

# **Creativity, Imagination and Transformation <sup>1</sup>**

(from *Disruption, Change & Transformation in Organisations: A Human Relations Perspective*)

By Andrew Day

## **Introduction**

This article is based on chapter 11 of my book *Disruption, Change & Transformation in Organisations: A Human Relations Perspective*. In the book I explore the questions of how people respond to, cope with and adapt to sudden, dramatic and disruptive organisational change. My central argument is that we (individuals, groups, organisations and societies) are struggling to adapt as we shift from the industrial into the digital age and as globalisation continues unabated. Since the book was published in December 2019, the global pandemic has further disrupted our lives and escalated our sense of uncertainty. We are fighting to make sense of and to cope with what is happening to us and around us. The situation demands that we adapt and transform organisations and institutions. This calls for creativity, imagination and learning on the part of individual employees and that we develop social systems that support creativity.

## **Creativity, imagination and transformation**

*“Anxiety is the hand maiden of creativity”*

T. S. Eliot

Creativity is a critical characteristic of life and is necessary for its preservation (Capra & Luisi, 2014). Indeed, part of the human condition is our impulse to explore our environments and to be creative. The psychoanalyst Donald Winnicott (1971) believed that it is this capacity for creativity that makes the individual feel that life is worth living. Expressing our creative potential gives us a sense of vitality.

Permanence, equilibrium and stability is not a natural state of life. Organisations, like living systems, adapt to their environments. If they simply repeat what worked in the past, they decline, degenerate and eventually die. Some level of transformation and change is therefore critical to the long-term survival of organisations.

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The creative instinct lies at the heart of organisation transformation. As it requires the:

- discovery of something new and different about ourselves and our worlds
- the capacity to imagine different outcomes and new possibilities
- identification of where we place limits on our perceptions and our ability to act, and
- exploration of the consequences of removing these limits.

At a psychological level, this demands a shift in our inner world, our beliefs and assumptions about ourselves and others. At a sociological level, it reconfigures the social norms and assumptions that govern how we organise ourselves.

### **Creative potential, hope and anxiety**

Our ability to *imagine* alternative futures is at the heart of the creative process. A creative tension arises when the present, as we experience it, is different to the future we imagine (Fritz, 1989). This generates the energy that is necessary for transformations. For instance, I am currently working with a leading UK Charity that is transforming itself from a relatively hierarchical and static organisation that is organised around several legacy sites and services to become a more flexible and digital organisation that is organised as a network and delivers its services in partnership with local and national partners. At the heart of the transformation lies the leadership team's capacity to imagine a very different future that is grounded in the needs of their customers. Realising it however requires everyone to think, act and relate to each other very differently.

Imagining a vivid, realistic and desirable yet alternative future is important because people act into the future they imagine. For instance, if design engineers in a car company envisage a future made up of driverless, electric cars, they start to act differently in the present than if they imagine a future that is not much different to today. This creative tension opens up a desire to learn and motivates us unconsciously to strive for our desired future. Many change efforts fail to engage people because they are based on rational-logical plans that do not capture people's imagination or help them to connect to their emotional experience in the present.

Whenever we visualise possibility, both excitement and anxiety are present, as acts that matter to us are necessarily grounded in anxiety. Anxiety, however, signifies that we are ready to learn (Perls & Hefferline, 1951) and reveals the 'the possibility of freedom' (Kierkegaard, 2015). However, we fear stepping beyond our limits into the unknown and try to evade anxiety. Change means old patterns need to dissolve for new ones to emerge. Creative acts therefore also incur loss. And loss is painful and disorienting. For many people, the pain of loss is too much for them to bear and they respond by doing everything in their powers to hold onto the past or what is known. Their anxiety constricts them and lead them to choose not to move forward (May, 1977). Their thinking becomes concrete and rigid (Segal, 1974). This impairs their creative capacities. They fall back onto following rules and obeying authority, real or imagined, to deny their freedom and choice.

If we are to change, we need to step into an unknown possibility. This calls on us to confront our anxiety (Kierkegaard, 2015). To move beyond our limits and to take the risk of the doing something different, the impact of which is unknown. If we are to do this, we need some level of hope that something good will come of it. As without hope we experience despair and helplessness and try to hold onto what we know, even if it is not in our interests. With hope, so long as it is mature and realistic, we experience optimism and a belief that what we desire is attainable. This encourages us to draw on our capabilities and creativity to find ways of overcoming adversity, obstacles or difficulties to realise our goals.

