# Creating space for learning

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How are organisation development practitioners using complexity thinking to amplify learning in organisations?

## Why space for learning?

Life's all full up! The multitude of competing information and influences that exist in organisations mean that every space comes ready-filled. We're busy and we're time pressured, so we have a tendency to go round the wheel and adapt, rather than really learn. This means that both people and organisations can get 'stuck' - continuing to work ever harder and yet struggling to keep pace with demands.

The skilful organisation development practitioner recognises this and works to create space for a different type of learning to take place. A more radical and profound kind of learning, helping people and organisations to truly shift their perspective. The kind of transformational learning that can lead to breakthrough results.

They do this by creating the conditions for the right things to happen.

## What is 'complexity thinking'?

There's complexity science and there's complexity thinking.

Complexity science has its roots firmly embedded in the hard sciences: biology; chemistry; physics; maths; evolution; computer science. It is also informed by a collection of other disciplines including philosophy, psychology and economics. Complexity science is an integrative science, dealing in principles and patterns, not in detail. It focuses on wholes, not parts.

Taking a complexity view of the world means accepting the inter-related nature of just about everything in the universe. It also means dropping the notion that we can control, direct or architect what happens, as small triggers can cause events to unfold in an unpredictable manner – often exlained through the story of the 'butterfly effect'. This is what I mean by 'complexity thinking'.

As part of my research I spoke with practitioners who work to enhance learning in organisations and discovered that accepting the complexity view of the world has had a huge impact on them and their practice. That's why I believe it's important to distinguish between complexity science – the facts of the matter – and complexity thinking – the impact it has on people.

So, by using complexity science, we can study how organisations work. However, by using complexity thinking, we can interact with people within those organisations in a different way and thus facilitate a shift in perspective to create a more profound level of learning.

## The impact of complexity thinking on practitioners...

In conversations with practitioners, they described what an understanding of complexity had meant for them. "I knew my old paradigm wasn't working and I was waiting for something else. Complexity thinking opened up and validated a space for a different way of thinking and helped me to look beyond my constructed worldview," one person explained. Others described it as "liberating" and "freeing" and said that it allowed them to be more true to themselves. Another comment was that it had profoundly shaken their established view of the world and had initially caused great discomfort and a feeling of disempowerment.

An important theme emerged. Whether the understanding of complexity was innate, welcomed or suffered, practitioners felt it was about their own conceptual world-view and it was at this deep level that it impacted their practice. This notion was reinforced in a conversation with Professor Ralph Stacey, a leading thinker in how complexity science can be applied to organisations, when he commented; "when we think differently, we find ourselves doing things differently".

## ...and their practice

Our conversations surfaced a number of ways in which practitioners used complexity thinking in their practice in order to amplify learning in organisations - both in programmed learning events and through informal conversations. Some of the ideas that emerged were new to the practitioners themselves. So, in true complexity style, we co-created a fresh understanding through our conversation which enhanced their learning as well as my own.

Over the page you can see just a few of the ideas highlighted.

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- Connect with what's happening – pay attention to the little things that make the difference

- Connect with yourself – your genuine intention and authenticity is known by others and ego gets in the way

- Connect people together – encourage conversation and conversational spaces

- Help others navigate through their own uncertainty so it's not so terrifying

- Work where the energy is – and in a way that your organisation can hear things

- Feel your way – and work with your intuition to find emergent patterns and meaning

- Dump the illusion of control - you may be in charge, but you're not in control!

A key theme that emerged was around connection, which runs like a thread through many other areas. This not only means external connection between practitioners and others in the organisation. It means facilitating connectivity between others and with their context through conversational spaces. Importantly, however, connection is also internal; with our own intentions and our authentic selves. Although this may seem a strange notion, it goes to the heart of complexity science, which recognises the inherent interconnectedness of the world.

## A 'both and' approach

With all the benefits of complexity thinking in helping us open the way for transformational learning, practitioners also advise us to appreciate the value of more conventional perspectives. Indeed the best of both worlds seems to be afforded us if we use complexity thinking to create a learning space and then employ more conventional thinking to create an action space which facilitates the application of that new learning.