together, the techniques of bracketing one's business expertise and viewing all organizational behaviours as appropriate give pattern analysts an ability to discern coherence in those behaviours that people operating within the confines of their business expertise cannot.

When business experts fail to suspend normative business judgments, they fail to discern the evidence that a self-organized dynamic has emerged, or they fail to discern how such evidence is interconnected into a self-organized logic quite independent of the prevailing logics governing a firm. Remaining caught within the logic of one's formal and informal work training ("book learning" and "street smarts" alike) develops a business acumen that can act as a perceptual "corporate immune system" (de Gues cited in Senge, Scharmer, Jaworski, & Flowers, 2005), preventing the detection of self-organized dynamics. Proverbial wisdom counsels that, "to a hammer, everything looks like a nail." Unless corporate professionals know when to forgo the

tools afforded by their business training, their hard-won professional training will act as a barrier to the detection of self-organized patterns.

Obstacles to Awareness of Self-Organization: Entrainment

The apparent rationality of business training tends to convince corporate professional that their knowledge somehow distances them from organizational difficulties. Armed with expertise, we can recognize, predict, avoid, and control organizational events, exerting our will to act on them. Here, I wish to present a final obstacle to awareness of self-organized patterns – a characteristic of self-organization that confounds the assumption that intelligence and intention can neutralize the adverse impacts of self-organized dynamics.

Self-organization is a systemic dynamic that entrains participants into patterned behaviour. *Entrainment* occurs without participants recognizing it. This characteristic of self-organization is another impediment to consciousness of self-organized dynamics. In this section I will define entrainment, providing examples of what it does to pattern participants and pattern analysts alike.

Self-organized dynamics in a workplace enlist the participation of people who work there. People become entrained in self-organized systemic dynamics. To understand entrainment, consider this observation, made by a researcher interviewing executives in the tobacco industry. "I felt the presence of the company within them. … I felt that I was speaking with more company than person, or perhaps a person who could no longer distinguish between the two" (Rosenblatt, 1995 cited in (Bella, 1997). Pattern analysts encountering self-organized workplace dynamics offered similar accounts. To a degree, pattern participants' individuality becomes subsumed in the maintenance of self-organized patterns. When people become entrained in a pattern, their speech, behaviour, and reasoning styles express the pattern in which they are entrained.

Entrainment becomes an obstacle to the consciousness of self-organized workplace patterns because pattern analysts, themselves, can and do become entrained in the patterns they seek to detect and understand. On a simple level, pattern analysts may find themselves unconsciously synchronizing their body language to that of pattern participants (Kaufmann, 2003). More subtly,

> There is an overlap between the inner structure of one's internal psyche and the outer structure of external organizations that influence the mind…. [T]here is a constant and strong interplay between the structure of the internal personality of an individual and the structure of the external environment. (Mitroff, 1983:90).

As one pattern analyst commented, a pattern analyst examining a self-organized dynamic "will also orbit in its trajectory."

As a systemic phenomenon, entrainment challenges the attempts of scholars and pattern analysts to separate impersonal observations from personally entangled experience (Colaizzi, 1978). At any point during one's attempts to understand a self-organized dynamic, pattern analysts may suddenly discover that they have unwittingly adopted roles, moods, or decision-making habits that belong to the self-organized pattern they are seeking to understand. For example, self-organized patterns in the workplace often form around ineffective interpersonal relationships. Several study participants reported incidents where they suddenly discovered themselves to be involved in a similar, ineffective dynamic themselves. Such discoveries are both highly destabilizing and intensely revealing. Repeatedly, pattern analysts reported that their sense of personal autonomy becomes overtaken by discoveries that they have become entrained, for a time at least, in self-organized patterns. Entrainment shifts the pattern-detection process from an

intellectual exercise to a personal encounter.

Entrainment is a characteristic intrinsic to self-organization. Not uncommonly in organizations, people "will act in ways that are counterproductive; they will tend to be unaware that they themselves are doing so, yet tend to be aware when others are doing so" (Argyris, 1982:104). Highly skilled pattern analysts develop the ability to recognize when they themselves have become entrained in a self-organized dynamic: "To be able to see that they are 'carriers' of the very illnesses that they decry is an important step forward' (Argyris, 1976:74). Unrecognized entrainment is an obstacle to people's consciousness of self-organized dynamics in organizations. Recognized entrainment is humbling and maddening, but also vitally necessary to successful pattern analysis.

