

Right Clothes, Wrong Emperor!

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A week doesn't go by that I don't read or hear a comment about schools that makes so much sense that I wonder why others can't see it as clearly. I'm sure the writer or speaker is as frustrated as I am. In fact, I sometimes feel as the lead character must have in "The Emperor's New Clothes" who was ignored when he told the truth about what he saw -- specifically that there was no "there" there.

As I recall the fable, the Emperor was provided with imaginary clothes and, through peer pressure, made to believe that they were real. Other people went along with it because the Emperor was not necessarily a fool. After all, vivid descriptions of the clothes had been provided by "expert" tailors. They wouldn't lie. And, moreover, the Emperor had seen pictures or read descriptions of how they looked on others.

But for me, here's where that metaphor stops, and my frustration increases. Today, we have many new practices intended to clothe our "barren" schools. The "clothes" are real. They work, and many who have tried on the *separate* pieces have recognized their value. But this time, *there's no Emperor!*

More exactly, the scope and nature of the connected, whole "body" the clothes are designed to fit is not the structure most of the clothing developers have *assumed* it is. The school system, the presumed structure serving as the mannequin for effective practices is proving to be false as we learn more about how people learn and work. We've been using a picture drawn from *assumptions* of why and how organization's work [or *should* work]. From these assumptions we've drawn the "body" in pyramid-shaped charts that seem useful for deploying resources, but which strangely never portray how the organization's work gets done.

How could this have happened? Where did this picture of the "emperor" to be clothed come from?

The Mind as System Maker

With *systemic* change and *systems* thinking proposed as "answers" for many school problems today, it may be timely to ask more fundamental questions about "systems" -- not just what they are -- whole entities with interdependent parts connected to a common outcome -- but also where do they come from?

Our *minds* create them as this purpose-driven, sense-making mechanism continually tries to connect experiences into meaningful knowledge. We then use this connected picture as the frame for purposeful actions.

But in this “system-making” role the mind may “see” two types of systems. First are the ones most often addressed in managing organized work -- those we plan and operate *as* systems. More important, however, may be the second. These are less visible ones we *assume* must be there because we feel their cumulative effects on our lives. If our assumptions about them are wrong, however, there is little hope for escaping their effects.

Unfortunately, we seldom question those assumptions because these “systems” we experience often become “*the system*” -- the enemies we try to fight and “beat.” Today, with the school system usually placed in that category, it follows that many “systemic” change strategies aim to get the system out of the schools, or the school out of the system.

One critical consequence of not questioning assumptions about the scope and nature of the organizational system is that when we consciously try to improve organizations, we might ignore what turn out to be two, “invisible” *natural* systems that can be its key functioning parts. In fact, where quality management has been effective, it has been due to its direct connection to these two hidden systems.

The relationship between these two *natural* systems and the organizational system that contains them might be seen by picturing a school district as made up of three nested “systems.

1. **A *Living system*** -- a human being. At the core of the three nested systems is the basic wiring of this *Living system*’s mind. It supports a process of acting, and then learning from the response. Effective “learning” is always the product of this *interaction*. Along the way, this basic process gets called “trial and error”, “PDSA,” and “continual improvement.”

2. ***Natural systems*** we create when we connect with others for common purposes. These natural communities support *interactions* related to those purposes. Their “wiring” or structure is supported by a base of common social principles.

One might note at this point that leaders don’t have much control over these first two “systems.” The nature and needs of the first is already wired-in. And control in *natural* systems seems to come from the natural laws and principles.

3. ***Organizational systems*** that we purposefully create in order to achieve a purpose.

This obviously is the system over which we have most “control.” Unfortunately, as the only “visible” one it becomes the battlefield for “power and control” conflicts.

Yet, these three nested systems are, by nature, interdependent. It is the *organizational* system’s boundary that provides the coherent structure whose survival is necessary if the other two systems are to survive to accomplish their common work. Sadly, many current “change efforts” set this whole and its parts up as “enemies. ” Deming called it “sub-optimization.” In living systems its called an “auto-immune disease” --the parts battle each other and ultimately destroy the whole.

What does the “Emperor” look like then?

1- We’ve noted how the school system is composed of *living systems* whose minds are already wired in common ways to “make sense,” so that they can

- *Make a difference* in their environment, and *know it*.
- Get *better* at making a difference.
- *Solve the problems and challenges* that get in the way of making that difference.

We’ve also noted that this is “hard-wiring” over which we have no control. Our only choice is to feed and support it so that the “differences” these human “systems” make align to those desired by the organization.

2- These *living systems*, because of their personal needs to make a difference, then connect informally and formally with others into purposeful *natural systems*. Examples are networks, communities of interest or practice, and unions.

3- Now when we look at the planned *organizational system* of the school district, we may no longer see the *mechanical* system we supposed it to be, but instead, a disconnected *natural* system operating dysfunctionally.

And if we look a little deeper, we might be surprised to see that our school district actually contains two *natural systems* [of individuals striving for a common purpose.] One is held accountable for “making a difference” for each child whose life they touch each day; the other held accountable for “making a difference” for every child in the district. In most instances they function separately with few interactive connections between them.

How can this help the Emperor improve?

The frustrated “tailors” of new practices [e.g., foundations, national change projects] will continue to hit the wall of non-sustainability if they keep applying the ‘clothes’ of sound learning practices to an assumed structure that exists only on paper organizational charts. Instead, their change strategies must be driven by schools *natural* systems of work. Until we question those assumptions, school systems will continue to require unnatural behavior of natural learners -- both children and adults.