



INFLUENCING THE UNCONTROLLABLE

When thousands of starlings flock (it is called a murmuration) it is, in my view, one of the most awe-inspiring sights imaginable. How do they do that without colliding? How do they move in concert with such glorious grace and beauty?

In a world strangled by management theory based on assumptions that we can actually control and manage others, the notion that thousands of people could enact the dance of starlings without the guidance of the hidden hand, seems incomprehensible. Questions would surely rise up from those who believe they have power; believe they have the authority and the right to dictate the actions and direction of others: Who is in control? Who is to blame when it goes wrong? How can we control and measure performance? What policies and procedures will ensure compliance?

If for a moment, we were to accept reality as it is – complex, fundamentally unpredictable and uncontrollable – what difference might that make to the ways in which we might seek to influence and engage with others? How could we possibly bring any kind of stability into a human system without forced structure and protocol – and if this were even possible, is it actually desirable?

Strangely and counter-intuitive though it may seem, we can influence - but not if we keep thinking in the old paradigm of management control.

Human beings alone and together are ‘complex adaptive systems’- CAS. Essentially we can never act independently because we are connected in infinite, unknowable, interdependent ways to those around us. This means that within a physically or metaphysically bounded space/ system, through our connections and interactions between each other, we spontaneously generate patterns that serve to hold us in ‘formation’ – rather like the birds. And like the birds, we generally do not see ourselves in pattern formation from the outside. Whether or not we believe it or see it, we do seem to comply with certain unseen, unnamed ‘simple rules of behaviour’. Observing human city populations at the start and end of a working day reveals the truth of this statement.

Unlike the starlings, our pattern formations are not always generative and supportive to the wellbeing of those within the whole group. We surely have enough evidence in organisations and institutions in which the physical and mental wellbeing of its population suffer greatly. Unconscious compliance in the human species is killing us.

This is how social movements emerge from seemingly nowhere. One cannot command a movement into existence. It arises out of individuals expressing their passion or deep concern for something and being so moved to action that it creates ripples in those around them. If the passion or concern is shared, people will come together in collective action and this in turn inspires or incites others to join in. Anything that suddenly bursts into view will have come out of something like this: the Occupy Movement, the Jimmy Saville revelations that have exposed more and more child abuse; Enron; the Arab Spring; the economic crisis can all be illuminated by understanding the theory and principles of CAS.

In essence, sometimes a pattern might become so clear and may play out in smaller groupings within a wider system, it becomes possible to see and name what is being observed. This can be useful because it helps us to better understand the dynamics at play – assisting us in being able to articulate specific behaviours that are being expressed and to discern which are helpful or not in any particular context. When we arrive at this level of awareness, we open up ourselves and the ‘system’ to being transformed. This does not bring absolute control or predictability – only greater insight and enhanced potential to take new and different action. If this is the best we can do, as a leader, facilitator and coach, then I want it! How about you?

If you would like to find out more about developing your own capacity to better see, understand and influence the complex dynamics in individuals, groups, organisations and communities around you then do follow this link: <http://potent6.co.uk> or give me a call on +44 7730 596 771

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