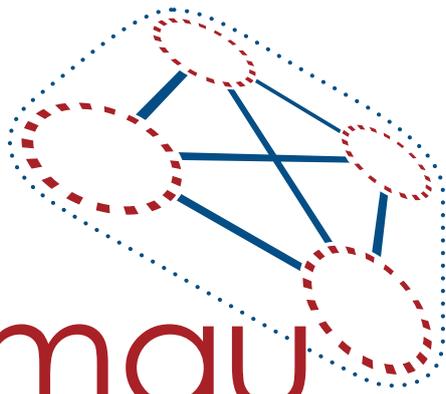


Sustainable Change: Applying a whole of systems view



Dalmau
CONSULTING

Dalmau Consulting

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Introduction

To put it simply, linear models of change and change leadership are inadequate. This paper attempts to explain how this comes to be.

We make a fundamental distinction between the type of analysis developed in the 17th Century in the Age of Enlightenment (reductionism) with what we might call a whole-of-system viewpoint. One approach breaks things down into separate elements to understand, the other focuses on the whole and the relationships among the parts.

We realize that in taking this view point we are opening ourselves to potential criticism from post modernists and that some social constructionist management and organization theory discourse has avoided referring to systems concepts. But the simple fact is that we are left dissatisfied with reductionist approaches for they provide a wholly inadequate understanding of complex, interconnected phenomena. The fundamental assumption upon which reductionism rests is the belief that you don't know something until you break it down into its parts.

A whole of system view, on the other hand, assumes there are also things operating at the level of the whole that this approach cannot comprehend. Its origins lie in systems thinking with the work of Ludwig von Bertalanffy (1968). Checkland (1993) implied that systems thinking is a particular way of thinking about the world *and* adopting a corresponding set of ideologies and concepts to render world's complexity more comprehensible. To our knowledge, no better way of knowing the world has yet been devised in the 25 years since Checkland made this statement. Systems thinking has come to inform our understanding of organizational behavior, change and leadership by providing what Blake (2004) calls a set of ideologies and concepts that attempt to comprehend organizational complexity. One key benefit is the potential to see the whole of something, how it behaves as a whole and how its parts interact with one another and with that whole.

Blake points out that a system perspective perceives individuals and entities as being linked together in a chain of activities and networks. He cites Senge (1995) indicating that when an entire organization (or a significant part of an organization) is viewed as a system, it represents a 'perceived whole' whose component elements 'hang together' because they continually affect each other over time.

The process enneagram fosters a whole of system perspective

We have found a systems thinking approach has never failed us in generating workable solutions in very complicated and messy environments. In concert with our colleagues, we have used it to illuminate and guide leaders in volatile, uncertain, complex and ambiguous environments and guide change initiatives in these same settings.

Back in 1997 when we first came across Dick Knowles, we started to use his process enneagram for facilitation of conversations about complex or wicked problems. It slowly dawned on us that this framework and associated methodologies elicited systems thinking perspectives about complex problems.

At the most fundamental level, the process enneagram has enabled those using it to easily generate a picture of the whole system that is their focus or interest. The significance of this should not be underestimated as many organizational and management practices start out by breaking problems down into their constituent elements, believing that if they are re-constructed in some new manner, then the “problem” will be solved. The focus is on the parts, not the whole.

There is still a place for this mindset, but mostly in settings where there is both high social cohesion and stability of power relationships combined with high predictability as to the efficacy of a solution set. This approach, however, often fails to acknowledge or understand the powerful, hidden human cultural and social forces at work in organizations, especially when change is required. It is these forces where there is less agreement, less cohesion that tend to undo well-intentioned mechanistic approaches.

Approaches based on the process enneagram model (Figure 1) help those involved to see “the system” with all its rational and non-rational elements as one, in a simple and visual manner (Dalmau & Tideman, 2010. p78). And when it is supported by appropriate leadership from power figures in the organization, it tends to produce coherent and engaging solutions.

