Complex Responsive Processes – Challenging Systems Thinking

Organizational development provides the opportunity to act systemically and creatively to help the people in an organization learn.   At their best OD practitioners understand and act on the connectedness of the work process and serve the potential of the people within the organization. The current financial crisis is challenging our society at many, many levels - the impact on organizations and on the OD field is more than economic. We have an opportunity to re-vision and re-calibrate how we work together and within organizations to make a difference.

As OD practitioners we have become well versed, even expert at applying the discipline of systems thinking - as a perspective, a language and a set of tools to address critical organizational problems/issues. The work of Stacey, Griffin and Shaw and the concepts behind complex responsive processes offer a powerful additional way to look at how organizations develop. This work challenges the value of systems thinking as it s evolved to be a comprehensive approach to effective OD work. While it is an effective and powerful approach to historical analysis and archetypal pattern recognition, systems thinking can have very real limitations in explaining and/or supporting novelty, innovation and even learning.   It may actually be constraining.

This is not about replacing systems thinking but objectively discussing its limitations and looking at a balancing perspective. It is always important to step back and review any approach - recognize where it works and where it may be constraining.

During this interactive session we will work together to explore the connections and disconnections between the two disciplines – systems thinking and complex responsive processes - and demonstrate specific strategies to leverage their respective value.

- Affirmation of systems thinking as an effective tool for specific applications
- New concepts around complexity and complex responsive processes
- Practical tools for application of new concepts
- Resources for further exploration/development

Suggested resources:

Stacey, Ralph D., Douglas Griffin and Patricia Shaw (2000). *Complexity and Management: Fad or Radical Challenge*. New York, Routledge.
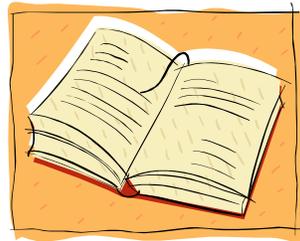
One of TMS-Americas' blog entries:

Sh__ Happens – B ut What Causes It?

Complex Responsive Processes

Challenging Systems Thinking

Our Story…. To This Point

Experience in Search of an Ideology

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Complex Responsive Processes

The concept and ideology of Complex Responsive Processes was developed by Dr. Ralph Stacey and his colleagues Dr. Douglas Griffin and Dr. Patricia Shaw.

It is a way of looking at causality in human interaction.

Ralph Stacey is Professor of Management and Director of the Complexity and Management Centre at the Business School of the University of Hertfordshire in the UK and a Member of the Institute of Group Analysis. He is also Director of an innovative Masters and Doctoral program in complexity and organizational change at the University of Hertfordshire.

