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Sustainability in Organization Development

Research Outcome and Current Practice

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Abstract* — Since the publishing of what has become to be known as the 'Brundtland-Report' in 1987 the term sustainability has been used in various ways. However, there is almost no relevant literature that would explicitly exhort the concept of sustainability in the context of Organization Development (OD) itself. The paper attempts to sketch sustainability in the organizational field as a contingent matter. In effect, in capturing potential aspects of sustainability that might be 'in the room' and in dialoguing about the relevance thereof for an OD endeavor we deem it to be primordial to give a voice to both the existing environments and those that might possibly arise in the future. Additionally, it proves essential to establish some sort of transition organization which is predestined to encompass all the sustainability aspects identified as relevant and to follow up on those aspects in a room free from taboos in what we refer to as a cyclical, recursive and reflexive process. Such an approach is likely to allow for sustainable solutions to emerge with impunity. Finally and complementing the two ideas above, on a personal and social level, it seems imperative to accompany parties concerned from leadership, to management, to shopfloor such that they feel facilitated to embark on a joint Organization Development journey cognitively and emotionally with the aim to develop sustainable and fully engaged realities in their organization.

Keywords — ***Sustainability, Organization Development, Transformation Management, Relational Coaching,***

I. Introduction

Since the publishing of what is commonly known as the Brundtland-Report (World Commission on Environment and Development, 1987) [22] the term sustainability has been used in various ways (Marrewijk, 2003: 96) [12]. In the context of organizations sustainability primarily appears in two facets. On the one hand the term is likely used as a largely featurless and non-descript adjective, and on the other hand as 'Corporate Sustainability' (Jonker, 2015) [10]. Corporate sustainability receives growing scientific attention as companies have begun to acknowledge their social and environmental responsibility (UN Global Compact, 2010) [21]. However, there is almost no relevant literature which would explicitly pertain to or which would provide an in-depth exploration of the concept of sustainability in the context of Organization Development (OD) itself (Neugebauer / Prammer / Pawel / Erdös, 2015) [13].

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There are some publications that relate to OD work by using the term sustainability and even attempt to describe what enables sustainability (e.g. Reichert 2008: 37) [18]. Yet, almost none responds to the question of what 'sustainability' should mean in the context of OD and OD consultancy. Nor can any of them be found to outline the requirements which would seem likely to assure sustainability in and of OD processes.

For about 15 years, my colleagues of the iff-faculty at the University of Klagenfurt (Prammer, 2014: 27) [17], of CONECTA - Vienna School of Organisation Consultancy, Alfred Janes, and we as the authors of this paper try to inquire into what sustainability could mean in a specific OD process and what might be the way in which we could ensure that an OD process becomes and remains sustainable (Grossmann, 2007) [6]. Below are our main conclusions in what we offer as a concise synopsis on the pages below.

II. Some Reflections on Sustainability and Organization Development: A Synoptic Practical Theory

Latest when we opt to make a practical contribution to Sustainability and OD we come face to face with the question: "Do we keep the focus on OD to facilitate concepts of Corporate Sustainability or on solidifying the sustainability of OD endeavors?" As OD researchers and consultants accompanying OD projects let us turn the main focus of our attention to the latter.

The claim 'OD'd rather be sustainable' lends itself to multiple interpretations. Why is that?

At first glance, the suggestive power and straightforwardness of Brundtland's statement in 1987 "Sustainable development is development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs" (World Commission on Environment and Development, 1987) [22] might stem from the clarity of the context in which it was embedded. Following Brundtland's logic, for the OD context this statement might imply that sustainability means that solutions remain in place also and even after the OD agents as sponsors as well as consultants and effectively all project participants have exited the OD endeavor.

Already at a second glance though, the topic of sustainability raises a whole range of questions that beg to be answered. In other words, the reduction of complexity in the context of ecology by the term 'sustainability' does not work in the same straightforward way in each and every context to the same level of effectiveness. For example, who does the 'ability to meet the needs of future generations' apply to in an OD context? To employees, to the established original technology, to the achievements of an endeavor in

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the region, to culture and society where it is embedded, to the OD sponsors and consultants, or to all of them? (see also Prammer, 2009b: 96 f.) [15] Participants involved in an OD process will all assess the results obtained in that process for their sustainability in a different way. To be more precise, they might not deem them to be sustainable at all.