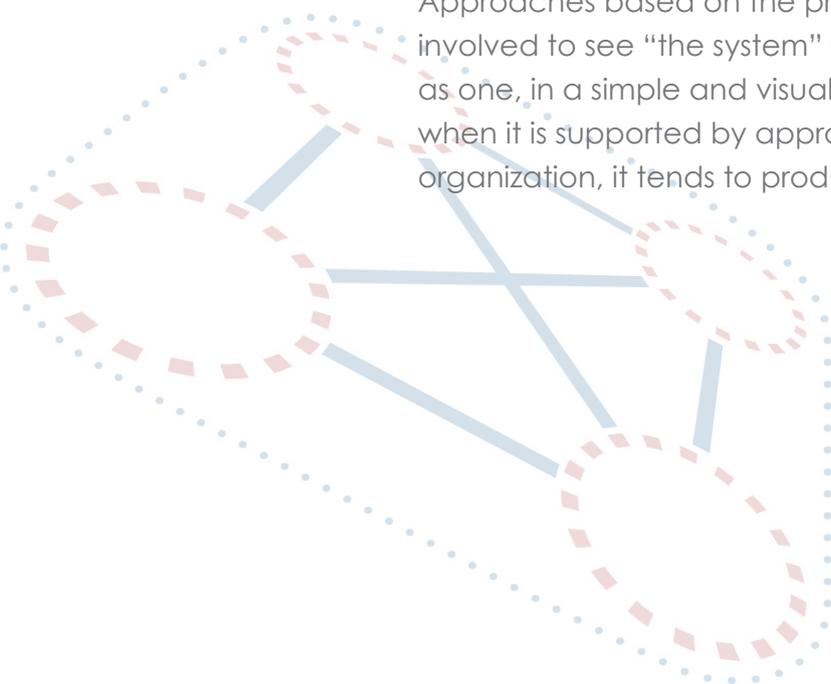
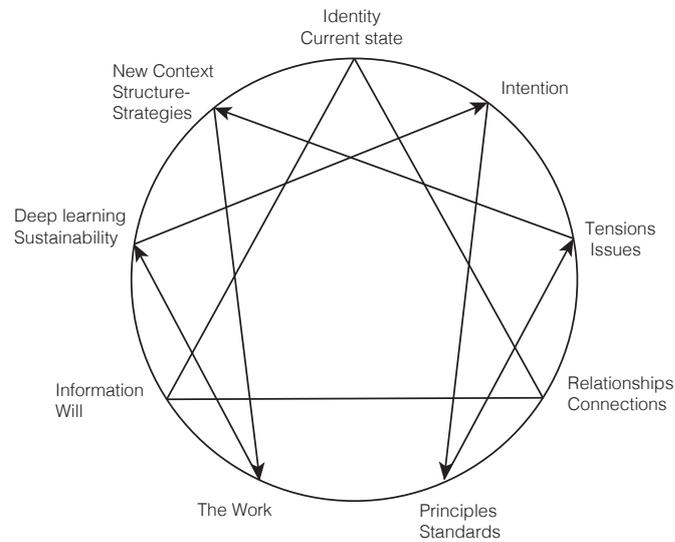


Figure 1: The Process Enneagram Model (after Knowles, 2002)



The nine dimensions of the model are:-

- Current state of the system and the historical factors that created it
- Relationships between various parts of the system and their functionality
- Relevance, functionality and availability of information flowing in the system
- Fundamental goals or intention of the system
- Espoused and actual standards and principles on which the system operates
- Dilemmas, constraints, issues and tensions within the system
- New context and approaches to achieve the intention and resolve dilemmas
- Actual work and activity that is an expression of the previous seven dimensions
- The system's ability to achieve deep learning, respond and sustain itself

Conversations by real people in real settings, sensitively stimulated around these nine dimensions, allow for emergence, paradox and surprise to come forth. Paradox and surprise are essential elements of deep learning – the contradictions, inconsistencies and absurdities they generate in turn foster new perceptions, different perspectives and a level of disassociation that allow a group to move forward.

