



# WHEN RUBBER HITS

MAKING SENSE OF ORGANISATIONAL DYNAMICS

NICK WRIGHT

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In the late 1970s, accelerating from 0-60mph in just 6.9 seconds felt like being catapulted from a slingshot. At least that's what I remember of my old RD400DX motorcycle. Clinging onto the handlebars whilst racing across the tarmac at breakneck speed was an exhilarating experience. The bike was notoriously light which meant that the front end would leave the ground easily, adding to the burning sense of adventure and thrill. Returning to the ground, however, could be a more sobering experience.

I will explain.

While the bike's front wheel is off the ground, it stops spinning because it's no longer being driven by contact with the road. When it does drop, the sudden jolt can jack-knife the bike and send the rider flying over the handlebars in distinctly undignified manner – painful, expensive and seriously bad for street cred. I've heard since that this is the same reason why aircraft coming in to land have motors that set the wheels spinning before they touch the static runway.

Wise idea.

Something like this might be the origin of the expression: "Let's get up to speed on this". There's a critical principle involved here that entails harmonising the motion of two or more objects or parties in such a way that enables them to engage positively rather than simply collide with one-another – with potentially disastrous impact. I'm not a mechanic but I guess that similar principles apply to car driving when changing gear by using the clutch. The awful splintering sound of cogs smashing together when the clutch doesn't work is a vivid reminder of its importance.

There's a similar principle at work in the context of interpersonal relationships called 'pacing and leading' – a neuro-linguistic programming (NLP) device concerned with one person or group moving into the pace and rhythm of another (e.g. running alongside, in a metaphorical sense) to increase the potential for positive engagement and influence. This may link to the notion of 'walking in another's shoes'.

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I experienced this phenomenon in an organisation where the senior leadership team met together regularly over a six-month period to conduct a radical review of strategy, particularly in terms of its long-term viability and effectiveness. Those involved in the process became increasingly envisioned and excited and finally decided, with considerable enthusiasm, to announce their new strategy to the wider organisation. Not only were they met with a deafening silence, but the angry backlash that followed sent the bruised and humiliated team straight back to the drawing board.

What the team hadn't noticed was that its meeting together over a period of time had created a powerful, dynamic momentum within the team itself. One of its members commented in retrospect, "Things did fall into place very quickly and we felt as if we were moving ahead at speed." When the team came back into contact with the wider organisation that had, in the meantime, remained in a relatively static state, the team found itself thrown violently and unexpectedly over the organisational handlebars. Ouch.

Another organisation I worked with has a team-based structure that, in principle, lends itself well to adaptive and innovative patterns of working. Teams are able to configure and reconfigure their relationships to one-another according to evolving priorities and demands. The difficulty this organisation encountered was how to synchronise dynamic momentum in individual teams, which are able to move quickly owing to their relatively small size, with that of the corporate organisation which is necessarily larger, more complex and less capable of rapid change.

Team A in this organisation had found a new way to configure internal team roles that would have significantly increased its flexibility and productivity. Changes would involve shifts in responsibility, however, and the organisation had a policy that changes must be evaluated first in terms of their salary implications. The organisation also had a policy that changes could be agreed only after consultation with all teams in order to ensure that opportunities and benefits were available equally. Since internal team redesigns were not a corporate priority at that time, Team A was prevented by default from moving forward.

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This type of rub between smaller and larger entities within a corporate system can result in metaphorical friction burns, frustration, loss of productivity and morale and diminished organisational effectiveness. The small cogs moving at considerable speed can feel deflected and damaged by the larger corporate cog when they try to engage with it over their specific issues of immediate concern. The longer-term cumulative effects of this experience can lead to something approaching corporate breakdown.

How to engage organisational entities moving at different speeds and at times in different directions is, of course, somewhat easier in theory than in practice. The more complex the organisational system, the more difficult the potential changes can be. In my experience, complexity in organisations tends to exhibit itself in terms of 4 principal characteristics:

- ⚙️ The number of entities (e.g. individuals or teams) involved.
- ⚙️ The number of 'states' in which entity can exist in relation to the others (e.g. roles, cultures, professional interests - see team meeting example below).
- ⚙️ The dynamics (e.g. nature, pace, consistency) of change within each entity.
- ⚙️ The dynamics of change in the system (e.g. department, group, organisation) as a whole.

The second characteristic listed here – a critical variable in all human systems – is almost impossible to predict reliably let alone manage in practice. Imagine, for instance, a simple team meeting involving just 5 people. What takes place in the meeting, including how it runs and the specific results it achieves, will be influenced by a virtually unlimited range of human factors. Some examples are:

- ⚙️ How each person is feeling: e.g. alert, tired, cold, enthusiastic, angry, confused, playful, distracted.
- ⚙️ Prior relationships between those present: e.g. friends, competitors, cooperative, suspicious.
- ⚙️ The effect each person has on others in the room: e.g. encouraged, irritated, envisioned, intimidated, bored.

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- ⚙️ What has happened before the meeting: e.g. arrived late, received a gift, an argument with a colleague, an urgent phone call.
- ⚙️ What will happen after the meeting: e.g. a difficult review, a deadline to meet, lunch with a good friend.
- ⚙️ What happened at the last meeting: e.g. successful outcome, awkward silences, lots of laughter, a stressful agenda.
- ⚙️ Expectations of this meeting: e.g. a great chance to catch up, an important issue, a distraction from more important things, a waste of time.
- ⚙️ Formal and informal roles in the meeting: e.g. chair, facilitator, presenter, note-taker, encourager, sceptic, joker.

When we consider how each of these factors can change even within the short time boundaries of a 1-hour meeting, the fluid complexity of organisational life becomes all too perplexingly apparent. Internal dynamics within people, as well as between people and groups of people, are not determined by mechanistic laws of physics. We can't change organisations in the way we might change a gearbox.

Paradoxically, the dynamics inherent to any human organisation, often regarded by consultants as problematic, can in fact provide the very condition necessary for positive movement and change. Rather than calming the waters to facilitate smooth transition, sometimes the proverbial waters need to be stirred up first. Think back to the car analogy above. Consider how difficult it is to turn the steering wheel with the vehicle is stationary and the engine is turned off compared to when driving it at speed. The real challenge is how to engage human dynamics in such a way that energy is released to drive the organisation forward.

The leadership team I mentioned in the first example above tried to steer its organisation without engaging with organisational dynamics first. We have, since, met to design a radically new process which has included setting up a series of inter-connected solutions-focused teams, drawing in staff throughout the organisation with shared responsibility to produce concrete action recommendations on the basis of their combined knowledge, experience and expertise.

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The explicit, shared, appreciative and solutions-focused orientation of this approach has helped create a considerably higher degree of alignment between individual interests and that of the leadership team and, therefore, corresponding motivational lift. The participatory dimension of this new change process is, of course, fairly textbook in nature. What has been striking is the success achieved by positively and deliberately creating movement as a condition for engagement with leadership vision.

The moral of this story is this:

We sometimes view the effective leader as someone who personifies vision and passion. It's as if we are saying: 'Have the right visionary qualities and people will follow.' What I have proposed here, however, is that an effective model of leadership for sustainable change must include not only vision and passion but also engagement. As a follower of Jesus, I see profound parallels here with incarnation too. Without engagement, even the best leaders will hit the organisational tarmac alone, bruised and humiliated.

Being-with is the elusive X factor that makes all the difference.

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