



Introduction

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Organized Impermanence: An Overview

Suppose we took seriously the idea that 'Organization is a temporarily stabilized event cluster' (Chia, 2003, p. 130). What would we notice if we believed that? William James provides an answer:

Whenever a desired result is achieved by the cooperation of many independent persons, its existence as a fact is a pure consequence of the precursive faith in one another of those immediately concerned. A government, an army, a commercial system, a ship, a college, an athletic team, all exist on this condition without which not only is nothing achieved, but nothing is even attempted. A whole train of passengers (individually brave enough) will be looted by a few highwaymen, simply because the latter can count on one another, while each passenger fears that if he makes a movement of resistance, he will be shot before anyone else backs him up. If we believed that the whole car-full would rise at once with us, we should each severally rise, and train-robbing would never even be attempted. There are, then, cases where a fact cannot come at all unless a preliminary faith exists in its coming (James, 1992, p. 474).

(See Quinn and Worline, 2008, for a stunning elaboration of this mechanism in their analysis of the intentional crash of UA flight 93 on 9/11.)

The organized defiance of the coach passengers is a relatively stabilized relational order that is enacted into streaming experience. When social order is acted into 'a sea of ceaseless change' (Chia, 2003, p. 131) that order continues to change but at a slower rate. The shorthand for this transient social order with a slower rate of change is the 'impermanent organization.' Event clusters with slower rates of change tend to consist of a recurrent sequence (e.g. Czarniawska, 2006) held together by a closed, deviation-counteracting feedback loop.

The phrase 'impermanent organization' may seem like a questionable choice of words because it can be read as both trivial and ambiguous. It sounds trivial because it suggests that organizations come and go. It sounds ambiguous because it fails to make clear just what it is that comes and goes. The essays in this book begin to tackle that ambiguity and to do so in a way that makes impermanence less trivial and more significant. If impermanence is inherent in organizations it matters greatly how people try to organize portions of this impermanence and redo these organized portions when they begin to unravel. The argument is that people build recurrence into

portions of ongoing experience by means of texts, conversations, and interdependent activity. The result is that the rate of change in these more organized portions is slowed and therefore feels relatively stable. Change is slowed but it does not stop completely. Recurrent patterns can lose their shape, they can become obsolete, and the pattern can shift each time it is redone.

So what does such organizing look like? A metaphorical answer is found in Taylor and Van Every's (2000) use of Atlan's (1979) contrast between smoke and crystal. As will be elaborated later in this book (p. 33 of Chapter 3 on faith, evidence, and action), the limiting conditions between which organizing unfolds are smoke, which they equate with variety, complexity, and conversations whose outcomes are unpredictable, and crystal, which they equate with repetition, regularity, and texts that stabilize.

Organization resides between smoke and crystal just as it resides between conversation and text. Organization is talked into existence when portions of smoke-like conversation are preserved in crystal-like texts that are then articulated by agents speaking on behalf of an emerging collectivity. Repetitive cycles of texts, conversations, and agents define and modify one another and jointly organize everyday life (Taylor and Van Every, 2000, p. 31).

Atlan's poetic depiction is not that far removed from more recent poetic descriptions that summarize complexity theory. Christopher Langton, in discussing 'the edge of chaos,' remarks that:

. . . right in between the two extremes (of order and chaos), at a kind of abstract phase transition called 'the edge of chaos,' you find complexity, a class of behaviors in which the components of the system never quite lock into place yet never quite dissolve into turbulence either (cited in Waldrop, 1991, p. 293).

Organizing carves out transient order in the space between smoke and crystal. Or stated more compactly, permanence is fabricated. It is fabricated out of streaming experience. Robert Chia (2003) provides one sense of what organizing means in the context of streaming experience:

The idea that organizing could be more productively thought of as a generic existential strategy for subjugating the immanent forces of change; that organization is really a loosely coordinated but precarious 'world-making' attempt to regularize human exchanges and to develop a predictable pattern of interactions for the purpose of minimizing effort; that language is the quintessential organizing technology that enables us to selectively abstract from the otherwise intractable flux of raw experiences; that management is more about the taming of chance, uncertainty, and ambiguity than about choice; and that individuals themselves are always already effects of organizational forces: all these escape the traditional organization theorist. Thus, the broader organizational questions of how social order is achieved; how the flux and flow of our lifeworlds are rendered coherent and plausible; how individual identities are established and social entities created; how taxonomies and systems of classification are produced and with what effects; how causal relations are imputed and with what consequences; how systems of signification are used to arbitrarily carve up reality and with what outcomes; these are left unanswered by traditional organizational theory (Chia, 2003, p. 123).

One way to make the 'generic existential strategy' of organizing more concrete is to propose that organization emerges in communication. Taylor and Van Every (2000) argue that conversation is the *site* for organizational emergence and language is the textual *surface* from which organization is read. Thus, organizations are talked into existence locally and are read from the language produced there. The intertwining of text and conversation turns circumstances into a situation that is comprehensible and that can then serve as a springboard for action.

