

Open Source Thinking

*possibilities for
“yes, and ...”
conversations*

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Guest Editors: Rosemary Cairns and Bob MacKenzie

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Creating the conditions for all voices to be heard

Strategies for working with differences

Rowena Davis



When I read the invitation to contribute to this edition of e-O&P, I had an instant 'yes!'. These phrases jumped out at me:

...generative ways of allowing diversity to flourish in groups, .. helping groups to move towards agreement and even consensus. ... participatory processes that provide order without imposing control from the top. ... draw upon and honour each and every contribution from group members, presuming that we all have wisdom to contribute.

Can we afford not to draw upon and honour every possible contribution that is latent in collective approaches to building better futures?

For the last decade I've been working with these goals and experimenting with how to do this.

Keywords

systems-centred theory, complexity theory, SAVI, functional sub-grouping, communication climate, integrating differences

Opening up to differences

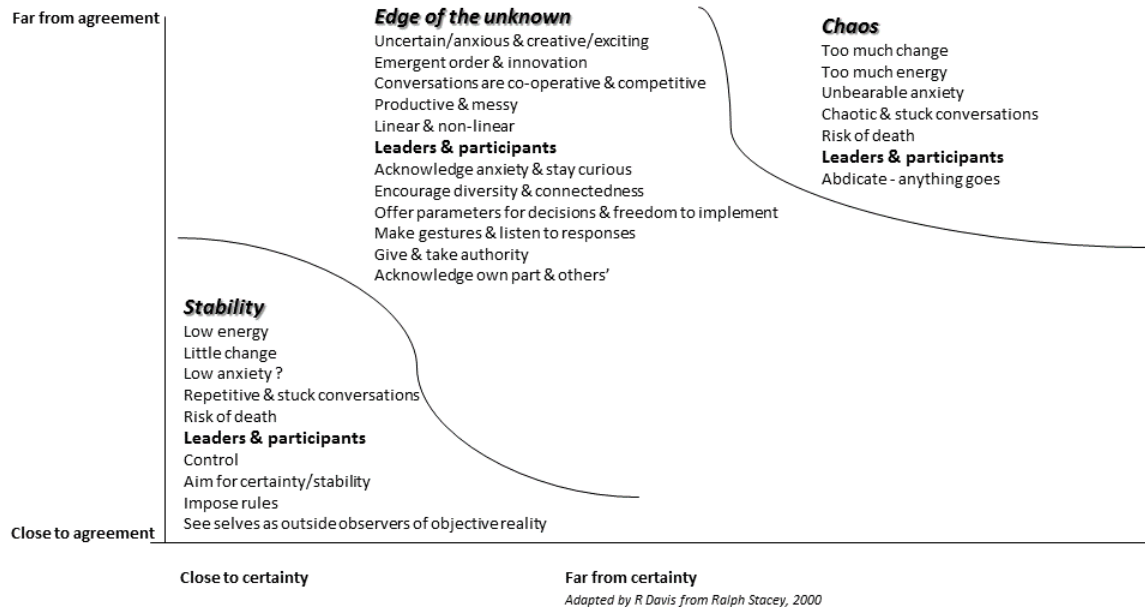
I've been using Systems-Centered[®] Theory (SCT) (Agazarian 1997) and complexity theory (Stacey 2000) as my main maps to make sense of how we co-create dynamics in human systems and how change happens. Both approaches acknowledge the emergent (and often unpredictable) nature of human interaction, and while seeing *some* structure as helpful – and necessary to contain chaos – see *too much* structure as being stifling. Potentially novel solutions emerge in the middle space, which Stacey calls 'the Edge of Chaos' and which Agazarian calls 'the Edge of the Unknown', *if* (and it is a big if) we can listen to our differences and explore the information they contain. This is shown below in the diagram 'Working with differences'.

What is it about differences?

'Living human systems survive, develop and transform by discriminating and integrating differences.'

(Agazarian 1997)

Many approaches, from genetics to encouraging innovation and development, recognise the importance of difference. Difference is central in Systems-Centered theory, which posits that we need differences to develop and transform even though, on the whole, we hate them!



