

Sustainability Leaders in Action

Making the Invisible Visible: A New Approach to Appreciating Complexity

Paul Wright

It's a foregone fact that complexity is the inevitable result whenever two or more human beings collaborate in any organizational setting. Yet grasping the complexity we see around us---in our organizations both public and private, as well as across our communities---is one of the greatest barriers to seeing the possibility for innovation and change.

As relationships evolve throughout an organization, mutual interdependencies and areas of resistance evolve with them. Change occurs as intentions cross, intertwine, interact and synergize. Leadership---in more traditional terms generally considered as the art of acting decisively and engendering commitment for action---is in fact more closely related to the ability to stimulate change by discerning and building on these crossed intentions.

This relational approach to leadership and change underlies the work of the Dacapo Theatre Consultancy, an Odense, Denmark-based organization of actors and consultants. Far from the typical theater group, Dacapo capitalizes on its insightful use of improvisation. This, among other tools, helps to "make the invisible visible" within the web of complexity we call organizations, as Preben Friis, an actor with the company, explained when we spoke with him in a recent interview. Dacapo's audience-centered improvisations lie at the heart of what is, in fact, a novel approach to facilitating discovery that leads to innovative problem-solving.

"Change doesn't happen as a result of individual decisions or strategies," says Friis. "Rather it occurs as the result of crossing intentions. As people try to do something---promote an idea, shift direction, address common issues---they meet resistance and different perspectives. We use the theater to recreate patterns---for example, to explore what managers think and what employees think. We put the complexity we

see into short, and fictitious, plays. Through these plays we can recognize ourselves by stepping into other perspectives. And in the midst of opening our perspectives, new ideas emerge. The change process is fundamentally unpredictable. This approach helps stir the mix."

Dacapo works with audiences that reflect organizational communities---for-profits and non-profits, for example, as well as government entities and even conference attendees. Typically, says Preben, members of the company will engage in conversations with the key stakeholders in a situation that will be the subject of a particular piece of work, as part of their preparation. These conversations allow participants to disclose themselves and what they see is at stake. For example, Dacapo was recently engaged to work with the managers and kindergarten teachers of a municipality that was weighing the notion of merging several kindergartens---historically self-managed---under one manager as a cost-saving measure. Input from managers and teachers was vital to the process, as well as that of parents and others. The actors then used these conversations to devise short plays---generally 5-6 minutes long---that they presented to their audience of stakeholders. "The plays are intended to reflect different perspectives, needs, dilemmas and loyalties. As members of the audience watch, they don't need to defend their own identity. Instead they can see themselves in the context of other perspectives."



Once an audience views a play, it may form small groups to discuss reactions and observations, guided by the Dacapo members. "We may ask what a particular character seemed to be thinking at some moment in the play. We look for ways to help the audience explore more deeply not only what they have seen but what they also

experience. This, in turn, opens up possibilities for everyone to consider as next steps, as they step into a character's shoes." Thus, the audience is the driving ingredient in Dacapo's "stagecraft." "We improvise where the audience wants to take us, as we ask them where we should go in order to gain forward movement."



Friis stresses that it is important for the plays to be very concrete. All too often the complex situations that bedevil organizations become abstractions in the minds of participants, making it harder to cut through the fog. Concreteness helps bring everyone down to earth. Improvisation is also critical to this method of understanding. "We don't realize that the answers we are looking for can be unpredictable. By improvising, we can discover something that is different than what we expected or intended. This is NOT the opposite of planning. Planning and improvisation are interconnected. It is essential to plan and form intentions, but if we are too fixed, we fail to see possibilities. So we must also be alert to what is happening in the environment around us. We must be alert to the small openings that appear. This is where innovation happens."

Leadership, says Friis, comes about as a result of situations unfolding and resolving, as the patterns of complexity emerge and shift. This offers a perspective on evolving leadership, as contrasted with traditional models of leadership in action.

In its work, Dacapo's improvisations aim both to enlarge and shrink a situation, a narrative, a web of interdependencies and experiences. "It is important to acknowledge complexity, not reduce it to simplicity." Too often we feel overwhelmed by complexity and then try to substitute simple versions of it that tend to distort the total picture. Dacapo's approach to conversational inquiry attempts to enable key stakeholders to observe

the complex microcosms in which they co-exist as a way to access the "small openings" that lead to greater understanding.



Observations: Mary Ferdig

I've long been interested in the work of Dacapo Theater Consultancy, having first learned about their approach at a meeting with Preben and others at the Complexity Management Center, Herefordshire University, England. As sustainability leaders seek to develop their capacity for observing themselves and the organizational patterns in which they engage, they may discover that these improvisational techniques are extraordinarily useful. A prospective sustainability leader is anyone, for example within a workgroup, or organization, regardless of position, who assumes responsibility for the interactive effectiveness and resulting outputs of the groups of which they are a part. Therefore, an entire "web of complexity" (workgroup or organization) shares in the deep learning that occurs in these outside-of-self, observational experiences leading to new awareness and potential shifts in behaviors. Learning to recognize patterns in the context of human complexity is a critical skill for sustainability leaders to learn and practice.

To learn more about complexity and innovation go to the [Dacapo Theater Consultancy](#) website.

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