COMPLEXITY AND CHANGE MANAGEMENT:
ANALYZING CHURCH LEADERS' NARRATIVES

Dr. Peter Simpson

Bristol Business School
University of the West of England
Frenchay Campus
Coldharbour Lane
Bristol
BS16 1QY
U.K.

Telephone   44 (0)117 328 3468
E-mail   Peter.Simpson@uwe.ac.uk

Autobiographical Note:
Dr. Peter Simpson is Reader in Organization Studies at Bristol Business School, University of the West of England where he is Director of Executive Education. His current areas of research interest are spirituality, psychodynamics and complexity applied to issues of organizational leadership and strategic change.

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Abstract

Purpose
This paper introduces a novel approach to the analysis of individual and co-constructed change management narratives utilizing a framework derived from the theory of complex responsive processes.

Design/methodology/approach
The research project explored change management through the analysis of narratives arising from participation in group conversation. This comprised a six month intervention with a group of six leaders from the Church of England. An action research method was employed that required the leaders to bring a case study from their work that required a change management intervention. The focus of the research study was not to 'solve the problem' but to practice a particular method of conversation. Transcripts of the conversations were analyzed for change or continuity in the organizing narratives. The analytical framework employed comprises three paired categories of organizing narrative themes, namely Legitimate/Shadow; Formal/Informal; and Conscious/Unconscious.

Findings
The analysis focuses on both the *interactions* between these organizing themes and upon the *iterations*, over time, in the narratives. Following the theory of complex responsive processes the practice of change management and its consequences are understood not as cause-effect but rather as participation in emergent narratives. It is suggested that such narratives do not merely contribute to change management within an organization but that from the perspective of complex responsive processes theory such conversational life *is* change management.

Originality/value
The action inquiry method employed and the approach to data analysis from the perspective of complex responsive processes theory together constitute a novel approach to researching and understanding change management.

Keywords:
Action Research; Change Management; Complex Responsive Processes; Narrative; Conversation

Complexity and Change Management:

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Organizational uncertainty and change sometimes requires leaders to practice the art of engaging with 'not knowing' (Raab, 1997; Simpson and Burnard, 2000). At its simplest this art constitutes the act of moving forward with the conscious awareness that decision making is based on information that is incomplete or even entirely absent. However, typically in organizations the prevailing dynamics encourage both leaders and followers to favour characteristics of 'knowing' in leaders. The leadership literature has been dominated by the myth of the 'leader as hero', most prevalent in some of the literature on the leadership of transformational change (Kouzes and Posner, 1987; Manz, 1989; Tichy and Sherman, 1993). It is commonly assumed that such leaders must know something that others do not.

However, there has been a growing realization that the complexity of organizations is never going to be 'knowable' or 'controllable' (Senge, 1990; Stacey, 2009) and that we need a greater appreciation of post-heroic leadership (Rippin, 2007). This challenges the notion that leaders can guide the organization through change by means of superior knowledge. It might be that some individuals do have capabilities that are helpful in times of uncertainty but it is not possible that they can know what cannot be known. Consequently, if we are to understand what contributes to effective change management then it is necessary to investigate not merely what leaders know but also how they engage with not knowing (Simpson, 2010).

This paper reports on one study in a series that have looked at how leaders engage with not knowing; including research projects in a charitable organization (Simpson, 1997), the UK civil service (Simpson and French, 1998; Simpson and Burnard, 2000), the oil and gas industry (Simpson, French and Harvey, 2002), and in leadership development (Simpson, 2007). This study was initiated to explore recent trends in the Church of England that encourage church leaders to behave like organizational managers.

The purpose of this paper is to introduce a novel approach to the analysis of individual and co-constructed change management narratives utilizing a framework derived from the theory of complex responsive processes (Stacey, 2007). The value of this paper is in the articulation of this analytical framework drawn from a relatively new theoretical perspective. For those interested in narrative analysis, the central place of conversation and narrative in this theory is likely to be of particular interest. In addition, the research approach and design, which generates narratives over a longitudinal period, may be of interest to those concerned with time dependent organizational variables, like change management.

The research project explored change management through the analysis of narratives arising from participation in group conversation. Six leaders from the Church of England volunteered to participate in an action research process in which they were asked to take seriously the notion that in some areas of their work they did not know what they were doing. They were encouraged to take further the idea of 'not knowing' and to work as a group on real challenges that required action on their part without the expectation

that they would find 'the answer'. Rather, a process of conversation was set up between them that encouraged further reflection on their narratives.