We have worked with the concepts of Complex Responsive Processes for close to 10 years now and operate our own organization through its lens.
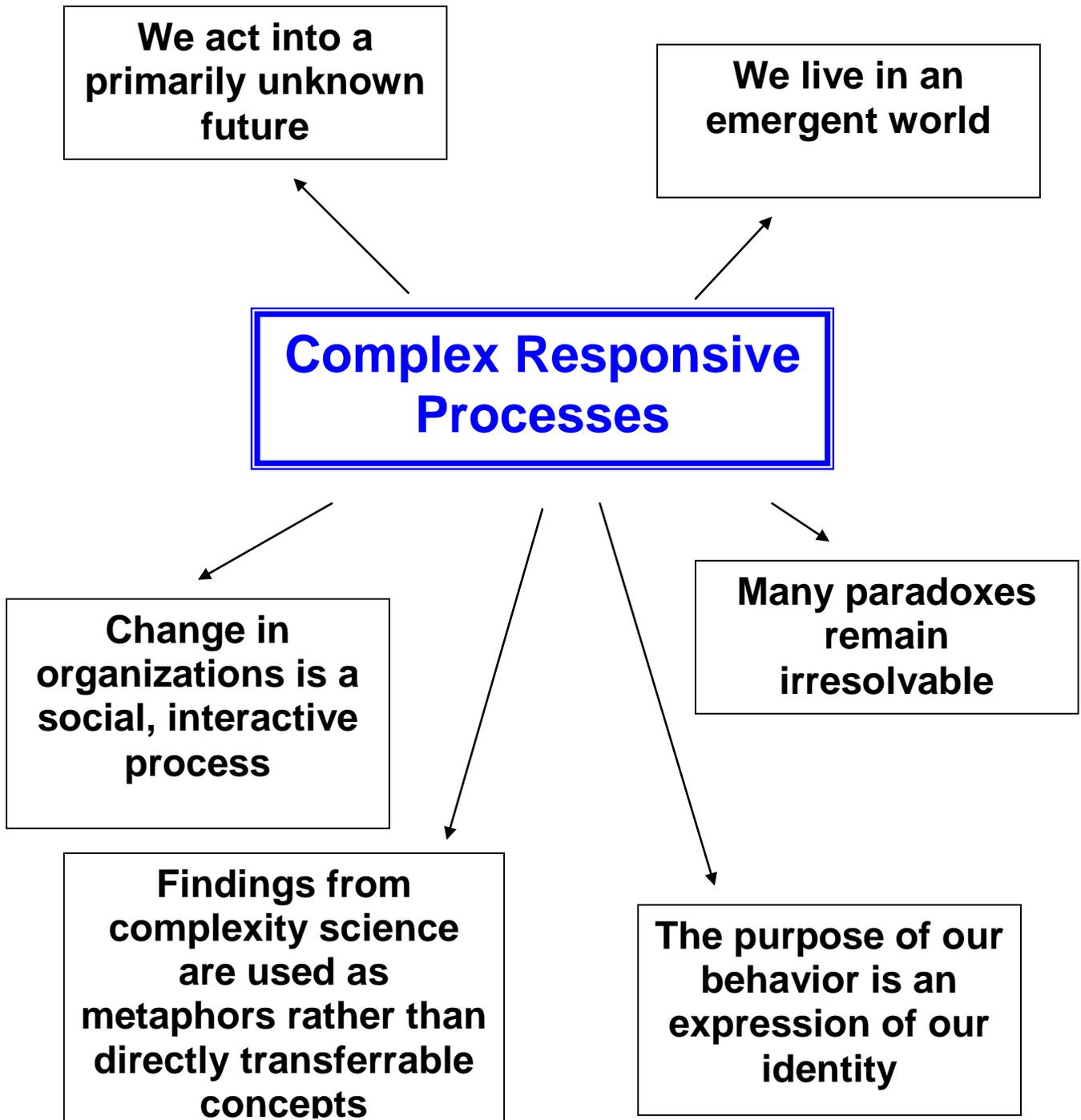
Complex Responsive Processes challenges much of the dominant thinking currently in use in organizations.

We have found it a challenging journey to our thinking and behavior, but one that is much closer to the reality of our day to day experiences in organizations.

We invite you to join in our story for our time together and work with the concepts from the basis of your own experiences.

Complex Responsive Processes

Some key points:

We act into a primarily unknown future

We live in an emergent world

Complex Responsive Processes

Change in organizations is a social, interactive process

Many paradoxes remain irresolvable

Findings from complexity science are used as metaphors rather than directly transferrable concepts

The purpose of our behavior is an expression of our identity

Dominant, Mainstream Thinking

Some key points:

