

Hive Of Activity

Lessons from honey bees can help us draw 'nectar' from our 'hive of activity'. Roger Booth tells the human story of a biological basis for optimal creativity.

When we explore the world around us, we engage in conversations to explain the things we observe. The sort of stories we invent through these conversations are supremely powerful because they influence not only how we behave and how we work, but also what we think and even what we are capable of perceiving.

In order to make coherent sense of our world we often take stories that explain one area and adapt them to explain another area. For example, our understanding of business and commerce draws heavily on theories about the biological world, which in turn are shaped by many concepts from physics and engineering.

Because these conversations shape our lives, changing them radically alters how we live and work. It is a little like shaking up a kaleidoscope. The pieces are all still there but, as they settle down, a whole new pattern emerges and we perceive new meanings in their relationship. Recognising this is important for the workplace because:

- Our notions about business operation are very closely related to our ideas about biology and evolution;
- Both these stories have serious flaws that impede our ability to work and live effectively;
- By rectifying the flaws we can dramatically improve both effectiveness in the workplace and life satisfaction.

Neo-Darwinian Metaphor

We live in a culture profoundly influenced by neo-Darwinian evolutionary theory which says that life arose as a chance accident. This means there is little here to support us so we essentially do it all alone. Moreover, it says that because the world is basically an inhospitable place, if we don't get things right,

we get killed. This viewpoint therefore sees life maintained through a constant struggle, driven by survival of the fittest through the competitive process we call 'natural selection'.

Reinforcing this is the view of the world as a phenomenally complex and intricate piece of mechanical engineering. The image of the world as a machine was invented in the 17th century and has remained the philosophy underpinning most of the impressive technological advances of the last 300 years. Unfortunately we've been so seduced by it that we often believe people too can best be understood as machines. We only need think about notions of the brain as a supercomputer controlling the operation of all the parts of our bodies to realise that we still rely heavily on technological machine metaphors for understanding ourselves.

These biological and mechanical ideas have been transposed in large measure into the business world where:

- We see competition and survival of the fittest under the influence of the natural selective pressure of 'market forces' as the way business operates;
- We even justify this by suggesting that evolution works similarly and because humans are biological beasts, such behaviour must be fundamental to human nature;
- This sort of thinking has led to the image of the great corporate leader as someone who crafts and controls organisational machinery to make things happen.

In sum, the metaphor of the biological world as a competitive and defensive hierarchy, red in tooth and claw yet with its components (living organisms) operating essentially as machines, accords with the

belief that truly successful businesses must operate along similar lines.

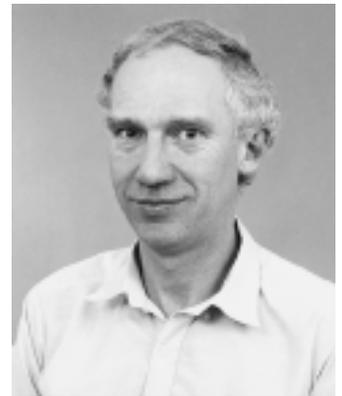
Missing Links

Unfortunately there are three crucial aspects of biology, and especially the biology of humanness, where the neo-Darwinian story is deficient – it does not take sufficient account of cooperation, self-organisation and networking.

Cooperation: Consider for a moment what a symphony would be like if we conceived it only in terms of competition amongst the players in a struggle for survival of the most powerful. It would probably end up as a very loud and aggressive bass drum solo:

- Life did not evolve by competition alone nor is it particularly sustained by it;
- Cooperative interactions and mutual dependence are vital elements, probably more important than competition in the biological world.

