1. Managing for Peak Performance
Interactive Session

TOWARD PEAK PERFORMANCE IN MANAGEMENT PRACTICE–
INSIGHTS FROM THE COMPLEXITY, COGNITIVE SCIENCES AND
CATE BLANCHETT

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ABSTRACT

Rita McGrath suggests that management needs to shift into a new era–the era of empathy and she has challenged scholars to put all of the questions about management back on the table so that the search for answers could begin as soon as possible. This paper argues that many of the answers may lie in the work of the complexity and cognitive sciences over the last fifty years and supports her contention that management should be moving into an era of empathy. Cate Blanchett’s comments about her approach to character in her acting and to her approach to management while Co-Artistic Director and CEO of Sydney Theatre Company suggest an instinctive alignment with those approaches.

INTRODUCTION

Professor Rita McGrath has called for a new era of management to supersede the eras of efficiency and expertise that have characterised management practice and education from the Industrial Revolution to the present day (McGrath, 2014). The wide-spread criticism of the persistent business as a machine metaphor and its promotion of inequality, profits only for shareholders over a broader set of stakeholders at the expense of employees/ customers must be urgently addressed. In the era of empathy we need to figure out what it would be like to manage “when work is done through networks rather than lines of command, when “work” itself is tinged with emotions, and when individual managers are responsible for creating communities for those who work with them” (2014). In the seemingly different world of acting and theatre, Cate Blanchett has described her profession as a compassionate one that allows actors and audiences to sit with a set of concerns related to the characters in a production as they relate to each other. In both her acting and her role as CEO of Sydney Theatre Company she emphasises the importance of conversation and being humble to the task at hand (Darling, 2007; Summers, 2014). Good conversations are empathetic ones where we expand each other’s perspectives through sharing our ideas and stepping into each other’s shoes, sitting with each other’s concerns. This modus operandi is not characteristic of the
more traditional approaches to management practice but if McCarthy’s era of Empathy is a worthy goal perhaps it is something worth pursuing.

McGrath calls for all management theories to be put back on the table for re-examination in pursuit of this goal. In doing so, we should keep Ghoshal’s (2005) warnings about bad management theories destroying good management practice in mind. The “logic of falsification, which is so very essential for the epistemology of positivism, is very hard to apply with any degree of rigor and ruthlessness in the domain of social theories” (2005, p.86). Positivist epistemology is a legacy of the Enlightenment and much of the underpinning ideas from the Enlightenment still dominate our public discourse. These include: we can understand reality in an objective and linear way; such understanding requires the reduction of things to their constituent parts; mind is separate from the body and thus, we can conduct our investigations objectively and only biases or prejudices can prevent us from such objectivity; analysis should lead us to causal connections – every effect has a cause which once determined will allow us to know that thing predictably such that if observe $x$ we should be able to determine what it will do in the future; we have full access to our own thoughts and those thoughts fit the world as it is. While these ideas dominate our public discourse, they were challenged from the outset by a variety of theorists including William James, George Herbert Mead, John Dewey, Husserl, the post-modernists and systems theorists and by the Interpretivist tradition in research. McCarthy’s idea of empathy is similar to Max Weber’s concept of *verstehen* or empathetic understanding, which is the cornerstone of interpretivism (Weber, 1947). While interpretivism has a long tradition in management research it seems it may also have a place in management practice. The evidence from the complexity and cognitive sciences suggests this may well be the case.

**COMPLEXITY**

Complexity theories seek to understand the how parts of systems give rise to collective behaviour and how collective behaviour impacts on the system and how the systems interact
with their environment and how adaptation occurs. Such systems are referred to as Complex Adaptive Systems (CAS). There are multiple complexity theories from disciplines as divergent as biology to computer science complexity approaches which provide a conceptual framework or way of seeing the world (Mitleton-Kelly, 2003) In organisational studies organisations are characterised as CAS (Cooksey, 2001, 2003; Lissack, 1997) or Complex Evolutionary Systems (Mitleton-Kelly, 2003) or Complex Responsive Process (Stacey, 2011; Stacey, Griffin, & Shaw, 2000). They share several key features.

