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David McKie, Margalit Toledano

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Giving up the ghost: Communication, complexity, and smart surrender

Daneke and Sager's (2015) "Ghoshal's Ghost: Financialization and the End of Management Theory" inspired this paper in a number of ways. Firstly, we enjoy their playful language and their serious fun in conjuring up the ghost by expanding Ghoshal's idea that "bad management theories" were "destroying good management practices" into a call for an alternative approach to management theory. In addition to then following them into the non-linear world of complexity, we augment their approach with communication to better address current conditions.

In part, this is because communication, by its nature, is interdisciplinary (Herbst, 2008; Swanson, 1993) and its 21C scholarship has been charting the "fluid flows of people, information, and relationships as a result of globalization and economic change" (Cohen, 2013, p. xxi). Yet, the scholarship itself is not very fluid as research flows are constrained by disciplinary dams. Despite the richness of a variety of theoretical, methodological, and disciplinary approaches to key communication issues of our time, scholars often work in discipline, field or subfield-based silos of their own and are "largely out of touch with one another" (Vorderer & Weinmann, 2016, p. 211). Herbst (2008) attributed this to the tensions of retaining the creativity and freedom that interdisciplinarity allows, on the one hand, and the need to "fight for legitimacy" (p. 605) as a discipline, on the other hand. Pfau (2008) ascribed it to communication scholars only using tools they are familiar with and that their research questions occupy too narrow a bandwidth. As a result, communication scholars only "write for [each] other within specific narrow niches of our own discipline" (Pfau, 2008, p. 595). This insularity is long overdue for overhaul because of concern about the disconnection between communication and allied fields (Pfau, 2008).

Once upon a time philosophy and science were one. In 20C century, management, which is applied social science, seized the commanding heights of prediction and control by imitating "hard" sciences. That predominance remains in management's so-called A* journals, which are heavily tilted to subprime quantitative studies. Many of their predictions should have lost credibility after the GFC bailouts when trillion became the new billion in terms of debt. Linear mathematics, linear mindsets, and the science-social science divide are not geared up for such challenges. One earlier potential turning point was Wallerstein's (1966) *Open the Social Sciences* Gulbenkian Report advocating breaking down divisions between natural science and social science by means of complexity theory. The Report held up the promise of 21C emergent sciences of uncertainty that encompassed both scientific and philosophical thinking.

Despite winning some theoretical allegiance in the leadership and management field, complexity failed to get much traction in applied management practices. Building on

this ridiculously brief narrative as a prelude to burying command and control management's illusion of control, this paper goes on to offer a brief but still relevant, if neglected, tale of three C's (Catastrophe, Chaos, and Complexity). Finally, it mobilises those accounts to propose research approaches aiming partially fulfil the Gulbenkian promise of merging theories of science with social science (or at least with management praxis).

Phasing illusions: Complexity, control, and smart surrender

From a complexity perspective, control is an illusion. However, although complexity's removal of the illusion often resonates with the workplace experiences of leaders and managers, they are not immediately empowered by that knowledge. Confirmation of how even well-planned interventions cause negative outcomes is more useful and has a higher uptake when accompanied by replacement strategies. This paper explores how complexity can assist in reducing interventions with unproductive outcomes and increasing interventions with productive outcomes.

Although structuralism is passé, we still find a set of binary oppositions a good platform for diving into fluidity looking at how best to understand and engage organisations. At one end of the continuum, we situate thinking and practices clustered around rational planning, or what we will call "managing by old science." At the other pole, we put an opposing cluster around managing - in the sense of "coping" with new science (i.e., with emerging learnings that are alert to unique, and often local, circumstances). We will call the former pole, the "protocols of scientific control," assign it to represent past evidence-based management, and credit it with sophisticated insight into relatively fixed, known, and unitary structures. Adhering to such protocols, organisations look ahead strategically and set clear goals in the light of past failures and successes. They then project futures largely based on those past results.

