

A Response to “Reflections on Wicked Problems in Organizations”

Annemieke Stoppelenburg

Hans Vermaak

We appreciate the reflections and cautionary notes of both professors Marshak and Worley. Even though we largely agree with the points made, we would like to respond to explore some professional dilemmas further.

Marshak mentions that the theory of change is too implicit in this case. We agree with some of his inferences of this theory. Looking back, we see our change strategy as a *deliberate one-sided one to complement* some 20 to 30 odd change processes scattered throughout the ministry we were involved in over a 5-year period and many others that took place without our help. We feel this complementary function is often the case in consultancy and even desirable when there is a need for innovation of learning: Rather than centralized integral change plans, a loose coupling of many parallel change processes executed on a local level works much better (Dodgson, 1993). The change strategy for this case is the reasoning why and how this research intervention would complement the understanding of the big picture: This was indeed implicit. Describing it might also address Worley's surprise that we focused on the plvDG-council rather than the larger system: We did that in the formal part of this intervention only; all other change processes we were involved in took place on the “shop floor,” especially at embassies in developing countries.

So, what was this complementary change strategy, then? It could be described as a “mirroring intervention,” whereby we used participative research to create a cognitive map of behavioral patterns in the organization. It was a way to lay bare commonly shared “theories in use,” both to scrutinize where they seemed dysfunctional but also to appreciate where they weren't (Argyris & Schön, 1974). This last category represented tacit knowledge on dealing with wicked issues (Polanyi, 1966). The one-sidedness of the intervention resides in the focus on making a *common cognitive map of complexity* rather than supporting people to deal with that complexity in

their own domains. We felt that such cognitive maps were not produced in many of the action learning type processes taking place elsewhere in the organization: Explicit knowledge on change was scarce and definitely did not do justice to either the challenges people faced, the experience they had, or the know how available in the field. You could say that we had been hoping for an opportunity to address that gap and support the organization to shift from precontemplation to the contemplation phase (Prochaska, Redding, & Evers, 2002).

The content of the report focused not on facts and figures but more on hidden (behavioral) processes, as these often explained much better why things worked the way they did. The list in Marshak's response (from internal politics, implicit assumptions, culture to anxieties) is very much part and parcel of the content of the report. Maybe *one of the intervention paradoxes* in the case is that we *rationaly confronted irrationality*: We mapped it, drew it in causal diagrams, and brought it alive in hot examples. We agree with Marshak that this has its limits. Further still, we believe these limits should be embraced, as they allowed for two suitable conditions to deal with irrational and counterintuitive findings:

- *Voluntary confrontation*: Hundreds of people read and used the report, but they did so because they wanted to learn from it, without any outside pressure. Others chose not too. Also, subscribing to the findings had no formal consequences in terms of policies, politics, or commitments. Informal “leaking” of the report as chosen dissemination method (rather than formal channels and decision processes) made this easier. When people contacted us later on to work with the report, this too was voluntary and geared toward learning.
- *“Impersonally” described patterns*: No specific actors or factors could thus be blamed for the “irrational”

behavioral patterns. Causal loop diagramming helped here because causes are effects in their own right in such diagrams. The report also wasn't necessarily critical: Findings were mostly descriptive rather than prescriptive and presented more with a sense of humor than with normative earnestness. It actually allowed for a much more candid depiction. Also, quite a few patterns were shown to have positive functions and effects, even when frowned upon in the organization. All of this made the report quite unsuitable as expert intervention for what to do next, which makes it safer to explore the findings without immediate consequences.

Worley highlights that practitioners should define their boundaries and values carefully. He also advocates what these might be as far as he is concerned: that the client system should choose its own interventions and that practitioners are there to facilitate that choice and to develop the client's ability to change. We perceive these as *organization development (OD) type values and boundaries*, which are anything but universal. In discussions with practitioners, we found, for example, that people with a more rational-empirical stance might put their faith more in proven methods, expertise, and benchmarks and would find it reasonable to advocate solutions and perspectives from an independent position rather than developing a client's ability and respecting their choice (e.g., de Caluwé & Vermaak, 2006). However, we generally subscribe to the OD values that Worley highlights and also tried to in the case described in the article.

Worley mentions that subscribing to OD values "doesn't mean wimping out and colluding with senior managers to exercise their influence and power over the less powerful, nor does it mean forcing our solutions onto the client system." We agree and this implies we are dealing with dilemmas: Doing what the client asks can be as unhelpful as convincing them to do what you feel is right, or demanding internal commitment as unhelpful as ignoring it. Many such dilemmas are part and parcel of the relationships between practitioner and client (Whittle, 2006). With dilemmas, behavioral codes do not work well. An example of this would be a code that activities should be laid down in a formal contract beforehand. Following such ethical codes can even lead to immoral behavior (Kleinman, 2006) because the consequence can be a refusal to help where an organization has a hard time delineating a problem, predicting solutions, or outlining an unfamiliar change process. This is exactly the case with wicked problems (Rittel & Webber, 1973). We feel that OD values can be respected by

sharing these dilemmas with clients. Maybe even more so than by following the codes of our own close-knit community. We tried this in the case by doing the following:

- *Composing a mixed team of change agents*: internal ministry people together with external consultants. Both the initiation of the change and pitching it to formal sponsors or reshaping it along the way happened in that team. This points to our tendency to contract the change effort primarily with change agents from the client's side more so than with formal contract partners. The reasoning is that those internal change agents do more of the actual "homework" to figure out what works and what's ethical.
- *Contracting the work multiple times* along the way, rather than once beforehand. We also chose to rely on *psychological contracts* more than on formal contracts. The reason for both is that this does justice to the incremental shaping of a change process like this. It also allows for more impactful change efforts than would be possible if it all needed to be formally contracted beforehand while still being in the organization's interest.
- *Self-organization of most of the follow up*: The change process orchestrated by us limited itself to providing insights and cognitive maps in a brief period of time. All readings, discussions, decisions, and implementations afterward were orchestrated by other people, all within the ministry.

These bulleted points are not meant to "prove" that we have wholly succeeded to heed OD values in this case. We do feel that we walked a thin line here and there. At times, it might have looked like "collaborative thuggery" (Huxham & Vangen, 2005) where we *tested the boundaries* of the OD field. We feel that such "testing" is, however, very much in the spirit of OD: to reflect in and on action. In our view, condemning ourselves to less relevant work does not come about by subscribing to OD values. It comes about when we refuse to help clients with wicked problems when they can't show the type of behavior OD practitioners prefer in their clients.

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