## **Transitional space**

One of the distinctive characteristics of human beings is our consciousness and capacity to reflect on our thoughts and behaviour. By heightening our awareness, we create the possibility that, with others, we can change social systems. Reflection requires us to interrupt what we are doing (technically or practically) to explore its nature, dynamics and worth (Kemmis, 2001). It is only by examining our taken-for-granted assumptions, habits and ideologies that we can consider what kind of collective social action might be necessary to transform things for the better (Kemmis, 2001). It is through reflective dialogue that critical consciousness emerges (Habermas, 1984), which is necessary for collaborative acts of change.

Reflective dialogue emerges in social spaces where the current ways of doing things can be suspended to allow for a playful and creative atmosphere in which new ideas and possibilities can be explored. Winnicott (1953) called such an environment a *transitional space*. This is a psychological space where an individual can play, and imagination and illusion can flourish. Here, the pressures of the immediate demands of reality can be put on hold, to enable people to explore what they are doing together – its nature, dynamics and worth. Transitional spaces help people to work through the tensions of moving from the past to a future that is only partly known and largely imagined (Vansina & Schruijer, 2013) and to process the losses that change incurs. They create an opportunity for people to exercise their imagination by adopting a position between social ‘reality’ and ‘inner’ experience (Winnicott, 1971).

One method of creating a transitional space is the process of a ‘group review’ (Bridger, 2001) whereby the business agenda is suspended to allow space for a group to explore how they are working together and relating to their environment. In a complex project, this might involve bringing relevant stakeholders together to talk about how a project is progressing and how this reflects how they are relating to each other and working together.

## **Dialogue**

In dialogue a group is able to suspend judgement and to be receptive to different perspectives. This reduces a group’s anxiety and its regressive tendencies, enabling it to retain its capacity to think and act creatively. The quality of dialogue influences both the quantity and richness of information that is shared between people. When people from diverse backgrounds and different parts of a system are brought together, this also amplifies both the quality and quantity

of information that is potentially available to a group. As people think together, they are more able to see how they are connected and part of wider patterns and dynamics in a system.

The higher the level of trust and psychological safety that exists within a group, the more individuals are willing to share information and insights that they have been withholding, such as fears, resentments, controversial observations or unconventional ideas. People need to feel they can express themselves without judgement or risk of attack from others. This is encouraged when a group feels safe and its environment feels dependable and secure. Winnicott (1971) called this a 'holding environment'. This is a space where paradoxically there is sufficient reliability, order and dependability for disturbance, uncertainty and movement to occur. The presence of a consultant or facilitator who takes responsibility for the process can help create the conditions that enable dialogue and creative thinking.

### ***Regressive tendencies***

Bringing people together however has its risks. Being in a group, even a small one, can trigger considerable anxiety as individuals struggle with issues such as control, rejection, judgement, acceptance and recognition. As a group becomes larger, levels of anxieties tend to increase and become harder to contain. As it regresses, a group loses its capacity to make reasoned decisions. If anxiety gets too overwhelming, a 'perverse space' (Fischer, 2012) can develop, where people or sub-groups become so frustrated and scared that they blame others and become aggressive. This leads to splits and fragmentation between individuals and groups. Persecutory aggressor–victim dynamics emerge, fuelled by hostile projections, in which 'others' are seen to be 'bad' and 'the problem'. Ultimately, this leads to mutually destructive conflict and outcomes. Alternatively, groups can deal with anxiety by avoiding 'reality' so they do not have to encounter what is causing them to feel anxious. They may pursue hopelessly optimistic ideas or place constraints on their conversations. When avoiding their anxieties, a group's exchanges remain superficial and on familiar, safe territory. Rather than confronting difficult issues or dilemmas, the group colludes to focus their attention on topics and subjects that feel safe. Their conversations become stale and mundane as conflicts, disagreements and emotions are evaded.

