

In sync and in health

Synchronistic behaviour exists everywhere in nature, and is mimicked within many organisations. But has synchronisation in business gone a step too far? asks Dr Leandro Herrero

Last month I presented three examples of synchronicity with jogging, running and racing. I suggested you should decide which kind of running model you want for your organisation: the 'random' solitary set of joggers in the park that don't synchronise because they have no reason to do so, the 'pack', where runners synchronise as they chat and run, or the 'race', where runners synchronise in silence until one breaks away and sprints. The random joggers model seems too risky – who wants 'individuals'? We call them loose cannons, loners, not team players. But I suggested you suspend judgement. Maybe there is merit in individuality; after all, the random joggers are making the most of themselves, unlike the 'pack' that may look like a team but contains, by definition, some people who will underperform to allow for those who can't run as fast. Strictly speaking, and looking through the glasses of detachment, the reality is that the 'pack' contains more waste than the 'random' model.

Finally, there's the 'race', an image that clicks emotionally with our concept of the aggressive pace of company life. But while it may sound good, the majority of runners in the race spend their time watching each other and pacing themselves, making sure they avoid burn-out before the last lap.

The world of synchronisation is one that has a lot to say to us, from an organisational perspective. The analogies above are primitive but, hopefully, thought-provoking. Less primitive is Steven Strogatz's book, 'Sync: the emerging science of spontaneous order', which gave me the jogging idea but is also full of other stories. The new science, as he calls it, is fascinating. Biology is an endless source of mysterious synchronicity. Advanced computing and maths – Strogatz's home ground – then come in, with attempts to understand the 'laws', with little success so far. As it happens, in ideas development – whether a science or not – the questions are more important than the answers.

Here are some examples. Crickets make noises in synchronisation, as my Mediterranean roots can assert. Why? Who is in charge? Who decides that instead of hundreds of random noises, you only get one? Who's the leader?

The brain has its rhythms; neurones are synchro-

nised, but how? Where is the neurones' command centre? Specialised cardiac cells fire in sync (cardiac rhythm) and if there is a sync problem, the whole body has a problem (arrhythmia). How do they get in sync? There is no 'nucleus' or centre that dictates the synchronicity. Fireflies, and some fish, are also favourite examples for sync fans.

At the human behaviour level, which I suppose we could call 'elevating the confusion to a higher plane', we synchronise without even thinking about it. At the end of an orchestral performance in a large auditorium, hundreds of people clap hands and one single synchronous noise emerges. Can you imagine the scenario of out-of-sync, random clapping at the end of a concert? But how do we do it, how do we synchronise so effortlessly? Traffic experts who regularly carry out computer simulations are well aware that even a few cars can create havoc on a motorway if they synchronise, which they tend to do in 'blocks' (similar to the 'pack' joggers).

Elevating the confusion even higher, let's touch on sociology – fads. Why on earth did millions of people in the 1970s play with a Rubik's cube? Why is a particular style of trousers worn from Shanghai to Palermo? Who decides that?

Sociology's cousin, the 'science of social networks', has some of the explanations, but not all. An interesting angle on this is offered by the actor Alan Alda on a weblog website. He suggests if we could understand how fads inundate the world, from jeans to junk food, from verbal expressions to 'ideas', then we could reverse-engineer the process and learn the laws. Perhaps then we could apply them to good causes, such as convincing millions of people to wear condoms to avoid the spread of HIV, or to use other prophylactic measures against illness.

Emerging sciences

The interesting thing is that the answers no longer lie with individual disciplines. Sociology and brain biology now need computational mathematics. People working in traffic control, insect behaviour, brain surgery, marine biology, mass communications or politics – who traditionally would not 'talk' to each other – are progressively converging on 'synchronicity' and other emerging sciences. We are fast going back to philosophy in its original sense, but this time with a maths degree.

Sometimes, intriguing synchronicity phenomena end up being explained, at other times there is no good explanation. Between these two extremes is the case of the apparent synchronisation of menstrual rhythms of women who work or live together. Experiments with college students and flatmates have corroborated what was for many years only an esoteric belief, that eventually the

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The synchronised workforce: too much of a good thing?