Complex Adaptive Systems are non-linear, non-determinative, non-predictive and emergent which challenges the Enlightenment ideas of linear causality, predictability and analysis. They are sensitive to initial conditions – a small input may result in a huge output or nothing at all; cause and effect are ambiguous and not easily isolated thus, predictability with any real certainty is impossible. Breaking these systems into their constituent parts will not assist us in understanding the behaviour of the system because behaviour emerges from within the system itself and not from any single constituent piece. Self organization happens when an emergent behaviour has the effect of changing the structure or creating a new one in the absence of some kind of formal authority. Complex behaviour arises from inter-relationship, interaction between elements in a system and with the environment in which that system sits. The behaviour of the group emerges from the collective interactions of all of the individuals. In responding to their own local contexts the parts of a complex system can cause the system as a whole to display emergent patterns at a collective level. Complex systems adapt and evolve and create new order and coherence without necessarily requiring an overarching grand design (Stacey et al., 2000). They can create different types of hierarchies and relationships to achieve different goals.

In complex systems feedback is either balancing or reinforcing. Negative feedback balances and moderates and brings the system back into equilibrium. Positive feedback drives change by creating some kind of short-term instability that pushes the system far from equilibrium. Small changes or fluctuations can have very big effects under such conditions. In human
systems this occurs when an organization is pushed well beyond established norms (Cooksey, 2001, 2003).

In terms of human social interaction Stacey prefers to think of complexity as Complex Responsive Processes (Stacey et al., 2000), (Stacey, 2007, 2010) arguing that we should think of organisations as “patterns of interaction between people that are iterated in each present” wherein…”relating can be understood as acts of communication, relations of power, and the interplay between peoples’ choices arising in acts of evaluation” (2007, pp. 298-299). Our acts of communication occur through our language, the expression of our mind, which emerges from our social interactions. Following Mead, Stacey argues humans have sophisticated processes of cooperation and the primary tool for this is language, though all It is through language that an elaborate mind develops. It is impossible to have a mind in advance of the vocal public interaction that typifies human communication. Our self-consciousness requires others whose standpoint we take in viewing ourselves. Self is a social construction emerging in relationships with others (Stacey et al., 2000). How that manifests in terms of neurology is becoming more apparent via developments in the cognitive sciences over the last forty years.

COGNITIVE SCIENCES

Cognitive Science encompasses work across several disciplines including linguistics, psychology, neurology, computer science and philosophy. Research in this field challenges the Enlightenment ideas about reason being disembodied, fully conscious, unemotional, and apprehending the world as it is objectively. It provides extensive evidence that we actually think and reason in a way that is “mostly unconscious (98%)” (Lakoff, 2010, p. 72). Most of our thinking occurs while we are ‘consciously’ going about our business and it is quite difficult for us to access our thoughts. Thinking/reasoning is not dispassionate. We need emotion to make decisions and people with damage to their emotional centres cannot determine which choice they make will make them satisfied or make others satisfied.
Our brains have mirror neurons – the same neurons will fire in our brain if we perform an act such as picking up a cup, if we see someone else pick up a cup, if we remember, imagine or dream about picking up a cup (Gallese & Lakoff, 2005). Mirror neurons are also connected to our emotional centres- if we see someone laughing it will bring a smile to our face, or if we see someone crying we feel distressed for them. This is the basis of empathy- it is physically present in our brains. Thinking/reasoning is not disembodied/abstract and the results of our thinking do not fit the world as it is. We apprehend it subjectively through our moto-sensory experiences and map it accordingly.