### ***Creating a transitional space***

To facilitate transformative processes, therefore, we need to take care to establish social spaces in which people feel sufficiently safe to be able to be vulnerable, to hear others and to acknowledge difficulties. This is most likely to emerge when the group experiences a sense of a shared purpose in meeting together, 'good enough' trust and clear boundaries of time, place and participation. The space itself needs to:

- Be sanctioned to give it legitimacy and acceptance within the wider system
- Focus on addressing issues of mutual concern to those present
- Be held in a physical space that enables free-flowing communication, privacy and prevents impingements from the external world

- Create a climate of safety to allow those present to express themselves, including their fantasies, assumptions and emotional experiences
- Provide time for free and uninhibited reflection, discovery and sharing of insight and ideas
- Have minimal yet sufficient structure to enable free-flowing conversation and expression whilst not creating excessive anxieties around control and inclusion
- Facilitate the expression of conflict to help people work through the tension between holding on to the past and moving on
- Allow individuals to feel heard, to find their own meaning and not be subjected to ideology or rational arguments as to why they must change, and
- Give individuals a free and informed choice (Argyris, 1970) to decide for themselves the actions and changes they wish to make.

There are a range of methods and approaches that have been developed for creating these conditions in small (Isaacs, 1999) and large groups (Bunker & Alban, 1996), such as Future Search (Weisbord & Janoff, 2010) and Open Space (Owen, 2008).

### **Experimentation, muddling through and reviewing**

Complexity theory (Waldrop, 1992; Stacey, 2003) helps us to understand how change evolves in unpredictable ways that we cannot fully comprehend as it is happening. Because complex systems change in unexpected ways, we need to act and pay close attention to what happens. Kurt Lewin famously said: 'you cannot understand a system until you try to change it'. By this, he meant that intervention or action was necessary to disturb a social system in order to learn about it. This simple idea was the basis of Lewin's method of action research. To bring about change we need to work in cycles of action and review, helping people to study the impact of their behaviour and to modify it. Change is therefore a process of experimentation, learning and improvisation in response to feedback. Muddling through with an intent, perhaps, rather than a result of rational planning and implementation. All attempts therefore to bring about change are experiments that create the possibility that those involved can learn about how to change the organisation. In a similar manner, methodologies for working in dynamic environments, such as agile methods, rapid proto-typing or design thinking, encourage people to work in short iterative cycles of design and testing with customers or users to develop new solutions.

Reviewing is central to the process of change. This step is, however, very often missed. People's attention tends to be directed towards tangible actions or changes rather than on learning. Regular, disciplined and rigorous learning reviews, however, are critical to the process of transformation. They help those involved to make sense of change and identify intended and unintended consequences of their interventions. The process of reviewing needs to attend to both the 'task-work' and how people work together on the task (Bridger, 2001). It is a process of making sense of experience and involves looking back at events, interactions and outcomes to support future actions. Typical questions that need to be explored include:

- What did we do?
- What impact did it have – what changed and what did not?
- What is our understanding of what enabled change?
- How did we work together?
- What are we learning?
- What do we therefore need to stop doing, start doing or do more of?

The process needs to encourage a climate of reflection and learning rather than judgement and evaluation. Otherwise, it can easily become a persecutory space in which those involved find excuses, blame others or attack each other. Reviewing can help sustain the process of change and transformation by providing support to those who are attempting to affect change (Vansina & Vansina-Cobbaert, 2008).

## Conclusion

Disruption opens up the possibility for creativity, learning and transformation. To many of us, it often feels forced upon us, yet change and adaptation are central to living. We are constantly adapting to events and life itself is a creative process of adjustment. The gap between our desires for the future and our current experiences creates a tension that generates both anxiety and a creative potential. When we are willing to step into the unknown and face our anxieties, we grow, develop and transform. We stretch and challenge ourselves and in doing so, learn something about ourselves, our assumptions and our environments.

Disruptive change therefore offers us the opportunity for creative self-expression and self-development. Such growth promoting processes are nurtured in environments that encourage people to connect, experiment and to take personal risks without fear of judgement or punishment. If, however, the environment generates fear and anxiety, people quickly lose their capacity to think, to learn and be creative. In sum, an organisation's adaptive capacity rests on its ability to cultivate the conditions that allow employees to realise their creative potential.

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