This analysis of these narratives draws upon Stacey's (2007) theory of complex responsive processes, which challenges the prevailing organizational dynamic of knowing-controlling and offers the basis for a nuanced critical understanding of management practice in situations of change. From this perspective, change management is seen not so much as the application of professional knowledge but as emerging in and through participation in conversation. Stacey suggests, 'Organisational change is change in conversation' (2007: 271).

The discussion below begins with a brief overview of the changing context of church leadership and the leadership role. The research design is then described. A necessarily brief introduction to the theory of complex responsive processes is provided as the basis for outlining an analytical framework of 'narrative themes'. This is then used to analyze a narrative thread from the transcript of one leader's case study in order to illustrate how this analytical framework may be utilized. The paper concludes with a summary of implications for change managers and researchers.

Church Leaders as Change Managers

Traditionally, the Church of England has been based on a model of geographical regions, known as parishes, in which a single church leader, the vicar, has responsibility for the 'cure of souls': spiritual leadership and care through teaching and the administration of the sacraments. However, it is generally accepted that this has changed. Peterson (1989), in discussing 'curing souls: the forgotten art', suggests that

> The between Sundays work of American pastors in this century…is running church… In running church, I seize the initiative. I take charge. I take responsibility for motivation and recruitment, for showing the way, for getting things started. If I don't, things drift. I am aware of the tendency to apathy, the human susceptibility to indolence, and I use my leadership position to counter it. (pp.57-60).

Peterson is not in favour of this trend but recognises that he is in a very small minority. In practice, modern day church leaders – in the UK as well as the US – look and behave increasingly like organizational managers. Whatever the rights or wrongs of this, it can be observed that the Church of England has not been immune to the pressures for change that have been characteristic in other fields over recent years. This has contributed to the trend for those in leadership positions to take on new responsibilities and to define their roles in novel ways. The causes of these changes are multiple.

For example, well-documented losses from stock market investments and declining church attendance challenge the institution's ability to resource its existing commitments, let alone to fulfill its mission to 'go into all the world'. As such, church leaders increasingly share in common with organizational managers a responsibility for financial management. Whilst this may differ in nature from businesses driven by the profit motive, there are clear similarities to managers in public services and the third sector.

Less tangible, but equally significant, are political and social trends that directly and indirectly stimulate change within the church. For example, the politically driven shift in thinking in the public services to copy private sector practices and ideologies has also found its way into religious settings. In part this drive to 'run a parish like a business' has its

roots in the increasing influence of a general management discourse. This is evident in a number of publications that contribute directly to this trend (see, for example, Handy *et al*, 2004; Grundy, 2007). In the UK a coalition of prominent business, academic and church leaders have formed MODEM, a national Christian network which seeks to initiate authentic dialogue on leadership and ministry. In an occasional paper (2007) they suggest that:

> …one of the short term objectives of the MODEM leadership committee is to invite the Church to renew its commitment to the leadership of people by encouraging and facilitating 'Thinking about Christian Leadership' based on the life and teaching of Jesus that will be of help to people both in the Church and to Christians serving in other organisations. Every organisation throughout the world has to take account of change. Change calls for leadership. (p.1)

This paper goes on to focus on many of the established themes of modern change leadership literatures, with section headings including: vision, strategy, planning, teamwork, communication, inspiring others, courage, integrity, taking the team with you, and emotional intelligence (pp.5-11). It is evident that church leaders are encouraged less to understand their roles through reflection on the 'life and teaching of Jesus' and more to understand the practice of Jesus through the discourses of modern leadership.

Another impetus for change in leadership practice is the trend towards increased participation. This has lent support to the move towards "collaborative ministry" over the last two decades (see, for example, Council for Ministry, 1995; Pickard, 2009), which promotes a greater involvement of church members in the leadership and ministry of a church. The Council for Ministry suggests,

> 'Collaborative' or 'shared' ministry… should not arise from the needs of the institution facing a professional staffing shortage (i.e. responding to crisis management), nor is it envisaged as a stop-gap measure. It is rather a way of opening up, forming and strengthening the ministry of all God's people within a local context, that is either a single parish or a group of parishes, which takes fully into account the local situation, local resources and needs. (1995: 1)

One of the direct consequences of this is that formal church leaders will tend to take on a coordinating managerial role in relation to those who become more involved in the work of the church.