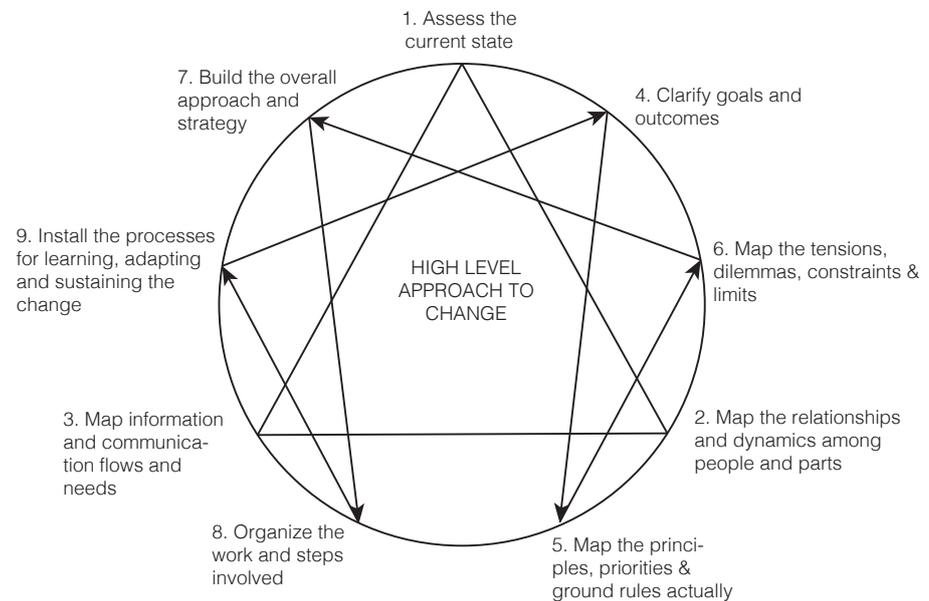
In its purest representation, the process enneagram can be viewed as nine areas of inquiry and engagement, see Table 1.

Table 1: Process Enneagram: Nine Dimensions of Inquiry

Identity & Current State	A sense of purpose and meaning – the area of focus that unleashes energy and commitment. The description of the present state in which the players find themselves and the historical forces and factors that have shaped them.
Relationships & Connections	Description of the nature of relationships that the players have with other individuals, groups in and across organizations as a whole, both among people but also among units, functions, groups, and processes. This area includes both ideal and actual relationships.
Information & Will	Understandings about the importance of information and beliefs about the relationship of information to individual and organizational effectiveness, and its impact on coalescing shared meaning to marshal concerted action.
Intention & Ambition	What is it that the players want to create and achieve with people, within their areas of responsibility, around the problem or issue under consideration, or the organization as a whole?
Principles, Ground Rules & Standards	The priorities they hold, the principles they work to, the ground rules they seek to abide by and the standards that model their beliefs and aspirations within the organization, i.e., the underlying ground rules and priorities that guide (or should guide) behavior, strategies and tactics – both espoused and in-use (Dick, B. & Dalmau, T. 1990)
Tensions & Issues	The existing dilemmas, constraints, contradictions and behavioral patterns that are currently keeping individuals, teams and the organization as a whole from realizing the desired outcomes.
New Contexts, Structures & Approaches	The creative perspectives, strategies, structures and approaches that model the espoused principles, ground rules and standards, resolve the tensions, and thus move the “system” toward the intended outcomes
Work	The specific actions associated with the strategies that need to be implemented.
Deep Learning & Sustainability	This describes a process of ongoing reflection whereby individuals, groups and organizations can learn what is working relative to their outcomes and make course corrections based on the learning, combined with mechanisms for adjustment and regeneration to ensure sustainability.

Early on we started to apply these nine dimensions to plan high level approaches to change tasks using the same framework. It seemed at the time a small conceptual step to take and its utility value and comprehensiveness gave us confidence to continue. It had, as they say, high face validity both for us and to our clients. This high-level framework is depicted in Figure 2.