Illustration by Rob Wilcockson

menstrual rhythms of women in close contact synchronise. It doesn't become exact in calendar terms, but the progressive proximity of menstrual days is statistically significant. In this case, pheromones seem to be the vehicles for communication.

Organisational style

So we live in sync, sort of. If this is true, then it's natural for us to have constructed organisational life around sync. I told you, we like packs and races. Our management language is built around sync: let's have a 'common sense of purpose'; be a team player; be on the same page; align individual and corporate goals, sing the same song, be organised, cohesive, etc. And what's wrong with that? Not much. It's certainly better than the alternative, and I can't think of any CEO preaching the opposite. But the question is, is it always good? Does it have a limit? Is there an organisational pathology of over-alignment, over-cohesiveness and over-team spirit? These may be politically incorrect questions, but remember my joggers? Is there merit in some non-aligned, random jogging?

I'd like to suggest that although sync organisational life has intrinsic merit, we may have overdone it. Why do all project teams need to be constructed in the same way, report progress in the same form and meet with the same frequency even if they are dealing with completely different things? Other than the convenience of managing a synchronised 'one-noise organisation', what's the merit, and more importantly, what's the liability?

Teamocracy, as I call current organisational life, always gives the best examples and questions. Why is it that we have synchronised team life around an event called a 'team meeting'? Because meetings are our social pheromones? Picture this sync, that I am sure you'll be familiar with. 'The meeting' is happening soon. Frenetic activity, we need an agenda, send emails for input, prepare forests of

PowerPoint, read crucial documents the night before on the plane. The meeting takes place, the high point is reached, action notes are taken. Then, relax, go home, go back to the office, nothing really happens, activity is low, there is a gap, an organisational nap, for a few weeks. Hey, when's the next meeting? In a fortnight? Here we go again, here comes the agenda, let's review the actions, frenetic again, a peak of activity. Afterwards, the same story, the activity curve slopes down to an asymptotic existence...

We live an organisational (teamocratic) life in waves. I'll bet you I can draw a graph of the information and activity flow in an organisation (and I have tools of social network analysis to do so!) that looks like an electrocardiogram, the peaks being the social pheromone of 'the meeting'. There is enormous waste in the over-sync of, say, new product development. If, in principle, what you want is a constant flow of information, knowledge, decisions and actions, the logical thing is to ban 'meetings', killing the de facto 'social pheromone'. Absurd? Okay, let's redefine 'meetings'. Of all the technical information-sharing, multidisciplinary decisions to be made and actions to be tracked, 90% can be done on-line using collaborative tools that work 365 days a year. Updates can be posted constantly as a weblog. The project leader can direct the traffic, establish deadlines for decisions, solicit input, call people on the phone when required. A highly professional scientific and technical team can communicate and work seven days a week, 24 hours a day. Forget emails, I'm talking about a rolling (web)log and an on-demand update on a collaborative tool. Should this team ever meet? Yes, but for other reasons: the main purpose of the meeting being, dare I say it, social. To learn to understand each other; to accommodate different work styles; listen to corporate presentations; ask the boss; get verbal communications on strategy or progress; practise brain-to-brain-via-mouth-to-ear; unleash tacit knowledge. There will be no decisions made in this meeting that couldn't have been made earlier, by the relevant people with the relevant information.

The virtual meeting

A better way would be to declare that 'the meeting' takes place constantly – that 'the meeting room' is open 24 hours a day. Who does what should be clearly articulated, who makes the decisions with what information should be known, who is accountable for what clearly fixed. Occasionally you meet face to face but the agenda contains no 'operational' topics because they will have already been dealt with. Scary: a bunch of random joggers doing their best, no waste, occasionally called into a 'pack' by the leader, but only when and with who is needed. Would senior managers put up with 24-hour joggers?

