

Dancing with Change

Cultivating
Healthy Organisations

Eric Lynn

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*"Mundus vult decipi:
The world wants to be deceived.
The truth is too complex and frightening:
the taste for the truth is an acquired taste that few acquire."*

(Martin Buber, I and Thou)

The Illusion that Constructed Models actually explain the World

*"The map is not the territory."
(Alfred Korzybski)*

B'

It was early afternoon on a beautiful clear day, as we flew over the wide expanse of land to which we have given the names, the Yukon Territory and Alaska. As I looked down taking in the stunning views, I remember thinking, "There's a border down there. How absurd! Most of this border comprises a straight line drawn on a map. That's even more absurd!"

In our attempts to make sense of and represent the natural complexity of the world, we create abstractions in the form of models, rules, narratives, etc.

And then, we pretend that these abstractions explain the world, or at least a part of it.

With this pretence ... including the idea that the artificial divisions we create actually represent the true world ...
... we exacerbate the environmental, ethical, psychological, relational damage we have already foisted upon ourselves.

B'

We seek clarity.

It is easy to understand the allure of clarity.

After all, daily life can be so confusing.

Navigating the multitude of contexts in which we live our lives today can be overwhelming.

B'

Picture the challenges of organisation leaders ...

... dealing simultaneously, with pressure from ...
 ... owners, employees, society, business partners, customers,
 suppliers;

... while ...
 natural disasters, government regulations and political events outside
 their sphere of influence can create havoc with their strategy;

... while ...
 being held responsible for decisions that may pull at their core,
 the core which gives life to their ethics.

... Oh ...
 Did I forget to mention the needs of their family, as well as their needs
 for connection with their family?
 And ...

Survival can be a relentless challenge.

B'

Any idea that appears to bring a semblance of sense into this
 whirlwind is naturally seductive. Especially on bad days, everybody
 has bad days, we salivate at the prospect of finally having an ordered
 framework for our lives, and perhaps naturally, grasp at models
 containing the promise of such order.

At some stage, however, we wake up from the dream in which we
 envisioned the illusion of the model that explains ...
 ... as we realise that the model did not explain.

***The map is not the territory.
 It is not even an abstraction of the territory.
 The map is an abstraction of an abstraction.***

B'

*Nature is real, not an abstraction.
It contains neither straight lines nor neat packages.*

*Your organisation, a living organism,
functions according to nature's rules.
Nature is not a model.*

B'

How do the structures of our surroundings pervade our thoughts?

Models of government and governance everywhere occur within the framework of those entities we know as countries. Organisations are formally located in one or more countries, subject to its laws and regulations.

Yet there is nothing natural whatsoever about countries as entities. National borders are all, without exception, artificial constructs. Indeed, they change more frequently than we may like to realise.

What are national borders?

They are nothing more than the fragmentation of the world resulting from the power games, generally violent, that power-mongers play.

What is the origin of these power games?

Thought; violent thought.

How are organisations traditionally designed?

By dividing them up into sections which are considered "manageable" and treated as independent units. The division of the organisation mirrors the divisions that we have imposed upon our world.

This practice is riddled with traps.

The organisation remains an entire entity, a whole.

A note of clarification:

Work in organisations needs to be divided up ... and managed.
The problems arise from the manner in which organisations tend to be divided up and the way work is managed; especially, from the way people in these organisations are managed.



Our problems originate in thought; the way we think;
the way we think about our world.

Speaking of the difficulty in thinking, David Bohm formulated this problem for us in his book, *On Dialogue*:

"One of these difficulties is fragmentation, which originates in thought – it is thought which divides everything up. [...] In actuality, the whole world is shades merging into one. [...] Later we give this separation great importance."



*Nature is real, alive, not an abstraction.
It contains neither straight lines nor neat packages.
The same applies to every organisation.*



Models for Organisation Life

Some years ago, I was staying with an old university friend during a business trip to London. He came into my room one evening, saw some documents that I was preparing for a meeting the following day, and commented, *"You consultants do like your neat triangular and rectangular models, don't you?"* I stopped ... and recognised the trap I had stumbled into.



What do all models have in common?

The ideas underlying the models are nothing more than a mirror of the thoughts their architect ... thoughts grounded in cartesian reasoning.

Most are innately reductionist, ignoring the dynamic interrelational complexity of the living organism that is the organisation.

