

Book Reviews

Engaging Emergence: Turning upheaval into opportunity

Peggy Holman

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Review by Mark McKergow

Peggy Holman is a leading figure in the whole systems/large scale organisational change world, and is known as one of the editors of *The Change Handbook* (Holman, Devane & Cady, 2007), which brings together a whole range of different tools and approaches. This book has somewhat different objectives however – moving away from this huge range of ‘methods’ towards a bigger picture of what it means to ‘engage emergence’ and host conversations which build change.

I liked this book as soon as I saw it (at the OD World Summit in 2010). There are blurb quotes from a huge range of people, from consulting guru Peter Block to my friend Lynne Twist of the Pachamama Alliance. Each chapter starts with a brief quote – nothing unusual about that, but when the sources include Terry Pratchett, Ursula LeGuin, Gilda Radner and Carl Sagan, one suspects one is in for a treat.

Holman starts off by looking at changing notions of change – of how taking a complex view of the world suggests different routes to change from the tightly-managed corporate initiatives of the past. She stresses the idea of change being about coherence being disrupted (perhaps intentionally), which allows differentiation – new realisations, distinctions, connections and awarenesses – to emerge. A new coherence is then developed, which allows things to

proceed. I liked her ‘six catches’ of working with emergence – ways in which this is more challenging than taking a conventional approach, but nonetheless key to working with an emergent perspective.

Part Two of the book consists of five practices for engaging emergence: Step up, prepare, host, step in, iterate. Each of these is nicely crafted with a chapter of relatively practical ideas. I was very interested to see the question of “what do we want more of?” coming into the chapter on Prepare – a very SF idea. Likewise, the chapter on Host had some great ideas on how to cultivate conditions for engaging people – creating a hospitable space, inviting diversity (including all opinions) and welcoming people.

Part Three is made up of Principles for engaging emergence. I was very interested to see that Holman chose to put these after the practices. I think this layout works well, stressing the point that hosting and facilitating is first a practice to be done, not a theory to be known. One of her principles is ‘welcome disturbance’, a key concept which also connects to the Agile software manifesto idea of valuing ‘responding to change’ over ‘following a plan’.

Finally, in Part Four Holman discusses three key questions for those seeking to engage emergence:

- How do we disrupt coherence compassionately?
- How do we engage disruptions creatively?
- How do we renew coherence wisely?

This got me thinking about the many links and occasional differences with SF ideas. For example, I don’t often think about disrupting coherence – compassionately or otherwise. A key SF idea is discovering and working with “customers for change”, people who want something different and are prepared to act. Where these people are to be found, something has already disrupted things. Perhaps getting working on the issue at hand with the customers for change is already a slight disruptive force for the others – those who have yet to see clearly the benefits of moving on?

I think the question of how to renew coherence wisely is also very relevant. Once things are on the right track, how much more do we intervene and how much do we trust people to keep things going? I think the SF tradition emphasises the latter, but I occasionally wonder about getting the right balance between letting people move at their own pace and (perhaps) disappearing from the scene too quickly.

At the end of the book Holman does in fact list some of the key technologies which are a part of the emergent change movement – Open Space, World Café, Appreciative Inquiry, Circle Work and more. She also mentions the Art of Hosting, a movement which seeks to bring these ideas together into practical combinations. Of course, I'd have liked to see SF in this list. One difficulty we have, in my view, is that (rather like this whole book) SF is an approach which is adapted and shaped by the emerging context, rather than a simple set of steps. It is very coherent with these ideas, as well as offering very practical ways to engage emergence – much of which is learning to set aside (at least temporarily) one's own prejudices and think more widely and more inclusively. Holding everyone's interests, hopes and concerns is a key SF skill, and perhaps one we don't talk about enough. Peggy Holman offers a great collection of ideas and strategies on how to do this. An excellent addition to any facilitator's (or indeed manager's) bookshelf.

References

- Holman, P., Devane, T., & Cady, S. (Eds.) (2007). *The Change Handbook: The definitive resource on today's best methods for engaging whole systems*. San Francisco: Berrett-Kohler Publishers Inc.