The difference lies in that unlike Brundtland's statement OD does not fall back unmistakably on the 'survival of this planet' by an ecology which will ensure this survival. That is why Brundtland's concept of sustainability is not replicable one-to-one in OD and that is also why OD and its agents need to first and foremost identify which 'planet' they wish to sustain for that planet to survive.

An attempt to meet the need of the complexity of sustainability, a consciously driven OD endeavor in and of organizations which intends to balance various dimensions of sustainability coming from the many different stakeholders involved shall be the definition below (Janes/Prammer, 2007) [9]. According to this definition, OD endeavors are deemed sustainable if the following three conditions apply:

- If the solutions developed will be implemented,
- If the solutions found have a direct generational impact on the survival of the 'system' that has been the main focus of the OD endeavor,
- If the environment relevant to the system that has been the main focus of the OD endeavor will not be harmed sustainably.

In a next step, to take the sustainability dialogue to an action level, it might be helpful to reference the three basic 'Design Levels' defined within the 'Transformation Management' approach by Janes, Prammer and Schulte-Derne (Janes / Prammer, 2003) [8] to trigger OD processes. These three design levels are referred to as the 'Learning Design', 'Process Design', and 'Solution Design' (Prammer, 2009a: 27f.) [14].

The two design levels likely to directly trigger organized OD projects are as follows:

- 'Process Design': it triggers OD processes by directly offering process architectures and designs, roles of participation, social settings, instruments of intervention. Eventually, a Process Design that is to succeed presupposes a willingness to engage in a development endeavor.
- 'Solution Design': it triggers OD processes by offering blueprints from the outside of the system concerned for how the organization should be structured and work in the future. Eventually, a Solution Design that is to succeed presupposes that the stakeholders concerned deem the solutions found to be meaningful and feasible.

Against this background, let us highlight some final hypotheses (see also Prammer 2009b: 99 f.) [15]:

Hypothesis 1:

New solutions involving pattern changes tend to impact social systems. In particular, rules of cooperation, solution-making processes, sets of values, social attributions are likely to be impacted resulting in different social dynamics on various levels. Each solution design which fails to sufficiently account for these dynamics will most probably not be sustainable. Right after their implementation solutions start to undergo transformation.

In the end, what makes a solution design sustainable are not so much the architects of the solution implemented but those who will need to work with that solution. Solution designs will only be sustainable where the OD agents as sponsors as well as consultants open up to the needs, demands and ideas of those who are directly concerned by the particular solution and if they openly show how much they depend on the parties concerned by solutions.

Hypothesis 2:

If a corporate culture fails to ensure an open-minded dialogue among and with the different stakeholders then it is required to recur to the process design level as an instrument to establish a transition organization as opposed to the standard organization. By involving OD agents and consultants who will act in line with what Boszormenyi-Nagy calls 'Multidirectional Partiality' (Boszormenyi-Nagy 1987: 99) [1] towards interest groups and competitive solutions these agents and consultants will introduce settings and provide instruments and form attitudes which will facilitate and empower an open dialogue to address relevant aspects of sustainability.

Hypothesis 3:

Paradoxically, sustainability ought not to be seen as 'a value in itself' if an OD endeavor and the solutions identified were to be made sustainable. It takes this approach of putting sustainability into perspective that is likely to open the gates to a more open-minded dialogue about sustainability devoid of any taboos.

III. Recommendations for Action from our own OD Practice: An 'amuse gueule' of Sustainability on our OD Menu

In the following we discuss a few OD relevant instruments and examples of effective questions taken from our own OD practice of the recent past. These instruments and questions have been tried and tested and prove to heighten the probability of OD-endeavors to be sustainable. We will do so by focusing on five areas of action within an OD endeavor:

- Investigating the initial situation
- Setting up the OD endeavor
- Conceptualizing solutions
- Realizing and implementing solutions
- Enhancing and sustaining solutions

As Kurt Lewin said "You cannot understand a system until you try to change it" (cf. Schein, 1996: 34) [20] these instruments and questions are designed to recur in several cycles and are to be fine-tuned in each cycle. It is in this manner that insights gained can be rendered useful and results obtained will ensure sustainability.

