

Changing the way we change

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A tribunal of inquiry is an inadequate process for surfacing the deeper cultural dynamics that enable questionable behaviour. Culture is a complex system that cannot be approached or understood in that way.

This essay was first published in the April 2007 edition of *The Garda Review*.

Views commonly expressed in *The Garda Review* suggest that behaviour that led to the events that prompted the Morris Tribunal are the exception rather than the rule. The GRA claims [*Garda Review* September 2006] that tribunal reports have demoralised rank-and-file gardaí by generalising the behaviour of the few across the many, and failing to cite the role of garda management which, it says, has an *“obsession with budgetary concerns and rank advancement.”* By failing to deal forthrightly and forcefully with these issues early on, the GRA says management has allowed *“unscrupulous gardaí to abuse, manipulate and corrupt both the system and those below, around and above them.”*

In the same publication, the Commissioner says management has not been ignoring problems within its own rank and claims that action has been taken. He called for more openness and asked officers to create a more accountable force by being truthful about mistakes they make on duty rather than closing ranks.

The truth is always complex, and is easily lost when we pretend otherwise. As a concerned citizen with a professional insight into organisational culture, my own view is that all perspectives hold a piece of the truth: the

Commissioner, the GRA, the individual officers who keep the show on the road day and night often in difficult circumstances, and citizens who find themselves on the receiving end of garda culture as it is communicated through the behaviour of individual officers - good and bad.

To assume that any incident involving members of the organisation is an exception is to deny the nature of complex human systems. The real issue is not the *“small number of members who fail to meet the required and expected standards”*, as the Garda Commissioner suggests. It's the wider culture that allows any garda to operate outside acceptable standards.

Just as the behaviour of a small number of priests and nuns darkened the reputation of the whole Catholic Church when abuse by known individuals was swept under the carpet by peers and authority figures alike, questionable or unlawful behaviour by individual gardaí is a wider *cultural* issue with implications for the institution. Of course such behaviour is a matter for individual sanction, but the cultural context cannot be separated. It is intrinsic to everything, good and bad.

The GRA's anger at what it views as Mr Justice Morris's sidestepping of management culpability in the Donegal affair, is a case in

point. Describing the Morris Report in one instance as the work of someone walking in a thick fog that obscures reality may appear to be pointing an accusing finger at Mr Morris, but what it really highlights is the inadequacy of this type of investigation in dealing with complex human systems. The process is the real problem, because the moment you put an artificial wall around a piece of a problem and exclude the wider system in which it is embedded, efforts to address the issue will always fall short of what's required, or fail entirely, because a critical piece of the jigsaw is missing.

To add to the difficulty, those inside 'the wall' and under the spotlight become frustrated as any normal human being tends to become when an outsider tries to analyse a situation they themselves know more about. They feel misunderstood and alienated. The situation becomes more and more entrenched, relationships sour and the mess is perpetuated.

Old Thinking

If this sounds familiar it's because this Newtonian approach to management and organisational problem-solving has become institutionalised right across the public and private landscape, its theory and practice underpinning almost every profession you care to name. This worldview believes we live in an orderly world, where causes lead to known effects and where it's possible to make simple links between actions and consequences. The basic tenet is that everything is predictable, knowable and manageable, and that if we can just figure out the rules by which something works, we can send it in a direction of our choosing, or 'improve' it, as a mechanic might tweak a machine to enhance its performance.

It's this mechanistic mindset that drives people to break things down into smaller parts - units, departments, divisions, regions, functions, grades - in order to deal with them. Faced with the need to change, the mechanical mind will analyse, strategise and then 'roll out' an implementation 'plan' or change 'programme' designed to get a known 'us' from an

identifiable 'here' to a predictable 'there'.

Even the language of the machine with its concepts of re-structuring, re-engineering, downsizing, embedding, benchmarking, going forward, 'driving' change and so on, supports and legitimises the dominance of an approach that condemns people in positions of authority to a life of forensic strategising, planning and forecasting in a valiant effort to control the machines over which they preside.

Unfortunately, the relentless focus on surface symptoms almost guarantees that well-meaning attempts to improve everything from the health service, to the educational experience, the effectiveness of local government or the dream of workplace partnership, will remain stubbornly in the realm of wishful thinking.