The resulting network of multiple, overlapping, loosely connected conversations, spread across time and distance, collectively preserves patterns of understanding that are more complicated than any one node can reproduce. The distributed organization literally does not know what it knows until macro-actors articulate it. This ongoing articulation gives voice to the collectivity and enables interconnected conversations and conversationalists to see what they have said, to understand what it might mean, and to learn who they might be.

For an organization to act, its knowledge must undergo two transformations: (1) it has to be textualized so that it becomes a unique representation of the otherwise multiply distributed understandings; (2) it has to be voiced by someone who speaks on behalf of the network and its knowledge (Taylor and Van Every, 2000, p. 243). One has to be careful here not to presume that there is a fixed sequence in which conversing produces texts that then produce action. Frequently, action is the pretext for subsequent conversations and texts that interpret the enacted event. Alternatively, to pose the question in the vernacular of sensemaking, how can we know what we think (texts) until we see (listening) what we've done (conversing)? Communication, language, talk, conversation, and interaction are crucial sites in organizing. Phrases such as 'Drop your tools,' 'We are at take-off,' 'If I don't know about it, it isn't happening,' 'This virus looks like St Louis Encephalitis,' 'Our pediatric heart cases are unusually complex,' and 'These fingerprints are a close enough match to the prints at the Madrid commuter train bombing,' all represent textual surfaces constructed at conversational sites where people make sense of prior actions in ways that constrain subsequent actions.

The resulting picture of impermanence and organization looks something like this:

We perceive the processes of organization to be a restless searching to fix its structure through the generation of texts, written and spoken, that reflexively map the organization and its preoccupations back into its discourse, and so, for the moment, produce regularity. . . . It is the existence of such texts and the text-worlds they constitute that makes the organization visible and tangible to people (Taylor and Van Every, 2000, p. 325).

'Restless searching' (in an early draft I mistakenly (?) typed 'reckless') and 'generation of texts' both presume that action is a force on conversations and texts. If cognition lies in the path of the action, then texts and conversations also lie in its path.

The preceding line of analysis is a composite of several familiar ideas. Most obvious is the affinity with several ideas in pragmatism. To depict impermanent organizing is to presume that people have agency, that there is an ongoing dialectic between continuity and discontinuity from which events emerge, that humans shape their circumstances, and that minds and selves emerge from action (Maines, 1991, p. 1532). Frequent citations to the work of William James and John Dewey will attest to the pragmatic grounding of this

argument. Discussions of organizing that take the form of a garbage can (e.g. Cohen, March, and Olsen, 1972), temporary system (Meyerson, Kramer, and Weick, 1995), a site for self-organizing (e.g. Kramer, 2007), and an impermanent collaboration (Ferriani, Corriado, and Boschetti, 2005), all presume ongoing flows of experience punctuated by moments of relative order. The notion of 'impermanence' is prominent in Eastern psychology and philosophy, as is apparent in our discussions of mindful organizing in Chapters 6 and 7. Impermanence in Eastern thought 'is the quality of experience that everything is shifting, going to pieces, slowly dissolving, rising and falling, and that moment-to-moment experience is all there is' (p. 93 in Chapter 6).

In the face of all of this shifting, dissolving, and discontinuity, people are not passive. They enact as well as search for anchors. They anchor by means of sensemaking, as we discuss in chapters on the properties of sensemaking (Chapter 8), doubt as a trigger for sensemaking (Chapter 15), information overload as both the occasion and the product of sensemaking (Chapter 5), enactment as a means of structuring flux (Chapter 11), and an example of collective sensemaking grounded in efforts by the Centers for Disease Control to make sense of the strange virus that was eventually recognized as West Nile Virus (Chapter 4). People also anchor by means of recurrent processes, as we discuss in chapters on distributed organization at NASA and how that distribution hindered prevention of the Columbia shuttle tragedy (Chapter 7), systems that are implemented to coordinate medical care but which are also vulnerable to error (Chapter 9); temporary organizing under extreme conditions of danger and uncertainty in wildland fire (Chapter 12), and what it means to organize change when change is already underway (Chapter 13). People also anchor by efforts to learn new patterns, hold recurrent patterns together, and bounce back when those patterns begin to unravel. This form of anchoring is discussed in chapters on faith as the glue of organizing (Chapter 3), dropping one's tools as a means to preserve patterns (Chapter 14), mindful attention as a way of keeping up with change (Chapter 6), and the liabilities that can occur when processes are held together too tightly and too narrowly (Chapter 10).

If we reinvoke the image of smoke and crystal, attempted anchoring by means of organizing is a move away from the impermanence of smoke toward the permanence of crystal. That movement, however, is slowed and counteracted by conditions such as continuing change, reorganizing, forgetting, and adaptation. All of these limit efforts to establish permanence. Organization, therefore, embodies continuing tension in the form of simultaneous pulls toward smoke and crystal. Under such dynamic conditions of continuous rise and fall, it makes sense to study processes of organizing and to treat organization as a reification in the service of stabilizing an event cluster.

