Institutional «Games» and Strategies as a Response to Complexity

This paper introduces one aspect of the complexity theme which has been explored from other points of view in earlier papers in this periodical. [Les Kubie, Institution, X, 1977, 3, pp 77-79]. Wielding an international project — 114 notes from a saboteur’s vade mecum (1972, 11, pp 487-490) and Limits to Human Potentials (1976, 10, pp 444-446. 1977, 4, pp 147-151). Transnational Associations 5-1977

The complex international environment consitutes, for many people in industrialized societies, a reality which is as substantial as that of the natural environment, but to which previous generations felt themselves to be in closer contact. Within each context in which these involved must simplify their perception of their surroundings in order to be able to act and survive, additional dynamics occur. Individuals, groups and institutions use that part of the environment upon which they have some control or operational hold as a territorial base from which to interact with others. This then emerges a form of territorial behaviour in which each attempts to build up the significance and control of others. This occurs between organizations, between disciplines or schools of thought, between languages, between cultures, between ideologies, between religions, between values, etc. Having acquired a hold on a part of any domain, the individual or group can effectively transform it into a fortress which has to be defended against enemies from without and against rivals from within. Survival demands an expertise in strategy and tactics which may well involve obstructing the development of control has been achieved.

Nullification of innovation

Clearly there is a disparity between the declared reason for the existence of an organization and its behaviour in practice. It is widely assumed that people or organizations acting on societal problems are attempting to improve the system as a whole. The people who are the interest group they are trying to represent, economics, and organizations in general, it is not always the substantive problem which is important. This is in many cases merely a symbol for the territory constituted by the issue.

a. In the case of diplomacy or politics, for example, issues may be viewed as an opportunity for advancement of the nation or party, or for the benefit of its public image, and only incidentally as a question which requires solution in its own right, independent of national interests or party politics.
b. In the academic environment, again it is territory which is often the prime concern. A new hypothesis or paradigm may be viewed, if at all, as a territorial invasion. Even if it is not program effectiveness which leads to the final criterion but rather the territory captured by the problem for which the program was created and its implications for the survival of the organization.

Organizations become « learning environments » and rule habitats and have a system maintenance, rather than a system change, function. « The organization is the message » to borrow from McLuhan.

Activity in politics, organizations or academia may thus be more directed to stabilizing a condition of fulfilling behavior. As a result « more effective » or « more truthful » may become interpreted as doing more activity of the same kind and avoiding or opposing innovation. The tension involved in the process of problem identification and solution, and the associated behavior, may be considered a desirable feature of the environment, perhaps of the environment as a whole. Much activity is therefore a territory. It may be analyzed in terms of order to ensure maintenance of the status quo. Such activity may effectively replace any innovative activity as Stafford Beer has made clear in his adoption of Le Chateller's Principle to social systems:

« Reformats, critics of institutions, consultants in innovation, people in short who "want to get something done", often fail to see this point. They cannot understand why their advice, or demands do not result in effective change. They expect either to achieve a measure of access in their own terms or to be flung off the premises. But an ultra-stable system (like a social institution)... has no need to react in either of these ways. If specialization in equilibrium readjustment, which is to the observer a social form of change requiring no actual alienation in the macro-systemic characteristics that he is trying to do something about. » (Stafford Beer, The cybernetic cyblast - management itself. Chairman's Address to the International Cybernetics Congress, September 1965).

Problem displacement

Close analysts of « successful » social innovation may therefore reveal that the particular problem has been alleviated to the satisfaction of all concerned (from the electorate to the policy-maker) by eliminating the particular set of symptoms by which it was recognized and which gave rise to the call for remedial action. But action of this kind may merely have ensured that a new set of symptoms emerges in some other social domain. The new set may well be considered more acceptable, or may be less easy to focus on as the basis for an effective campaign for remedial action. Some time will always be required before the new set of symptoms can be effectively recognized. It may in fact be very difficult for an organization to see that its programme merely displaces a problem into the jurisdiction of some other body — whose own actions will eventually result in the problem being displaced back again or into the jurisdiction of a third body. (Institutions may deliberately engage in problem displacement throughout a network of jurisdictions as a way of legitimating their own continued existence.) Such displacement may be difficult to detect because one set of symptoms may be apparent in legislation (e.g. legal discrimination), but when eliminated may then take on an economic character (e.g. economic discrimination), and then a cultural character, etc. Such displacement chains may loop back on themselves and develop side chains which are difficult to detect since each organization is only sensitive to the problem symptoms in its own domain and considers symptoms of the same problem in other domains to be acceptable or of secondary importance. This situation makes it difficult to compare the presence or absence of problems in different geographical areas because of the different forms its symptoms take, the acceptability of some forms in some areas, or the lack of sensibility to them.

Insubstantiality of complex problems

The fluidity and complexity of this situation is reinforced by the ambiguous character of societal problems. Such problems are the artefacts of concerned minds; their shadowy nature derives from the fact that they represent in part an objective state of affairs and in part a subjective state of mind. What is a critical problem to one person may appear unimportant, not a problem at all, or even an aspect of a solution, to another person. There is no paradox then in finding that some complex industrial societies, having a comparatively high plane of material life and rapid advancement of cultural values, may nevertheless be regarded by their members as more problem-ridden than other societies with substantially less material wealth and cultural achievement. Problems thus bear a resemblance to « negative theories », namely they « exist » in the same way that theories exist (bearing the same relationship to data and values) in a deductive system of providing explanatory and prescriptive power to link related propositional matter within a coherent framework, they mark a presence of confusion and unpredictable relationships between seemingly unrelated phenomena.