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Investigating the initial situation

As a solid portion of success in sustainability is already anchored in what and how things happen in the pre-phase of an OD endeavor, we will focus in our short paper a little bit more on this phase.

Questions that might prove to meet the purpose of rendering OD sustainable in this phase include:

- *Which sustainability-relevant situations and groups or individuals need to be given a 'voice'?*
- *What is the purpose of having a robust 'invitation to breaking taboos' by authority figures? How to ensure in the specific organizational structures and in the specific corporate culture that 'hot' and possibly sustainability-relevant issues can be addressed with impunity?*
- *Who poses a risk of contributing to failure through their action or their failure to act when it comes to rendering OD sustainable? What needs to be avoided in terms of solutions and social behavior on any account?*

In this area, the *'graphical representation of relevant OD environments'* has turned out to be a tool with high sustainability impact. It originates from project management where it is used as a self-referential concept applied prior to the start of projects. It is also implemented with the aim to monitor change processes (Kreuzer / Schulte-Derne, 2013: 15ff.) [11].

On one hand, it helps identify if sustainability is of any specific relevance at all. On the other hand, it helps make visible the complexity of an OD situation as well as the various interest groups involved. The graphical OD environment analysis is performed by the individuals as a group in a social setting. Thus the responsibility for balancing contradictions and sustainability-relevant aspects moves from the individuals to the group as a whole.

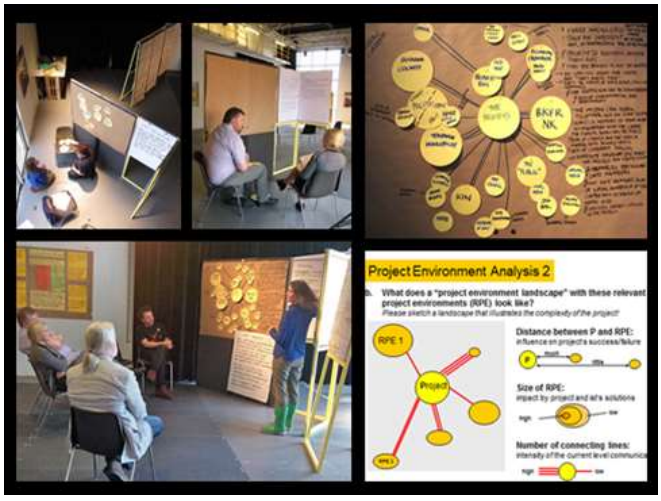

Figure 1: Example of a group work
on a graphical representation of relevant OD environments

By figure 1 we hope to give a slight impression of how processes like this are normally handled. The content stems from an OD process at an institution dedicated to the field of art and culture. In this project with an explicit sustainability impact we even started a collaboration with two artists, whom we invited into this OD process to get closer to the world of the artists and artisans concerned in the client organization. In our role of consultants we wanted to signal to the members of the client system that we intend to dive into their specific culture and way of thinking. Therefore and to provide an example for this intervention here, we even designed and built a special artistic workshop equipment.

An additional key tool is the *'guideline-orientated stakeholder depth-analysis along with feedback and reflection mechanisms without censorship'*. The feedback given to the parties interviewed renders the OD endeavor and the OD agents most directly involved in this process credible. The feedback given to the key players of the organization and the OD agents ensures that the sustainability aspects deemed relevant are reflected on broadly. This frees the solutions and approaches which might be 'hot' but highly relevant to sustainability from taboos. This instrument represents an enhancement of a guideline that is derived from the transformation management approach. (Prammer, 2009a: 243 ff.) [14]

In analogy, a further instrument worth mentioning is what we refer to as *'micro-constellations'* involving a selected group of key OD agents. This tool builds on Mathias Varga's 'Organizational Constellation' Work (see Daimler, 2008) [4]. OD agents are invited to position themselves in a one-dimensional or two-dimensional 'constellation area' in which they will dialogue about existing key success factors as well as differences in viewpoints about and the objectives of the OD endeavor on hand. Participants are able to change their positions or may be nominated to be speakers for key OD topics, which renders the OD project in its complexity a mutually created asset. Thus it remains (more) sustainable in the OD endeavor. (see also example given in Prammer, 2009a: 345) [14]

Figure 2 offers a certain insight into how things happen within such micro-constellation settings.

