CONVERGENCE GATHERING AS AN EXAMPLE OF A MEDIUM SCALE ACEPHALOUS GROUP

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ABSTRACT

We face increasingly complex issues today, many of which may be critical to our survival. If we are to survive, thrive, and find new ways of being, we need to be experimenting with innovative ways of organising ourselves to increase our adaptability and resilience.

Top-down hierarchical organisations have become the norm to the point where we rarely consider alternative ways of organising ourselves even though they divide people against each other and impose power differentials. As we gain an insight into the coercive nature of our organisations we begin to seek alternatives that might be more wholesome and humane.

A group mainly living in the South Island of New Zealand called Convergence is exploring alternatives that have much in common with systems principles. It is an acephalous group, in that it has no structured leadership, and yet over three hundred people have been able to gather together as a co-creative alternative community for five days every year for almost thirty years. Avoiding the divisive distinction between management and worker, Convergence has developed a distributed, transient, self-selected leadership style so the group acts more like a forest or a brain without central control that has proved to be robust. This paper explores the organisation of Convergence from a systems perspective to find its strengths and weaknesses, and its applicability to other groups.

Keywords: complex system, organisation, acephalous, co-creation, unstructured leadership

INTRODUCTION

While being efficient, traditional top-down hierarchies have an inherent violence in the way they divide people according to roles and value them according to those roles. Those at the top get to define and legitimise the way those lower on the hierarchy see the world

and their position in it. This leads to inequalities of power and access to resources. The imposed beliefs tend to infiltrate all aspects of an individual's being (Peltzer, 2003).

We have become accustomed to these structures to the point where the inherent violence becomes invisible and we dull our ability to envisage alternative ways of organising ourselves that would be more wholesome (Danaher, Shirato, & Webb, 2000). Bourdieu (Weininger, 2002) emphasises how the social system legitimates itself to the point where those who suffer under it continue to work to maintain that unjust structure.

Particularly as our organisations have become increasingly complex, our hierarchical structures have become more rigid and impersonal. Von Bertalanffy (1969) saw our social institutions as becoming increasingly mechanised and dehumanised and he was vocal in espousing the need to humanise the ways we organise our lives.

Wheatley (1999, p15) states:

> Our concept of organisations is moving away from the mechanistic creations that flourished in the age of bureaucracy. We now speak in earnest of more fluid, organic structures, of boundaryless and seamless organisations.

And she also describes nature's processes (p.111) saying:

> From the 'interweaving of process' new capacities and structures emerge. Order is never imposed from the top down or from the outside in. Order emerges as elements of the system work together, discovering each other and together inventing new capacities.

Marion and Uhl-Bien (2008, in the abstract) write:

> The problems with which human organisations deal are just too complex to be effectively co-ordinated by top-down managers. Managers and leaders are just incapable of co-ordinating the complexities of human environments as queen bees are of bee environments.

This all speaks to the need to find new ways of organising ourselves to cope with the greater complexities of our age in ways that are more humane and respectful of those involved.

One example of an organisation experimenting with new ways for people to come together and organise themselves is Convergence. It is a network of people based mainly in the South Island of New Zealand, which offers a place for people to explore alternative lifestyles through natural healing techniques, spiritual paths and personal development modalities. This co-creative community gathers at regular events, the main one being an annual gathering over the New Year where three hundred or more people come together

for around five days. Increasingly, there are also three or four day regional gatherings and informal localised gatherings.

The first gathering occurred in 1985-86 under the name, "Towards 2000" and Convergence has occurred every year since except for one. It initially had a traditional committee structure, but it has evolved over the years into an acephalous group (Rhodes, 1995) in that there is no formal leadership structure. Informal leadership is low key, distributed, transitory and self- selecting. High levels of trust, openness and tolerance and reduced levels of complexity enable the operations of Convergence to have become more fluid and seamless (all discussed below). One participant stated, "Convergence is whatever people choose to co-create".

While the operation of Convergence may be on a relatively small scale and not be an effective way for many groups to organise themselves, it may yet foreshadow the development of more flexible organisational structures, which better meet our needs in an increasingly complex and chaotic world.