People are beginning to recognise this and I believe the cry for 'joined-up thinking' heard in virtually every walk of life today is a distress signal pleading for rescue from the vice-like grip of an out-of-date worldview that casts a long shadow over workplaces everywhere.

New Thinking

People or groups of people organised for whatever purpose, are not machines subject to the laws of engineering where the application of a few more rules or regulations or a tad more bureaucracy will do the trick. Individually and collectively people are living systems governed by the principles of Life.

Living systems are organic. Dynamic. Alive. And constantly changing. They aren't connected up in neat hierarchies as depicted in organisational charts, but exist in overlapping webs of relationship. Nested inside each other like Russian dolls, living systems create themselves moment by moment as they participate with each other and their wider environment through a myriad of relationships that combine and respond in unpredictable ways.

Critically, living systems are defined not by what is tangible and quantitative, but by what is

intangible and *qualitative*. Take any living system - an ant, a tree, a meadow, a human body, a garda division, or the entire Garda Síochána organisation - and we find that the possibility of its effectiveness and durability is determined by the nature and quality of its relationships - internally between its components, and externally with its wider environment.

Relationship is the central organising principle of life - a fundamental insight of 20th century physics that has yet to penetrate our social world to fundamentally influence how we see our human institutions or work with living, breathing, human beings.

Culture as a living system

Just as a plant emerges from the soil, everything an organisation is and does, emerges from its culture. And just as the plant's success depends on the nature and quality of the soil and surrounding conditions, the degree to which an organisation can achieve the human qualities it claims to need - flexibility, creativity, partnership, innovation, openness, trust, responsiveness to change and so on - also depends on the degree to which the deeper culture supports and enables the germination of those qualities.

For example, trust is the single most pervasive and potent characteristic of successful groups, but trust will not grow in a cultural 'soil' that lacks personal integrity or relationships that are open and authentic.

While culture takes shape as structures and phenomena we can touch and feel and experience, the powerful drivers that shape it are *invisible*. Beneath our everyday experience a hidden architecture of beliefs, assumptions, values and patterns of relationship continually influences the choices and decisions and behaviours that bring life to life each and every day. The visible evidence - the buildings, policies, procedures, practices, behaviours and much more - is a *secondary* effect of the underlying dynamics.

Within this perspective the phenomenon of

Donegal or any of the cases that have reached the headlines, can be understood not as isolated incidents of corruption or an individual officer's unprofessional behaviour, but as surface evidence of a weakening of some of the fundamental structural relationships within the force which if not addressed, ultimately increase the vulnerability of the entire organisation.

Seeing culture through the lens of living systems, it becomes clear that change happens from the inside out, and not the other way around so if we want the surface conditions to change it's necessary to work with the deeper and more subtle inner world - to attend to the soil.

In this regard, the new Garda Ombudsman could be seen as an outside-in initiative, and while it will be an important new forum one wonders what long-lasting difference it will make.

It's quite likely that low-level infringement of discipline and basic human rights will continue unabated unless and until the deeper culture that tolerates it changes. The bottom line is that members of the *class of people* - in this case the Gardaí - who are guilty of breaches of regulations or professional ethics, need to take responsibility for the behaviour of their class, and work to stop it. In other words the behaviour of one is the responsibility of all.

Cultivating the relational space

Changing thinking changes everything and when we treat an organisation as a living system rather than a machine, priorities change, and language changes. We begin to see the importance of working with the framing conditions of the culture, and put less emphasis on managing outcomes.

In my work, we have articulated a conceptual framework for a systems approach to culture change in large organisations such as An Garda Síochána. There are five overlapping dimensions which I will summarise here.

1 *Insight*

Deciding to work with the principles of life and living systems is a step in a different direction. The starting point is our perception of what we *think* we are doing.

A basic insight into living systems is necessary to fully appreciate what might seem like a radical departure from accepted practice. The mechanistic habits that drive popular approaches to change are largely outside-in, top-down attempts to regulate new behaviours into being. A systems sensibility will prompt a natural shift in focus from the work we do (tasks), to how we do the work (processes). From the components of the system, to the relationships between them. And from visible behaviours that define the culture, to the invisible beliefs and values that drive behaviour.