Taken together, this range of developments in the context and understanding of church leadership has meant that clergy are increasingly behaving like organizational managers. It is in this context that this study sought to explore one particular aspect of their practice: as change managers in situations of uncertainty.

Researching Church Leaders' Experience

The nature of leadership, which is predicated upon an orientation towards action, suggests a form of action research (Eden and Huxham, 1996) involving working with participants on real issues in their practice. Narratives of personal experience (Clandinin and Connelly, 2004) can provide direct access to the practice of leaders through a focus upon the processes of sense making and the social construction of knowledge (see Simpson, 2010, for a more detailed exploration of this).

In line with these principles a research project was designed in which six church leaders were invited to participate in a form of action inquiry requiring them to share a specific

challenge that they each faced in their work. The leaders were asked to identify a situation in which they did not know what to do and yet there was an imperative or requirement for them to take action. This process generated narratives of change management similar to those that might be told in any organization.

An established group process (Simpson and French, 1998) was used. The design required the group to meet five times over a 6-month period, with each meeting lasting for 2 hours. The first meeting was introductory, allowing the group to meet one another, to gain a greater understanding of the research project and to experience the inquiry process that would be used. The research approach was designed to create a 'safe place' where participants could trust one another and felt able to speak with candor. At each of the second, third and fourth meetings two of the participants had the opportunity to share their management issues in a similar manner, which then formed the basis of the group's conversation. The format of the sessions was as follows:

1) Presentation of the Case followed by Conversation:
    a) Leaders made a brief presentation of their issue: the 'presentations' varied in the degree to which they were structured or unstructured but all lasted no more than 5-10 minutes.
    b) This was followed by questions for clarification only and the process was facilitated by the researcher to prevent the conversation from drifting into 'problem solving'.
    c) After the Q&A the presenter sat slightly outside of the group and was required to keep silent – merely listening to others talk about the issue.
    d) After 20 minutes the presenter was allowed to rejoin the discussion, which continued for another 20 minutes.

2) The leaders then took action in relation to the issue (one month period).

3) At the beginning of the subsequent meeting the two leaders who had presented at the previous session reported back on the actions taken and described how the situation had developed.

The meetings were digitally recorded and the narratives, from phases 1 and 3, were transcribed producing 6500-7000 words of text per case study. The analysis then utilized complex responsive processes theory (Stacey, 2007) to explore change management themes in these narratives.

Change Management and Complex Responsive Processes

Stacey *et al* (2000) propose the theory of complex responsive processes as a means of understanding change in organizations and present this as a radical alternative to dominant systems theories. They provide an extensive critique of the major forms of systems thinking, including the theories of general systems (von Bertallanfy, 1968; Miller and Rice, 1967), cybernetic systems (Beer, 1967), systems dynamics (Senge, 1990) and complex systems (Thietart and Forgue, 1995; Wheatley, 1999). Systems theories describe the configuration of an organization in its context and tend to focus on the conditions required for improved performance and the changes required to move to that state. Change management is something that can be conducted 'at one step removed' by the leader or change manager as 'system designer'. In contrast, process thinking draws attention to the evolving dynamics of relating that make an organization what it is

and how it is continuously evolving. The change manager cannot be thought of as somehow 'detached' from the process and able to influence from the sidelines: the leader is an integral part of the emergent process and not able to take up a distant, 'knowing' position.

Consequently, Stacey eschews grand solutions to the problems of organization and offers an explanation of the management of change in the 'micro processes' of organizational relationships:

> 'Instead of macro processes (systems) of participation and reification, the theory of complex responsive processes is one micro process (one social act) of gesture-response in which meaning emerges. This micro process is at one and the same time communicative interaction and power relating.' (Stacey, 2003:355)

The change management practices of the church leaders in this study are understood as aspects of a complex, emergent social process. Unlike approaches to the analysis of organizational change leadership that employ complex systems thinking (see, for example, Axley and McMahon, 2006; Collier and Estaban, 2000; Englehardt and Simmons, 2002; Meyer *et al*, 2005) the individual is not seen as the prime agent of emergent change and the 'emphasis on control and organization-wide intention' (Stacey, 2007: 231) is challenged. Narrative *themes*, not individuals, are the basis of emergent self-organization, for it is not people but

