

Harnessing the Power of Living Systems' Cycles

**Dianna Wuagneux, Ph.D., Principal
International Center for the Advancement of Adult Learning
P.O. Box 1545 Main Street
Castleton, Vermont 05735 USA
1-7-802-468-2539 phone
1-7-802-468-2583 fax
icaal@msn.com**

The old axiom "You can't change the wind, but you can adjust your sails" is not only a solid piece of "changing-one's-attitude" wisdom, it also serves as an excellent metaphor for harnessing, rather than fighting, the power of natural systems place.

There has been a good deal written over the last few years about chaos and complexity theory as they relate to organizations. As a result, many organizations have become familiar with the premise that it is natural, even necessary, that as living systems organizations undergo periods of instability as a part of their development process. In fact, many organizations have incorporated basic systems theory into educational workshops and strategic visioning sessions where these processes are presented as normal, cyclic adjustments that are the foundation of adaptability. Typically, however, while managers and other organizational leaders will acknowledge that, *in theory*, interfering with these processes greatly diminishes flexibility, collaborative spirit, and ingenuity, *in practice* they still find themselves trying not only to regulate, but eliminate cyclic disintegration. While the behavior seems contradictory, it is understandable.

The viability of any organization is defined by interrelationships. The seeming breakdown of these vital relationships is frightening, even when the ultimate advantages and temporary nature of the discomfiting conditions are understood. The difficulty then lies not in the cognitive ability of leaders to grasp the value and necessity of the living systems cycle (LSC), but in the emotional need of those in charge to affect outcomes in order to influence the direction of the flow in such a way as to fulfill a common purpose. It has been supposed that any form of manipulation of the disequilibrium-equilibrium cycle disrupts the LSC defeating its design. I submit that it is a matter of using, rather than interfering with the process. We place limits on potentiality because we are conditioned to think in terms of mechanistic systems that wear down and exhaust their resources. Yet, living systems regenerate themselves.

The benefit of letting LSC run their course include the rebirth of a more elastic, participatory organization, then the advantages of learning to use this process to induce *directional* development may well be limitless.

Reception is Perception

The connectedness between spatially separate individuals is based on signals - these signals and their responses sustain the organizational life cycle and vary from one stage of the cycle to the next. The reaction to these signals feeds organizational evolution spiraling through phases from static complacency to dynamic activity. While these bursts of energy punctuated by periods of seeming indifference appear to be spontaneous, they are actually the product of LSC influence, and the degree of influence depends largely on levels of receptivity at any given time. How and when a message is received affects how it is perceived. By gaining a

clearer understanding of LSC in an organizational setting, initiatives can be modified in content, aligned in structure, and planned to coincide with periods when cooperation and collaborative behavior surface. In fact, employing “intentional timing” allows projects to catch hold and ride the energy of the LSC improving the chance of disseminating messages and changing behaviors.

The time when people are most apt to accept new/innovative ideas is early in the cycle when they are stimulated by challenge. In the face of a well-timed challenge, people revert to the survival-based response of group protection by looking for ways to cooperate and collaborate. At this receptive stage, people are more likely to contrive concepts, explore connections, recognize relevance, and share positive emotion than at any other time. These emotions bolster relationships, improve recall, and trigger scenario building, integral to concept formation.

How do you know where you are in the cycle? In the beginning, it's by gut feeling guided by logic. First, set your sights on a group of no more than fifteen people in your organization that already have something in common, such as seeing themselves as peers, or working together on similar projects. Wait for a time when you sense low energy, just after the completion of an exhausting project, for example. Choose an initiative in which all would share equal footing or one where no one in the group has particular expertise. Make it a project with an emotional attachment, perhaps something connected to the institution's mission that everyone already feels a connection to, or better yet, ask the group to come up with such a project.

Without assigning duties to anyone, allow the group to have this as a “pet” project and carry it out in their own way. Encourage creativity. The only parameters being that they all be involved and that they meet a set date for implementation of their creation. During the first few weeks, there will be an increase in energy, cooperation and resource sharing. It is during the peak of this activity when other, focused, short-term projects should be introduced to the group. Their desire and willingness to share ideas and support one another through this phase will spill over and carry through not only demonstrated in terms of productivity and efficiency, but in the vastly more important areas of improved internal relationships, communication and organizational value.