DOMINANCE HIERARCHIES

For members of a group to choose compliance and co-operation they normally need to be convinced that the advantages of co-operating are greater than the advantages of defecting (Davis, 1997). Without language in particular, this is difficult to communicate. The temptation is to control through violence, or the threat of violence, using fear to gain compliance. Fear-based dominance structures are common in nature (Peterson & Wrangham, 1997) and are deeply embedded in animal behaviour. The violence separates out those with the ability to mete out violence and those who are victims.

Since there is always the potential of a rival emerging to take power, those in power must continually use violence or threats of violence to maintain control. This also means there is a constant need of surveillance for any signs of rebellion. When we first began creating organisations, violence and separation were already woven into the social structure.

The larger an organisation grows, the larger the structure needed to manage the increased complexity (Boulding, 1968). This is particularly so because in any network the number of links grows far faster than the number of nodes (In a system where all possible links between nodes exist a 10% increase in the number of nodes means a 21% increase in the number of links). Traditionally, the added complexity is controlled by rules and regulations that reduce the chaos so the system may remain sufficiently stable.

The physical violence of animal societies is almost always replaced in human societies by more subtle controls and forms of violence. The constant surveillance in animal societies is carried over into human organisations; not so much out of fear of violent rebellion as to ensure that all the tasks of the organisation are carried out in the proscribed manner.

Over time the institutional violence becomes increasingly entrenched and less visible. We can only create alternatives by using our higher cognitive capacities to override our habitual behaviours. The inherent violence then becomes visible, prompting us to seek alternatives. It is through gaining insight using Bateson's Learning II and even Learning III (Bateson, 2000), we can see beyond our canalysed thinking to be able to develop new approaches.

Acephalous groups are generally formed with the specific intention of creating a more equitable organisation and reducing the institutional violence inherent in dominance-based hierarchies.

FOREST AND BRAIN

Nature has created countless exquisite forms that are ideally suited to their environment. When we look to improve the efficiency of human created systems, it is often useful to look at natural systems. There is no Chief Executive Officer (CEO) function in a forest or a human brain and yet both are capable of co-ordination far more complex than is found in human organisations. Senge (2006, p365) writes:

> Nobody is "in charge" of a forest. Your body does not wait for orders from the brain to flow coagulants to a cut in your finger. Whatever "centralized" control does exist in nature is possible precisely because of complex networks of local control.

No creature or life form has overall responsibility for the ongoing maintenance of a forest. Indeed through natural selection and other mechanisms (Wesson, 1993) there is a constant readjustment as each part of the forest struggles to increase its own fitness, often to the detriment of others, and yet a dynamic balance is reached such that the sustainability of a forest may be maintained over millennia.

There is often clustering in a complex adaptive system, so that specific tasks might be picked up by a sub-group of agents, which maintain connectivity with the other clusters. A lake in a forest, for example, will have specific qualities not found in other parts of the forest, but is nevertheless an integral part of the forest and its functioning.

There is clustering in the brain. Vision tends to be processed in the occipital region to the back of the brain and speech tends to be localised in areas like Wernicke's area and Broca's area (Dronkers & Ogar, 2004). The brain also has nested hierarchies with more primitive functions in the mid-brain, enveloped by the limbic system involved with emotions, which in turn is enveloped by the cerebral cortex involved in higher order cognitive processes (MacLean, 1990). These clusters and levels are heavily interlinked. Decision-making does not spring from a central controlling unit. There is no homunculus

in the brain. It is rather a distributed process emerging from the interactions of many different brain functions.

Convergence has a similar structure to a forest or brain and has a palpable organic feel to it. This enables Convergence to link into the resilience (Gunderson & Holling, 2002) of complex adaptive systems.

SMALL WORLD NETWORKS

Convergence is an example of a small world network (Barabasi, 2003) where the nodes are participants and the links are the relationships between them. There are hubs and clusters. Small world networks are typically robust against a random external attack but vulnerable to a selected attack against nodes, which happen to be hubs in the network. Without a structured leadership it is very difficult for someone from the outside to gain control of Convergence. One participant stated, “There is no target for those attacking”. Even though there are hub people, who are more heavily linked than others, they do not fulfil roles that cannot be readily undertaken by others.

Convergence is large enough that weak ties (Granovetter, 2012) can be important. Over five days of a gathering, there may well be many people one does not meet, or with whom one only has a brief encounter. However, two (or perhaps three) degrees of separation (Watts, 2004) would generally be sufficient to access the requisite variety of all of those present. An example was cited where a child broke her arm on a roundabout one year. Word of mouth spread quickly, and two doctors were found amongst the participants to take care of her.

