Reflections on Experience

Editor's Introduction

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The following article by Stoppelenburg and Vermaak provides an outstanding platform for the interplay between theory and practice. It starts with an organizational situation characterized by a "wicked problem" . . . one that endures despite many attempts at resolution and is so embedded in the fabric of the organization that it has become the normal, accepted way of doing things. The researchers enter this situation and discuss what they saw and eventually did, with reflections on their thinking and choices throughout. These types of problems occur in all organizations; and the issues raised, reflections generated, and lessons learned from this case can be useful across many similar types of situations.

The weaving of the authors' story and response with the comments of the other scholar-practitioners provides a rich tapestry of perspectives, issues, choices, and approaches for consideration, from both a managerial and change agent orientation. Many of the inherent dilemmas and choice points in consultation and leading large organization change are laid bare and explored. The authors and commentators are to be thanked for providing a learning case and such thoughtful discussion and considerations.

In the process of reading these entries, we learn a lot about the nature of wicked problems, including their intractability, web of causality, multiplayer configuration, active ways of staying stable, and the futility of adding more "solutions" of limited scope. We can also learn more about the many questions and choices that face both change agents and the client system in such situations, such as

- What's possible?
- Who's responsible?
- Work within normal boundaries or push beyond?
- Meet client expectations or use confrontation and surprise?
- Manage something or allow for self-organizing processes?
- Balance rationality and irrationality in the system?
- Contract and work with what you know at the start versus incorporating what you both learn along the way?
- Surface covert processes and their impact on the overt behaviors?
- Recognize pay-offs of the status quo?
- What to make explicit?
- How data can be used and misused? and many more. . . .

The interplay of theory and practice in managing and changing large organizations is such a challenge, yet one of the most creative and exhilarating endeavors one can undertake! The following discussion contributes to our unraveling of some of the issues and learning about some of the options and choices.