We can't help this. We are hard wired to react to differences in the form of our Flight/Fight response. Neurobiological research shows when our 'low road' emotional brain or amygdala detects danger, it acts within about 10 or 12 milliseconds to trigger a fear response in us.

Joseph LeDoux (2010) gives the example of seeing a long dark object in a wood. Instantly, even before we even think 'A snake!' , our brain begins to respond fearfully to the danger. We are likely to have physiological responses like rapid heartbeat and raised blood pressure, a diminished capacity to feel pain, an exaggerated startle reflex, and production of stress hormones.

If we then take a moment to settle our brains down and check reality, we might discover it is only a stick. This conscious awareness involves another part of the brain – 'the high road' or prefrontal cortex (the area of the brain most responsible for planning and reasoning), which takes more time to come into play. In LeDoux's words '...for you to be consciously aware of the stimulus, it takes 250-300 milliseconds. So, the amygdala is being triggered much, much faster than consciousness is processing.'

Our Flight/Fight response is very useful. As LeDoux says: 'You're better off mistaking a stick for a snake than a snake for a stick' (Hendrix 1997). However, when we are working in organisations or in communities (or indeed relating to family and friends), we often get caught in this automatic response and thus lose our ability to check reality. As a result, we often react to, rather than listen to, differences.

Typically we try to convert, discount or blame/attack those who don't see things the way we do. This has potentially high costs societally. Think of RBS' acquisition of ABN Amro, BP's Deepwater Horizon, subprime lending, X-raying pregnant women long after the link to childhood cancer had been proved (Heffernan 2012) and the Mid Staffordshire NHS Foundation Trust. Robert Francis QC, who chaired the inquiry into the high death rate at Mid Staffordshire, highlighted one of the causes: "It is now clear that some staff did express concern about the standard of care being provided to patients. The tragedy was that they were ignored and worse still others were discouraged from speaking out." (Francis, 2013).

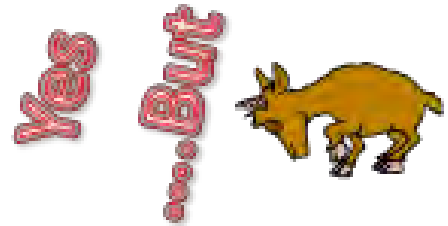
We now know from neuroscience that rather than being set in stone, our brains are plastic (Doidge 2007), and can and do change. The more we use certain behaviours, the more they become engrained which, paradoxically, means they can change. This is Hebb's law, often paraphrased as 'neurons that fire together, wire together' (Hebb 1949).

What helps us open to differences?

So how do we interrupt or at least catch our automatic Flight/Fight response before it gets entrenched and costs us dearly?

From many perspectives – including Systems-Centered Theory, complex responsive processes, dialogue and Positive Psychology – how we talk to each other (and ourselves) is key.

If we view the communication patterns we co-create as verbal behaviours – which like all behaviours get reinforced the more we do them – then (paradoxically again), we also have the potential to change them. Our verbal behaviours create neural pathways in our brains so, instead of being triggered into responding automatically to differences, we can open up to exploring them.



You may recognise these as familiar responses when someone expresses a different view: Yes...but (*'I agree but I think this is would be better'*); discounting (*'That's a stupid idea'*); attacking the other person (*'What! Are you crazy!?'*); trying to convert the other person to your view (*'Don't you think it would be better if we...?'*); or more radically, getting rid of people who hold different views, as happened in the top team at RBS during the run up to acquiring ABN- AMRO. The overall impact is to discourage the speaker from his or her view, to orient to my view (the 'RIGHT' view), and to lose the potentially valuable grit in the oyster that is held within the difference of views.

One of the core Systems-Centered methods – functional sub-grouping – is designed to interrupt these patterns and instead explore the potentially useful information in differences. Functional sub-grouping involves stating clearly when we have a difference, and agreeing to explore one side first, then the other. Systems-Centered Theory also posits that, in a climate of similarity, we will discover just tolerable differences in what initially seemed only similar, and some similarities in what appeared to be only different. This process of exploration is more likely to lead to integration and innovative outcomes. (see the short video Susan Gantt and I produced @

http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3A_ZsQgmbAM&feature=player_embedded.)