> '…themes organizing conversations, communication and power relations. What is organizing itself, therefore, is not individuals but the pattern of their relationships in communicational and power terms...' (Stacey, 2003: 332)

Stacey continues,

> '…conversational processes are organizing the experience of the group of people conversing and from them there is continually emerging the very minds of the individual participants at the same time as group phenomena of culture and ideology are emerging.' (2003: 350)

Complex responsive processes theory draws our attention away from the individuals and puts our focus in this study upon the conversational processes, church culture and the ideology of Christian spirituality. In order to understand the practice of change management from this perspective it is necessary to give attention to the process of conversation, to its free flowing or repetitive character, and to the identification of themes. In the interplay of responsive processes, in which themes become significant, interact with other themes, and change form, it is possible to understand change management as a pattern of interdependence, in which power relations form and re-form.

These self-organizing processes of communicating enact webs of power relations, which, depending upon various factors such as the quality of conversation and participation, the capacity to work with anxiety, and the presence of diversity (Stacey 2007: 442-449), will lead either to change management and novel forms of organizing in free flowing conversation, or to stability in stuck or repetitive conversation. These are features that the design of the research process sought to create: placing a focus upon conversation and participation rather than upon problem solving; encouraging an atmosphere of trust and openness; and establishing a group process that allowed for expressions of difference as well as affirmation.

An Analytical Framework of Organizing Narrative Themes

In complex responsive processes theory, the notion of *iterations* in the process is important:

> '…patterns of interaction emerge as continuity and potential transformation at the same time in the iteration of interaction itself.' (Stacey, 2007: 263)

The fact that participants' case studies were articulated in three distinct phases, with narratives produced over a period of time, means that the analysis of the transcripts was able to explore how the conversational approach generated narrative-in-process or 'emergent narrative' (Taptiklis 2005: 2).

The analysis of the transcripts has utilized the recording of conversations over a period of time in order to focus on successive iterations in the narratives. This makes it possible to see how change management has been enacted by analyzing how the conversations and narratives have changed. It is in this sense that we can observe change management as change in conversation:

> 'If one takes the perspective that an organisation is a pattern of conversation (relational constraints), then an organisation changes only insofar as its conversational life (power relations/ideology) evolves...Creativity, novelty and innovation are all the emergence of new patterns of conversations, patterns of power relations and ideological themes.' (Stacey 2007: 378)

One of the challenges in researching change management from this perspective is in clearly identifying those aspects of the emerging complex conversations that will allow these *interactions* and *iterations* to be clearly observed. In this regard, Stacey helpfully states that organisational reproduction or transformation occurs through the interaction of different types of organising narrative themes, which he describes in three distinct pairings: Legitimate/Shadow; Formal/Informal; and Conscious/Unconscious (2007: 379-390). The pairs of organizing themes are described in Table 1.

This is a technical use of the notion of 'organizing narrative theme' as it is constrained to just three pairings. In many other forms of narrative analysis the notion of 'narrative theme' is broader. However, the analysis here will utilize this technical framework of organising narrative themes to demonstrate how change management emerges in conversation through the changes in successive iterations in the narratives.

Legitimate	Narrative themes that organise what can be talked about.	*Shadow*	Narrative themes that organise what *cannot* be talked about.
Formal	Narrative themes that reflect the proposed purpose, tasks and roles of the organization.	*Informal*	Narrative themes that reflect all relationships not defined by formal roles and task.
Conscious	Narrative themes based on propositional statements that people are aware are organising their experience of being together.	*Unconscious*	Narrative themes that are organising experience of which people are unaware.

Table 1: Organizing Narrative Themes

Whilst described as separate pairings, these three categories of organising narrative theme must be understood as always operating simultaneously and together 'constitute the complex responsive processes of relating that are the organization and in which its strategy emerges as identity narrative' (p. 384-5). Thus, it is important to consider how these themes interact with one another and how, over successive iterations, the configuration of these interactions can change.