The failure is not so much individual as structural and is elegantly encapsulated in Baets' (2006) formulation that "management is always a discontinuous approximation of a continuous phenomenon." Complexity perspectives, in opposing the protocols of scientific control, acknowledge these shifting realities in a variety of ways: they perceive organisations as dynamic and emerging from complex processes (with many contingent factors that make outcomes difficult to predict); they stress organisational actions as irreversible and history-sensitive; they accept nonlinear consequences; and they focus on key zones of change (e.g., M&A; *The (Mis)behaviour of Markets* (Mandelbrot, 2005)). To go beyond the limitations of managing with old science, while still allowing management action (albeit selectively), the paper makes two proposals. The first is to abandon the assembly of a strategic plan, in favour of forging an overarching unifying purpose.

The second proposal is for a policy of conscious phase management, which involves shifting between periods of smart surrender (i.e., consciously taking little or no action), and controlled amplification, or dampening, on the basis of targeted assessments in zones of change. This process extends Karl Weick's adaptation of "requisite variety" - from photography and systems to issues of organisational diversity - to three new requisites: *requisite continuity*, *requisite connectivity*, and *requisite authority*. The three requisites cannot be framed as simple order generating rules, but might yield a kind of equivalent heuristic process. When combined with the protocols of unifying purpose, these requisites could enable local levels to generate new forms resonant with overall aims, while minimising negative or stifling controls.

The approach is congruent with how complexity sees organisations co-evolving: as independent agents interact to rules (their own and others), events, and environments;

as impetus comes from points inside the organisation (top or bottom) and outside the organisation (especially given the porous boundaries of partnering with suppliers and outsourced researchers). We see the resulting challenge as how to adapt continuously in open-ended fashion between hypercontrol (immobility) and free autonomies (chaos). This we focus as the need for *requisite continuity*. If an organisation has been too long at the edge of chaos, then stability will be required to reduce the risk of atrophy or extinction. Interventions then direct attention towards ways of ensuring continuity, whether of personnel, of location, of brand, or, of operating procedures. At the other end of the continuum, if an organisation has been stable in key features for a considerable time, then action could be taken to push it closer to the edge of chaos, in order to trigger innovation and the adaptations necessary to compete in an uncertain and changing environment. Of course, it must be emphasised that these interventions are far from risk-free and can reactivate the third C, catastrophe (e.g., Enron; Lehman Brothers), in the lineage that passes on through chaos to complexity, as well as the possibility of a new emergent higher order organisation (e.g., Edinburgh Fringe Festival).

The second key is requisite connectivity. How adequate is the organisation's communication? Are there enough links in terms of breadth and depth to enable sustained innovation and adaptation? Are there significant (hierarchical) exclusions or distracting channels (tearoom gossip)? Such issues can be addressed methodology (e.g., through communication audits, learning histories, narrative inquiry, and network theory). The third and final key is requisite authority. Following on from Argyris' work, leaders and managers need to test if enough people are taking enough authority for their key responsibilities and for the health of the organisation as a whole. In effect, this offers a smaller fractal of the overarching strategy of smart surrender. In further evaluating these ideas, the paper will ground them through a case study, including strategic outsourcing, with the hope of better informing the timing and intensity of effective practitioner (non)interventions.

The project also aims to benefit research by re-orienting scholars away from a predominant research tendency to overemphasise previous arcs of change rather than the attending closely to emerging trends in the present. In the current environment of rapid discontinuity, Taleb's (2008) Black Swan Events, are typically unexpected occurrences that emerge from the periphery with dramatic consequences for individuals, organizations and wider society. Organisations need new ways of intelligently directing organisations. Academic attachments to previous protocols from the sciences of certainty are obscuring, rather than clarifying, sustainable pathways. These routes too are uncertain, and, perhaps, radically divergent (with capacities ranging from catastrophe to self-organising transformations) ways ahead. But they are simultaneously holistic enough, and open enough to new science, and to philosophy informed by more than economic fundamentalism, so have the potential to let Ghoshal's ghost rest in peace.