Figure 2: Approaching Change



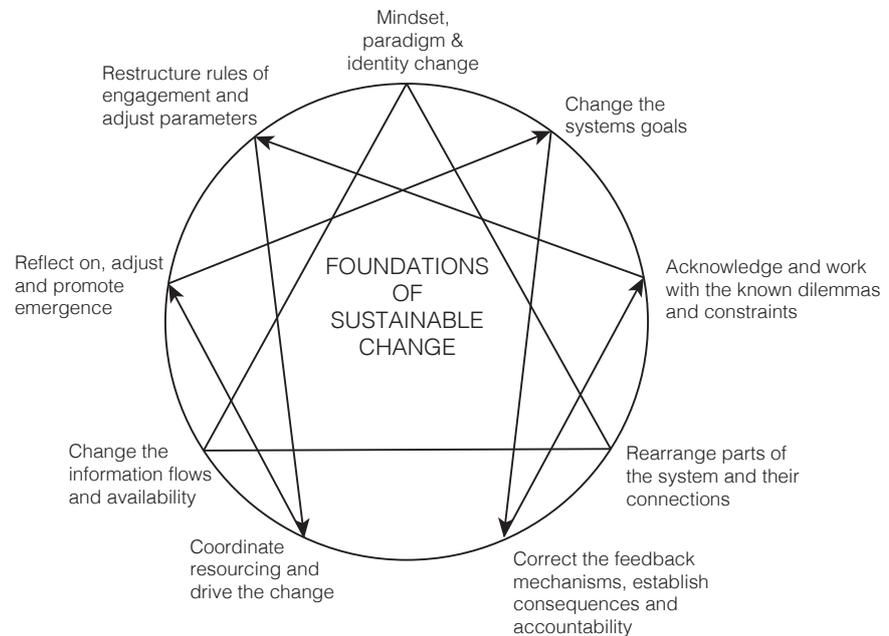
The fundamentals of sustainable change

Doppelt's work (2003) on sustainability struck a deep chord. He provides a comprehensive framework on what makes for sustainable change and spells out the necessary conditions for change to persist over time and to not diminish the optionality of future "generations."

He suggests a need to change the controlling mindset or paradigm shared by most in the system. No change will be sustainable without re-arranging the connections among the parts of the system, along with the system's overall goal and the rules of engagement. He suggests sustainable change also demands a shift in what and how information flows combined with new feedback and corrective mechanisms. Acknowledging the reality of what we face, altering the parameters by which performance is measured is another requirement, as is building new ways to pay attention and respond to what is emerging and then, of course, coordinating resourcing and driving movement.

We soon realized the Doppelt model bore a striking resemblance to the dimensions of the process enneagram and started to merge the two. This approach had its first outing in real world in 2005 as a framework for leading internal global change in one of the “Big Four” accounting firms. We have been applying and refining it since. (See Figure 3).

Figure 3: Foundations of Sustainable Change



We have applied it to organizations seeking to implement a whole new way of developing and delivering an organ donation program across Australia, creating an integrated national approach to something that had been done in isolation by various state institutions. We have used it in,

- Assisting a very successful construction company transition from a family-owned enterprise to a professional corporation (Australia)
- Reconceptualizing and driving significant improvement in safety performance in a global alumina company (Global)
- Establishing workable understanding and reconfiguring relationship between a gold and copper producer and the local community to reduce preventable deaths (Laos)
- Clinical leadership improvement in one of the world's most advanced hospitals (UK)
- Re-organizing a resources sector industry association (Global)
- Diagnosing and driving a fundamental re-configuration of management and operations in a gold producer (South Africa)
- Leadership development in one of the largest school systems in the world (USA)
- Guiding the development of a startup resources company (Australia)
- Establishing a productive and respectful relationship between forest products industry and local environmental activists (USA)

- Re-establishing trust and personal/political safety in the clinical workforce of a significant public hospital (Australia)
- Defining a workable organizational configuration for a global branded ballet company (UK)
- Building alignment and working relationships among the management group of a large accountancy firm across eight countries (Europe)

This list is only partial but illustrates the diversity of change issues to which this approach has been used successfully over the last decade or more.

[This is an excerpt from a longer paper, *The Practice and Art of Leading Complex Change* Dalmau, T and Tideman, J (2018) in *The Journal of Leadership, Accountability and Ethics* 15(4).]

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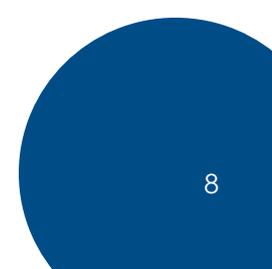
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Dalmau Consulting

Box 283 Samford Village
Queensland 4520
Australia

Tel: +61 7 3289 2133
Email: info@dalmau.com

www.dalmau.com