How to have results from Conversations?

Benchimol, Guy

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HOW TO HAVE RESULTS EMERGING FROM CONVERSATIONS?

The difficulty of emergence is not the complexity but the recursivity of its working. That is why there are so many debates to know whether structure generates strategy or strategy generates structure. In fact all we know is that networking allows conversations and that conversations help creating structure, that is a system embedding procedures and technologies; in other words, the network is the tool, the conversation the use of the tool and the structure the result of this use. The use is starting from the identification of a problem, its solving and the decision making. The system itself resulting from such a process, it will be necessary to bootstrap this process starting from a network, a conversation or a nascent or already existing structure.

The question is: which type of structure? It seems that self-managed and networked teams are most suitable; thus, at the beginning the emergence is not spontaneous; you need to have a will at the top; managers will then endorse the completion of groups, identify representative of groups who will speak on behalf of their group before other groups. The networking will take place and more and more conversations will be oriented so that they answer the requirements of the strategy and goals of the organization; the technology will be used to harvest and diffuse the results of the conversations.

EMERGENCE

When one speaks about emergence, emergent strategy or collective intelligence, one means there is creation of something that cannot be imputed to a given individual; in fact, it is the result of a common work/discussion/conversation that several persons participated in during which the insights.opinions/expertnesses are modifying/completing one another. Of course, the mechanism of such a working out is to be scrutinized namely by means of sociotechnical methods but it does not seemto be spontaneous: if you leave it evolving all by itself, it is not sure that the result will be compliant with what the organization could expect Indeed, in the case of complex systems, there are not always natural dynamics for sometimes the system may stiffen/stall in an attractor state.The main issue is preserving the spontaneity that is not killing the emergence while preventing the conversations from swerving from the settled strategy and goals or straying into deadlocks.

LEADERSHIP

We saw the necessity of leadership but it does not mean that you have to appoint leaders; you have better let leaders show themselves but they may be warily supported; they must not be perceived as coming from without the group, being the representatives of external interests or playing the role of managers.

The leaders wil

- be imbued by the strategy and goals to be reached
- be reserved and look after others
- be clever enough to spot people being able to have the conversations getting on and get in touch with them, if needed, outside the conversations

In fact, the leader plays the role of a catalyzer.

Acceleration of renewal of technologies make management more complex and induces organizations to absorb more and more knowledge, in less and less time ; of course each member of the organization accomplishes this task of its own but only a collective effort is doomed to be efficient. To cope with such a situation, it seems that we need a new breed of managers or leaders.

In fact, any collective work implies collaboration that is a team mind and software tools. It is not sufficient to acquire knowledge : you have to understand it, examine what it could be done with it, appreciate the pro's and con's of its possible applications before building projects based on it. The role of the whole organization which deserves the name of learning organization is to leverage the acquired knowledge to increase outcomes and performance. This new kind of mind is no longer compliant with former styles of management and, even with people acquainted with teamwork, it is not safe from failure as it was stated by Chauhan and Bontis(1).

The principle is that if you allow information to reach individuals, the result will not be the same if you let each one turn it to results than if you incite them to discuss between them without constraint, sharing and selecting ideas. So you have to find an intermediary structure which would be compelling enough to enforce a minimum of discipline avoiding excessive looseness whereas being nimble enough to allow the expression of everybody and the free matching of ideas and opinions.

In fact, we have not only to care about people and the way of managing them but we must wonder which kind of knowledge we need and for which goal : thus, we have to come back to the strategy of the firm and be able to

translate into clear goals. That’s why even if you are a supporter of a flat hierarchy and self-organizing units, you must have a leader who tells which way to go so that everybody might be able to know what he has to do. Once you know that, you may choose the knowledge you need either for current tasks or innovative ones.

Teamwork is a way to tackle complexity and stimulate new ideas ; but it may be used either to solve specific problems at a given time or to durably improve performance by launching new processes or products ; so, you may have various teams, temporary or permanent ones. According to the purpose of the team, you have various possibilities of choice as for membership and it is a
very important criterion ; in every case, a ”trusted competency” is a must, as underline it Ken Thompson and Robin Good (2) . The term of “Bioteaming” must not let us believe that we may behave like ants but it reminds us that we are social beings and therefore have a potential for cooperating and collectively creating ; ants too but they follow very simple and unchangeable rules sufficiently efficient for what they are doomed to and that may lead to very unexpected emergent situations. We shall observe that ants accomplish tasks in a durable way and that for such a type of tasks, they are highly specialized whereas for innovating tasks the diversity lies in the minds as Moster shows it (3). Of course we are neither ants nor hermites and that is why the choice of membership is so important in teams and depends on the very nature of their purpose.