AUTONOMY, CONNECTEDNESS AND DIVERSITY

People who choose to attend Convergence share common ideals and values, which is of course necessary for group cohesion (Vickers, 1968a). Values of openness and honesty, a focus on relationships, seeking alternatives to the mainstream, and a desire for natural wholesomeness bind the participants even though their particular spiritual, cultural, political, economic and other values and beliefs vary widely. Convergence has no set code of beliefs. The acceptance of difference in this diverse social mix allows individuals to maintain a strong sense of autonomy. The requisite variety (Ashby, 1947) that arises from the mix enables access to a broad range of skills, resources and knowledge. The shared values, openness of communication, and lack of dominance structures encourages connectivity. Strong autonomy and connectivity builds a robust system.

DISSIPATIVE FLOWS

Between a half and a third of those attending any annual gathering will be people who have not attended previously. This high level of dissipative flow (Prigogine, 1984) has the advantage that new forms of requisite variety are constantly coming into the organisation, but the disadvantage that so many skills and resources flow out untapped. There is a growing number of people, who return to Convergence after having been away for many years. Many who do not attend still retain their links to the network.

As well as the flow of people, comes the flow of ideas. A meme (Dawkins, 1976) needs to be constantly replicated to survive. With a constant flow of participants through the organisation some ideas stay long enough to be incorporated into the Convergence culture, while others die away, especially if the originator of the idea has moved away.

VIABLE SYSTEMS MODEL

Stafford Beer's Viable Systems Model proposes that through structural recursion every viable system is comprised of viable systems (Beer, 1984). He wrote of five sub-systems that interact to form each viable system. His model equally effectively describes biological or social systems and is often used in a business context. At first glance the model might seem to not be relevant for an acephalous group, but in fact all the sub-systems are present; they are just carried out in a different manner.

System one is the system where the basic function of the whole system is carried out. In a manufacturing business, this is the factory floor, where the workers create the products. There may be many different tasks performed at this level.

System two provides information channels needed for system one to operate. This is the administration of the factory.

System three provides the overview of the functioning of system one. This level provides the supervision of the factory workers and ensures that instructions from systems four and five are carried out.

System four looks at how the system must interact with the outside environment, such as meeting legal requirements, research or marketing.

System five sets policy for the whole operation, balances the demands of the various sub-systems and sets the direction. This is the upper management of the business.

Normally, the various sub-systems have different people in them, who specialise in that area and the people in the top layer get to impose rules on the lower layers. All five sub-

systems are active in Convergence, but people self-select the level at which they choose to operate and may freely move from sub-system to sub-system or be active at multiple levels. There is no reward or status attached to any level. The higher levels of trust might mean that systems two and three are less prominent as surveillance and control need less emphasis. System four might also be less prominent because there is less interaction with the outside world.

BOULDING'S TYPES OF SOCIAL SYSTEMS

Boulding talked of three types of social system (Latzko, n.d.):

1. Exchange systems, which provide a venue for exchange where those involved are driven by self interest
2. Threat systems, where the desired behaviour is reached by the enforcement of rules. This system is fear ridden
3. Integrative systems, which are based on love, trust and honesty.

Boulding states that all three are needed and are interlinked. Convergence has a low exchange system in terms of physical trading, while in society it predominates. Once people arrive on site, no money changes hands.

The threat system is minimal in Convergence, but cannot be fully removed. In spite of the openness of Convergence, there still needs to be ways to kerb unacceptable behaviour that would be destructive for the whole group. Most situations are resolved by an informal intervention, more usually by an experienced participant or participants. These issues are dealt with in a low key manner that is generally not apparent to most other participants. There have been examples of outsiders "gate crashing" the gathering, which have been successfully dealt with in a similar manner.

In Convergence any individual has the right to challenge any other person. The outcome of any challenge is determined by the response of the participants who are present at the time. The censure of one's peers is generally a powerful deterrent that some people would find harsher than the official censure of an organisation.

The integrative system is the most apparent in Convergence. The more the integrative system can be used the less the threat system is needed. The legitimacy of Convergence rests in the whole organisation rather than a select group, thus enabling a stronger sense of ownership by participants. The high level of trust and goodwill enables a high level of co-operation. If an individual does not agree with how Convergence is running, they have the authority, even the obligation, to bring the issue up, which could potentially redefine Convergence and the basis of its legitimacy.