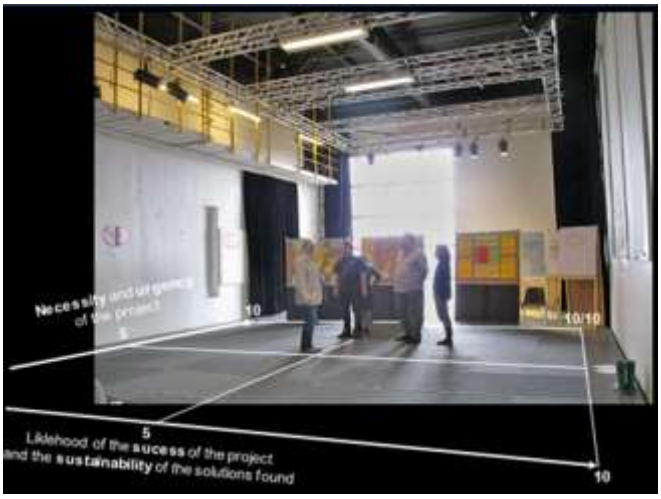

Figure 2: Example of a micro-constellation work
in a small group of representatives of the relevant environment

Setting up the OD endeavor

Questions that might be relevant to sustainability include:

- *Who/what needs to be represented in the OD endeavor because this influences the quality and acceptability of the solutions upon introduction as well as their sustainability; conversely, who/what can be neglected*

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with impunity to meet the need of reliably reducing levels of complexity?

- *How to arrange for an appropriately broad and deep participation and thus help the core agents act in a 'protected space' with impunity, driven by creative forward-thinking while ensuring that the OD process is backed sufficiently enough by all stakeholders?*
- *Which key players and functional groups need to be involved right from the outset even though they might be expected to become relevant in the course of implementation only? Which roles should they be assigned in the OD organization such that they can support them in a meaningful way?*

A tool with high sustainability impact from our OD tool kit may be as defined below (see also Prammer, 2014: 31f.) [17]

- Establishing a *'protected space'* to enable small project teams consisting of representatives selected by predefined criteria to engage in deliberation and conceptualization activities creatively with impunity and without taboos.
- Identifying further *system participants on demand for the OD across all phases* of an OD project; they will be selected by predefined criteria such as membership in a social 'vessel', platform, team and allocation to a specific role, task and job description and may be involved based on their availability across the time span of the OD endeavor.
- *Strictly differentiating in project bodies each with a predefined* responsibility for either conceptualization, or decision making, or internal advisory expert responsibilities and activities.
- Establishing an *all-party, process-oriented external system of consultants* who are committed to the 'matter' on hand.

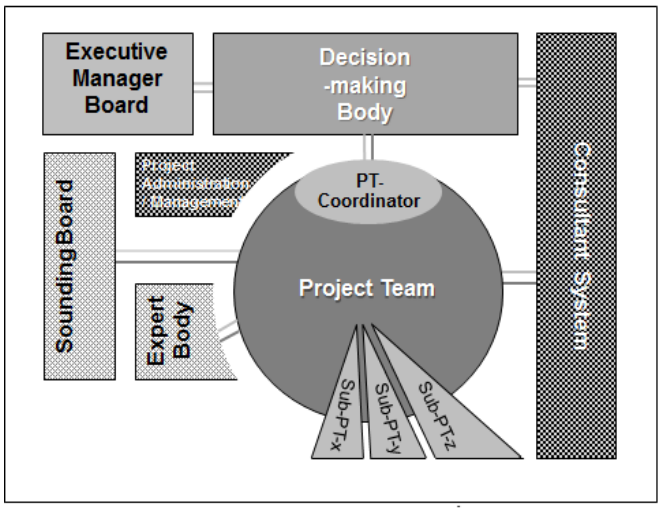

Figure 3: Possible bodies of a project organization with small groups to assure differentiation and working ability

Conceptualizing solutions

Questions that might be relevant to sustainability in this OD field of action may include:

