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Unfolding Meaning
Through Values

eZine #31 - Chaordic Organisational Design

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Keeping you up to date with Values R&D and Events

Chaordic Organisational Design

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Introduction

In a recent workshop I made the comment that the most creative space for a team to work is near the edge of chaos. I also commented that this creative space can only be sustained when team members have a clearly defined and understood shared purpose based on their shared values. In this eZine I overview an approach which enables teams to operate in this highly creative space - order within apparent chaos - the chaordic space.

A Chaordic Design Process

The Chaordic Design Process described here has been adapted from the model used in the transformation of VISA from an organisation of a few hundred members twenty years ago, to its current form which is a highly decentralised, collaborative organisation linking together 20,000 financial institutions, 14 million merchants, and 600 million consumers in 220 countries (Clanon 1999, p. 150).

The Seven Components of the Chaordic Design Process
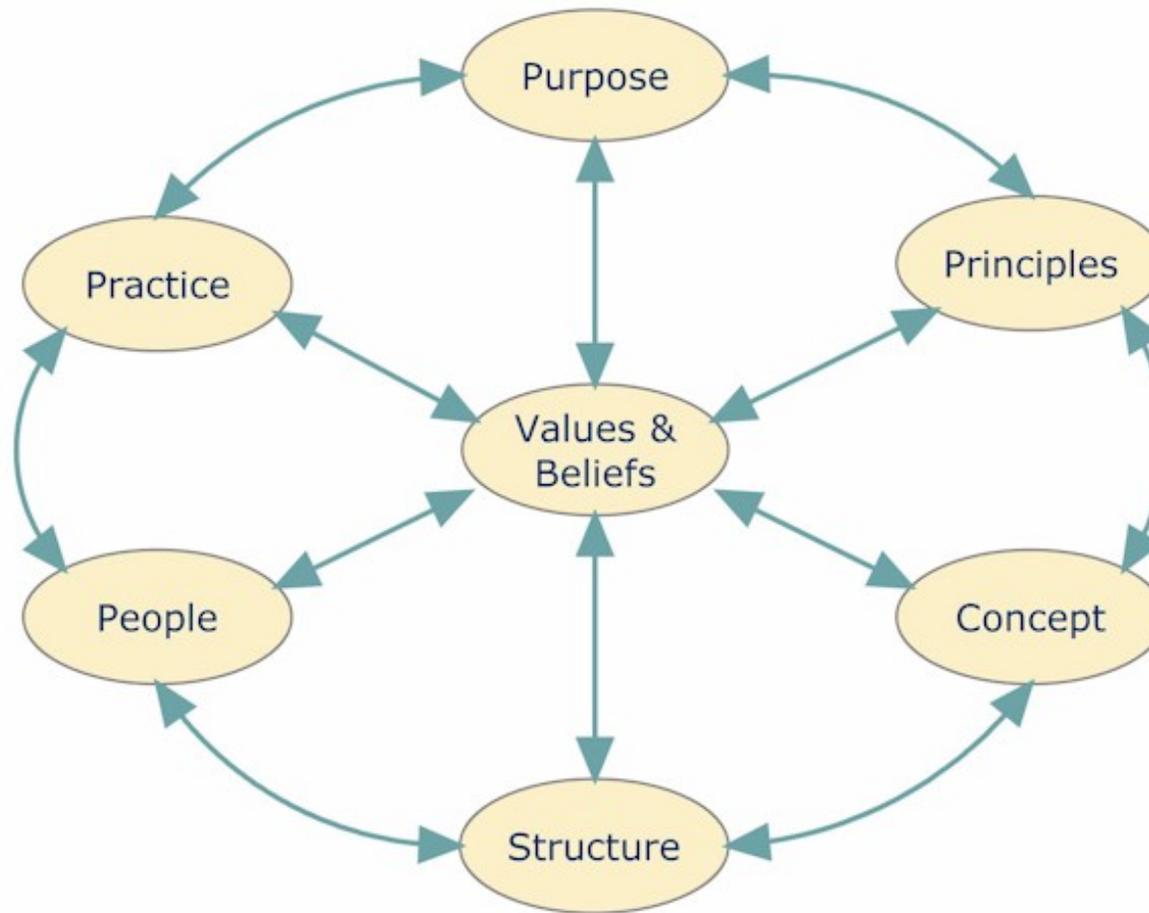
1. **Values & Beliefs.** All people in the organisation need to be consciously aware of their priority values and why these values are important in their life. To facilitate this process, each person takes an inventory of their values, via, for example, the AVI (A Values Inventory). Use of an instrument like the AVI, with its standardized values' definitions, enables the building of a shared language of values within the organisation. It is important to note that people have the values they have and we can only work with them, i.e. go with the flow, we cannot make people take on values that are of no importance to them.

