

Don McCormick | Innovation through Emergence *

Relationships with like minded people give us the knowledge, the courage, and the commitment to change the way in which we do things so as to improve them.

Networks emerge from these kindred relationships that grow and transform into active working communities. The scale of these networks can be as large as the common interests of the communities they create. Within these communities the influence and capacities for change become greater than those of the individual participants. It is like a living force and is invested with greater power than is possible by planned incremental change.

Through this vibrant change we connect people who are separated geographically and who have many differences in ideas and attitudes. This often happens in spite of conflicting plans and can lead to large scale solutions to intractable problems we encounter in health care and in economics.

Networks are powerful and appear to be self organizing because of the rapidity of their emergence. They seem not to have a hierarchy or to have control mechanisms that humans normally impose on their organizations. They are more like living organisms with internal intelligence and symbiotic relationships.

Making a map of the networks within the communities that emerge is useful in convincing the participants of their reality and nature. Identifying the roles within the mapped networks becomes useful in controlling and changing the work that is desired for positive outcomes. These communities are dynamic social beings that can be kept alive and grow in either healthy or destructive ways depending on the internal leadership and how the emergence is fostered.

Change begins as local actions become connected. As the actions emerge they can influence all of the connected communities very rapidly and a new power will appear that is greater than the sum of it parts. It will have new capacities different from the local actions and may surprise those who launched them. This is often observed in nature when animals act in concert as a school of small fish may appear to be a large fish to fool its predators.

Social change undertaken by skillful practitioners should be through connections to like-minded people. The skills and capacities needed by the system will emerge more readily than through traditionally designed programs. There are usually three stages in this Emergence:

- Stage One: People with like interests network together for their own benefit and to develop their own work.
- Stage Two: Networks make it possible for people to find others engaged in similar work and thereby create communities in which the desired work can be accomplished using the talents and skills of the networked participants. If it is an open source community then the discoveries and desirable end results will spread to the other communities.
- Stage Three: A system appears that has real power and influence. Pioneering efforts that hovered at the periphery suddenly become the norm. The practices developed by courageous communities become the accepted standard. People no longer hesitate about adopting these approaches and methods and they learn them easily.

There is no scientific explanation for how local changes can materialize as global systems of influence. However, the emergence of networks and communities who do work for positive change by the intentional acts of concerned people can make a big difference in how well we live and survive. This is especially true in the areas of health care and economics.

- Abstracted and interpreted from an essay by Margaret Wheatley and Deborah Frieze titled “USING EMERGENCE TO TAKE SOCIAL INNOVATIONS TO SCALE” This was rewritten to fit network development used to improve health care and economic systems.