- *How can 'premature closures' in the diagnostic as well as solution finding phase be prevented?*
- *What does it take to enable the core OD agents to balance 'double-loyalty', that to their home organization and that to the OD endeavor including various sustainability dimensions?*
- *What does it take to manage possible risks and opportunities jointly with the key players of the standard organization such that commitments entered into can be renewed and agreements made can be sustained in the future?*

In this area, the explicit development of several alternative solution models in a rudimentary way (Janes / Prammer, 2003: 109 f.) [8] has proven highly effective. The project team members are asked to feed each variant offered with detail as long as it takes to render each one workable in daily routine! This way, even solutions alien to the team members get a chance to be owned by them. Each alternative solution is designed to harbor at least one relevant yet different solution logic for the situation on hand. The solutions will all be assessed for their impact in terms of quality and sustainability on the basis of a sophisticated assessment process using weighted assessment criteria in a 'social setting' in line with the principle of parity of participation of the OD agents concerned. The involvement of external experts depends on the OD agents' capacity to engage in a multi-facetted thinking process for solutions that radically diverge from the current situation and which move towards a genuine pattern change (Prammer / Neugebauer, 2012: 41f.; Prammer, 2009: 66ff., 327ff.) [16] [14].

Realizing and implementing solutions

Questions that might be relevant to sustainability include:

- *How to achieve that corporate political realities are accounted for sufficiently enough to ensure that the core corner stones which constitute the solution identified are not jeopardized in the course of the introduction of the solution approved?*
- *What are the minimum requirements that it takes to get started with daily routine in a serious manner? Which aspects of the requirements driving the solutions and implementation thereof can be still missing on D-Day without jeopardizing the 'new' and the sustainability thereof?*
- *Which measures does it take to prevent the situation from relapsing into the 'old'? How to avoid a softening of the solution approved for implementation? Who/which member of a committee vested with final decision taking and implementation power can be held responsible or liable for implementation of measures approved?*

In this area, the explicit establishment of an unique *'implementation organization'* has proven highly sustainable. On one hand, this organization is designed to include individuals who in their capacity as final authority are responsible for the implementation of solutions approved. On the other hand, it is meant to include members of the OD project team who were initially engaged in the conceptualization phase to act as advisors and evaluators of the measures implemented. The goal is to avoid that solutions end up softened up and can withstand political

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restraints. The more explicit the content and the clearer the processes of an implementation concept as well as the sooner such an implementation organization forms part of the solutions approved, the higher the likelihood that measures are implemented and the better they can withstand political restraints.

Enhancing and sustaining solutions

Questions that might be relevant to sustainability include:

- *What might a meaningful mechanism of controlling, reflection and measure identification look like? How can it be set up such that the solutions identified in the OD process can remain sustained and further developed for real?*
- *Who can ensure that requirements relevant for sustainability are addressed, investigated, located, processed and sustained properly? Where/when and how is that to happen?*

In many organized OD endeavors the area of 'Realizing and Implementing Solutions' falls generally short of further in-depth differentiation and the anchoring of the 'new'. In many cases, once solutions are conceptualized, however, latest after the first introduction of solutions external OD agents are invited to exit the OD endeavor. This is because the Great Powers of the organization tend to take back the steering wheel.

On one hand, this necessitates targeted action around ensuring that leaders or KeyPlayers of the standard organization (are called on to) embody the solutions identified. On the other hand, it is imperative to take action to prevent them from (possibly) deviating from the principles that inform solutions identified.

When accompanying OD processes as OD researches and consultants we have found the following four strands of action to back up the OD processes in terms of sustainability.

- Enacting the handover of solutions identified by visibly transferring them from the hands of project team members into the hands of the leaders of the standard organization, e.g. in the *framework of a festive ritual encompassing the handover 'in public'*.
- Fine-tuning solutions and developing teams in departments and for business processes, e.g. by means of *implementation and team workshops*,
- Supporting key players and key platforms in assuming their roles and in driving as well as rendering OD solutions effective, e.g. by means of *relational group and one-to-one coaching measures*,
- Evaluating the OD status-quo regularly and deriving measures which are potentially supportive in terms of sustainability, e.g. by means of *qualitative evaluation workshops*.

In this area, it has proven highly impactful to embark on a 'reflective and reflexive journey' (Cunliffe, 2004: 407ff.) [3] covering all four strands of action.