I now invite you to re-think other 'social pheromones' in the organisation, such as the annual budget cycle, the most artificial and often disruptive driver in business life. Entire legions of

managers and staff gather periodically, like birds migrating, to prepare figures, alter figures, prepare them again and alter them again. The means sometimes becomes the end; it's exhaustion glorified as strategic planning.

As my son would say, can we fix it? Yes we can. Budgeting is an annual planning process that suffers from over-sync syndrome. What's special about 365 days, other than as an artificial cut-off? It's a very long cycle, anyway. If you mathematically simulate a budget model, you will use what's called a 'pulse function', that is, once a year you will inject money in (the peak pulse) and will not repeat the process until the next year. With such a long gap, all events and activities group themselves around the pulse. You start spending after the first pulse and go down to zero or thereabouts just before the next one. This will often force you to postpone any decisions, including strategic ones, until the next budget year.

Imagine now that your budget cycle is, say, 100 days. You get a 'pulse function' every 100 days, rather than every 365. Your risk of delaying decisions is now much lower; you play with relatively shorter budget cycles. People who have experimented with this have reported a far more agile organisation, that is, more real, where resources and portfolio options are made continually, maximising cost savings. By breaking the traditional sync (yearly cycle) you can manage your resources more efficiently.

As far as I can see, and advocates agree, the only reason we don't do this is because of traditional accounting methods and Wall Street requirements. It would be too much hassle, people say. But of course there's nothing to prevent 100-day cycles, even if the accounting legions need to translate them into 365-day ones. It's just one of those ideas that are easily dismissed as crazy without giving serious thought to the benefits.

Challenging the sync

The point about over-sync project management and artificial budget cycles is that we run organisational life around fixed ideas, usually artificial synchronisations that mostly seem to suit management. Just the exercise of challenging the sync and exploring what organisational life would look like with a different sync, or asynchronous rhythms, is enlightening. Project management or product development, for example, could run 'asynchronously', entirely tailored to the nature, class or lifecycle of products. This makes more sense than the synchronised 'all-projects, all-products' meeting pattern, or the ritual reporting to a development committee. Of course, it is more complex and challenging for senior management. But the question is, what is more important? Senior management convenience, or the life of a project? In my experience, the former wins in many organisations.

The broader background of 'rhythms' in organisational life is worth looking at, too. Rhythms are

a socio-biological phenomenon (as well as a physics one) and are very much linked to rituals. Social anthropology has not yet made a dent in the business organisation world, but we could learn a lot from it. Most organisational life phenomena such as the dynamics of power and authority, the establishment and protection of territories, or rites of passage have more similarities with tribal life than any other more conventional approach taught in the organisational behaviour class of a business school. We are led to believe there is a 'science of management' that can be taught or learnt, but in reality this is no more than an applied field for psychology, social psychology, sociology and anthropology. Plug in some modern economics, by which I mean behavioural rather than traditional economics, and you should have a good curriculum for an MBA. Emergent 'sciences' such as synchronicity or networks that cut across traditional disciplines have a much greater future as management vehicles for the modern business organisation than the classical territories of, say, operations management and traditional human resources.

Good vibrations

A healthy organisation must periodically revise its rhythms and examine how much sync it needs. Too much sync may look good as 'alignment' and 'good management' but it may have more built-in inefficiencies than you think. A slightly asynchronous organisation may be more difficult to manage or lead, but it could prove more efficient, allowing for different individual and team rhythms. Over the years I have made a point of being suspicious of the business organisation that looks terribly well-organised and aligned, where, say, the CEO's goals cascade down pristinely to the troupes, and all the objectives look connected and geometric. A typical example of this is when the boss's goals are translated into your own goals and seen as critical success factors, while your team has goals that are a translation of yours, and so on. The idea is that, when talking to a low level employee, one could track the goal-setting system back to the CEO. Great on paper. I have never seen it work in practice, and I have yet to find an employee that seriously believes in the system. This may be an extreme example of an over-aligned or over-sync organisation, but there are other, less obvious, examples out there. When a business organisation behaves like an army, you have to question whether the people inside it have chosen the right vocation. SM

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