

7 Organizations of the future are based on ecological principles

A NEW TYPE OF ORGANIZATION EMERGES

In 'Reinventing Organisations' Frederic Laloux describes a new type of organization that is more adaptive, more flexible. Some of the secrets of their concept is self-organization and holding an evolutionary perspective. Laloux talks about Organisations as living systems. Great.. Love that! Another type of organization that seems to emerge is the pop-up company. They also do as nature would do: cleverly making use of what is already available. Grow big when possible and shrink again if necessary. Agile and flexible. I consider 'organisations as living systems' and 'pop-ups' as the evolutionary step towards a more ecological order. An 'order' away from hierarchical organizations that are not agile enough to meet today's dynamics. To enhance the transition towards this new order it can be really helpful to turn to nature for more organizational ideas and models. We only have to go outside and get inspired by practical and beautiful examples!

Ecosystem inspiration

Ecosystems are complex and dynamic systems that change in response to their changing environment. An ecosystem moves towards an equilibrium without ever reaching it (a 'dynamic equilibrium'). The whole purpose is to sustain and survive and that means moving along with the rhythm of our planet (day-night, low and high tide, summer and winter). It also means taking the planetary boundaries into account (limited resources) and using what is available. Nature does not have jobs for change managers. Nevertheless, adapting to changing conditions is part of what nature does all the time. I think that this ability of being in sync with the environment is one of the most fascinating qualities of the natural world. There are three domains from ecology that are most relevant for organizations: context, relationships and dealing with change.

CONTEXT: MONITORING YOUR BUSINESS ENVIRONMENT

In fall, deciduous trees in most areas shed their leaves. It is getting colder and that means that taking up water is more difficult causing a real risk for dehydration. But how do trees know that it is fall or that fall is coming? They just monitor their environment for factors that are important for their survival: length of the day (hours of light) and temperature. If temperature drops to a critical threshold and the hours of light over the day shorten, they start shedding their leaves. The interaction of stimulus and response between environmental factors and tree is called a feedback loop. From experience we know that personnel that is being informed about the yearly revenue of the company as well as the satisfaction of the clients perform better than personnel that is only informed about satisfaction of the client. Just asking the question what the most important feedback loops for your organization are will increase your awareness. In our turbulent economic and social environment it might be of great value to take this ecological perspective.

RELATIONSHIPS: COOPERATION ABOVE COMPETITION

Although all nature documentaries make us believe differently, more than 90% of nature's relationships are focussed on cooperation and only less than 10% of the relationships focus on competition. From a forest around the corner nearby to the African Savanna, nature focusses on establishing collaboration. This focus saves a lot of energy and helps you to survive. It is fascinating how two species with very different interests over their evolution have found each other. Of course: what one species is lacking, the other species will have. Shelter in return for safety. Food in return of health. Biologists call this mutualism.

CHANGE: ALWAYS 'READY TO MOVE...'

A landslide or a fire in a forest looks devastating, but visiting this spot after some years might surprise you. The forest ecosystem has started growing herbs, shrubs and even trees all over. Nature has the ability to recover in a magnificent way! Change is the most constant factor in nature and taking change into account is probably one of nature's most important values. But how to establish that? By always take care of having your stockpile available. Stock in terms of (bio)diversity for example. Because more different species means more food sources or more ways to distribute seeds. If one of these relations fail you might not be in trouble. Does your organization think that way? Do you think of diversity as the foundation of you being resilient?

And another thing... 'Living life to the max' is not nature's way of doing things. Growing as big as you can or having maximum offspring will make you weak and vulnerable. Nature is being effective but is not being as efficient as possible! That is just not the way to survive the unpredictable. Specialized companies who were used to focus on profit maximizations have sometimes found out the hard way. In a changing environment you need to secure flexibility by offering different products or services. Being successful on the long run is not about short term profits but it's all about long term success.

LET'S REINVENT!

Nature as inspiration for the design of organizations is in my perspective an approach that fits today's challenges. Biomimicry can help to make the transition towards a more ecological, natural way of collaborate, do business and look after our common goods. Biomimicry 3.8, the thought leaders in the field of applying nature's genius to our human challenges, have developed the appropriate tools that we can all build on.