Mechanical models to describe the workings of organisations constitute a misguided attempt to reduce this natural complexity.

It is impossible to reduce the complexity of the world.

Understandably, some models reflect approaches that consultants have successfully implemented with their clients.

To these consultants I would ask two Questions:



(a) *"Who implemented what, how, why?"*

(b) *"Which criteria are you using to define success?"*

Management consultants frequently superimpose their models upon the dynamic natural world, while declaring them to be universally applicable.

All models will find followers. All, regardless of positive intentions, will form stumbling blocks to the natural order of the organisms that are organisations, as well as communities.

B'

I googled "Change Models" and received "About 8.220.000.000 results". Wow! There must be something good among these. Perhaps there is. However, I remain dubious.

The first 8 results in order of appearance were:

Major Approaches and Models of Change Management, 8 Critical Change Management Models, 7 Fundamental Change Management

Models, 10 Proven Change Management Models, Top Ten Change Management Models, 6 Essential Change Management Models, 5 Change Management Models, Models of Change Management.

Thought and its ensuing practice, together with algorithms (created by human beings), have converted "change" to "change management". The myth of "Change Management" will be negated in the next chapter.

B'

What remains?

Thought and its accompanying Illusions ...

... the Illusion of Understanding ...

... the Illusion of Knowing ...

... the Delusion of Control ...

... the Misconception that constructed models reflect the natural world ...

... in contradiction of nature's laws.

B'

During a business trip to Japan, a professor at one of Tokyo's universities invited me to participate in a research project he was conducting into differences in communication styles between Japanese and western businesspeople. We were 12 people in total, and were initially asked to complete a questionnaire. The professor followed up by interviewing us individually, in the presence of the whole group.

He was becoming visibly more frustrated while interviewing me until, suddenly, he burst out, "*Eric, you're uncategorizable!*"

We all laughed.

When the group went for a beer together at the end of the day, I explained my background. The professor understood. He also recognised how he had become entrapped within the structure of the model he had devised.

So, what are these models that supposedly explain how organisations work or should work, and how people behave? And how are they commonly represented?

Let's look first at those that claim to be models of change processes (another myth about change).

Some are represented as a staircase; others as a linear flow from left to right; others as a collection of interconnected cogs. A brief internet search will reveal further variations on these themes.

All are clearly presented, encouraging acceptance. All indicate linear development and/or clear delineation.

Let's remind ourselves ...
Evolutionary processes are never linear.
Nature rarely if ever displays clear delineation.
Change is ubiquitous.



During the 20th century, a seemingly logical idea emerged ... that it is possible to create pre-defined categories that represent types of people.

I vividly remember a lunchtime conversation with my colleagues in New Delhi. *"There are two kinds of people in the world,"* began one. *"Correct,"* responded another interrupting him in full flow. *"There are those who think there are two kinds of people in the world. And then, there are the others."* The laughter quickly spread to the neighbouring tables, then through the rest of the canteen.

Real and self-proclaimed psychologists have gifted us the wonderfully absurd idea that it is possible to meaningfully divide up people into categories according to sets of characteristics that they themselves have constructed.

These "characteristics" are commonly depicted as quadrants in rectangles or circles; perhaps as concentric circles; perhaps as fuzzy shades where the delineation boundaries meet.
All are merely variations on a theme.

The categories ... and subsequently the people to whom they are applied ... are assigned letters, colours, numbers, descriptive words.

And now ... bingo! We have a magically neat and easy way to describe people.

Except that we don't.
We have yet another illusion.

B'

How about other Organisation Design Models?

In recent years, we have been able to observe the spread of models, representing ideals, developed on notions borrowed from political structures.

These models may be assigned titles ending in "-ocracy", a term that has its origins in the Greek word for power or rule.
In effect, supporters of such models suggest that their personal pre-fabricated notions of ideals, should be superimposed upon all organisations.

Even democracy has found favour among some consultants as a model for organisation design. While democracy, with its numerous imperfections, may well be the best political system we have invented to date, it necessarily incorporates winners and losers among the people, making it completely inappropriate as a model for healthy organisations.

Why ever would we want to have losers within our organisations?

B'

Teal is a rarely used alternative English word for the colour turquoise. In the past few years, this four-letter word has become a popular descriptor for a movement that purports to have created the ideal organisation design framework, known as teal organisations.

