

This article is part of a series exploring the value of complexity-science inspired consulting practice. First, I am trying to make sense of my own experience. Second, others may benefit from a description of my exploration with clients. Insights that inform this article are drawn from practical experience among multiple clients with diverse integration and system development challenges. The scale of change initiatives ranges from large organizational mergers of competitors to functional teams within departments. Feedback is treasured! KLM

Integrated-Autonomy: From Shilly-Shallying to Unleashing System Vitality

By Keith McCandless, 2002

The promise of synergy is a strong attractor for system formation, mergers, integration initiatives, and joint partnerships. Yet in many cases nothing much happens. People in newly formed relationships find themselves betwixt and between: neither integrated nor autonomous.

The allure of synergy is centered on the new *whole* becoming much more than the mere sum of the old *parts*: $1 + 1 = 7$. The rationale for integration efforts often includes one or more of the following elements:

- Vast efficiencies gained through shared resources or economy of scale
- Protection from a competitor or short-term financial problems
- Powerful new capabilities arising from combining distinct functions & talent
- Growth in the customer or client base by extending the scope of service (all-in-one integrated service) and product offering

The promise is irresistible until you try to integrate autonomous people and groups.

Competitive rivalries, the-way-we-do-things-around-here traditions, and loyalty to the “home” organization or unit seem to hold people in their sway and keep them from letting go of self-centeredness. Executives and managers spend time preserving what is unique about *their* organization, group, or team. It is a full-court defense of their culture, their identity, their way of succeeding.

Group members expend incredible energy maintaining equilibrium in established cultural patterns, in contrast to putting their energy into development of a new pattern. Yet, preserving culture does not have to be viewed as resistance to change. Preserving culture is a positive attraction to what works for each group.

Healthy rivalries, traditions and loyalty are all good things we want more of in organizations. Yet clinging to an established cultural attractor pattern seems to stunt system development and movement toward a vision. Further, unrealized collaborative potential is neglected. Too often

leaders offer an oversimplified message: *give up your autonomy and integrate*. "Make everything as simple as possible, but not simpler," suggests Albert Einstein.

Shilly-shallying in the Shadows

We have found the enemy and he is us! Pogo

Interactions among "integrating" partners can generate a self-fulfilling prophecy. [1] Similar to a run on a bank: perceived fear of a potential run amplifies and reinforces the actual withdrawal of money... which creates more fear of a run and more withdrawals. The bank is kaput in no time – a victim of a vicious loop.

[Insert Diagram – Self Fulfilling Prophecy At Work on page 11]

In newly formed systems, fear of losing identity and successful work patterns, feeds into "withdrawal" of support for joining forces. Actions are interpreted as *THEY are trying to destroy our way of life, again! They ARE the dark side*. Managerial actions may or may not be destructive but it doesn't matter much. The prophecy is coming true as the "withdrawals" snowball.

People start to look for evidence of power plays and controlling behaviors. Of course, they find them -- in part because they are looking for them. This fuels further "withdrawal" from collaboration, trust and synergy. Cynicism rules in the shadows. The pattern of relating is becoming information tight – impermeable to disconfirming information.

Shilly-shallying, vacillation, and dithering-R-Us. "We are a system; we aren't even close to integration. We are, we aren't"... ad infinitum, repeated in shadow conversations. Everyone knows rationally they are in a single system: all sinking or swimming in the same boat. Often recriminations and poisonous finger-pointing creates a vicious, sinking cycle of doom while the sanctioned "leadership story" continues in dulcet, self-assured tones.

Leaders Leaning Into Paradox – *Integrated Autonomy*

*Not hammer strokes, but the dance of water
sings the pebbles to perfection. R. Tagore*

The challenge lies in the heart of paradox – a statement or situation that is seemingly self-contradictory or impossible, yet expressing truth. Leaders and followers desire an organization with *integrated autonomy*. We are searching for an organization in which:

- difference and uniformity are held in robust balance

- the parts maintain individuality while the whole system is enfolded into each of the parts (e.g. like DNA in a human being)
- the power of being together (centralized coordination) exists in concert with the creative growth potential of being separate (distributed autonomy)

When leaders hold a paradox – not sweeping it under the rug OR taking on all the responsibility for it – it creates an opportunity for *everyone* to reframe the challenge in way that creates positive movement forward. Leaning into paradox is a group activity that knocks people out of their comfort zones. Seeing the two sides of a paradox as a complementary pair opens a door to better-than-expected results.

Ground Up Reality

Before enlightenment: chop wood, carry water.

