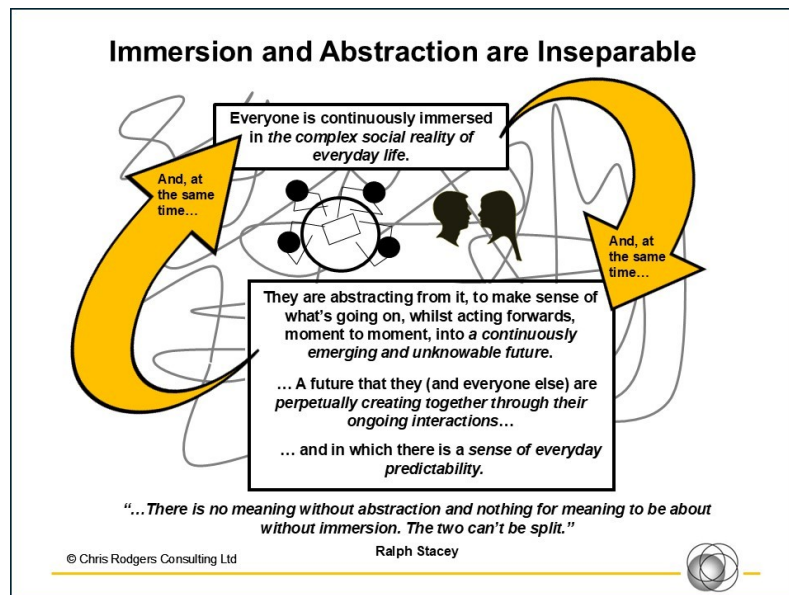


# THE PARADOX OF IMMERSION AND ABSTRACTION

Chris Rodgers



In the excellent *Complexity and Organizational Reality*, Ralph Stacey argues that people are “simultaneously immersed in the experience of local interaction and abstracting from it at the same time”. That is to say, abstraction is fundamental to the ways in which people make sense of their own and others’ experience and take action. This begs the question as to what extent, and in what ways, abstraction is congruent with the complex, self-organizing and emergent dynamics of organization. And this is one of those *very rare* occasions in which my perspective differs, in one important respect, from that which he sets out in this book and elsewhere.

## Stacey's Type 1 and Type 2 abstractions

In expanding on his comment that "Human thought has... always been paradoxical acts of immersing and abstracting at the same time", Stacey distinguishes between two types of abstraction, which he labels Type 1 and Type 2. In relation to the former, he sees meaning as arising in “the simplifying, generalizing, elaborating and categorizing of experience in the form of narrative and philosophy”; with group dynamics at the core of this meaning-making process. By contrast, he describes Type 2 abstraction as “deliberately operating on the categories of experience, to construct models, based on more precise categorizing and measuring”, etc.

As he goes on to say, "It is in in local interaction that people perform acts of both first and second order abstraction, and it is in such local interaction that the meaning of these abstractions emerges". Importantly, from my perspective, he sees the aim of the latter mode as “simplicity, standardization and uniformity, with the explicit intention being to exert some form of control”. That is to say, he positions the use of models as reflecting a view of organization and management practice that is consistent with what he refers to elsewhere as “the dominant management discourse”.

## The issue

To begin with, I agree wholeheartedly with the view that linear, context-free models and methodologies run counter to Stacey's complex responsive process (and my

complex social process) view of organization. However, not all models (or *sense-making frameworks*, as I prefer to position them) are rooted in an understanding of organizational dynamics that fits his complexity-denying "Type 2" description.

Many of them are, of course. However, the *context-specific* use of *complexity-congruent* sense-making frameworks can potentially transform the nature and content of people's ongoing participation. In particular, the use of these can facilitate individual and collective sense-making in creative ways that are not consciously part of current experience, and which otherwise might not become apparent. Importantly, too, this approach can also bring to the fore - and make visible - aspects of the real-world nature of organization, and the implications of these for everyday practice. In this case, doing so *by repurposing a central 'tool' of management orthodoxy to expose the flaws that exist in the latter's principles and practices.* That is to say, it starts from where people typically *are* in their thinking and practice, rather than where we might like them to be, given their constant exposure to mainstream, 'do this and you'll get that' prescriptions based on assumptions of order, predictability and control..

### **From 'set-piece' events to the 'open play' of everyday interaction**

The imaginative use of sense-making frameworks can also help to shift the focus of managers' and others' attention beyond periodic 'set-piece' events towards the 'open play' of everyday conversational interaction: 'Drawing out' (literally!) some of the key themes that may be affecting the current situation and shaping emerging changes. This can help managers to escape from unhelpful patterns of thinking, feeling and acting, by enabling them to (re)frame their understanding and provoking new insights; encouraging the exploration of possibilities that are not consciously part of current experience; exposing, and inviting challenge to, taken-for-granted assumptions; and so on.

The ways in which people make sense of their everyday experience (i.e. abstract from it) is a fundamental aspect of that lived reality. It therefore seems to me that it makes sense(!) for them, and those working with them, to make appropriate and timely use of *all* such enablers of joint-sense-making-cum-action-taking activity. As always, what emerges depends upon the ways in which these are framed and subsequently taken up - or not - by people in the wiggly reality and ultimate unknowability of their everyday lives. In all cases, though, *it's the conversations that flow from the use of the frameworks that are important, not the frameworks themselves!* It is these that determine the meanings and actions that people make from their use – at *that time*, in *that situation* and in the specifics of *that relationship*.

It is also worth recognizing that, through the widespread interplay of their small-group and one-to-one interactions (formal and informal, structured and unstructured), people are perpetually creating the future together.. As such, what we think of as 'the organization' is continuously (re)emerging in this ongoing interactional process. Or, as I put it in *The Wiggly World of Organization*, *every conversation is a co-creation forum*. Crucially, though, the vast majority of these conversations (at all 'levels') take place without the relevant manager(s) being physically present. So, influencing this overall process of sense-making-cum-action-taking needs to go beyond the intensity of periodic, structured, group-wide interactions.

### **In sum**

We all have no option but to muddle through the practical implications of the immersion-abstraction paradox. It seems to me that seeing abstraction in terms of *either* narrative and philosophy (good) *or* the use of sense-making frameworks (bad) limits the possibilities available for shifting the patterning of people's everyday

perspectives, practices and performance in ways that are judged to be organizationally beneficial, personally resonant and complexity-congruent.

Overall, I would maintain that the pragmatic use of sense-making frameworks, as a way of abstracting meaningfully from the complex social reality of everyday life, is not the problem. Attributing a false sense of concreteness to them, or claiming their universal, context-free applicability, is! As set out above, it's the mainstream narratives, with their accompanying 'if you do this, you'll get that' certainties and linear, step-wise methodologies, that need to be de-bunked; not diagrams and sense-making frameworks as such. When these are appropriately designed and deployed, they can expose the flaws in such thinking; open up dialogue rather than close it down; and provoke new insights and possibilities that might otherwise not be accessible.

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Contact: [info@chrisrodgers.com](mailto:info@chrisrodgers.com)