A critical part of our cognition occurs through neural exploitation – the adaptation of the sensory-motor brain mechanisms to take on roles in reason and language while maintaining their original functions (Feldman, 2006; Gibbs, 2006). The neurological developments that give rise to our conscious selves begin in-utero and form the basis of our future cognition. We take our moto-sensory experience and build neural maps with it. Those maps are frame based and metaphorical. A frame is a way of organising our experiences. Fillmore (in Feldman, 2006, pp. 200-201) observed that to really understand relationships between related words you had to understand the relationships between words. You had to understand the structure underlying the conceptual setting. We have frames for what our world looks like, we have frames for concepts like a classroom, a hospital and in it there are semantic roles. For example, a classroom consists of a teacher and students, tables and chairs, a board for writing on, perhaps an AV display, we might have added internet connections to that, so they evolve with relevant new data but your frame for a class room would not have a surgeon performing an operation in it. The idea of a surgeon cannot exist without all of the concepts that attach to that role – surgical instruments, a surgical theatre, a hospital and so on.

At a deeper level we have cognitive metaphors (Gibbs, 2008; Lakoff, 1987, 2012; Lakoff & Johnson, 2003). We tend to think of metaphors as literary devices (such as ‘the dancer was a wisp of smoke moving across the stage’) but they are also neurological. They are frame to frame mappings across conceptual domains. Linguistic metaphors are the expression of those
conceptual mappings. Our first (primary) metaphors arise from correlations between co-occurring embodied experiences such as affection is warmth, happy is up. ‘Affection is warmth’ is formed when a baby experiences being held affectionately and feeling warm in that embrace. The two neural firings eventually form a circuit after many repeated experiences.

Primary metaphors tend to be cross-cultural and so as children we have learned hundreds of primary metaphors even before we have acquired language. As we acquire language its expression demonstrates the linkages back to primary metaphors such as ‘she has such a warm personality or his demeanour was icy’ tie to the ‘affection is warmth’ primary metaphor. We move from literal expression from our moto-sensory experience, such as ‘I see Daddy’ to ‘I see what you mean’. Our emotional metaphors reveal the physical impacts of those emotions – ‘I was so angry, my blood was boiling’ (Lakoff, 1987). Primary metaphors combine with each other and with frames enabling us to develop more complex conceptual metaphors (Lakoff & Johnson, 1999).

From a complexity perspective, frames and metaphors could be understood as manifestations of the self-organising principle, where learning, at the discrete neuronal level, coalesces into higher-level meaningful representations which then provide frameworks into which new perceptions, new knowledge may be integrated, judged and reshaped. From an organisational perspective, complexity also adds the richness of situating our cognition within other complex adaptive systems, as captured in Figure 1.

Those activities engage us in learning, in making meaning to progress organisational activities towards organisational objectives. How can meaning be made in such complex environments?

According to Lakoff, the bridge between existing knowledge or understanding and new ideas is imagination (Lakoff, 2012). To be able to share an idea with someone they need to already have a neural circuit for understanding it. There has to be something present neurally that the idea can attach to as it were or else there is no possibility of the other person being able to
understand at all. Empathetic conversation enables people to express how each sees the world, to voice their frames and metaphors and gain understanding by finding some frame or metaphor that is common to both. This is about hooking into pre-existing frames in the other person’s neurology and can allow them a hook into the conversation and a thread on which to weave mutual understanding. If no such frame can be found it is unlikely that a mutual understanding can be achieved or built. The same applies in learning contexts. Such hooks seem to come easily when we are captivated by a story conveyed brilliantly in a great theatre production or movie. Many such productions have featured Oscar winning actress Cate Blanchett, who also was Co-Artistic Director and CEO of Sydney Theatre Company for six years. Is there something in the work of acting that can inform management practice?