After enlightenment: chop wood, carry water. Zen saying

A leadership focus on paradox – this impossible state of *integrated autonomy* - amplifies the real challenges faced by people in the organization. In new systems or mergers, these often include but are not limited to:

- Lingering uncertainty regarding how the relationship among parties will unfold and what it means for individuals... *yet the leaders don't seem to know more than managers and staff*
- The need to explore multiple collaborative actions from-the-ground-up to see what works... *yet we are inclined to seek the one "right" approach to integration*
- The allure of cross-functional synergies... *yet clear accountabilities and outcomes from each functional silo have been driven-home repeatedly*
- There is an increasing need for "inefficient" innovation and exploration from all levels of the system... *yet time is not allocated for it*
- The need to work with others that share similar responsibilities... *yet these same people may be in direct competition for a limited number of jobs*
- Everyone wonders why others are not changing... *yet leaders must transform themselves as they are to transform others*

Tolerance for ambiguity – accepting that the future of the relationship is unknowable - helps to create a sense of *urgency and interdependency* in the system. The ambiguity can create far-from-equilibrium conditions. Which, in turn, can encourage people to form novel relationships and seek meaning through exploration of new territory. New information starts to unravel the information-tight the self-fulfilling prophecy. What falls between and round these paradoxical challenges is a source of momentum and a shared identity.

Cure and Curiosity in Far-From-Equilibrium Conditions

A vivid imagination compels the whole body to obey. Aristotle

Cure and curiosity come from the same root. As new territory is explored, people heal and renew by connecting with parts of the system they may have forgotten or neglected. Curiosity draws people forward... curiosity about what is possible and what improvisations will work under shifting constraints.

Far-from-equilibrium conditions help to release energy for change. These conditions are not so chaotic that people are immobilized in fear. Human intellect and ingenuity are awakened by meaningful-but-not-overwhelming challenge.

As a shared paradox is surfaced, healthy questions arise about possibility and challenge. Curiosity regarding *integrated autonomy* helps people move forward. Further, groups move forward toward what they persistently ask questions about [2]. Some initial questions to evoke exploration include:

- How can more integration and more autonomy go hand-in-hand?
- How can our distinct cultures transcend and include their individual identities as a novel relationship or system unfolds?
- How can we responsibly let go of control and maintain coherence while encouraging autonomy?
- What can we do together that we can't do as separate organizations?
- For which functions does autonomous or competitive operations serve our joint purpose better than collaboration?
- For which functions does collaborative or tightly integrated operations serve our joint purpose better than competitive or autonomous operations?

The answers to these questions require disciplined and sustained inquiry. In large part, matching the people and real opportunities that exist in an *integrated-autonomous* relationship will pull the group forward toward a compelling purpose.

Structured time to “let imaginations run wild” is critical. The same energy that held people in a self-fulfilling prophecy starts to refocus on generative relationships and possibility. The information-tight system is becoming permeable.

Where To Start: Appreciating What Is Working

*In practicing and cherishing the old, he attains the new;
Attaining the new, he reanimates the old. He is indeed a teacher.*

Herbert Fingarette

The paradox of successful relationships calls us to honor our individual identity while letting go of self-centeredness. We need to give (appreciate) freely and generously without going so far that we lose ourselves in the process. Too much holding *back* or too much holding *forth* stifles creativity. It is a dance in which we must lead-and-follow, separate-and-gather, attach-and-detach in a moments notice.

It requires a high level of attention, appreciation, and attunement to your partner. Trust grows out of respectful interactions. This means you are willing to base your beliefs and actions on contributions from another person. A pattern of respectful interactions among a group means you can rely on the contributions offered by multiple group members.

Trust requires emotional agility as the unexpected unfolds. Polarities abound as conditions shift and patterns are disturbed. Key challenges to developing trust include:

- Living on a boundary that is defined by the unknowable-next-step
- Appreciating the vast differences between group members and to become the guardian of each other's individuality
- Cultivating positive individual appreciation and social connection
- Appreciating that no one person (or group) is smart enough but everyone together is

Experiences of hope, inspiration and joy of creating with others helps create this momentum. Appreciative Inquiry, Positive Deviance and a variety of Liberating Structures invite people to inquire about the best and most valued aspects of our work lives [2]. These methods enrich understanding, deepen respect, and helps to establish trusting relationships.

