



EVOLUTIONARY ORGANISATIONS

ABSTRACT

Organisations need to be best adapted to their environment. They must adapt faster and more efficiently than ever before.

Motivation Matters Limited



Introduction

An organisation is a collection of people, processes and procedures to achieve a purpose. The purpose of an organisation will always be to achieve an end – it is a machine, a working system, it has a function.

Organisation Development (OD) consultants have been around as long as organisations. No doubt, the Romans had a name for OD consultants. At some point in history, we learnt to industrialise, specialise, vertically integrate, conglomerate and globalise. Then we learnt how to matrix, project and lean manage.

The subject fascinated me when I did my research. It just seemed obvious to me that the design of the machine affected its output.

OD is subject to the same conditions as much of the rest of the human condition – a rapidly escalating rate of change. It seems obvious that if the environment in which the machine operates is changing rapidly then the machine needs modifying, at least as quickly as the environment is changing.

The System

The machine, the organisation, is a system that transforms inputs to outputs. If it doesn't do at least that, it is a store and not a machine.

The people, processes and procedures of the system determine its transforming abilities. People are the ultimately flexible work unit. They are readily re-programmed to carry out different tasks. The reprogramming is done through the processes and procedures of the organisation. If you change the procedure, the people behave differently producing different outcomes.

If you consider the UK Banking system, you can see that what has happened in the last few years is the result of the system. The system drives people to behave in that way.

Similarly, the UK Benefits system makes people behave in a certain way. The Benefits trap, where getting work results in lower take home pay, is a national disgrace. The Government, as all Governments for decades, should be ashamed they can't be bothered to fix this. The system is telling people to stay at home and not go out to work.

I'm not advocating people living on the streets or being starved into work. But the system should promote a good outcome by more gradually withdrawing benefits as earned income increases.

All systems need to react to the demands of the environment: to be a system that evolves when faced with a different environment.





The most successful organism

Organic systems, living creatures, evolve or die, many become extinct. One organic system has beaten them all.

Purists may argue that my choice is not organic or not living. It is, however, a highly successful example.

I refer to the virus. A form of organisation, machine, system that not only predates life on Earth, but will be here long after the Earth is devoid of complex life-forms once more.

Let me give you some facts. A recent experiment crippled the lambda virus, which normally infects the bacterium *Escherichia coli*, by removing surface molecules from the bacterium that the virus uses to latch onto. The now powerless virus evolved to use a new molecule, never before reported as occurring, to attack the bacterium.

It successfully evolved in fifteen days: fifteen days from helpless to invasive.

Do you think this newly evolved virus rapidly infect all the bacterium? It started to but then the bacterium evolved and the cycle of evolution started again.

If a simple bacterium or a simpler virus can evolve in fifteen days, why can't we design human systems, organisations that evolve as quickly?

Relevance to us

Most of us in any form of human activity know how quickly the environment can change. It doesn't need to be flu pandemics or banking crises or internet blackouts that cause severe environmental changes. Something simple can be extraordinarily influential in your particular sphere of activity.

The old style hierarchical command and control structure is slow to react. Data has to be collected, passed to the top, analysed, decisions made and the instructions passed back down the chain of command. In this system, no one will be satisfied with a small amount of data. The data collection is likely to take longer than the virus takes to evolve.

My preference remains for local decision-making; at least there is a chance to react more quickly. How long should you collect data? Until you are certain all possibilities have been captured? Surely if you wait long enough and collect enough data, things average out to mediocrity.

We collect data over relatively long periods because our decision-making is slow and we can't react to mistakes in time. Our decision-making is slow because we collect lots of data.





Experiment

Our human systems need to copy the virus and the bacterium: we need to experiment and experiment quickly.

Any system, process or procedure is as good as its last outcome was relevant.

How long should you watch and wait when you could try to do something better?

Any human organisation is complex. Nevertheless, it is made of smaller and smaller components at each level in the hierarchy. What would happen if each component had the resources to experiment under its own control?

Experiments need a resource, which means having free resources in the organisation. This may be anathema to many but frankly, the vast majority of organisations utilise their resources so inadequately they are 30% over resourced in the first place!

The local experimenters must have the freedom to succeed. Devolved decision-making means protecting them from the “we’ve always done it this way” response while ensuring the result meets requirements.

Central direction

The experiment with the bacterium and virus was conducted by an intervention by the researcher. This allowed a series of events to take place that led to one mutation after another in rapid succession.

The equivalent in a human organism would be a big experiment where failure was permitted within limits because it has the organisation’s sponsorship.

Sometimes rapid experiments at local level will not deliver a sequence of changes that may be extremely beneficial but are unlikely to occur together by random chance.

Conclusion

All our human organisations need to be best adapted to their environment. They need to be able to adapt more quickly and more efficiently than ever before.

Evolution is not the whole answer however and revolutionary changes have to be introduced, experimented with, and adopted or dropped.

Successful organisations are equipped to test evolutionary ideas: they are capable of rapid experiment and evolution along with a directed experimental revolutionary capability,





MOTIVATION MATTERS LIMITED

VISION

Inspiring good management, and thus achievement, within organisations will improve employee attitudes, engagement and job satisfaction to create stronger companies with more productive people.

More productive companies build competitive advantage creating a sustainable business with safe growth, healthy profits, secure well paid jobs and contribute to the well-being of the UK.

PARTNERS



Anne Walker



Stephen Walker

CONTACT DETAILS

Telephone: +44 (0)1787 378851

Email: Enquiry@motivationmatters.co.uk

Website: www.motivationmatters.co.uk