For example, the interaction of *Legitimate + Formal + Conscious* narrative themes may be thought of as 'Legitimate Interactions' (p. 385). This may be readily illustrated from the research project with a direct quote from Trevor, one of the church leaders, in the early stages of the presentation of his issue:

> My background, as some of you know, is that I used to be a social worker, in particular with deaf people and mental health… A while ago I was asked if I would be part of the interview panel for a new role as a community worker with deaf people in the diocese. We appointed and that was fine. Then the supervision role broke down between this person and the Chaplain for the Deaf... She had never managed anyone in her life before and coming from the background that I have - I've been used to managing staff for a very long time and, in particular, to do with disabilities - so the Social Responsibility Officer for the diocese asked me, in conjunction with the Archdeacon of Wells, if I would manage this person. So, I have been managing this member of staff for 12 – 18 months. That has entailed meeting up with her on a regular basis, going through her work and all the rest of it. The difficulty has been that the Social Responsibility Officer is the line manager for the Chaplain for the Deaf and just happened to forget to tell the Chaplain for the Deaf that I would be taking on this role.

It is common for the initial presentation of the issue to be expressed in this form of 'legitimate interactions'. That is, the account is *legitimate* in that these ideas and experiences can be freely discussed; *formal* in that the process of organising that is described reflects agreed roles, tasks and purpose; and *conscious* in that the different characters are aware of the themes that organize how they are relating to one another (e.g. the Social Responsibility Officer asks Trevor, as a vicar in the parish, to manage the community worker).

What is significant, and will be illustrated in detail in the following section, is that this early focus on 'legitimate interactions' tends gradually to give way to narratives that reflect *shadow*, *informal* and *unconscious* organising themes. In Trevor's case the narratives move on to explore the challenges of managing the performance of someone with a disability because of the potential for claims of discrimination. Thus, managing a change in the situation was problematic because certain things could not be said (*shadow*), required conversations 'off the record' (*informal*), and involved personal motives that were difficult to recognise or acknowledge (*unconscious*). As a case study of change management, this shift in narrative themes became significant for Trevor when he realised that his managerial expectations were typically 'too high'. In the reporting back session one month later he described his process of management learning in relation to an unhelpful pattern in his own behaviour as an unconscious narrative theme came into conscious awareness:

The thing that has struck me [from the conversation at last meeting] is that I don't suffer fools gladly. I'm more conscious of that now than I was and it's not how I work with a fool – I don't mean that – but how I work with somebody who doesn't come up to the same expectations that I have. This happened once to me before.

In order to illustrate the use of this analytical framework the following section provides a detailed analysis of one of the case studies.

Analyzing a Church Leader's Narratives

Mary had recently been appointed vicar of a rural parish with oversight of several village churches. She described to the research group a difficulty she was having at one of these churches with two church wardens. One of the wardens, Bill, was a successful businessman, also recently appointed to his post in the church. The following analysis identifies three distinct iterations in Mary's narrative and the group conversation.

1st Iteration: Conflict between church wardens

> *Mary*: …a situation that's sort of been brewing for quite a while but it's really come to a head in the last week or so. It's in one of my smaller churches where I have two church wardens both called Bill (*laughter*). And what has happened is that we've reached a stage where they won't talk to each other at all.

Analysis: As described above for Trevor, Mary begins the presentation of her issue with a narrative that reflects 'legitimate interactions' in her church.

Legitimate	It is the role of the vicar to manage the two church wardens
Formal	The church wardens have tasks and responsibilities that are a part of their role but that are not being fulfilled
Conscious	The vicar has been aware that this has been a problem for some time and feels an imperative to do something about the situation

Table 2: Analysis of Narrative Themes – 1st Iteration

2nd Iteration: A misogynist church warden

Mary continued with her description of the issue, providing examples of difficult conversations, problems that had been caused at different events, and then took a number of questions. At the very last moment, just before Mary was due to sit back and listen silently to the group conversation, she volunteered 'something else':

Mary: There may be something else that's relevant. Bill the businessman has told me that he is very uncomfortable with women's ministry…

… several exploratory questions are asked and responded to, and then:

Sarah: Have you ever talked to Bill about women's ministry?

Mary: Only on the occasion when he suddenly said at about 11 o'clock at night having drunk an awful lot of whiskey that he wasn't happy with it. And he's not happy with it because he thinks women are weak leaders.