I use this approach in work contexts with colleagues or clients where we have different ideas of what the issues are or of how to solve problems. If there are just two of us, it means we both try and get into each other's boat. For example, if my colleague thinks we should wait before contacting a client and I think we should talk to them immediately, we will agree which side to explore together first. Then we'll both try to find potential plusses/impacts of going the first route. When we feel we've done enough on the first option, we'll explore the plusses of the second one. Usually, we come to agreement through the process. If we don't, we use other criteria (e.g. whose decision it is). At the very least, we each feel we've had a chance to air our views and to be heard.

Functional sub-grouping is used in many organisational and clinical contexts in the UK, US, Scandinavia, The Netherlands, Japan and in Israel. Marvin Weisbord and Sandra Janoff (2007: 104) use it in Future Search and effective meetings trainings. From their experience it is key to keeping groups and teams working on their tasks.

'[Solomon] Asch showed that as long as each person has an ally, people maintain their independence from [group] pressure. Agazarian went further demonstrating that so long as ...every person has a functional ally – someone who carries the same ideas and/or feelings – a group is more likely to keep working. Members will not distract themselves with side trips into rejecting, rescuing, or scapegoating those who take risks. Our minimal job becomes helping people experience functional differences when stereotypes might prevail.'

The impact of our communication climate

SAVI® (System for Analyzing Verbal Interaction) offers another route to fostering more free-flowing generative conversations. SAVI is a nine box grid (see below) devised by Agazarian and Simon to track and make sense of communication patterns in any context e.g. individuals, couples, teams and groups in personal, organisational and wider social settings. It classifies all verbal behaviours according to whether they are likely to be neutral, to help, or to get in the way of communicating and understanding each other. (SAVI also looks at whether the content is mainly focusing on the Person or the outside world [Topic] <http://www.savicomunications.com/savi.html>).

SAVI helps individuals, couples, teams, and organisations to identify communication patterns, by offering insights into why certain patterns feel generative and satisfying, and why others feel stuck and dissatisfying. It also helps identify strategies for shifting patterns – if desired.

SAVI is not a linear model; it offers ways of thinking about and experimenting with different behaviours and seeing what impact they have in reality. It is also non-judgemental. No behaviours are 'right' or 'wrong'. The only question is whether the behaviours are helping or hindering communication, and whether they support or hinder our goals in the contexts in which we work and live.

SAVI highlights how powerful patterns can be and how our view of people can change, depending on the climate, rather than the people. The same people, with a different communication climate, appear and behave differently!




Recently, in a two day SAVI introductory workshop I was leading in Stockholm, we were all researching the impact of the communication climate on productivity and morale. Four participants were role-playing a discussion while the rest of us observed. The topic was where to take a visiting client to dinner.

I asked the players to use only certain verbal behaviours over four rounds. In *Round 1* they were using Obscuring, Individualizing and Influencing behaviours. These are typical behaviours at the start of a team discussion when we are likely to be in 'Flight' from our task (Wheelan, 2005; Gantt and Agazarian 2007).

In *Round 2*, things got a bit more heated with Fighting, Competing and Influencing behaviours – with lots of Yes-Buts, Interrupting, Opinions and some Attacking and Self-Defence. In this round, one person was also asked to use Finding Facts – Facts and Figures and asking Questions. One player reported at the end of

this Round that he had had a strong impulse to get rid of the Facts and Figures person (this illustrates the scapegoating impulse that is elicited in a 'Fight' climate).