   The objective of any approach to personal or systemic change is to change peoples' values. It is known from neuroscience and complexity theory, that world-views must be altered in order to change people's values Thus the change program has to somehow change people's world-views. To be successful, the program is going to have to wrestle with the very nature of the brain itself, which has a vested interest in preventing the beliefs, which structure it's thinking, to be challenged.

   The *values-system* of any organisation is its *strange attractor*[1] which gives order to what would otherwise be chaos. The values system can only operate as an attractor to create order when members of the organisation are conscious of their priority values, know why the values are important, and have a common language of values.

   Values and beliefs clarification is the most important component of the chaordic design process.

2. **Purpose.** Define with absolute clarity, common understanding, and deep conviction, the organisation's collective *purpose*. This can be accomplished via a series of workshops using CMapTools, repertory grids, appreciative inquiry, etc., to "tease out" the shared meaning lying behind their values.

   This component is the key to motivating people in the workplace - people are highly motivated at work only when *their work* makes *their life* meaningful.

3. **Principles.** Define a body of *principles* against which all structure, decisions, and conduct will be judged i.e. the fundamental shared understandings about the 'nature of things' which will guide people in the organisation. As with *purpose*, these principles can be made explicit through an exploration of the underlying shared values and beliefs of participants in the chaordic design process.

   Because we live in a society we cannot live our values anyway we want. This component of the chaordic design process ensures shared norms, as to "how things are done around here", emerge.

4. **Concept Organisation.** Create a *concept organisation* which is congruent with the expressed values, beliefs, purpose and principles.

5. **Structure.** Operationalise the *purpose, principles*, and *concept organisation* by developing a charter, constitution, code-of-ethics, bylaws, etc. in which all three aspects are embedded as a fundamental web-of-meaning for governance.

6. **People.** Identify and draw together the people and institutions necessary to achieve the purpose in accordance with the values, beliefs, principles and the defined structure.

7. **Practice.** Identify and engage in the *practices* required to realise the purpose - i.e. define organisational strategy and implement all systems, processes and activities necessary to create the organisation ensuring all are congruent with the values, beliefs, purpose, principles and structure.

Concluding Comments

Values alignment, so crucial to an organisation's success cannot be dictated - though I've seen many try!

Through the chaordic design process, values alignment occurs as a natural consequence of the interaction of the component processes - i.e. values alignment becomes an emergent property.[2]

The chaordic design process looks simple, and, up to a point it is. To be successful, people must put *real effort* (as against token effort) into exploring their values and to building the common language of values in their organisation. I'm tempted to say "no pain, no gain", however, it does not have to involve pain, exploring one's values can be a fun, energising exercise - so I'll re-word it, "no values exploration effort, no gain."

Footnotes

1. A magnet, or an individual value, are both point attractors. Place a metal ball near a magnet and you know how it will be attracted to it. Likewise, if a person could have only one priority value in their life, say achievement, you know all their behaviour will be directed towards this one value. In the real world, point attractors can form a system of many point attractors. A system of many point attractors is known as a *strange attractor* because it attracts in strange ways. A system of individual magnets, each of different strengths, will still attract a metal ball towards it, however, there's no way of predicting the path it will follow. Also, in the real world, people have many values, all with different priorities. This their values' system, their personal strange attractor. Only through understanding their values' system are you able to understand their behaviour. Predicting their behaviour from moment to moment is not possible, however, through understanding their values' system, you will be able to predict the general pattern of their behaviours.

2. An emergent property is something you cannot predict from knowledge of the individual components, it's only when the components are combined in a certain way that the property manifests itself. For example, when hydrogen and oxygen are combined in a particular way as to form water (H_2O), the emergent property,

"wetness", manifests itself.

References & Suggested Reading

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