… after more exploratory questions Mary sits out of the group and listens, the group conversation started by Sarah:

Sarah: I think I would want to try and get to know Bill better, just the two of us.
Tim: With a big stick.
Sarah: Well, behind my back. Just to find out what makes him tick, to build up something more of a friendship so he can hopefully in the process learn a bit more about me and where I am coming from…

…the conversation continues for ten minutes and then Paul makes a contribution that was later picked up by Mary:

Paul: I know for me, I wouldn't want to speak with Bill. That would be my feeling. I would need to recognize that and go against it. But that would be my feeling, "I wish this would go away. This person is just impossible".
Jane: "I wish he would go back to working overseas and staying away more".
Sarah: Oh, right.
Paul: That's my main reaction, putting myself in Mary's shoes

When the group conversation had continued for 20 minutes Mary was invited back into the conversation and, when asked whether she had any reactions to the conversation so far, admitted:

Mary: I certainly identified with, "I don't want to go and see Bill". I know I've got to but I'm absolutely terrified of it because, knowing what he thinks about women and leadership and so on, there's part of me that wonders how much this is him testing me out to see whether I'm going to be any good, which I think is probably paranoia on a grand scale.

Analysis: In terms of change management, this redefinition of the problem is a significant development in the conversation. Whilst the 'legitimate' management problem of the two church wardens not talking continued to be important, Mary only just managed to give voice to what – it became clear – was a much more significant issue: her own difficulty with one of the wardens. Initially this was expressed as a description of Bill and only implicitly about Mary: 'he is very uncomfortable with women's ministry'.

The fact that this 'relevant' piece of information could only be given at the last moment suggests that this is a *shadow* organizing theme: something that cannot be talked about. Only twenty minutes later, having listened to the group conversation, was Mary able to talk about herself and her problem: 'I'm absolutely terrified…'

Something happened in the group conversation that allowed Mary to consider thoughts that were previously unexpressed (*shadow* and, possibly, *unconscious*). However, it is likely that this relates not merely to ideas and strategies voiced by others (e.g. Paul: 'I wouldn't want to speak with Bill') but also to a shift from *formal* to *informal* organizing themes (illustrated by the joke of getting to know Bill 'with a big stick').

In the following summary table, it is possible to see how the dominant configuration of the organizing themes has changed from a focus on legitimate interaction to an open exploration of what we might call 'illegitimate interaction', including aspects that were not only previously unspoken but may also have been unconscious.

Shadow	As the leader Mary thought that it was not acceptable to be frightened of church wardens and that she should not be weak or paranoid
Informal	This conversation, away from her church and in a quickly developing relationship with peers in an open and trusting environment, made it possible to have this thought and to voice it
Unconscious	Mary may not have admitted to herself before this that she was frightened of Bill

Table 3: Analysis of Narrative Themes – 2ⁿᵈ Iteration

3ʳᵈ Iteration: A political response?

Following Mary's admission of fear, the group conversation continued (now involving Mary) to reflect on the situation.

Jane: There's no way that Mary could phone him up and say…
Tim: …let's go out for a pint
Jane: Mary could, because I know Mary…
Paul: Would the pub be neutral ground?
Mary: Yes, it might be actually.
Sarah: The particular sort of pub you'd have to suss out.
Jane: So that's where the humour would come in that you're breaking all traditions and protocol by actually doing it and saying, "You'll never believe what I'm going to ask you"

The meeting ended and the group then reconvened a month later. In the intervening period Mary had taken some action, which she reported to the group. The following excerpts from the transcript highlight salient aspects of her narrative:

Mary: I said to Bill, "Why don't we meet up at the pub, have a chat about things, kick some ideas around?" and we did…
I think it was good just to get out of our normal environment…so I went in, the barman said, "Hi Mary, do you want your usual?"
…and I think it was good talking about all sorts of things that weren't strictly church. We were talking about ideas and he did say at one point that he hadn't ever had that sort of conversation with a woman...

Analysis: Mary's action appears to amount to organizing this experience through *shadow* and *informal* themes, or what Stacey calls 'covert politics':

'Skilful participating in covert politics plays an important part in the emergence of strategy as identity narrative… Covert politics are clearly informal, shadow themes organising experience and the themes are often conscious, although the underlying reasons for them may not be. However, covert politics are not organising experience in isolation from, or as an alternative to, other

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combinations of themes.' (2007: 387).

