

How Organisations Work and Why they're Crazy

Adapted from an address given at the VCOSS National Conference in 2000 by Naomi Raab

This paper explores the way organisations really work, as distinct from how they are meant to work as described in text books and management rhetoric. For whilst managers and the army of consultants, experts and coaches they pay to help them want to believe in a notion of organisation as rational, goal focused and high performing, few steps are taken towards looking down into the abyss of fear and anxiety that we also experience as organisational life.

Organisations can generate tremendous anxiety and hurt for the people who work in them as well as provide the kinds of love and acknowledgement not even always available for them in their families and relationships. As a result, the things we do in organisations can at times appear crazy. This paper looks at the seemingly crazy things that happen in organisations : the ways groups avoid working on task by engaging in fantasies, the ways managers avoid managing, the ways gender dynamics can spiral groups into an endless cycle of victim hood and blaming, the ways “professionalism” and “process” are a cover for fear and distaste, the ways the most important things team members need to talk about are the very things they “forget” or “don’t see” or “don’t feel”, the ways people can sacrifice their families, partners and children for the loyalty and devotion they give to the organisation, the ways all of us, and especially leaders can at times be rendered helpless and child like in our terror or confusion.

Not only do all organisations experience this craziness, but organizations in different industry sectors reflect the craziness of their particular client groups: in mental health, professionals can struggle to get a grip; in correction and police services, officers struggle with their own internal corruption and violence; in consulting firms it is the consultants who have trouble in having “courageous conversations” and in raising undiscussables; in the IT sector where control and process is everything staff can be abandoned in a chaotic world of overly matrixed project teams where confusion reigns, and there is no accountability whatsoever.

As an organisational consultant coming in to work with leaders, often new leaders wanting to initiate change, the kinds of dynamics encountered can be crazy making. It is only in

examining the underlying dynamics of the culture as well as the connection this has to leaders' (and certainly the consultant's) own craziness, that we can begin to understand and intervene in a more meaningful and effective way. This work can be both life enhancing and difficult. This paper begins to address the ways in which consultants can help organisations contain and work through their anxieties to provide a space in which real work can be done in service of both clients and staff.

The way organisations really work as distinct from how they are described in text books. (And why we prefer to study the text books)

In reading about the way organisations are meant to work and in listening to the rhetoric around management and organisational change there is immediate discord as well as a sense of inadequacy in measuring up.

- Organisations are meant to be rational, goal driven entities where people work together united by a shared vision around serving their clients' needs and creating a workplace characterised by co-operation, enlightened management practices, team work, staff development and growth.
- Traditionally in this organisation, sometimes characterised as the clockwork organisation,(Schwartz (1990) people know what their roles are; these roles are clear; if there is friction this is due to problems which can be addressed by better communication, more training and a more advanced computer system.
- Change “ the only constant in these turbulent times”, is managed in a planned way , ensuring that all staff are on board and excited about the new opportunities that will be opened up to them.
- The more updated version of this textbook organisation differs only in its breathless excitement about the boundaryless organisation at the frontier of continuous learning and transformational change. Here, in this fluid and dynamic organisation, all employees are constantly embracing change; the organisation is organic and quick to

- respond to its environment to which it is linked by only a thin membrane. It is a learning organisation and also a virtual organisation that operates in cyberspace. It is so close to its environment, its teams so fluid, that it instinctively has the capability of making an instantaneous change to adapt.

These however are not the organisations in which we actually live. My experience of organisations more closely resembles the snake pit where “everything is always falling apart, and people’s main activity is to see that it doesn’t fall on them; nobody really knows what is going on, though everyone cares about what is going on because there is danger in not knowing; anxiety and stress are constant companions; and people take little pleasure in dealing with each other, doing so primarily to use others for their own purposes or because they cannot avoid being so used themselves. Managerial problems here are experienced as intractable, and managers feel that they have done well if they are able to make it through the day.”(ibid p.7)

In contrast to the intelligence and fluidity of the almost virtual organisation at the forefront of change I see people terrified of taking up any authority, locked ever more tightly into constricting roles camouflaged by the crazy making rhetoric flooding their job descriptions and quality audits. By this I mean that their jobs, on paper, are so big, filled with endless lists of competencies and accountability statements and yet, in practice, the way they take up their roles is actually very constrained and timid. How else can it be when they are supposed to work in “virtual” teams, with people they can’t see and don’t really know? How do staff feel a level of real accountability to a boss they might see twice a year, or might possibly have never met? I see managers bullied by staff and staff having well and truly lost their way in a forest of mind numbing, anti task activity. “Keeping the customer happy” has become a frantic mantra, which, when imported into the organisation, is really a cover used to avoid confronting and dealing with some pretty difficult issues.

So what’s going on? Is it just that we haven’t got it right and should try harder?