LEADERSHIP

Uhl-Bien & Marion (2008) wrote about complexity leadership. They speak of a new style of leadership springing from a complexity perspective that resonates with the style of leadership evident within Convergence.

They noted that during Hurricane Katrina the top-down structured pre-planning was unable to cope with the complex, rapidly changing course of events. Cajun boatmen linked only by two-way radios proved far more effective at co-ordinating evacuations. They were small, mobile, adaptable and worked locally. Paul Hawken (2000) described how small, autonomous, mobile bands of protesters with mobile phones at the Seattle World Trade Organisation meeting of 1999 were able to outmanoeuvre the centralised, heavily weaponed and resourced Police trying to stop them.

Uhl-Bien and Marion (2008) talk of a leadership style that does not have a pre-determined plan, expects the unexpected, is moderately coupled but still flexible, and works with bottom- up emergence.

They see leadership moving away from an individual with personal qualities who controls the organisation and whom others will follow, towards someone who fosters the network and encourages others to participate more fully (Marion & Uhl-Bien, 2001). The goals of the organisation are transmitted by the leader's example engendering a clear sense of identity (Wheatley, 1999, p. 87). Marion and Uhl-Bien further say a complexity leader drops "seeds of emergence", which often means creating "organised disorder".

Wheatley writes (1999, p.108), "we become the grand disturbers. We stir things up and roil the pot, looking always to provoke, even to disrupt". Thus, rather than enabling the group to maintain stasis, the new leader actively looks for ways to skilfully bring the group to bifurcation points that might lead to the emergence of new possibilities.

A complexity leader also uses a systems approach, being aware of the whole system and the relationships between all of the levels, whilst not getting too caught up coping with small, immediate issues (A. Laszlo & Krippner, 1998).

While there may be no structured leadership and even no apparent informal leadership in Convergence, there is nevertheless a clear leadership operating through what one participant called the "invisible structure". A group of participants with considerable expertise in Convergence watch attentively in the background of each Convergence. They are quietly talking to people when necessary encouraging them to take the initiative, or desist from an approach that works against the values of Convergence. Convergence may therefore appear very chaotic to a new comer, who is not aware of the invisible structure and how it is operating.

HIERARCHY

Complex adaptive systems tend to naturally form hierarchies (Ahl & Allen, 1996). Because human complex adaptive systems are able to appreciate their situation and their environment (Vickers, 1968b) we have the added ability to intentionally modify how we operate (Stacey, 1996). This has led to the formation of top-down dominance-based hierarchies with nested levels of control. Hierarchies are neither bad nor destructive in themselves. It is only when power, control and the associated resources are attached disproportionately to the higher levels of the hierarchy that it becomes inequitable and exploitative.

Convergence has intentionally avoided such a dominance-based structure. It therefore has a much flatter structure, but having no formal hierarchy does not mean there is no hierarchy. Informally, some people come to have a greater influence and some individuals self-select for particular tasks. Most often the sub-groups such as the kitchen, workshops, toilets, etc. operate acephalously by consensus in themselves, but sometimes they will have a self-selected person or persons to focus the group to achieve the necessary tasks, especially if that person has a recognised expertise in the area. There is no extrinsic reward for taking on any role.

Just as the leadership of Convergence is transitory, so is the nature of the hierarchy. Without set roles, people move in and out of roles and levels of hierarchy as they choose. Participants often stated that the more influential older members have worked hard to take a "background seat" allowing others to step forward. One of those influential participants stated, "I had to learn to step back and allow others to do things their way even though you knew it had been tried and failed. It was leaving space for people to learn. I had to learn non-attachment to the outcome."

Stacey (2011) proposes that an organisation comprises of a legitimate network and a shadow network. The legitimate network expresses the formal view of the organisation, while the shadow network expresses the informal view that may or may not align with the legitimate network. The legitimate network might be seen as the public face of the organisation, while the shadow is that which operates out of the public gaze. In Convergence everyone has access to the legitimate network and there is no dominant story or official ideology. The dominant story and the recessive story together become one multi-faceted, dynamic and interactive story.

