

Complexity management emphasises cooperation

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Summer has turned to fall, and people are once again full of vigour and drive. Teams and groups have already started their operations, and cooperation is up and running again after the quiet of summer. However, I have noticed that sometimes people question the benefits of teamwork and emphasise its laborious effects and the fact that, in groups, some members may even be “free riders”. It is also said that many things would get done more quickly if you could do it alone. Personally, I disagree; I believe that acting as a group is more efficient and rewarding than acting alone.

I was reminded of this while sitting on the porch of my holiday cottage last summer. The gulls were screaming more loudly than usual, and soon I learned why. A bird I tentatively identified as a marsh harrier has been busily circling around the lands of my cottage. One evening, the harrier became quite intrusive. Aquatic birds are its preferred diet, so it started harrying a flock of gulls. The gulls were not phased and instead joined forces to drive it away. A flock of maybe 15 gulls flew screaming towards and around the harrier, some of them coming extremely close to its beak and talons. This continued for a while, and finally the marsh harrier could do nothing but fly away. As a tenacious hunter, however, it soon returned, and once again the gulls worked together successfully. The harrier had to go and find more agreeable prey. Thus, even a gull seems to realise that a group has power. This is also the way in the different fields and organisations of human life.

There is cause to wonder whether the management systems of our country’s welfare organisation actually allow real teamwork. I have often asked myself this after studying the wicked problems, complexity thinking and complexity management of Finnish organisations. I have come to the conclusion that, in Finland, management systems are still fairly hierarchical and leader-centric. I wish that our organisations would interest themselves more in complexity thinking and the ideas of management that go with it, not least complexity management. Complexity management is also interesting because organisations often strive to curb

complexity by increasing hierarchy and controlling management. In doing this, they do the opposite of what is proposed by the philosophy of complexity management.

Complexity management is a fairly new theoretical movement that gives answers for what organisations should do to survive and thrive in the complex world of today. The idea is to shift focus from the prevailing leader-centric analysis towards engagement, self-management, trust and resonance.

However, it should be known that complexity management does not strive to eliminate operational management or initiative management, but instead strives to create an adaptive space between these two operating principles. An adaptive space is a space where people dare to innovate and experiment, direct themselves and seek new partners for cooperation. This way, the organisation gradually generates a new order that emphasises empowering management. Empowering management is one of the tools of complexity management.

One of the most important skills of an empowering leader is the courage to trust their personnel and encourage them to experiment, work in close interaction and act collectively. The leader encourages this even though there is usually no certainty of the results of the experiments. While the encouragement empowers the personnel, it also strengthens collective action and the entire organisation's social capital. In summary, it can be stated that empowering leaders are not meant to act as controllers but rather as leaders who encourage creativity and independence. They can encourage teams to discover new and feasible work methods and allow self-direction, which moulds operating models and, in the end, the entire organisational culture.

The message of my text can probably be summarised in the following quote:

“... when the new order (reform establishment stage) has finally been created, the empowering leader does their utmost to ensure that the change is truly implemented even though they are not completely sure of the result of the new order. The empowering leader also understands that the conflicts (caused by the reform) and unanticipated consequences result from the fundamental characteristics of complex systems and are (often) not anyone's fault.”
(Vartiainen et al. 2016).