SAVI[®] Grid
 System for Analyzing Verbal Interaction

	PERSON		TOPIC	
	Personal 	Factual 	Orienting 	
AVOIDANCE	1 FIGHTING Attack/Blame Righteous Question Sarcasm Self Attack/Defend Complaint	2 OBSCURING Mind-Reading Negative or Positive Prediction Gossip Joking Around Thinking Out Loud Social Ritual	3 COMPETING Yes-But Discount Leading Question Oughtitude Interrupt	
CONTINGENT	4 INDIVIDUALIZING Personal Information Current Personal Information Past Personal Opinion Explanation Personal Question	5 FINDING FACTS Facts & Figures General Information Narrow Question Broad Question	6 INFLUENCING Opinion Proposal Command Social Reinforcement	
APPROACH	7 RESONATING Inner Feeling Feeling Question Answer Feeling Question Mirror Inner Experience Affectionate Joke Self Assertion	8 RESPONDING Answer Question Clarify Own Answer (with data) Paraphrase Summarize Corrective Feedback	9 INTEGRATING Agreement Positives Build on Other's Ideas or Experience Work Joke	

Silence, Laughter, Noise

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(Image: SAVI Grid – reproduced with permission of the author)

Round 3 was 'As If' – nice and neutral with Individualizing, Finding Facts and Influencing – but very little work being done. Finally, in *Round 4* using Finding Facts, Influencing, Responding and Integrating squares, the players came to agreement and felt satisfied with the climate of their discussion. They were very surprised about how their feelings about each other had shifted from targeting and irritation to feeling closer, more curious and open to different views.

This pattern – called Problem Solving – has similarities with the impact of positivity, inquiry and ability to see the wider system on team performance in Losada's study of 60 Strategic Business Unit (SBU) teams. Researchers observed over 60 management teams and defined "high performing" teams as demonstrating

high profitability, high customer satisfaction, and high evaluations by superiors, peer, and subordinates. They observed teams by capturing statements made during business meetings and coding them on three dimensions: positivity / negativity; self-focused / other-focused; and inquiry / advocacy.

Losada defined positivity as support, encouragement and appreciation in contrast to negativity (disapproval, sarcasm, cynicism). *'A speech act was coded as "inquiry" if it involved a question aimed at exploring and examining a position and as "advocacy" if it involved arguing in favour of the speaker's viewpoint. A speech act was coded as "self" if it referred to the person speaking or to the group present at the lab or to the company the person speaking belonged, and it was coded as "other" if the reference was to a person or group outside the company to which the person speaking belonged. The coders were blind to the performance level of the teams at the time of observation. Performance data were used to categorise the teams only after their meeting had been observed and coded.'* (Losada and Heaphy, 2004: 745). Characteristics of high performing teams showed high levels of other-focused and inquiry-based statements, and a positivity ratio of about 6:1. The findings are summarised in the table here.

Table: Summary of Losada research

	Ratios for the Three Bipolar Dimensions		
	Inquiry/Advocacy	Positivity/Negativity	Other/Self
High-performance teams	1.143	5.614	0.935
Medium-performance teams	0.667	1.855	0.622
Low-performance teams	0.052	0.363	0.034

With one major retailer, we used SAVI to role play the product review meetings, using Take 1, Take 2 and so on, trying out different communication strategies. People were able to see how they contributed to the dismissive responses they often received about their proposals by often Yes-Butting back or responding defensively. By Paraphrasing and asking for more information, they slowed themselves down and started to open up - and so did the climate in the meeting.

Interestingly, recent research (Edmondson 2012) suggests that the behaviours of successful teaming are highly correlated with verbal behaviours, namely:

- Speaking up – asking and answering questions, acknowledging errors, raising issues, exploring ideas
- Experimenting
- Reflecting – observing, questioning, discussing processes and outcomes regularly
- Listening intently – paraphrasing, building on others' ideas
- Integrating – synthesising different facts and points of view to create new possibilities

Conclusion

Being able to engage in healthy conflict is crucial if we are to move past either 'too much sameness' so that nothing changes, or 'too much conflict' so that we tear each other apart, or separate from each other in order to get rid of our differences.

Opening up to difference is not easy: it requires skill, practice and commitment. Part of opening up to difference involves slowing down enough so that our autonomic response is interrupted sooner rather than later. For facilitators, it means a commitment to notice and work with our own triggers around difference, so we can be more open to them. For leaders in organisations and in communities, it means an awareness that this is not easy and that we need to shift behaviours. Thinking of this in viral terms might be helpful. If we facilitate the achievement of sufficient critical mass and positive deviance from existing patterns, then things might indeed shift for the better (Herrero 2010-11).

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