In any case, motivation and passion are genuine drivers and the successful leader will take into account these emotional factors. The main tool is groupware but in this case it has not to be considered as a simple project assistance application ; it has to be used as a mean of having people thinking together and will support interrogation, answers, reflection, exchanges, suggestions, solutions, discussions and decisions at any level. It implies valuable contributors, feedback and recognition as well as an uninterrupted effort of animation.

Of course, we must recognize this new way of management is very difficult, risky and very paintaking but, if it is successfully conducted, it may bring very high performances and human satisfaction ... on condition that suitable leaders would be available.

CONVERSATIONS

The source of emergence is the existence of free agents showing a great diversity and able to discuss between them by means of conversations over a network. It seems that emergent patterns would have to be made salient by change agents who, after arbitration, make the liaison with the representatives of the whole organization. The conversation enhancing self-organization and emerging strategy must be envisionned from a microstructural point of view. Conversations, indeed, can take place, on a regular basis, only in a specific context and a community of practice; this will give birth to micro-strategies which will have to be aggregated into a macro-strategy.

PREREQUISITES

Let us consider an organization runned according to the current rules of management; is its CEO inclined to change it toward more self-organization? Maybe this will become a must if environment and competition are changing more and more rapidly and if old rules are becoming obsolete within a too short time. He will have to create the propitious conditions for that: stating goals (including alternative ones following to unpredictable circumstances), flattening hierarchy, role assignment, empowerment, knowledge management (mix of push and pull), team-work, incentives and communications. The managing task are essentially monitoring and controlling whereas employees learn by doing, solve problems, adapt themselves, develop their competencies and evaluate their results.

MOTIVE

To build a new organization (once the above prerequisites are realized), you need to consider at first the customer's needs in terms of products, services and applications. The teams will be centered around either applications requirements, products supply or services prestations. Conversations will take place inside teams or between team representatives (designed in turn by their peers) who will have conversations with the interlocutors of the customer. The general principle of relationships is the slient to purveyor one on a quasi-contractual basis.

WORKING UP

We think that such principles could be applied to the life of organization which are comparable to living beings; their behaviour shows an increasing specialization of organs with more and more needs of coordination and communication between components. You can then successively observe birth, growth and swarming. It is a question of appraisal to know which degree of differentiation is suitable to ensure a good working of the whole.

GOALS AND ROLES

We are accustomed to traditional organizational charts which reserve a place to individuals according to the level and the kind of task for which they were hired; when an employee leaves the company, another one generally takes his place in order to fill the gap. In this way, the organization offers always the same structure and change is not an easy matter –insofar that somebody cares for it-.

The principle of most organizational charts is “one task, one man” and it is extended from the bottom to the top. This leads to a work partition which is not always compliant with a good consistence and unique alignment on strategy. Everybody heard of stories (not success ones) about the divergent actions of the Marketing Manager and the Sales Manager (about product scope), the Financial Manager and the Sales Mannager (about inventories level), the Technical Manager and the Sales Manager (about batches size) and so on.

It may be necessary to think of goals before roles and the goals may be grouped into a few basic clusters such as:

- (A) scientific and technical
- (B) commercial and marketing
- (C) administrative and social
- (D) economical and financial
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After that, you may think of operations such as the ones you may find in any quality manual; for instance

- (A) design and development, product realization
- (B) customer-related processes
- (C) resource management
- (D) measurement analysis and improvement

There are some analogies with scorecard practice concerning

- (B) CUSTOMER
- (D) FINANCIAL

but it is difficult to compare (A) to LEARNING AND GROWTH and (C) to INTERNAL BUSINESS PROCESS; in fact, scorecard items are performance-oriented. Then you may come back to occupational concerns such as those of the US Department of Labour for managing occupations:

- (A) Operations specialties: Industrial Production
- (B) Advertising, Marketing, Promotions, Public Relations, Sales

  Operations specialties: Purchasing

  Transportation, Storage, and Distribution
- (C) Operations specialties: Administrative

  Human Resources
- (D) Operations specialties: Computer and Information Systems

  Financial

Starting from the goals (according the leading strategy) , we shall define the roles in a cluster frame, then we could specify the occupational positions and then state the performance indicators.

