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Review of H. Ulrish & G.J.B. Probst, *Self-Organization and Management of Social Systems: Insights, Promises, Doubts, and Questions*

Disciplines

Communication | Social and Behavioral Sciences

Self-Organization and Management of Social Systems: Insights, Promises, Doubts, and Questions

H. ULRICH and G.J.B. PROBST (eds.)

Volume 26 in: Springer Series in Synergetics, Springer, Berlin, 1984, ix+ 155 pages, DM65.00

This book consists of twelve original papers from what must have been a fascinating conference on management and self-organization. The first five concern principles of self-organization in a variety of fields and the remaining explore these ideas in various management contexts. All are united in search for the roots of a little understood phenomenon.

The phenomenon in question is self-organization. To this reviewer, its importance stems from the difficulty our western causal thinking has with phenomena that are either circular-causal or arise seemingly spontaneously. This difficulty is reflected in contemporary corporate culture which associates management with leadership, with the top of a control hierarchy, and with the coordination of people towards a purpose that may not be theirs to begin with. In this culture, self-organization can easily become the antithesis of management, the emergence of leaderless organization and the absence of purposive control. The threat is real but the attractiveness of this antithesis is fuelled by the experiences of many failures of hierarchical forms of organization, by the incentives people derived from participating in directing social processes, and by the recognition that good managers often arise from, are responsible to, and are even directed by the people they claim to lead and can, hence, not be separated from them. The book explores these challenges to meaningful management.

To delimit the concern, R. Riedle's contribution invokes the image of a cartoon film in which we see bricks arising of their own accord, turning and arranging themselves into a wall, a gate-house or a castle. We realize that the castle was indeed one of the potentialities present in the pile of bricks, but since there are so many potentialities, it was impossible to foresee them. In this account, one cannot escape the frequent reference to seeing or observing and indeed, the difference in organization between the pile of bricks and the castle must be seen to begin with and then explained. The problem with self-organizing systems is that they defy explanations in terms of external determinisms (causes) on the one side and pre-destination (final conditions) on the other (after all the not-yet existing castle could not have organized the bricks). If such explanations were warranted, the system would be other-organized and since such explanations are the received view, some authors have flatly denied self-organization to exist. However, if self-organization is a realistic phenomenon, the direction of the process cannot be discerned from the outside of that system but resides in the properties and motivations of the components that organize themselves interactively.

Naturally, these issues border on epistemological concerns and several contributors to the book, notably H. von Foerster and F. Varela consider these from a constructivist perspective. This perspective is appropriate because, unable to explain self-organization from the outside, the observer of such systems must get inside, involved, and thus becomes part of the system he or she describes including his own actions in that description. H. von Foerster who organized, what was probably the first conference on self-organization some 25 years ago, described several principles particularly from autology and recursive computation.

Using examples from physics, biology and sociology, the contributions by H. Haken, H. von Foerster, F. Varela, P.B. Checkland and P.M. Hejl discuss self-organization in the context of systems theory and systems methodology. In these discussions, the polarity between an emphasis on autonomy versus on control surfaces in numerous forms, for example, in F. Varela's definition of a living system as autopoietic or self-producing as opposed to allopoietic systems whose genesis relies on processes other than embedded within it, or in the difference between operationally closed systems which over time converge towards an eigenvalue and operationally open systems which are largely obedient to their environment. This difference is also reflected in the difference between considering managers as part of a system or organizing it from the top or from outside. P.M. Hejl further clarifies the issues by differentiating self-organization from self-maintenance, self-reference and syn-reference and exploring the recursive explanations giving rise to them.

The gist of the book is of course devoted to (self-)management of social organization. H. Ulrich considers it a largely misunderstood social function. F. Malik and G.J.B. Probst want to see it as an evolutionary process of social interaction. P. Daehler explores the organismic metaphors governing the understanding of social systems, and both F. Malik and G.J.B. Probst each write afterthoughts from a systems and a cybernetic perspective respectively.

The value of the book is two-fold. It makes a great number of ideas from fields other than management science, notably from cybernetics, available, and opens with these many doors signaling a shift in perspectives on management. Let me sketch some issues that might invite potential readers to go to this source and explore these for themselves. The shifts I see are:

<i>from</i>	<i>to</i>
organization by design	self-organization
hierarchical forms	heterarchical forms
causal explanations	circular explanations
operationally open systems	operationally closed systems
control	self-determination
management by authority	management as distributed function
truth by validation	coherence in interaction
allonomy	autonomy

As the subtitle of the book suggests, there are perhaps more questions than answers, but the fact that they are raised is a major step toward broadening our understanding of what seems otherwise so natural.

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