We only have to think of the air we breathe to appreciate this. We depend on oxygen. Plants produce that oxygen for us as they live. Plants depend on carbon dioxide



Roger Booth PhD is Director of The Human Asset, a company devoted to generating successful and prosperous relationships within organisations. He also teaches in the Faculty of Medicine and Health Science at the University of Auckland

and we produce that for them as we live – a highly effective cooperative venture. *Life does not evolve, it co-evolves with other life.*

Self-Organisation: In any living organism there are numerous components that participate in the living process but they are not directed by a 'master controller' either inside or outside the organism. All the parts



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Roger Booth, PhD
Director

Phone: (9) 445-7647
Email: Human.Asset@clear.net.nz PO Box 32-169, Devonport

work together to generate and maintain themselves as an identity or 'self'. In other words, living organisms are 'self-organising'. We often refer to the context in which our self-generation occurs as our 'environment', as if it exists independently of us. Yet our environment also actively participates in our self-organising process and is in fact essential to it:

- Self-organisational living arises in concert with environment or context rather than in opposition to it;
- The environment is really an organised set of relationships among individuals and it is permissive and generative rather than hostile or aggressive.

Networking: Although we sometimes like to conceptualise life as a sort of pyramid with humans at the top and other species in a hierarchy of diminishing importance below us, that is not really how it works. If we were to examine our own bodies closely we would discover that we contain many millions of other 'lower' organisms (for example the bacteria that help us digest our food) which we simply cannot live without:

- We operate in a complex web of relationships with members of our own species and with many other species;
- Life promotes interdependence because that fosters more diversity and gives each of us greater freedom to experiment and generate more than would ever be possible individually.

We see excellent examples of this in the insect world in beehives and termite mounds. Here there are many individuals cooperating to create extraordinary structural and functional complexity yet there is no grand plan, or design or goal seeking – just cooperative living. Their

Humans have evolved to live cooperatively with other humans. This requires acceptance of others and the authentic contribution they make to our lives.

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living together is a leaderless phenomenon and none of them does anything especially sophisticated – they just communicate through the exchange of chemicals and cooperate.

If you think of the hive as a brain and the social relationships as a mind, individual bees or termites are like single neurons. Isolated they barely have any significance, but as a coordinated group they perform a hive mind.

Working Miracles

If we shake up the commercial kaleidoscope, what new perceptions of the components and their relationships do we see in the light of cooperative, self-organising biology? There are two vital issues here. The first is fully to appreciate that:

- The components of organisations are creative, biologically self-organising human beings rather than resources to be consumed by or subsumed within the operation of the business;
- As living humans they function best if their humanness is honoured in ways that foster initiative and facilitate uniqueness and idiosyncrasy.

Bees and termites can create miracles by working together with reverence – humans even more so.

The contexts for life include a variety of environments and domains. For humans these are much more diverse than for many other species and include the domains of language and emotion. We coordinate our lives together by constantly exchanging ideas, thoughts and feelings through linguistic and emotional communication with others, much in the way bees and termites coordinate their activities by exchanging chemical substances. In doing this, we maintain our self identity and also generate meaning for our lives and the lives of those around us.

The basic unit of human interaction is therefore conversation; both spoken and unspoken. Humans are fundamentally linguistic beings. We coordinate our actions through our

conversations but these never occur in isolation from our emotions. We are always in some mood or emotion that forms the core of our frame of mind and because emotions are central to our sense of self, they have a major bearing on how we listen, speak and act. Emotions are therefore predispositions for our actions.

Everyone listens from their own perspective of what matters most to them. Because of this, when changes are forced upon us and we perceive them as threatening to our identity or sense of meaning, we react against them. Resistance always reflects the need of each of us to understand and protect our sense of identity and dignity rather than representing a fundamental tendency towards inertia. From this perspective, good organisational management:

- Involves people from the start in whatever changes are considered;

- Allows them a chance to reorganise their own sense of identity to fit the change.

Effective communication always authentically addresses the concerns of others. You can't change people but people change all the time. That's biologically how we are.

The second vital issue concerns how to apply the principles of biological self-organisation and networking to the workplace. From an appreciation of how life works we realise that if businesses operate as self-organising networks:

- There are no bottoms or tops;
 - Solutions can emerge from anywhere within the organisation.
- Such emergent organisations are leader-full rather than leaderless.