To define the roles we may call for a method prompted by Value Analysis (4). It is generally used to define new products in order to evaluate each function with regard to the genuine needs of the user and the cost it

implies.The aim is to satisfy the customer neither less nor more than what he expects for his expense and at the least cost for the supplier. For this purpose, you have to scrutinize each component or subsystem, estimate its contribution to the value of the product and its cost share.

Similarly, we could do something like that to analyze functions, especially managerial ones, starting from the goals and the tasks to be done, as well as the deliverables within a defined period and the necessary resources (5).

COLLABORATIVE DECISION MAKING

In the labour field, we are interested in human resources and peculiarly competencies. The problem is to state: Who or which group or team will do the work and to whom will it report?

You may find insight about a method after the study of City University (6): it unifies objectives statement, performance indicators, competencies, management role, performance assessment and individual development.

We recognize that the cluster organization we suggested is not sufficient to entirely avoid siloing for it remains a need for linking clusters together but this could be realized by teams including representatives of each cluster.

Such teams could be permanent or temporary according to their purpose; but the main role of these teams is to help making decisions. As Professor Nielsen asserts “By denying no one the chance to make decisions about issues affecting his or her work, it will increase everyone’s productivity and lower costs.” (7), opposing Peer Thinking to Rank Thinking.

Teams will become more and more at the core of decision-making inside complex organizations because change is fast, competition acute, technology evolving, environment uncertain. Professor Nielsen’s concept implies peer-based councils, networks of councils, rotational leadership based on peer review, teamwork and knowledge sharing.

In fact, on one hand, the collective thinking is significative only if you have a sufficient number of participants because of the necessary diversity of points of views, experiences, competencies and opinions, on the other hand, it is difficult to coordinate plethoric groups; this leads to maintain teams of reasonable size which is very context-dependent (it is said that 50 to 75

individuals is a good number on condition that you would be able to divide them into smaller groups of about 8 for more focused discussions).

A mean of solving the above contradiction is to adopt a hierarchy of teams having not a rank role but simply a logical one linked to the level of issues to be tackled, upper levels comprising delegates of lower ones.

TOWARD A NEW CULTURE

Everybody can imagine the best organization being suitable to his environment but the difficulty is to bring together the psychological requirements leading to employees involvement. This point is well underlined by NCEO (8) with examples such as W. L. Gore & Associates, a 8,000-associates owned company (“no manager, no job title, no hierarchy, no reporting rules”); this is an extreme example but it is typical of the team building on the initiative of any employee on condition that some agree with joining, the leadership of the team being devoted to the most skilled for a given time.

The collaborative work is often compared with the collective action of ants, bees, birds or herrings but we must notice that man is different namely because he has other concerns than the elementary instinctive drivers of those populations and because he is not only guided by a collective motivation; thus, if you want to obtain a collective behaviour, you have to introduce incentives (stock ownership plan, rewards) and create propitious conditions (open-book management, training, information sharing).

In fact, it is very difficult to obtain good teams that is teams where people feel well together and which offer the necessary diversity. Before doing that, you have to create a good social climate, an enterprise culture with clearly stated and practised values and a prime information system including an adequate knowledge management.

(1) Chauhan, N. and Bontis, N. (2004) “Organizational learning via groupware : a path to discovery or disaster ?”, Int. J. Technology Management, Vol. 27, Nos 6/7, pp.591-610

(2) Thompson K., Good R., Bioteaming Manifesto, 2005.11.19

(3) Moster N. M., Diversity of the Mind as the Key to Creativity at Unilever, Unilever R&D Vlaardingen, The Netherlands Journal compilation, Vol. 16, N° 1, Blackwell Publishing, 2007

(4)Value Analysis in brief by Thomas Jefferson http://thequalityportal.com

(5) See Roles and Jobs into the Dowding's model for Managing Organizations http://www.howarddowding.com

(6) www.city.ac.uk and seek for "competencies": City University London's Management Competencies, January 2007

(7) Jeffrey S. Nielsen, The Values and Practices of the New Paradigm in Management: Peer-Based Organizations

(8) What Is an Ownership Culture? By Corey Rosen, NCEO Executive Director, May 29, 2007, The National Center for Employee Ownership, Oakland (CA), http://www.nceo.org

Guy Benchimol
Owner and Moderator of the Google Group
Computer Assisted Management for Performance