POWER AND AUTHORITY

For legal and taxation reasons Convergence is a registered trust with self-selected trustees, who are mandated to act if necessary. In practice, however, no person exercises a position of power over anyone else. This does mean that the trustees must have a high

level of trust in Convergence, because they are legally liable for the consequences of decisions they may not have been a part of or may have even disagreed with.

In practice, therefore, official oversight and responsibility resides with the whole organisation and not with any individual or individuals. At times individuals or groups have tried to gain control of Convergence, or move it in their own particular direction. This cannot be done by being elected to a position or influencing those in power. People seeking such power are more like to seek it in other organisations.

Because people cannot gain power by usual means, it can become tempting for anyone seeking power to use subversive or manipulative techniques as a means to gain power (e.g. spreading rumour or misinformation). In this respect an acephalous group might be more prone to subversive power plays. However, Stacey (2011, p.131) remarks that "Covert politics is a defence against anxiety…and a group of people can only make rational decisions and learn when they are able to contain the anxiety of organisational life." With the openness and trust, and lack of a dominance-based structure people are better able to contain their anxiety and thus the perceived need for manipulative techniques diminishes.

Participants spoke of a "take over attempt" that occurred when a certain spiritual organisation attempted to take control of the gathering, getting the participants to join in using particular sacred chants. Rather than challenging them directly one of the participants merely changed the words that were being chanted and when everyone joined in they were unable to continue to direct the gathering as they would have wished. A small "butterfly wing" action (Lorenz, 1963) caused a bifurcation of the system and brought about a significant change in the whole system.

SOCIAL CAPITAL

Robert Putnam (Putnam & Feldstein, 2004) has championed the need for social capital in our lives, stating that it is more critical for our lives than physical capital. Developing social capital is a strong focus of Convergence. This links to Laszlo's ideas about our need to regain our coherence (Laszlo & Currivan, 2008, p212).

Social capital is built up differently in Convergence compared to mainstream society. Factors that are generally seen as important outside of Convergence such as income, status or educational qualifications carry little weight inside. Far more emphasis is placed on qualities such as the ability to relate to others, a willingness to contribute, and the level of honesty and transparency.

The social capital acquired through the gatherings can assist the participants beyond the gatherings themselves. Because most Convergence participants live in or near Christchurch, the social capital accumulated through attending the gatherings (Putnam,

2001) proved to be a useful asset to help them recover from the devastation and trauma caused by the Christchurch earthquakes and their aftermath. Immediately after the February earthquake, a number of people shifted onto the campsite where Convergence is held until basic services were again functional in the city. There have been many local events where participants have been able to support each other and offer practical support.

DECISION MAKING

Many different ways of organising Convergence have been tried over the years. At first there was a committee or core group responsible for decision making, but there has been a slow but definite evolution from more traditional structures towards a flexible, egalitarian, open, acephalous structure.

Convergence has no set membership. What Convergence is and how it chooses to operate is determined by those present at any given time. This makes it very flexible and open to change directions. Just as there is the risk for top-down hierarchies to become too rigid, there is a risk of Convergence being too flexible and changeable, leading to a loss of coherence and sense of direction.

A major change occurred after a year when those co-ordinating Convergence were very strict on rules. For example, as the number of participants grew the gates were shut and people, many of whom had travelled a great distance to attend, were sent away. Because of the strict rule setting, people did not volunteer to become members of the core group at the end of the gathering. The next year the gathering proceeded without any leaders. To everyone's surprise, the gathering ran far more smoothly than previously and Convergence has continued to operate in such an unstructured way ever since. Those who had been members of the core group said they "felt a weight off our shoulders not being so responsible".

Convergence is not a democracy. There is no voting to decide any issue, and no formal means for a majority preference to prevail, although should no other means of making a decision prove to be effective, it would remain an option.

Consensus decision making works well in smaller groups where each person has time to express their views and everyone knows each other well. As the scale of the group increases, consensus decision making becomes less and less effective. Consensus decision making of the whole gathering was tried for some years but proved to be impractical. With over three hundred participants, the meeting to discuss the activities of the day was known to continue until 2.00pm. With such a large group even small issues can easily balloon out consuming vast amounts of time and energy. Consensus decision

making certainly occurs in sub-groups, such as a group organising the opening ceremony, where it is practical to give each person the time to express their views.