The following table summarizes the configuration of organizing themes that constitute the covert politics that Mary was engaging in:

Shadow	The change strategy was initially seen as unacceptable: 'There's no way that Mary could phone up and say... let's go for a pint' This was seen as 'breaking all traditions and protocol'
Informal	The 'pub' was described by Mary as 'out of our normal environment'; her approach stepping outside of established roles and tasks: "Why don't we…have a chat about things, kick some ideas around?" and then "talking about all sorts of things that weren't strictly church"
Conscious & Unconscious	An awareness that a friendlier environment might help but also... with less awareness, and little acknowledgement, the pub was chosen as a place where Mary was on her own territory, known and consequently more powerful

Table 4: Analysis of Narrative Themes – 3rd Iteration

However, as Stacey suggests, this interpretation of the complex responsive processes described in these narratives does not do full justice to this as an example of change management practice. It is also possible to see this as a *legitimate interaction*, in that it was quite *legitimate* for Mary to meet with Bill and there is no sense that Mary felt a need to keep this a secret; the fact that Mary was able to organise the meeting is almost certainly a reflection of the authority that she possessed in her *formal* role as the vicar; and her actions, as well as Bill's, were based on an awareness of appropriate forms of interaction.

An interesting feature of the resolution of the issue is Mary's tentative engagement with her covert political behaviour. Her narrative of the episode downplays the political nature of her actions and privileges the interpretation of this as a legitimate interaction. Whilst beyond the scope and focus of this paper, the specific issues of power relations and ideology that are central to the theory of complex responsive processes appeared to be particularly challenging for a group of evangelical Christian leaders. Thus, for example, there was little discussion of Mary's choice of her local pub where she was known. This was clearly a political act, giving her power over Bill – who was not on his own territory. This was further amplified by the barman offering Mary her 'usual'. However, in Mary's narrative and the group conversation there was little acknowledgement of this political success – the preferred tone was one of harmony regained rather than power relations rebalanced. Such complex issues of ideology and culture would, in all likelihood, require a greater degree of diversity within the group, involving others with the capacity for a more explicit engagement with politicised activity.

Implications for Change Managers and Researchers

Through the introduction of a particular approach to the analysis of change management narratives this paper has explored the contribution that can be made to understanding leadership through the lens of complex responsive processes. From this perspective,

change management is understood as emerging from the interactions between differences through successive narrative iterations:

> 'The future is thus under perpetual construction in the interaction between people and it is the processes of interaction between differences that amplifies these differences into novelty.' (Stacey, 2007: 263).

The method of group conversation that was employed in this research process provides an example of how it is possible to support and encourage high quality conversation and participation, diversity and difference, and the holding of anxiety to encourage candor. It is suggested that change management as changing conversation was encouraged in this instance not only through the iterative phases of an ongoing conversation but also, somewhat paradoxically, because there was no explicit intention for the group to solve the problem presented. By trusting the process it appears that a new change management narrative emerges as a result of 'the processes of interaction between differences'.

In the case study presented, and similarly in the other cases not included here, the church leaders were seen to experience a transition in their inner and outer conversations and these changes, expressed in their narratives, could be seen to represent the emergence of change management practice. This suggests that a potentially fruitful area of development for managers is in practicing forms of conversation characterized by a high quality of listening. Paradoxically, the research design, which focused upon 'exploration' rather than 'seeking solutions', implies that there might also be merit in the *lack* of an action-oriented focus upon problem resolution.

In learning to focus attention on practicing high quality conversation and participation, on diversity, and on holding anxiety, Stacey suggests that this amounts to the development of greater levels of self-awareness. He defines this development of self-awareness as 'paying more attention to the quality of your own experience of relating and managing in relationship with others' (2003: 422) and suggests that this is the most important management competence.

The argument of this paper has been that it can be fruitful for leaders to engage with the experience of not knowing. An analysis of change management practice that gives attention to how leaders engage with what is not known can give a different emphasis to an understanding of what leaders do. Rather than perpetuating the leader-as-hero myth, leaders and their actions appear quite ordinary and yet potentially effective. We see change managers as people without all the answers but with a responsibility to engage with difficult situations and to find a resolution with and through others.

However, this is not simple to understand nor necessarily straightforward to put into practice. Relational dynamics are complex and are not amenable to prediction or control. Conversation may be one approach to engaging with not knowing as change management in enacted through changes in conversation. Unfortunately, these changes in conversation are not guaranteed to develop in the direction of the manager's intent but rather as a feature of the interacting narrative themes that emerge in the responsive processes. The manager is likely to feel competent at engaging with legitimate interactions but most significant changes are likely to arise from shadow, informal and unconscious organizing narrative themes, which are altogether more challenging and unpredictable.

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