**CATE BLANCHETT**

In her time at Sydney Theatre Company from 2008-2013 the company grew from a poor financial position to a $32 Million dollar organisation. Within that organisation, the $5 Million dollar Greening the Wharf project instigated by Cate and co-Artistic Director and CEO, Andrew Upton, was completed. On being asked to describe her approach to management she said “the first we did was take the desk out of the office. We thought it’s easier to have a conversation with people where you don’t have that traditional business relationship. It’s a creative conversation” (Summers, 2014). Without having worked in an organisation, let alone run one it would seem that the work of being involved in film and theatre production may have been instructive.

Blanchett describes the rehearsal process as something to be treated as ‘the first day of school’ and that one has to be humble to the task of starting from a blank slate and allowing the characters and the play to develop organically. “Feedback is prompt and connected to the collective creative work unfolding between them” (Ford, 2008). The play emerges in the rehearsal process through the conversation with the actors, director and technical staff in an open dialogue, in an environment where all are fully committed to putting on the best
production possible. So, they humble themselves to that task. Characters emerge through the rehearsal process and the play emerges through the interaction of all cast and crew. According to actor and director, Robyn Nevin, the work of the director is to "work is in making space for, giving permission for people to explore very personally in the space, without stamping on them" (Darling, 2007). Cate and other actors describe character as something that only emerges in the interplay between the actors and in conversation with the writer, the director and other members of the production in a process that is embodied and largely unconscious (Darling, 2007). The final part of the puzzle comes together when the play is performed in front of a live audience and the audience themselves become a part of the play as they make sense of the characters through the lens of their own frames and metaphors (Darling, 2007).

IMPLICATIONS FOR MANAGEMENT PRACTICE

The rehearsal process as described by Blanchett and others is a complex and non-linear activity of interdependent people who share a common vision or goal to put on the best production possible. The process of developing the play is embodied, empathetic, largely unconscious and only occurs through the social interactions with the others involved in the production. The work of bringing a play to life resonates with the evidence from cognitive sciences about the way we actually think and learn; the process shares much in common with those of Complex Adaptive Systems.

The lack of command and control in the rehearsal process, suggest an alternate approach to management than that described in the average undergraduate textbook, particularly when we are dealing with challenging times. Much of management practice is informed by the instrumental and mechanistic approaches of management texts that emphasise planning, organising, staffing, coordinating and controlling. McGrath asks “if what is demanded of managers today is empathy (more than execution, more than expertise) ….what new roles and organisational structures make sense” how would we manage performance and what would it mean for “a leader to function as a pillar”(McGrath, 2014). At the very least, if we start from
an approach underpinned by a set of assumptions informed by the science we are more likely to be successful in our endeavours and we may draw some lessons from the processes of theatre production, a process that shares much with Edmondson’s conception of Teaming. Teaming is the process by which disparate individuals come together to work on specific projects, like a theatre production, or the developing new surgical procedures, or product development and is characterised by a “fluid network of interconnected individuals” working on projects and requires “everyone to remain vigilantly aware of other’s needs, roles and perspectives” and requires “affective (feeling) and cognitive (thinking) skills” which are enabled by distributed leadership” (Edmondson, 2012, p. 2). Cooksey coined the phrase Learnership to describe an organisational state where learning and leading became aspects of every organisational members role rather than leadership being a formal role held by a few key pillars (Cooksey, 2003). The evidence from theatre production suggests that each member of production is learning and leading when called for in an iterative, collaborative, self-organising process toward opening night. The key difference between theatre production and other types of projects of course is that all members of a theatre production are fully invested in putting on the best possible show. It may well be difficult in other organisational settings or teams to be assured of that level of commitment and power relations need to be considered.

If we take seriously the contributions of complexity and the cognitive sciences we will see the merit of managers engaging in empathetic approach with staff in a similar way to an interpretivist researcher. In taking an empathetic stance, in truly listening without judgment a leader or manager or team member is seeking to sit with that person’s set of concerns in terms of some activity, to build a bridge into their understanding, their frames of reference, to enable a shared view to emerge. There is much to explore in this space if McGrath’s new era is to come to bear.
Reference List


Figure 1 (Cooksey, 2003)