We act into a knowable, predictable future

We live in a linear world

Dominant, Mainstream Thinking

Change in organizations is a planned, designed process

Paradoxes require resolution

Findings from complexity science are used as directly transferrable concepts

The purpose of our behavior is survival
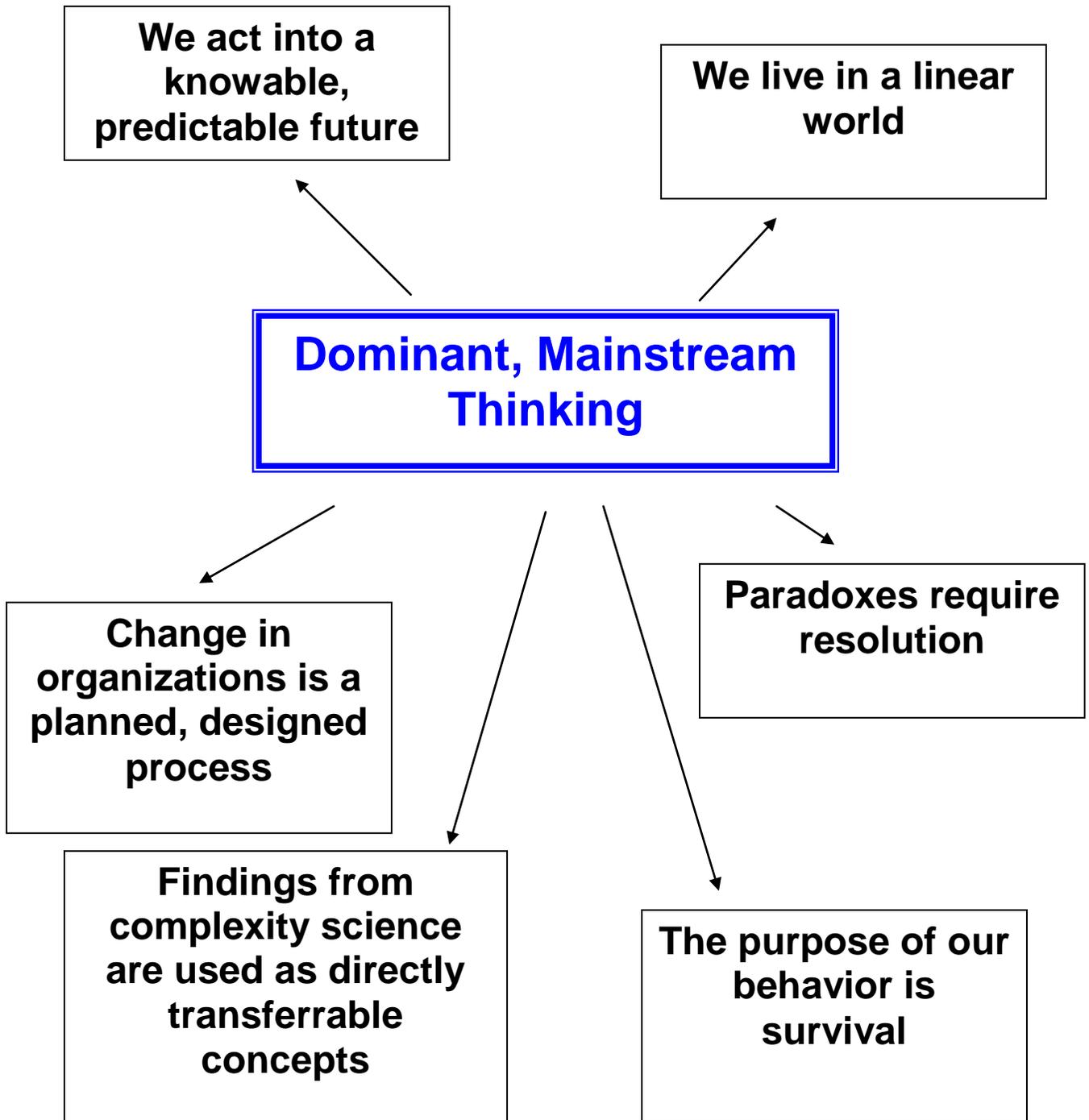
Complex Responsive Processes

Some responses when working with Complex Responsive Processes that we have found prematurely close down the opportunity to really investigate and 'play' with its value:

- The assumption that an unknowable future means present behavior is meaningless.

- The assumption that an unknowable future is unconstrained.

- The assumption that process (interactive emergence) is simply things or events separated by less time.

- The assumption that process means there are no things or events.

