

Complexity Theory and Change Management in Sport Organisations

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Introduction

Complexity theory is receiving increasing attention in both academic and popular literature as a potential management tool (Dent, 1999; Marion & Bacon, 2000). As momentum gathers surrounding its popularity in practical management, complexity theory is poised to become an influential paradigm for the future (Tetenbaum, 1998). This paper employs emergence, a key principle of complexity theory as a construct to explain some forms of change observed during the analysis of change in Australian sport organisations. Although several well-established theories including institutional theory, population ecology and strategic choice theory proved advantageous in revealing the nature of change attempts within a sample of eight case organisations, some changes remained inexplicable. Upon further investigation, these changes were observed to have properties associated with emergence, a principle dimension of complexity. Several examples are presented to explicate the emergent behaviour. This paper presents evidence to suggest that complexity theory has utility as an alternative perspective explaining certain types of organisational change.

Method

The population for the study included Australian National Sport Organisations (NSOs), State Sport Organisations (SSOs) and clubs participating in national league competitions. Theoretical sampling was used to select the cases in a method consistent with that proposed by Strauss and Corbin (1990). Three organisational members were interviewed for each of the eight cases created by the combinations of theoretical categories, including the senior operational managers, a junior paid employee or volunteer and a member of the board of management. The purpose of this selection was to create diversity in seniority across the organisational sample and to establish a consensus or 'triangulated' view of change practices. As a result, 24 interviews of approximately one hour in duration were conducted. Interviews were transcribed verbatim prior to the three phase open, axial and selective coding system consistent with the methods described by Strauss and Corbin (1990).

Results

This paper records an attempt to ascertain the explanatory power of complexity theory, and in particular emergent behaviour, on hitherto unexplained and apparently unintentional change occurring in a sample of Australian sport organisations. Several examples illustrated the presence of emergence, where this change could be traced back to a trigger event. Present in these changes were several important features: First, triggering decisions or actions were difficult to isolate and it was impossible to predict which would cascade into significant change events. Secondly, the study of perception of individual organisational members, irrespective of their position, was inadequate to explain why the emergent change occurred. For example, individual sport fans who were quietly spoken could become 'raging lunatics' when placed in certain circumstances. Thirdly, while there is an element of randomness in the chaos of organisational activity, some change was seen to come about that was unmistakably progressive, and yet was still essentially unintentional. Finally, some of the emergent change was quashed by senior management who viewed it as undermining.

Discussion

The examples provided in this paper illustrate a level of self-organisation that undermines explanations of random change. However, it is worth acknowledging Cohen's (1999) caution, that sometimes complex system approaches fit data too easily. Nevertheless, this paper employs complexity theory as a device to explain some unclear behaviour. The findings here do not diminish the importance of other theoretical perspectives for explaining change. Indeed a consortium of conventional theories goes a long way toward illuminating both intentional change and change arising from unintentional and unforeseen stimuli.

However, complexity theory has added an additional dimension to our range of analytical options where some forms of change were initially inexplicable.

References

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