



INTENTIONS, OUTCOMES AND DELUSIONS OF CONTROL

It takes time to grow some-thing from apparently 'no-thing'. No amount of believing otherwise, will actually make the process from germination to fruition happen in a heartbeat. Our society's addiction to 'quick fixes' is based on a state of mind in which we believe that it is THE result that matters: that it is getting to the top; being first; winning at any cost and as fast as possible. We give primacy to pace and miss the joys of the journey. We drive for destinations and fail to see the sights along the way. Even more, we believe that we know what the journey's end should be AND that we have control – the omnipotence – to make it happen.

I guess this is not wholly surprising, since we have accumulated sufficient 'evidence' throughout our lives that seems to 'prove' direct cause and effect. If I want a glass of water – I know how to make that happen. I exercise my choice and power to act; I bring together the resources – glass, tap, water – and wahoo, I drink clean water. But what about the myriad processes in our lives in which we simply do not have that apparent total control. What if, when I turn the tap, nothing happens? Where has my power to control, gone? What is the source of my problem – no running water? How can I diagnose the situation? I know NOTHING about plumbing and taps beyond turning them one way or another and that when they drip it might mean that the washers are worn. Suddenly I am slapped by reality. I am not 100% in control of my access to water – not even close! It is only when I am faced with an exception to the usual result of my turning the tap, that I am reminded of this. Nevertheless, on the whole, with this example, I can assume that what I expect to happen, will transpire most of the time. The tricky bit comes when I try to apply this assumption to everything I might attempt. Why? Because the conditions or parameters affecting other situations will be very different. The tap, plumbing and infrastructure, whilst highly complicated, represents a relatively tightly constrained context. Taps, washers, screws, pipes leading all the way back to the sewage processing works and reservoirs. Beyond leaks, bursts or breaks, the water will follow a pathway that has some inevitability – water will come out through someone's tap even if it isn't mine. The system has many constraints and relatively few variables which forces its process into a relatively high degree of predictability.

So what if the thing I want to 'make happen' is not bound by metal pipes and hardware? I am invited to write an article on a particular theme for the 3rdimagazine. I have been given a deadline. It is an online magazine. So I have some conceptual, time-bounded and media-related constraints. I use a computer so at a physical level I know that if I press the right keys on the keyboard with a word in mind, then those letters will form words. But what words? What meaning? I start with an intention to write. I decide to act upon that intention but am not immediately drawn to or sparked by the suggested topic. So what shall I write about? The container is now wide open.... Multiple and infinite possibilities.... So I could literally take this anywhere. Yet I have already begun the process of writing and a thread has been emerging. I have started to create my own pathway – I am laying my own pipes as I go.

I give space to the process of emergence, allowing my thinking to take shape. Paradoxically, I am in control of writing (it is my fingers on the keys, tapping out words that come out of my head); and yet I am not wholly 'in control' of what is being written; what meaning is being created. I do not know how each sentence will ultimately unfold until it lands on the page. A big part of my sense-making is out of reach until ideas, thoughts, memories, questions, feelings begin to connect enabling a pattern of meaning to begin form. Here is a crucial point. I can know in general, with some accuracy, what will happen – words will be written and the article will be posted online. Yet I do not know ahead of time, precisely what the finished article will be. This is *int erms of the precision of my tyupeom* [typing]; as well as the construction of my sentences, the meanings I think they generate (separately and together), and the multiple meanings that you as readers may make as you read them. I cannot assure (control) the achievement of any outcomes/ benefits I might want to create – for you the reader, or for me as the writer. I control the construction of the words on the page and very little else. But we resist the notion that we have so little control. It terrifies many of us to admit that we simply do not know what to do/ what will work for many of the challenges we face. Our strategic planning approaches, coaching models, performance management frameworks, use of KPI's, PDPs, goal setting, organisational development interventions – all of them are fraught with assumptions. In sticking to these 'old' ways, we remain trapped by delusions of control; control we simply do not have.