What has emerged as the best method of decision making is for self-selected small groups to meet over a particular issue. That group would make contact with other groups or individuals as necessary and find a solution on behalf of all the other participants. In practice this has rarely resulted in decisions that are later contested by others. This stresses the need for participants to take responsibility and be a part of any decision they feel is important to them.

Because Convergence has been operating for many years, considerable expertise and trust has developed amongst those preparing for the gathering. For example, there is now no budget set for Convergence. Individuals simply purchase what is needed.

SCALE

The number of people who attend Convergence (around 300) is largely determined by the capacity of the venue, but scale has a significant effect on the viability of any organisation. Boulding's iron law of size (Boulding, 1968, p.78), states that organisations have an optimum size. He states that organisations structure themselves according to size and if they grow too large they begin to breakdown. He notes that the challenge of building large organisations is to "avoid sacrificing liberty and even decency". Boulding's iron law of hierarchy states that the larger an organisation the more elaborate will be its hierarchical structure. He notes that this conflicts with the ideal of equality and states, "The only hope for an egalitarian world is a world of small organisations held together in a network of contractual relationship."

Dunbar and Hill (2003) researched the average group size of various animals and found the size of the group was linked to brain size and thus the cognitive capacity of the animals. From this they deduced that humans have the cerebral capacity to hold the necessary information to maintain working relationships with up to around one hundred and fifty people. Many organisations such as the military, church organisations and businesses tend to bifurcate into smaller groups when they reach around one hundred and fifty people. This number has become known as Dunbar's number.

Acephalous structures in small groups, even up to around thirty people are relatively easy to organise, because communication is far simpler and everyone knows each other and their reputation (Camerer, 2003). This allows trust to develop relatively easily. In larger groups, where a significant number of people are strangers, building trust is more difficult, and more structure is needed to cope with issues like personal security.

Convergence is thus an interesting group in that it appears to conflict with Boulding's iron law of hierarchy and is double or more the size indicated by Dunbar and Hill. Most

groups the size of Convergence have defaulted to choosing leaders because of the advantages of quicker decision making encapsulated in one or more individuals, who are accepted as having exceptional skills. Convergence has avoided this temptation, but still remains viable and effective.

SELF-SELECTION AND PERSONAL RESPONSIBILITY

One of the key elements of Convergence is self-selection. People put themselves forward for particular tasks, be it washing dishes, erecting marquees, being a trustee, or bringing up an issue. Nobody is given a role they do not choose. Participants feel a greater sense of ownership and commitment when they freely choose their tasks and level of involvement. Convergence lives with a level of vulnerability because individuals are just as free to de-select themselves at any point.

Apart from the trustees, whose powers have never been invoked, there is literally no individual or sub-group with overall responsibility. It leaves the potential for people to deny any personal responsibility when situations turn awry. It appears, however, that in practice important issues do get raised and dealt with and individuals do take responsibility and join together to act. An example was cited where a workshop presenter was suggesting that certain people had incurable diseases that he could fix for a fee after the event. A self- selected group met with the workshop presenter and asked him to stop giving workshops and not offer workshops at the event in the future. The group that met claimed the authority to set rules or boundaries in this case.

SYSTEMS SKILLS

The skills needed to be an effective member of an acephalous group are different from those in a traditional hierarchy. Although not called systems skills by Convergence, the necessary skills are in harmony with a systems approach. In society we have become accustomed to either being a worker who leaves organisational decisions to superiors or management who makes decisions on behalf of others. In an acephalous group those who previously left decision making to their superiors must learn to “step up” and take the initiative. Those who managed need to allow others the space to “step up”, trusting that they will make good decisions. It is therefore necessary that each person in the organisation has access to the requisite information, skills and resources to make informed decisions.

Participants need to be able to take a systems perspective. It means being able to step back and see the wider picture, be aware of the levels and their interactions and focus on processes. With less structure and control, chaos is more evident in Convergence. Participants need the ability to contain their anxiety (Stacey, 1996) rather than be overwhelmed by it.

With one half to one third of the participants at any time being new to Convergence, an ever present issue is that many of those attending do not have the skills required for effective functioning in an acephalous organisation. Many people attracted to Convergence naturally have a systems perspective, but others tend to automatically look for who is in charge and are not aware of how to bring about change or resolve issues. This is frustrating for them as well as reducing the effectiveness of the organisation. Passing on systems skills is thus crucial to the ongoing viability of Convergence.