We finish our short article on sustainability in and of OD endeavors by taking a closer look at one-to-one executive coaching and team coaching as a 'method of learning, which relies primarily on one-to-one conversations' (de Haan / Burger, 2014: 5ff.) [5]. The effectiveness of this journey has turned out to materialize most impressively with the system-psychodynamic approach (Brunning, 2006: xxii-xxiv) [2].

Full in line with the OD principle, this approach investigates and emphasizes personal and organizational issues which remain unspoken, forgotten, left out, denied, or repressed and thus is a way of overcoming conscious and unconscious resistance. This seems to be fruitful for both the individual and the OD process. The approach grew out of the requirement that "You can take a horse to water but you can't make it drink." – as the popular expression goes. The idea is that setting goals and finding solutions to issues within organized OD endeavors and relevant leadership might well qualify to lead the horse to water, but if the horse will not drink, an 'approach that includes thinking about the problem is required' (Brunning, 2006: xxii-xxiv) [2].

The core focus in OD coaching lies on moving from evidence-based practice to practice-based evidence in trying to find answers to the question: *"What works in practice for with whom?" or "What can OD measures tell us and what not?", or "What is expected of me to be productive and how can I interpret it to make it suitable for me so that I can become effective?", or "How can I break my own patterns of behaviour and at the same time manage my vulnerability in the face of the changes engendered by the OD process?", or "How can I recognize the 'psychological contract'* (Rousseau, 1989: 121 -139) [19] *that is implied in OD processes and how can I manage them effectively?"*

A controlling and monitoring mechanism that has proven sustainable in relational working alliances and now forms an integral part of our toolkit is the model of ‚focus of attention' as adapted from the 'seven-eyed process model of supervision' (Hawkins / Shohet, 2012: 85ff.) [7]. This strategy is designed to run in seven modes and encompasses the following relational elements:

1. *The organization as a whole*: focusing on what actually happened in the OD process and what difference it makes to the organizational structures, culture, seats of power, etc.; learning to separate actual data from preconceptions and interpretations
2. *Coachee's strategies, skills and actions*: focusing on what contributions the coachee made in the OD endeavor; exploring other choices they might have made; considering future situations and possible options and their likely impact; experimenting in role play
3. *The relationship between coachee and the organization*: focusing on the relationship the coachee and organization are creating together in the transformed organizational setting, seeing it afresh from a new angle; considering how an outsider would experience the relationship; what repeating patterns tend to occur in the new organizational setting
4. *The coachee:* focusing on coachee as fractal of what is happening in the organizational system; with a focus on the OD endeavor exploring personal strengths and resources / how the coachee's own patterns may be getting in the way; working through feelings that have been stimulated and treating coachee's feelings as data that may help increase understanding of what is going on in the OD endeavor

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5. *The relationship between the coach and the coachee:* exploring the dynamic between coachee and coach as a source of information about other dynamics relevant to the OD endeavor; using the relationship between coach and coachee as a space to co-create and experiment with different ways of relating, exploring possible implications for the OD endeavor
6. *The responses of the coach:* focusing on coach's feelings, thoughts and fantasies stimulated by the coachee and the OD process / OD solutions; self-reflection as important information for collaborative dialogue; offering coach's experience as possible indicator of what may be buried in the relationship with the transformed organizational system
7. *The wider context*: taking a ‚horizontal' view of possible occurrences relevant to OD, but also noticing the impact of the setting of the coaching atmosphere, shape of the space, sound, etc.; reflecting on what is happening in the coachee's work setting and wider professional environment; reflecting on the societal, cultural, political and ecological context of both the coach and the coachee in connection with OD and the possible impact on the OD solutions as well as their individual understanding of sustainability.

We close with a metaphor which is designed to encapsulate our attempt to present an OD synopsis of all the ideas that have not been given an ample voice including those which have not found any space to be raised in this paper at all:

"Most transformation programs satisfy themselves with shifting the same old furniture about in the same old room. Some seek to throw some of the furniture away. But real transformation requires that we redesign the room itself. Perhaps even blow up the old room. It requires that we change the thinking behind our thinking - literally, that we learn to rewire our corporate brains." (Zohar, 1997: 0) [23].

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