Managers who wish to become conscious of the self-organized dynamics in their corporations face some formidable obstacles. These include commonly-held views about organizations' role as tools, the tendency to focus on the "problematic" aspects of unintended behaviours, the expectation that businesspeople behave as experts with the ability to swiftly explain unexpected corporate performance, and the tendency for self- organized patterns to entrain even those trying to detect and understand them. If as Cilliers (1998), Conforti (1999), Mark & Pearson (2001), and Maturana & Varela (1980) have suggested, unintended self-organized patterns carry information about a corporations collective memory, strengths, challenges, fears, …[etc], the obstacles to consciousness I have discussed here are worrisome. To conclude, I will briefly discuss some of the consequences that arise from the obstacles to consciousness of self-organized patterns in corporate settings.

Discussion and Concluding Thoughts

An argument underlying this article is that managerial decision makers are disadvantaged if they are unconscious of the self-organized dynamics present in the corporations they lead. Here, I briefly discuss some of the consequences arising from such unconsciousness.

When an understanding of the self-organized dimension of a particular corporation is absent, leaders possess notably incomplete information, leading to impaired decision making. The systems dynamics writing of (Kim, 1992a; 1992b; 1994; 2000; Senge, 1990; Senge, Kleiner, Roberts, Ross, & Smith, 1994) alerts us to some specific consequences of decisions made in the absence of understanding of specific self-organized dynamics. First among them is the failure to manage for sustainable corporate growth. For example, awareness of certain self-organized dynamics in a workplace can alert managers to the dangers of focusing on short term fixes that divert attention from long-term, more fundamental solutions. Similarly, awareness of certain self-organized patterns can keep corporations from the unchecked use of a shared resource that will adversely impact the company when that resource becomes depleted. Second, managers who do not understand self-organized dynamics can make ineffective choices with regard to resource allocation. For example, both Kim and Senge have written about the self-organized systemic dynamics that can result when firms develop certain firm capacities while under-investing in other important capacities. Finally, managers who are unaware of self-organized dynamics will often select and maintain damaging competitive strategies. Price and talent wars in a variety of industries regularly destroy firms who fail to see and stop the aggressive competition that results in losses for all involved parties. Each of these examples occurs as a result of decision making impaired by an inability to detect and understand self-organized dynamics.

The systems dynamics work of Senge and others alerts us to the consequences that can arise when managers are not conscious of specific self-organized patterns in their midst. More broadly, leaders whose companies become caught in self-organized dynamics often find that their change efforts fail. Stakeholders commonly attribute such failure to "lacking leadership." I describe this failure differently – as a case of leaders attempting corporate interventions without a clear understanding of the dynamics producing the difficulties in the first place. If we accept the logic that a doctor is unlikely to prescribe useful treatment for a patient when the physician does not understand the patient's illness, why should we believe that a corporate leader can successfully intervene to fix unproductive business performance without understanding the self-organized dynamics generating that performance? Failed leadership initiatives occur when leaders fail to relate to the systems they govern. Self-organized patterns – unintended coherence – are among the organizational dynamics to which leaders must relate.

While the research findings discussed in this article may serve to raise awareness of the presence of self-organized systemic dynamics and their harmful impacts on organizations, more work is needed. Further research should seek to identify other workplace cues that can indicate the presence of emergent self-organization in a corporate setting. And organizational researchers could do managers a great service by identifying fruitful strategies leaders can use to overcome obstacles to the awareness of self-organized dynamics in the workplace.

For years, systems scholar (Senge, 1990) has written of the peril and promise of self-organized dynamics in corporations. Such dynamics are "structures of which we are unaware [which] hold us prisoner" (p. 94). Such dynamics are also patterned; they are "an elegant simplicity underlying the complexity of management issues" (ibid.:94). The elegant simplicity of self-organization can become an asset for corporate decision makers only if leaders become conscious of such patterns. At present, most self-organized collective behaviour operates in the unconscious depths of corporate life. Most management decision making arises from a superficial – or at the very least, seriously incomplete – picture of corporate reality. As Senge et al. (2005) have written more recently, if we could become conscious of the self-organized patterns that generate much of organizational behaviour, "the source and effectiveness of our actions can change dramatically" (p12).

Notes

[1] The Financial Times of London's Top 40 journal list acted as a rough indicator of "top-tier" academic journals.
[2] This concept-developing impact of the literature will be particularly evident to readers in this article's sections on *Viewing Organizations as Tools* and *The "Problem" Label*.

[3] Beyond the two forms of corporate incongruence described here, I have published a discussion of other forms of organizational anomaly elsewhere (Buckle, 2005).
[4] Several scholars (i.e. Card, 1991a; 1991b; 1996; Conforti, 1999; Pauli, 1955; van Eenwyk, 1997) have noted striking similarities between contemporary complexity science and the archetype theory Jung developed in the 1950s.
[5] To inform this discussion, I did a literature search in the ABI Inform database for peer reviewed articles containing the words "surprise" an/or "unexpected."

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