REDUCED COMPLEXITY

Reducing complexity has been a significant strategy used by Convergence to compensate for the advantages of a structured leadership. Traditional hierarchies tend to structure themselves to require a high level of energy, information and resources to maintain their existence. They become highly entangled with contractual arrangements with other organisations that mean they lose the flexibility to adapt quickly to changes.

Trust is also an important means of reducing complexity in Convergence. Most organisations have distrust woven into their structure, necessitating a reliance on surveillance and oversight (Danaher et al., 2000). Experience at Convergence has shown people can be trusted to undertake the necessary tasks, thus reducing the need for surveillance and control tasks.

Bringing about direct social change is not a goal of Convergence as it is for many similar organisations. Such organisations must necessarily engage the mainstream society on its terms. Convergence has deliberately sought minimal contact with outside groups. It is legally obliged to have a legal structure and by being a registered charitable trust does not pay income tax. It minimises its entanglement with government departments, owns minimal assets and hires the venue and necessary items like marquees and toilets. Participation is entirely voluntary and nobody is paid for any work obviating employment related issues.

Convergence runs on a minimum of rules and restrictions. Rules within a chaotic system enable the formation of attractors (Gleick, 1987). Too many rules, however, restrict the operation of the system as it becomes too ordered. Apart from rules imposed externally such as through the legal structure, or the owners of the campsite that is hired (no dogs, alcohol, etc.) any rules, written and unwritten, have emerged from within Convergence. This tends to mean the rules are more likely to be followed.

The gathering only comes together for short periods of time, and most of the tasks have been undertaken many times and are thus familiar. Many of the problems that emerge with ongoing communities do not reach the point where their effects are felt in

Convergence. Personality clashes or equipment malfunctions can often be coped with for a short period of time, whereas they must be fully addressed in an ongoing community.

Gunderson and Holling's adaptive cycle (2002) describes a four phase cycle typical of complex adaptive systems consisting of reorganisation, growth, conservation and release. As the growth phase progresses, limits to growth (Meadows, 2008) become apparent and eventually lead to a release phase where previously bound up resources are released. Convergence's low level of functioning helps it avoid becoming trapped by its own structure in the conservation phase. It also means Convergence has a greater resilience and adaptability when the release phase is activated. In Convergence the release phase tends to intermingle in other phases, especially the conservation phase, which reduces the potential for the release phase to be catastrophic.

The impact of a collapse into deep chaos (Gleick, 1987) is not as high for Convergence compared to most organisations. A hospital, prison, or airline, for example, must guard against risk of collapse far more because people's lives could be at stake. Such organisations must err on the side of maintaining order, thus finding it harder to innovate. Any changes in the more entangled traditional structures are likely to have more unintended consequences than in an open structure like Convergence. This means Convergence is able to take on more risk than many other groups. It can therefore ride nearer the edge of chaos (Waldrop, 1993), which makes emergence more likely.

VALUES

The importance of values in maintaining the coherence of groups is well established (Bertalanffy, 1969; E. Laszlo & Currivan, 2008; Vickers, 1968a; Wheatley, 1999). As an appreciative system the participants of Convergence form values through "what we notice and what we ignore; what we regard as acceptable or unacceptable, important or unimportant, demanding or not demanding by us" (Vickers, 1968a, p.91). From this comes the ability to refine the values that form the shared basis of interactions.

Vickers (1968a) notes that an appreciative structure gives information its meaning. Values thus provide a framework through which to see the world. As well as making meaning possible, however, they blind us to what is outside our appreciative structure. An openness to exploring what might be beyond the established boundaries; to explore rather than merely exploiting what is within the boundaries (Axelrod & Cohen, 2000) is also a critical part of any long term viable complex adaptive system. Convergence places a strong value on supporting people to stretch their boundaries and try innovative ways of doing things on both a personal and organisational level.

While Convergence does not have a fixed set of beliefs, cohesiveness within the group is held together by shared values. The spiritual base of Convergence points to values such

as goodwill, avoiding harm, honesty, acceptance of difference, forgiveness and tolerance, and non-violence. These values in themselves are likely to enhance co-operation and connectivity and increase the effectiveness of Convergence as a complex adaptive system.