Unleashing Energy for Change

*Out of intense complexities,
intense simplicities emerge.* Winston Churchill

Appreciating autonomous individuality is the requirement for creating integrated collaboration. Crazy, huh? The adaptive energy focused on maintaining autonomy is the very same energy that gets released in creative collaboration. An unlikely complementary pair.

The following sequence of questions can help with appreciation of autonomy and differentiation:

- What attracts people to the patterns of behavior and interaction in each organization?
- What makes each culture and pattern unique?
- What attracts us to these patterns? Why? Why? Why?
- What simple agreements-in-practice guide these patterns of day-to-day work and interaction?
- How is it that the idea of "everyone should participate in everything" failed to produce innovation or improvements?

The act of inquiring appreciatively of your partner has a powerful effect. A clear pattern of creative adaptability emerges. Each partner is perfectly and uniquely adapted to a local environment. Mutual understanding and curiosity grow very quickly, fostering the conditions for creative collaboration to grow.

Strangely Attracted To Novelty

The only way out is through. Robert Frost

Once current patterns are revealed and appreciated, amplifying an emerging attractor pattern can be guided with the following questions. These questions draw out new information that simultaneously unravels the current attractor pattern and reveals possibilities for moving toward a novel attractor.

- How is it that we are successfully collaborating right now?
- However small or subtle, where have we achieved synergy in our work and relationships?
- What conditions and assets made these successes possible? How can we invest more in the conditions and assets that made synergy possible?

The focus is on discovery-of-what-works and what assets made it possible. These discoveries can be used in design and strategy-making activities.

Asking challenging, provocative, or wicked questions can also be useful. [3] Engaging, as a group, in creative destruction is needed to sustain positive change and renewal. [4]

- Can we achieve our goals or dreams if we remain in the sway of this attractor... in the sway of these patterns of interacting & relating?
- What simple agreements might help us create a new pattern of interaction?
- What patterns do we need to creatively destroy and stop doing to focus on the highest purpose of our work?
- How are we complicit in not stopping what we know we should?
- How is it that both over-confidence (we know what we need to know!) and over-cautiousness (we don't know, let's wait!) dampen our joint exploration?

Finally, attuning as a group to serendipity, happy accidents, and surprise can help to set a new course. Looking for evidence of synergy (in contrast to domination or control) can help. A self-fulfilling *virtuous* prophecy can emerge.

- What opportunities would we be exploring if our dream for the *integrated-autonomous* organization is coming true?
- What serendipitous events or surprises can we build on as we move forward together?
- What events in the organization, market or environment would tell us our system is vital and poised for success?

Gathering Strength and Resolve

"I can never be what I ought to be until you are what you ought to be, and you can never be what you ought to be until I am what I ought to be. This is the inter-related structure of reality." Rev. Martin Luther King, Jr

The approaches described above involve emotional strength and firm resolve among leaders and followers. Evoking paradox, revealing self-fulfilling prophecies, holding anxiety and surfacing difference is not for the light-hearted.

Organizations seem to gravitate toward leader-as-shepherd or leader-as-fortune-teller. Some people are willing to entertain flimsy promises of certainty and smooth sailing ahead. Protection from harsh reality is elevated over skillful exploration of the unknowable, the unquestioned, and the unimagined territory that lies in front of autonomous-yet-integrating partners.

Caring deeply enough to risk changing the order of things – while not knowing in advance what direction will emerge -- takes tremendous courage. It also calls for deep trust in the creative adaptability and collective imagination of people.

It is a "no holds barred" path to greatness. A path toward a new way of organizing for *integrated-autonomy*.

Very few people ask to go on a journey in which the destination is not clearly known. Much less when the path hugs a precarious edge between what is known and what is barely-imagined-and-yet-to-be. It is best explored collectively and mindfully. This is a challenge in which no one person – no one leader - is smart enough, but everyone together is.

~ end ~

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Notes:

1. Jeffrey Goldstein, The Unshackled Organization (1994), Productivity Press
2. David Cooperrider, D. Whitney, "Appreciative Inquiry," Collaborating for Change, (Berrett Koehler Communications, 1999)
3. Brenda Zimmerman, Curt Lindberg, and Paul Plsek, EdgeWare: Insights from Complexity Science for Health Care Leaders. VHA. Inc. 1998
4. Joseph Schumpeter, Creative Destruction, New York, Harper 1975 and.