Just as you cannot direct a living system but can only disturb it such that it reorganises itself, so managers cannot really be masters of organisational transformation, but they can co-create it. Just as the brain does not control the other organs of the human body but rather facilitates their connection,



A Comparison of Hierarchies and Networks



In a hierarchy people are 'working for others'. There is a linear flow of control and information, and limited complexity and possibility. Patterns of activity are constrained to be directed from above and accountable to higher levels.



In a self-organising network people are 'working with others'. There are many interconnections leading to a high degree of diversity. Patterns of activity are less constrained by directed control and more open to novel solutions and flexible responses to change. Networks are better able to utilise human creativity. They have inherent responsibility and correspondingly less need for accountability.

coordination and effective operation, so an effective manager coordinates and facilitates human interactive processes within his or her organisation.

Additionally, when people are encouraged to engage as active participants in the generation of an organisation:

- It becomes part of their own identity and the meaning of their lives;
- This results in committed involvement through which they willingly take responsibility for their actions;
- Accountability becomes irrelevant and unnecessary.

As with living organisms, people legitimately participating in self-organising human networks are truly responsible for their actions and have no need to be held to account by any external controlling power or authority.

In A Nutshell

Life works through co-evolving, mutually dependent, self-organising networks. Humans have evolved to live cooperatively with other humans. This requires acceptance of others and the authentic contribution they make to our lives.

Language and emotion are domains through which we consensually coordinate our living together. We are human inasmuch as we actively participate in conversations in these domains. Because human life is fundamentally a cooperative process, organisations that understand the animated nature of corporate lives and the importance of cooperative engagements in that system will be successful human activities.

Just as conversations are essential to humanness, they are also the central feature of organisational work. Business comes down to people making contact with each other.

The heart of the workplace is interaction among people with highly specialised skills in a network of conversations, relationships, and commitments. It is through these that the tasks essential for the successful operation of an organisation are accomplished.

Ultimately it is by respecting and nourishing the biology of humanness that organisations prosper.

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Change Management

Celebrate The Four Cs

Completion of each chapter in the change cycle can lead to successful closure and competitive advantage. Charles van Heerden outlines the four Cs of change management.



Charles van Heerden is Principal of Change Management Consulting International, with 20 years' experience in organisational effectiveness and managing complex change. Currently he is working with a major company in the energy sector to implement large scale organisational change programmes

Mention the word 'change' and every manager thinks about one thing – if only things can be just the same for a short while. Yes, just long enough to catch my breath and get on with the real job.

Change is no longer just around us – in the age of digital sound we have surround change. We are being bombarded with structural change, transformational change and just to perpetuate the process; continuous improvement.

Why are organisations struggling to get it right? Why would most employees only give managers a C for the way they manage the change process?

Perhaps the first clue lies in the fact that change is a process with some very distinct steps. Most people would be familiar with the grievance cycle which follows any major change or traumatic event. Often:

- The various stages in the change process are not fully recognised; or
- There is a shift or jump to the next stage before having completed the current one.

Through personal experience with many major change processes the following four distinct phases can be identified for successful change management.

Commitment

Although change can be achieved by using either a top down or bottom up approach, the fundamental driver for effective change remains the commitment of a change champion. The visionary of the desired change needs to obtain the commitment of a group of senior management to embrace the new change.

An important part of this phase is the definition or visualisation of the new state of the business. It is important to paint as clear a picture as possible:

- For transformational change, this may be a set of new behaviours that support the values of the organisation;
- For any structural change, the new structure with roles and key result areas assist in shaping the commitment of the leadership group.

Communication

Often organisations start the communication in good faith, but too early without having completed the first step. The result is inevitable: confusion and mistrust.

Communication needs to be consistent and persistent. A clear

communication strategy encapsulates the key principles:

- We'll tell you what we know, when we know it;
- We'll acknowledge when we don't know.

Each organisation needs to determine the best way of getting the message across. This usually combines a number of methods, rather than a singular strategy. Effective

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