We must ask, however, the degree to which the particular values of Convergence account for its effectiveness. While the spiritual values add to the cohesiveness of the group, we should not read too much into their role in the effectiveness of the organisation. Many businesses organisation with a primary profit motive or political groups guided by political ideals have shared values that build cohesion that would be as strong as in Convergence.

SOCIAL ISSUES

A postmodernist perspective always looks for who is excluded or marginalised in any community (Danaher et al., 2000). There are always people with fewer skills and abilities than others that may mean they are more easily marginalised. Convergence relies on autonomous individuals being prepared and able to step forward and claim their power, expressing views and challenging what they see as not right. That is easier for some people than others and some are more eloquent when they do stand. Convergence tends to attract those people who do not fit the mainstream. Such people often lack social or intellectual skills, or self confidence, which are critical to an effectively functioning participant. There are, for example, some participants with a "loner personality", who gain much from Convergence, but for whom being amongst several hundred other people is enough of a challenge in itself.

Convergence is for people seeking alternatives. Kohlberg (1984) cites three stages of moral growth: pre-conventional, conventional and post-conventional. People operating from the pre-conventional level are unable to meet society's expectations of an adult and would include people such as children, those with intellectual disabilities and those with unstable personalities. Conventionally operating people meet societal expectations, while those operating at the post-conventional level are able to meet expectations, but have the ability to choose to be different. Convergence tends to attract people operating from both the pre-conventional and post-conventional level. Convergence freely accepts all who come. Many people operating pre-conventionally experience a level of acceptance at Convergence they rarely experience elsewhere. But they can bring challenges that have a significant impact upon both the individual and Convergence. Sexual predation has also arisen as an issue from time to time. The openness and acceptance of the organisation may create the space for some people to take advantage of others, who may be vulnerable.

GENERALISABILITY OF CONVERGENCE STRUCTURE

The way Convergence structures itself is, of course, particular to its own situation and cannot be seen as a blueprint for other organisations. As noted there are some situations where an acephalous structure would be entirely unworkable as in a team working on brain surgery or on the flight deck of a Boeing 787.

Scale is also critical. There is a gathering similar to Convergence called Confest in New South Wales, Australia with around three thousand people attending. While much of what occurs there is self-organising, an acephalous structure is not workable, and they have a traditional hierarchy with a CEO and management committee (although unpaid). They are not able to have shared rituals with all attending, such as an opening or closing ceremonies, and activities tend to be more clustered with, for example, a predominantly gay area, music area and spiritual area.

The development of systems skills as discussed above is crucial to any group trying to use an acephalous structure. Unless enough of the members of any acephalous group have a systems mindset, the group will not be flexible enough to be sustainable in the long term.

Organisations such as Mondragon in Northern Spain (Whyte & Whyte K., 1991), where the whole city is an interlinked web of worker co-operatives including hospitals, universities and banks, also share many characteristics with Convergence. Because of their scale they need a hierarchical management structures, but it is comprised of representatives from all levels in the hierarchy, which rotate regularly to avoid rigidifying into dominance-based hierarchies. The also have a ratio from the highest paid to lowest paid in any co-operative, which is commonly three to one. While not acepahlous as such, they structure themselves in ways that reduce the effects of top-down dominance hierarchies in ways appropriate to their scale.

Mintzberg's ad hoc organisational structure (Dolan, 2010) is often used where a sub-group within a traditional hierarchy is given the authority to operate acephalously to great advantage. They rely on constant communication and decentralised decision making and can be a means of creating an island of flexibility within a more constrained organisation.

CONCLUSIONS

The complex systems literature discussed clearly points towards the need to develop more flexible styles of management and leadership, which embrace uncertainty and adaptability, if we are to meet the complex challenges of coming decades as compared the top-down dominance-based hierarchies that are the norm at present.

Convergence is a medium scale acephalous organisation, which, while obviously not perfect, has evolved an organisational style that incorporates complex systems principles in a way that defies most conventional modes of operation. It has used strategies such as localised decision making; high levels of trust, openness and tolerance; reduced complexity; and distributed, low key, transitory, self-selected leadership to be able to demonstrate a level of robustness and resilience over several decades. Convergence continues to explore ways of people coming together that avoid the inherent violence of dominance-based hierarchies.

While its generalised applicability is restricted, there are principles that have been developed that may be useful to many other organisations looking to explore new ways for people to come together that are more wholesome and better uphold human dignity and liberty.

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