Additional articles in a complexity-science-inspired series by Keith McCandless:

"Mastering the Art of Innovating: A Funny, Wonderful Thing Happened on the Way to My Deliverable!", 2006 with Linda DeWolf. *Illuminating the interplay of make-it-happen and let-it-happen innovation strategies among nine innovation grantees.*

"Oil, Water, Apples, Oranges: Bootstrapping Innovation with Social Networks," (2005) with Linda DeWolf. *Creating a vibrant learning network among grantees of the VHA Health Foundation.*

"A Primordial Pedagogy: Caves, Campfires & Watering Holes at the Mayo/Plexus Summit" (2003) *Learning insights and lively design methods for a complexity science conference.*

"Surprise & Serendipity At Work: Managing the Unknowable Future," (2002) with Jim Smith. *Scenario-planning insights with a complexity twist at Group Health Cooperative.*

"Conversation As A Creative Advance Into Novelty; A Collaborative Hunch-In-Progress" (2002) *Exploring how dialogue unleashes creative adaptability and resilience via Seattle's public Conversation Café movement.*

"Reliability, Resilience and Results in Operations: Designed Autopilot and Collective Mindfulness At Work," (2002) *Exploring behaviors that help people collectively and mindfully respond to surprise and complexity.*

"Integrated-Autonomy: From Shilly-Shallying to Unleashing System Vitality" (2002) *Explores the paradoxical development of distributed systems, moving beyond "bi-polar swings" between decentralized and centralized strategies.*

Four illustration or insert options are attached:

- Narrative: *Problem-Solving: A "Cure" That Makes the "Disease" Worse*
- Chart: *Three Views of the Leadership Challenge*
- Diagram: *Self-Fulfilling Prophecy At Work*
- *Distributed Systems: Integration and Autonomy Hand-In-Hand*

[Insert option]

Problem-Solving: A “Cure” That Makes the “Disease” Worse

“Why don’t the leaders solve this problem and tell us what to do? Why are they holding back?”

The background conditions for most mergers and integration efforts -- market shifts, regulatory changes, or financial straits – calls for everyone in the organization to change rapidly. The sheer number of moving parts, people, and complex processes make centralized problem-solving slow and mal-adapted to local conditions. In fluid situations, the rule is *fast at the bottom, slow at the top*.

Further, there is no individual leadership decision can show the way forward or solve the “problem” of local adaptation in a complex situation. A wise leader knows that they don’t fully understand what is happening across the organization... much less how new events will unfold. Nonetheless, many leaders are set up to fail: trained and rewarded for precise technical execution from the top while opportunities for creative change emerge from the ground-up.

Opportunities for creative adaptability are lost for three main reasons:

- everyone delays local actions, dutifully functioning in their sanctioned role, waiting for the senior leaders to act decisively at the global level;
- as background conditions (financial, market or regulatory pressures) for the merger or integration effort escalate, fear dampens exploration of collaborative actions or generative relationships that could move the organization forward; and,
- frustrated about the lack of initiative and dismal performance, leaders DO make dramatic moves that don’t take into account local realities or assets

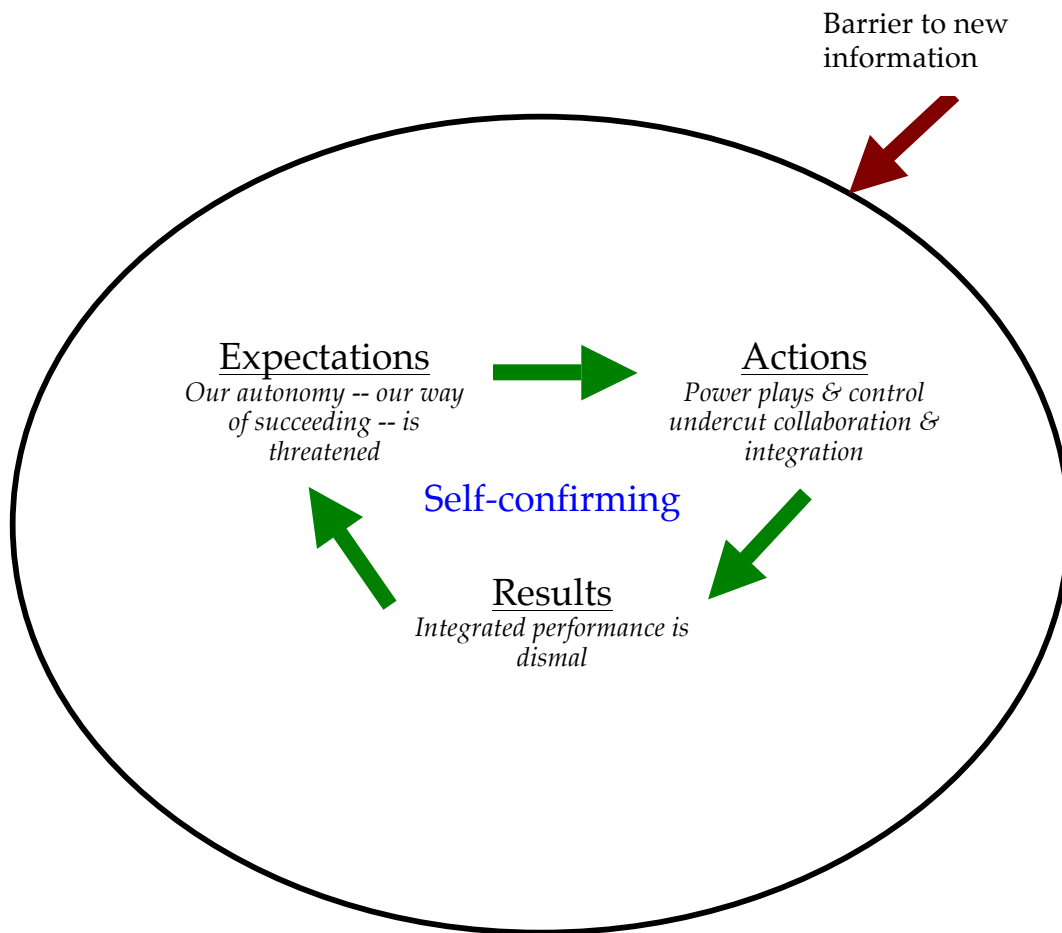
A vicious loop indeed. Mutual waiting, watching and blaming while the ship goes down.