Organizations struggle to preserve the illusion of permanence and to keep surprise at a minimum. People create fictions of permanence by means of practices such as long-term planning, strategy, reification of temporary structures, justification, investments in buildings and technology, and acting as if formal reporting relationships are stable. When people drop *some* of these fictions, the firm doesn't dissolve. Fictions can be selectively imposed on subunits, imposed with full appreciation of what they do and don't accomplish, updated regularly, and sometimes enacted into relative permanence through processes that resemble self-fulfilling prophecies. Aside from working with fictions, there is the option of mindful organizing.

When we talk about organizing rather than organization, we acknowledge impermanence (we accept that coordination and interdependence are not stable but need to be reaccomplished). To view the life of organizations as organizing is also to notice and reduce the discontent triggered by futile clinging to the impermanent as if it were permanent. The need to reorganize is not seen as a failure of strategy but as the inevitable rise and fall of patterns that are not rooted in one's own personal agency. Organizing, viewed as an emergent unpredictable order, replaces a distinctive, stable self as the actor with dynamic relationships as the actor. Taken together, impermanence, discontent, and absence of ego suggest that the presumed solidity of organizations is not so obvious and nor are ways to manage within impermanence.

If experience is impermanent, then the issue of organizing becomes an issue of freezing, not unfreezing. If you assume that improvisation is a fundamental means to cope with impermanence (e.g. Weick, 1987, pp. 284–304), then the question people face is 'How do I get a sequence of events to recur?' not 'How do I get a sequence to change?' (Weick and Quinn, 1999; see Chapter 13 in this book). The big deal is not unfreezing so that we can change and then refreeze. Instead, the big deal is to freeze some segment of an ongoing flow, learn how to make some portions of it happen again, and then unfreeze those portions not incorporated into the recurrent sequence. Sequences vary in the ease with which they can be made repetitive. Situations that are easy to convert from improvisation into repetition may well become the first and most basic organizational routines. It is the ease with which sequences of action can be extracted from improvisation and converted into routines, not mimesis, that may explain why organizations look so much alike. All organizations start out differently with idiosyncratic improvisations, but then they all also try to enact recurrence in the interest of predictability and uncertainty reduction. Now they begin to look and act alike as they find similar stretches of action to stabilize. Organizations look most alike in those sequences that are easiest to routinize.

One form of organizing implied by these ideas closely resembles organizing for high reliability. High reliability organizations (HRO; see Chapter 7 for a description) pay more attention to failures than success, avoid simplicity rather than cultivate it, are just as sensitive to operations as they are to strategy, organize for resilience rather than anticipation, and allow decisions to migrate to experts wherever they are located. These may sound like odd ways to make good decisions, and that may be true, but decision making is not what HROs are most worried about. Instead, they are more worried about enacting a structure that makes sense of the unexpected. In the context of ceaseless change, processes associated with attention to failure, simplification, operations, resilience, and expertise make perfectly good sense. Those five processes are important because they mobilize resources for sensemaking (see Chapter 7), resources such as interaction and conversation (social), clearer frames of reference (identity), relevant past experience (retrospect), neglected details in the current environment (cues), updating of impressions that have changed (ongoing), plausible stories of what could be happening (plausibility), and actions that clarify thinking (enactment). When these sensemaking resources are mobilized, people are better able to spot the significance of small, weak signals of danger implicit in the unexpected and to spot them earlier while it is still possible to do something about them.

Effectiveness in uncertain times lies as much in the capability for sensemaking as it does in the capability for decision making. Capabilities for making sense of the unexpected get activated, organized, strengthened, and institutionalized more or less effectively depending on how people handle failure, simplification, operations, resilience, and expertise. In compact form, the guidance implicit in these five is:

1. Scrutinize small failures.
2. Refine the categories you impose.
3. Watch what you're doing and what emerges.
4. Make do with the resources you have.
5. Listen.

As these five increase, transient organizing becomes more mindful and more responsive to the unexpected at earlier points in its unfolding.

What does it mean then to manage under conditions where what you manage is an impermanent fabrication? It means that you need to get good at attentive action.

Managing is firstly and fundamentally the task of becoming aware, attending to, sorting out, and prioritizing an inherently messy, fluxing, chaotic world of competing demands that are placed on a manager's attention. It is creating order out of chaos. It is an art, not a science. Active perceptual organization and the astute allocation of attention is a central feature of the managerial task (Chia, 2005, p. 1092).

Whether managers construct recurrent action sequences or talk organization into existence, they attend, interpret, act, and learn (Daft and Weick, 1984; see Chapter 10 in Weick, 2001). We use these four activities to impose a crude order on the following chapters. All four activities help stabilize event clusters, including the cluster wherein passengers mobilized by faith in one another resist highwaymen who are up to no good.

Before we get to these four sections, we include two chapters that show why people like William James, Robert Chia, James Taylor, and Elizabeth Van Every are valuable touchstones and exemplars. Chapters 2 and 3 preview the style of analysis used throughout the remainder of the book. Chapter 2 describes crucial assumptions, styles of thinking, and predecessors whose influence pervades the chapters. Chapter 3 provides a conceptual overview of key ideas and illustrates these ideas by applying them to the gradual discovery of the battered child syndrome.