Structuring the societal environment

In this strange perceptual environment based almost entirely on the movement of symbols and data through information systems and the media, individuals and organizations may react, in the absence of grounded realities, engender experiences for themselves analogous to those under sensory deprivation. A generalized sense of inessentialness may thus provoke the emergence of compensatory collective delusions (having an illusory quality), which can be called societal problems, and to which the collectivity can enthusiastically respond with positive innovative activity — thus structuring its « the dilemma in our position at the present time, de-« the erroneously complex set of problems, is to grasp quick, quick, but quick, at anything that will obscure the darkness of the sub-
The material of external reality. The experience of external reality, which may be partially transformed into recognition-hunger. These both express a drive to avoid sensory and emotional starvation which leads to biological adaptation. Structure-hunger is a further phenomenon through which the individual in order to avoid boredom and eventual emotional starvation, experiences the need to structure his time — most commonly through some project or activity designed to deal with the material of external reality.

There are several options for structuring time in an intra or inter-organizational environment. In order of complexity, these are: rituals, pastimes, games, intimacy, and activity (which may form a matrix for any of the others).

The goal of the individual then becomes that of obtaining as many satisfactions as possible from his transactions with others. The satisfactions of such social contact revolve around somatic and psychic equilibrium and are related to:

1. The relief of tension
2. The avoidance of uncontrolled situations
3. The procurement of recognition
4. The maintenance of an established equilibrium.

Games

Whilst much could be said about rituals and pastimes as substitutes for activity in an organizational context, it may be assumed that most games may be defined, in terms of their adaptation to an intra-organizational environment and structure individual behavior. In his book, *Games People Play* (1966), Eric Berne (author of *Games People Play*) provides a definition:

“A game is an ongoing series of complementary utterances progressing to a well-defined, predictable, winnable, superlatively pleasing, with a concealed motivation, or, more colloquially, a series of moves with a score, or... a gimmick. Games are clearly differentiated from procedures, rituals, and pastimes by two chief characteristics: (1) their ultimate quality and (2) the payoff. Procedures may be successful, rituals effective, and pastimes profitable, but all of them are essentially automatic, they may involve conflict, but not conflict and the ending may be sensationally, but it is not dramatic. Every game, on the other hand, is basically drama—next, and the outcome has a dramatic, as distinct from merely exciting, quality...”. In contrast to a mathematically definable game postulating completely rational players, this type of game is un-rational, or even irrational, and hence more real...”

In addition to the satisfaction they provide, which do not necessarily imply fun or enjoyment, people play such games for a variety of reasons:

1. To avoid confronting reality
2. To conceal ultra motives
3. To rationalize their activities
4. To avoid any real participative activity.

Clearly all these reasons and the games to which they give rise, may constitute significant obstacles to effective innovative activity. For whenever the individual involved are in key positions in their respective organizations, the games they play will effectively determine the positions, policies and activities of their units.

It is for this reason that it is important to understand the nature and range of such games. It is characteristic of the current approach to such matters that the games are only referred to in a humorous context, as coffee-table gossip, which thus prevents any formal recognition of their implications for innovative activity.

As all who are directly involved in organizational activity are aware, such games may be the occasion for humor, but their existence and acquisition of expertise in them can only be ignored at the risk of becoming ineffective in the initiation and implementation of any project.

It is significant to note that a recent in-depth study of institutional executives concluded that a new type of person is taking over the leadership of most technically advanced corporations in the U.S.A. The study names this type a gamesman, described as follows:

1. The modern gamesman lives in an environment which is uncertain and which is in a constant state of flux. He has to take calculated risks and is discouraged by experience and new trends. He sees a developing project, human relations, and his own career in terms of options and possibilities, as if they were a game. His character is a collection of near paradoxes underlined in terms of its adaptation to the organization requirements.

2. Detached and playful but compulsively driven to success a team player but a solitaire superior: a team leader but often a rebel against bureaucratic hierarchy; fair and unpredictable but conscientious of weaknesses, tough and dominating but not destructive. Unlike other business types, he is energized to compete not because he wants to build an empire, not for riches, but rather for fame, glory, the exhilaration of running his team and of winning victories. His main goal is to be known as a winner, and his deepest fear is to be labeled a loser. (Michael Maccoby. *The Gamester*. Simon & Schuster, Inc. 1976).

Of special interest is the gamesman’s attitude toward change and innovation, for this is in contrast to the status quo orientation noted above as characteristic of participation in most games in institutional settings. Perhaps these newer gamesters should be considered as super-played at the games at which the vast majority are merely novices. The study concludes that “given our socioeconomic system, with its elimination of greed, its orientation to control and predictability, its valuation of power and prestige above justice and creative human development, these fair-minded gamesman may be as good as we can expect from corporate leaders”.

The key question is whether, through the various existing semi-humorous perceptions of the kinds of games which are played, it is possible to develop greater recognition of their importance both for advancing social innovation or for retarding it. In doing so, it is important not to lose sight of the positive function of games for the individuals who play them, and for the organization until they represent, as Eric Berne notes, the games played are both necessary and desirable, and the only problem is whether the games played by an individual offer the best yield for him.

Then in order to stabilize a highly innovative environment, it may be necessary to ensure the emergence of more sophisticated creative gamesters. They might then be both directly supportive of social innovation and of the fulfillment of the individual players. The highest form of game skill, with the most benefit for society, may be the ability to borrow some resemblance to the attitudes finally developed in the Eastern martial arts.”

A.J.

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