Views of the Challenge →	Simple Technical / Routine	Complicated Adaptive	Complex Synergistic
Role of leaders in ↓	<i>Engineered or designed through isolating parts and fixing problems</i>	<i>Solutions through asking hard questions and changing beliefs</i>	<i>Creative leaps through seeking paradox, unleashing self-organization, & changing patterns</i>
Direction Setting	Diagnose and solve the problem	Diagnose challenge & frame core issues	Uncover paradox & seek direction from the edges
Boundary Controls	Shield people from external threats	Let external threats be felt within a safe range	Design permeable boundaries; hold anxiety in work processes
Role Definition	Clarify roles and responsibilities quickly	Delay role definition as people learn & adapt	Reveal self-fulfilling prophecies in the pattern of relating
Confusion & Conflict	Restore order in each part	Draw out conflict as a source of creativity	Build in cycles of creative destruction and appreciation
Shaping Norms	Maintain norms by example	Challenge unproductive norms	Amplify or dampen novel behaviors as they emerge & form norms
Surprise	Dampen and control damage; stay the course	Adapt as best you can	Notice, build on serendipitous, emergent direction

Adapted, in part, from Ronald A. Heifetz and Donald Laurie, "The Work of Leadership," HBR, 1997

Diagram A

A self-fulfilling prophecy * at work: *a failing integration effort* in a self-confirming, insular pattern. New information or practices that might unravel the prophecy are overlooked or unexplored. The prophecy isolates people. The energy expended to maintain the circular pattern can be redirected toward *integrated autonomy*.



* Adapted from Jeffrey Goldstein, The Unshackled Organization (1994), Productivity Press

Distributed Systems: Integration and Autonomy Hand-In-Hand

Many leaders structure organizations based on ideas about needing *either* more centralized-integration *or* more decentralized-autonomy. What people and markets seem to want now is BOTH -- more integrated know how AND more autonomous adaptability. *Distributed* systems can collect more intelligence AND creatively grow. See the simple distinctions offered below. (Adapted in part from Joel Getzendanner, Chaordic Alliance)

Decentralized, Autonomous

- *Fully autonomous, independent*
- *Unconnected elements*
- *Unstable relationships*
- *Diverse or uniform elements*
- *Random growth pattern*
- *Limited ability to increase scale*

Centralized, Integrated

- *Largely dependent*
- *Connected by power or permission from the center/top*
- *Fixed, formal relationships*
- *Uniform elements*
- *Growth from center out or the top down*
- *Fast at the bottom, slow at the top*

Distributed, [Integrated-Autonomy](#)

- *Largely autonomous-yet-interdependent*
- *Connected by protocol, principles, simple rules or minimum specifications*
- *Robust relationships*
- *Diverse **and** uniform elements*
- *Growth from any point in any direction*
- *Potential for rapid growth and creative adaptability*