A well-received book published just a few years ago, has contributed to the popularity of this trend. It claims, simultaneously, to present a new model for organisations, blueprints for the future of work, and that organisations who introduce these operate from a higher level of consciousness.

Personally, I have never experienced "consciousness" in association with models and blueprints.

I know I am not alone in observing the evolution of sect-like patterns in the behaviour of many supporters of this model. I wonder to which degree these people are aware of the pattern.



"Agile is an iterative approach to project management and software development that helps teams deliver value to their customers faster and with fewer headaches. Instead of betting everything on a "big bang" launch, an agile team delivers work in small, but consumable, increments. Requirements, plans, and results are evaluated continuously so teams have a natural mechanism for responding to change quickly."
(Source: <https://www.atlassian.com/agile>).

In the context of software development, this process makes sense. Unfortunately, Agile is frequently presented as a model for developing organisations, for which it is completely inappropriate.

Living organisms do not evolve iteratively.

Software does not provide a meaningful representation of the world.

Today, in the first decades of the 21st century, technology is dominating business.

The social media has become a key influencer of people's perspectives

of the world.

Many Agile practitioners possess, or work with companies possessing, the technology skills required to manipulate the social media. Present day social media is, after all, designed to be manipulated. Manipulation of the social media contributes to the spread of the delusion that Agile is an appropriate organisation design model.

Broad-minded Agile coaches also recognise the dangers of such manipulation, while criticising the preaching undertaken by many of their colleagues, some of whom readily describe themselves as an "Agile Evangelist".

Evangelism is colonial.

I know I am not alone in observing the evolution of sect-like patterns in the behaviour of many supporters of this model. I wonder to which degree these people are aware of the pattern.

B'

The distinction between "Agile" (iterative digital product development), and "agile" (flexible like a cat) is essential.

Without doubt, modern organisations need to be "agile".

B'

Summarising our Insights about Models

The idea that models can describe our world is a mechanical notion. For technology, for technological and administration processes, models are very useful. For predicting outcomes of technological interventions, they may also be useful.

For organic interactions in organisms, organisations, they remain abstractions of abstractions and are more likely to result in confusion rather than clarity.

And now ...

The only people who can create a generative model appropriate for their organisation are those within that particular organisation.

Any model evolved by the members of an organisation will be unique, applicable for their organisation alone.



Experiences shared by other organisations are always a source of rich learning, and we may well find ideas and approaches that are worthy of adaptation to alternative contexts.

Adaptation and copying are essentially different.



Orientation is essential, especially when undertaking any kind of change initiative.

Constructed Models merely provide the illusion of orientation, therefore, effectively disorientation.

Frameworks, on the other hand, are able to provide the orientation people need.



The chapter on Cultivating Healthy Organisations examines the characteristics that underlie organisation health, before presenting a framework for re-shaping organisations in line with these characteristics.



The Author: Eric Lynn

Eric Lynn is recognised among clients for posing poignant Questions that permit them to diagnose their key challenges quickly. Groups appreciate his openness, human-centred holistic approach to business and low tolerance for fluff. With a clear focus on clients' real Business Questions, Eric integrates his life-long learnings with principles from Bohmian Dialogue, the Power of Personal Stories, Open Space, Appreciative Inquiry and Living Systems Thinking, to create and hold the space that enables people across hierarchies, functions and systems to align, engage and develop healthy thriving organisations and social systems.



Today, he works primarily as ... a *Facilitator* for Organisation Culture Change Initiatives; an *Executive Coach* supporting leaders gain clarity and orientation in the frequently disorientating whirlwind of professional life; a *Mediator* for Executive, Management and Project Teams whose initiatives have lost their way and quickly need to get back on track.

Change and crossing cultures have been the defining features of Eric's life since childhood. As a tri-national, who was born in Canada, formally educated in the UK, has lived most of his adult life in Germany, he defies and rejects conventional categorisation. Having lived and worked on 4 continents, including 8 years in Asia, Eric has more than 40 years' worldwide experience supporting peoples' inherent desire to cooperate while connecting meaningfully. Previous occupations include, corporate communication skills trainer, teacher, economist, farm help, garbage collector, factory worker, bartender.

Eric's professional principle: Good Purposeful Work with Good People. He works in English and German, and currently lives in Germany.

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