In an interesting experiment, Schwartz (ibid) when teaching a course in introductory organisational behaviour first asked his students to form in their minds a picture of the

organisation they knew best. He then described to them two types of organisations: first, the clockwork organisation in their text book, and secondly, the snake pit organisation. The students were then asked to indicate which type of organisation more closely approximated the picture of the organisation they knew best. The overwhelming response was that the snake pit model fit better. The snake pit, each of them knew, was not an exception to the rule; it was the rule, and so Schwartz was happy as what he had wanted to do was to throw away the text and teach a program around the dynamics of what organisations were really about. But then the surprise came: the fact that the clockwork model bore little relation to the organisations they knew had no impact on the students – *what they wanted was to know about the techniques for managing clockworks.*

And so here we come to the crazy part which in itself tells us something about what is going on in organisations. How was it possible to reconcile the interest of the students in the clockwork model image of organisation with the fact that the best evidence of their own senses told them that such organisations do not exist? Why do they want to learn about management techniques as practiced in idealised rather than real organisations? For it seems there is great comfort to be drawn in learning about for example, the latest psychometrics for selection and recruitment, or identification of competencies, or strategic planning, as if these are all that are needed to get the best people in, to ensure they work well and that the organisation is on track and protected against surprises.

What Schwartz and other writers (Hirschhorn 1990, Gabriel 1999, de Vries, de Board) in the psychodynamic field alert us to is that there is something else going on here. The idea of the clockwork, the ideal, is an article of faith, (and therefore something that cannot be dislodged by facts, something that we believe in because we have to) representing something of great importance to these students – an ego ideal. “They wanted to know about the clockwork organisation not because it represents perfect organisation, but rather because it represents the possibility of becoming perfect themselves...” In an organisational world where at times we are flooded by anxiety, the ego ideal represents safety and an end to the anguish of just not knowing. Not knowing how to cope with the tensions of conflict, with the pain of betrayal, with

the savagery of competition nor also with the yearning for belonging and acceptance and intimacy all present in our organisational worlds of work.

And so instead of dealing with the terror of not knowing, and the shame that it can trigger, we turn our attention to the fantasy of the ideal, (be that the safety of the clockwork, the excitement of the virtual organisation etc.), and create a slavish striving for that. There is a fantasy that if only we get the right tools/program in, if only we learn the right skills, then the organisation will actually operate like clockwork. This is the ideal, that there are clear processes for dealing with issues, we can see them, learn them and run team / culture programs around them. The problem however is that knowing all this, perfecting the clockwork mechanisms, will not make the anxiety go away. For all the strategic planning workshops, the perfect on-line HR process, the motivational speakers, outdoor adventure team exercises and competency frameworks will not make the pain of existing in organisations, the burden of responsibility and the yearnings go away.

A Brief Aside

Now don't get me wrong, organisations aren't crazy all of the time. There are clockwork type problems which require clockwork solutions and the application of those solutions fixes the problem. A stock control problem in a warehouse can certainly be remedied by the use of a better logistics system to track goods and keep supplies at an efficient level. But problems aren't always quarantined in a crazy free zone. The right IT solution won't fix the stock problem if the underlying causes of the problem are a war between purchasing and sales taking place in a context of blurry accountability, blaming, rivalry for the MD's attention, and inadequate performance management. But if the stock problem alone is the only one they're willing to admit to, then it can seem that the IT logistics solution sounds pretty good.

A Psychodynamic Approach to the Understanding of Organisations.

Beyond the clockwork

For me working as an organisational consultant it's just not that useful to promote the clockwork i.e. to see organisations only as rational, goal driven, problem solving entities, and to berate them for not being more so. I have found that using an approach which

acknowledges the other, less visible, but arguably more powerful unconscious forces in organisations is both more forgiving, provides different options and is more reparative.

A psychodynamic approach frees people up to explore the less rational aspects of organisational life in a way which acknowledges the often undiscussable tensions in organisations for example around power, dependence, shame, authority, sex, aggression, love, envy, competition and scapegoating. In working this way, I am not so much pursuing the perfection, the ideal of the clockwork, but rather allowing the craziness in. For the craziness is not really crazy at all but a response, often out of peoples' awareness, to tremendous anxiety, strong feelings, depths of emotion they themselves may find difficult to acknowledge.

By incorporating this approach in an understanding of how organisations work I am not only addressing the pathological, the unusual or the problematic in organisations. A psychodynamic approach also helps us understand why things really work, often against all odds! The enormous sustenance people gain from each other and their work, the love, the commitment and the passion they express through their efforts means organisations frequently see people working well "beyond the call of the duty".

The approach is also useful not just in looking at individuals, for it enhances our understanding of organisations at the group, inter-group and organisation as whole levels. It provides a deeper understanding of many features of organisations, even those that appear straight forward and ordinary. In fact that can be its biggest strength – helping us understand why ordinary things surprise us when they work, or frustrate us when they clearly should work, but in fact, didn't.

Working this way as a consultant is surprisingly ordinary, low tech and all about relationship. It is about creating a space with clients in which they can look afresh at the things right under their noses. It's about developing an ongoing, collaborative relationship with managers and internal change consultants like Human Resources departments to creatively address issues and find solutions. The work is incremental and takes place on site with little need for expensive retreats and massive roll outs of standardised training.

Ultimately it is enormously satisfying as clients are able to access their authority and address issues that have been there all along. The changes happen by staying still long enough to deal with what's really happening right now