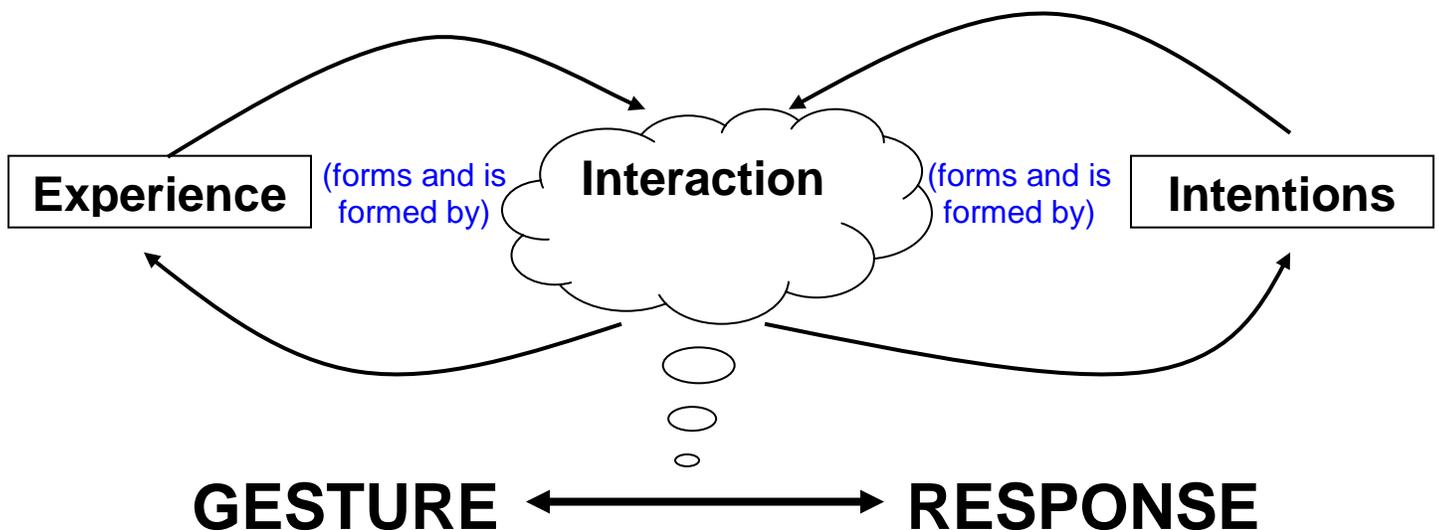- A position of defensiveness or aggressiveness if your current ideology is challenged.

Complex Responsive Processes

A way of looking at emergence in human interaction

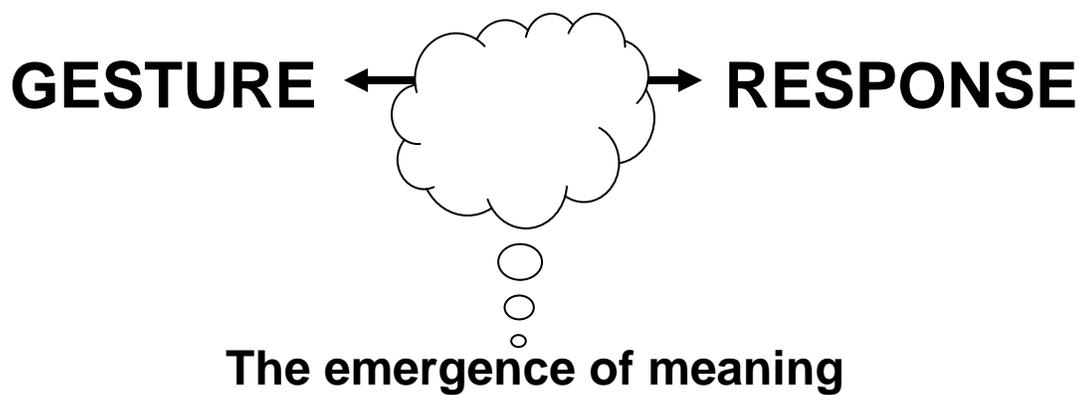Emergence in human interaction can be looked at through the flow of time as follows:

Past	(forms and is formed by)	Present	(forms and is formed by)	Future

The above representation can then be applied at a more specific level:

Experience — (forms and is formed by) — Interaction — (forms and is formed by) — Intentions

GESTURE ←——→ RESPONSE

Complex Responsive Processes

George Herbert Mead's 'Conversation of Gestures'

GESTURE ⟵ ⟶ **RESPONSE**

The emergence of meaning

Complex Responsive Processes

Working with our own experiences…..

Strategy development

Performance management

Learning and development

Change

Culture

…