All this points to how our attachment to believing we can control outcomes, can be problematic. When we fix single-mindedly on particular results and particular outcomes, we may limit the potential for many wonderful surprising



benefits to both arise and be appreciated. In my experience, it is often the unintended consequences that reap greatest potential reward, learning and delight. The more precise we attempt to be in defining our outcomes, the more we narrow possibilities and potential; and the more we confine our actions and processes into an assumed linear cause-effect relationship. There will be times when this may be fit; and many, many occasions when this is not. Replacing the washer on a dripping tap does not hold the same complexity as facilitating conflict in a team or creating a new innovation or crafting a piece of writing from unordered chaos. This is not about better or worse; it is a question of what is fit-for-purpose and having the adaptive capacity to choose and act accordingly.

The trouble is, we tend to live our lives, make choices and take action AS IF they are all as simple as turning the tap on and off – water on demand. And when the metaphorical water does not arrive, we fall into patterns of blame, shame, rage, despair and render ourselves blind to the unanticipated benefits, opportunities, gifts that might otherwise be flowing forth. Personally, when I get the chance, I want to see what I cannot already see and predict; I want to explore what is as yet, unknown to me because this excites me; this is how I learn; this is how I become more and how I become better equipped to serve the needs of others. I write to illuminate, discover and share. This is why I write in the way I do.

So, I move to action fuelled by my intentions. To me, this is where and how ‘purpose’ plays out – in my ‘being’ and ‘doing’. I do not know what I want to write until I give myself space to drop into a different state. I begin by focusing on a vague thread of an idea or a question or something that has been perturbing me in the last wee while. I wait until a few words begin to flow – sometimes they arrive in bursts with a rush of fluency; sometimes my pattern is disjointed. Always, each piece goes through several iterations - honing until the message becomes clearer. Never does a fully finished, perfectly formed, beautifully articulated article arrive on the page in a single flourish; and sometimes not ever.

The act of writing, for me, calls for me to surrender to the power of my intention and to let go of any forced notions of desired outcomes. It is good practice for how I want to live my life. Becoming a writer has helped me to set conditions for a more generative pattern to emerge at multiple levels and in multiple places in my life and work (this phenomenon of repeating patterns is as true in intra and interpersonal human dynamics/ behaviour as it is of the natural world around us).

I had NO IDEA, no comprehension that establishing new patterns in my life would be an outcome of my writing for the 3rd magazine. I could not have planned for it because I did not even know about the possibilities way back in 2010 when I first started writing. Back then, I used to worry and fret about how my articles would be received, how many people would read them, and what people might think of me. Now, I simply enjoy the process of reflecting, writing and revealing to myself and hopefully others, new and different ways of seeing and understanding ourselves. I trust that some of what I write will provoke, evoke and invoke conversation, reflection, connection – maybe even consternation and disagreement; and that is great too. Do I know the impact on or outcomes for others? Occasionally, when someone posts a comment. Does it matter that I don’t know? Not really, because I have gained so much in the process of writing that I find myself able to offer up the results unconditionally. The joy has been in the journey; the sights along the way delightful and unexpected. What more could I possibly want? OK – I am not egoless! I love it when I get comments... and am curious about what it means when there are none.

Comments aside: in writing this article I am implicitly illuminating conditions that influence the patterns that emerge within and between human beings. In so doing, I am illustrating elements of [The Potent 6 Constellation](#) – a radical new resource for coaches, therapists and other OD related practitioners. This is underpinned by many sources, in particular the pioneering work of the Human Systems Dynamics Institute and Glenda Eoyang. The following links offer a little more to chew on – if you are curious enough to explore:

Training for a radical new resource for coaches and therapists: http://potent6.co.uk/story.php?story_id=44

For more details and to register <http://www.eventbrite.co.uk/org/3736712159>

Youtube clip: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=nsLqPHu6MhQ>

And this piece, **Adaptive capacity: looking at human systems dynamics** - just published in [Coaching Today April 2013](#)

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