Old thinking frequently produces just another version of what already exists - often with a weakening of relationships that may never recover. New thinking sees culture as the predictable outcome of the underlying framing conditions of the system, and works to create the conditions in which the desired future can evolve.

2 *Identity*

At the heart of every living system is a sense of who we are, why we're here and what we're trying to become. A system is fundamentally shaped by this Story.

Every institution needs to regularly reassess and update its Story in order to remain relevant and resilient in a changing world. When it fails to respond meaningfully to its wider context, an organisation can lose its way, work can lose its meaning, and as people pull in different directions and internal politics and powerplay become the driving force, the experience for everyone, inside and outside, is diminished.

The purpose of policing and the essence of what it is to be a Garda needs to be constantly reinterpreted and the assumptions, beliefs and values that shape everyday practices and patterns of relationship reviewed and aligned.

Getting to real clarity in this area is the most important and strengthening development work any organisation can do. It provides a powerful compass for consistent decision-making in the mess and unpredictability of everyday life.

3 *Integrity*

Integrity is the state of being 'whole'. For the individual, this means there's no contradiction between our inner values and the choices we make and act on day by day. For the organisation, it means alignment between the promise and the reality - what it claims to believe and stand for, and the evidence of its everyday practices and behaviour. Continually closing the gap between what we say and what we do, is vital to create the basis for the trust upon which effective relationships thrive.

Seen through the lens of living systems, organisational change is a journey inwards, to discover and address the source of our behaviours and our dilemmas. Holistic, inside-out approaches to culture change such as Culture Mapping make values and behaviours tangible and measurable, and provide a hardcopy means of keeping tabs on the consistency between what is desired and the reality.

4 *Intelligence*

Rigid planning and top-down objective-setting typify the mechanistic desire for control. However, change initiatives cascaded down in this way can often seem incoherent to those on the receiving end, and despite the hype and rhetoric, nothing significant seems to change.

From a living systems perspective, organisations are inherently intelligent and people are quite capable of learning their way into the future if they have a true picture of where they stand. A key change strategy therefore is to nudge the system towards evolution by helping people learn about their internal reality and their external context, and experiment with new behaviours.

Management's role is not to mastermind change but to facilitate and accelerate people's ability to learn and evolve. Communication

initiatives that maximise participation and bring together experience and intelligence from different parts of the system are essential, while cutting-edge approaches such as Learning Histories can help by revealing multiple perspectives on complex issues, prompting new conversations across traditional organisational boundaries.

When diverse energies connect and cross-pollinate, intelligence increases exponentially so learning is always most acute at the boundary between systems. In this regard, civilianisation and an increased openness of the organisation to the voice of the community are more likely to prompt internally motivated change than detailed top-down change strategy.

It's also important to design ways of engaging that cultivate trusting relationships. Conventional committees and formulaic meetings tend to recreate the past, while diverse learning groups exploring real-life dilemmas can become collaborative communities of interest and the seeds of transition to a learning organisation.

5 Inspirational Leadership

The mechanistic view of the leadership role is about instilling confidence by taking charge, being decisive and producing results. Through the lens of living systems leadership is about inspiring the participation of others (internally and externally) and personally embodying new beliefs and values and behaviours that may not yet be the cultural norm.

This is subtle territory and leaders who genuinely understand this operate from a different source and intention. They've moved from a task-driven focus on short-term results, to a more expansive concern for the future and the common good. From managing others, to facilitating their participation. They've left behind a dependence on rules and compliance, and are concerned about values and ethics. And they've let go of the desire for certainty and control, and are comfortable with uncertainty and willing to take personal risks on behalf of the future.

In summary, in a complex world, the leadership task is to help the organisation evolve, *naturally*. Conventional management wisdom invites us to impose our will on life's unruliness, but life invites us to stop trying to direct it and begin participating *with* it.

Paradoxically, by abandoning the impulse to control and responding instead to life's rhythms, organisations grow more resilient and less vulnerable to the vicissitudes of their external environment. They stay relevant by staying responsive, consciously evolving towards a future they help to create as they participate - right now.

While the lessons of life and living systems turn conventional thinking on its head, experience tells us they feel natural, liberating and intuitively 'right', which is really no surprise. After all, we're simply beginning to tune in to what Life already knows.

About the author

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