

JUST A THOUGHT...

The logo for Triarchy Press features a stylized, metallic-looking arch that curves over the text. The text "TRIARCHY PRESS" is written in a teal, sans-serif font, centered within the arch.

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Triarchy Theory and Spiral Dynamics

Among the issues raised by Gerard Fairtlough in *The Three Ways of Getting Things Done*ⁱ is the observation that different types of organization seem to lend themselves to different forms of organizational structure. Thus the army and the police force are, perhaps self-evidently, more hierarchical in nature than most others; professional partnerships (for example, legal and accounting firms) are 'by nature' more heterarchical. Equally, scientific research teams may often flourish in an environment of responsible autonomy. Fairtlough also talks briefly about the relationship of triarchy theory to the understanding of team dynamics and the sort of psychological profiling offered by Meredith Belbin and others.

This type of approach can take us further, to consider whether some individuals might be 'constitutionally inclined' to prefer to work in a more hierarchical environment, while others might prefer a different balance of hierarchy, heterarchy and responsible autonomy. The theory of Spiral Dynamics offers one way of thinking about these issues and this paper is intended to encourage further thinking along these lines.

Spiral Dynamics is a concept originated by Dr. Clare W. Graves and later dubbed by Canada's *Maclean's Magazine* "The Theory that Explains Everything." It has since been considerably elaborated by Dr. Don Beck. The model describes and attempts to explain "the hidden complexity codes that shape human nature, create global diversities, and drive evolutionary change. These dynamic Spiral forces attract and repel individuals, form the webs and meshes that connect people within groups, communities and organizations, and forge the rise and fall of nations and cultures."ⁱⁱ

Spiral Dynamics combines thinking about *memetics* with Graves's notion of *value systems* to create a model of transformational change. This model can

be applied in many areas, including organizations. It offers one explanation of:

- How people think about things
- Why people make decisions in different ways
- Why people respond to different motivational stimuli
- Why and how values arise and spread

Looking at organizational change programmes, Fairtlough suggests that their frequent failure to deliver sustainable change – and the subsequent reversion of the organization into a dysfunctional state – can be accounted for by the failure of the organization to escape from the hegemony of hierarchical thinking. However, I would like to suggest that it can also be accounted for by a failure to take into account the working preferences of the individuals and groups involved.

Clearly, management (and management change initiatives) frequently lead to confusion, contradiction and frustration. Furthermore, an approach that works well in one context may fail abysmally in another. This might result from the same approach being applied differently, or from the approach being applied in radically different market or commercial or cultural environments. Spiral Dynamics offers another way of considering what happens in these situations.

The basis of this theory is that people are different; that one important area of difference is that they are motivated by very different stimuli and that there is a pattern to these differences. (Of course, the same broad description could be applied to Jungian typology or any of the myriad elaborations of that way of thinking. The value of Spiral Dynamics in this context is that the model includes a theory of society and organization as well as a theory of individual psychology. Fairtlough has himself developed this theme in his article on cultural theory and triarchyⁱⁱⁱ.)

The General Theory of Spiral Dynamics

Spiral Dynamics theory suggests that the psychology of the mature human being is an unfolding process in which one behavioural system or level becomes subordinated to another. The individual, group or organization tends to change psychology, or level of existence, as the conditions of existence or environment change. (Spiral Dynamics theory also suggests that this is a progressive process whereby people move towards “higher levels of awareness”. I propose to disregard the hierarchical elements of Spiral Dynamics here.)

Each successive level is a state of equilibrium through which the individual may pass. In each level they will be informed by feelings, motivations, ethics and values, concepts, perceptions, responses to stimuli, thoughts, and preferences for management that are particular to that state. Groups, whether family or social groups or organizational groups, tend to gravitate towards a common level. Group members may move through these series of levels or may stabilise at any one or a combination of levels. They may also tend to operate from one level when the situation is “normal” and from another when under different forms of stress.

So, the individual or group operates in a potentially open system of levels of existence, but often settles into what approximates to a closed system. Furthermore, talking about organizations, they will respond positively only to managerial principles appropriate to their level of existence and will respond negatively to an inappropriate managerial style.

The Levels of Existence as proposed by Spiral Dynamics^{iv}

Table 1 briefly describes each level of existence. While these descriptions were developed to explain different socio-cultural systems, they can be adapted easily enough to fit our experience of organizations and the people working in them.

Automatic	Primarily motivated by imperative biological or physiological needs or drives. Automatic responses. Using habits to survive. Little concept of time, distance, causality. Little awareness of self.
Tribalistic	Seeks social stability. Explains existence in terms of polarity: good-bad, safe-dangerous. Often founded on ritual, taboo and superstition. Dim awareness of self and autonomous behaviour. Allegiance to 'elders' and lineage. The task of daily life is simply to continue what has previously enabled the group to be. Powers must be placated and appeased.
Egocentric	Fully aware of self-existence. Life is like a jungle where the strongest prevail. Proud and aggressive, looking out for self above all others. Motivated by instant reward or gratification. Aggrandising, imperial. Proving self through heroic deeds. Open expression of individual wants by the powerful, more covert expression by others.
Saintly	Rules are prescribed for everything. Obedience and submission to the "order-of-things" is the price of security. Life is seen as orderly, predictable, and unchanging – based on the order set down by authority. It is one's duty to accept this order. Loyalty within groups is important. Impulses are controlled. Resistance to authority is discouraged. Codes of conduct are important.
Materialistic	The overriding concern is to control the world about one for personal ends. Exploration, discovery, questioning limits, calculated risks, rationality, efficiency, and accomplishment are all means to control or manipulate. In a pragmatic way all tools are used as appropriate – dishonesty, deceit, and deception are employed as required. Everything has its price. Ruthlessness doesn't pay. Only results matter.
Personalistic	Consensual and democratic. Distributes resources fairly. Values networking and dialogue. Relating to others is central. Being liked and with others is more important than material gain or power. Readiness to go along with everyone else in the group is important. Strong need to be accepted. Group membership is greatly valued – individual values are derived from the group and can change quickly. Non-group individuals or concepts have no valid claim to consideration. Group processes, consensus and majority rule are valued. Emotional intelligence is prized.
Cognitive	Co-operative, integrative, interdependent, accepting of change. Concern is less for the group than for oneself and the world one exists in. Information-oriented, pragmatic, seeks to do the "best" given the best information available. Self-motivating, flexible and spontaneous. Those with most knowledge should lead - as the situation changes so should the leader. Not motivated by fear of survival, materialistic ends or the group.
Experiential	Acceptance that one can never know or understand all things. Wonder, awe, reverence, humility, unity, and simplicity are valued. Reality can be experienced, but never known. Insists on an atmosphere of trust and respect. Resists coercion and restrictions in a quiet, personal way. Avoids relations in which others try to dominate.

Table 1

Table 2 tell us more about the drivers and values associated with each level and suggests an appropriate managerial style:

Nature of Existence	Problems of Existence	Motivational System	Means Values	Ends Values	Appropriate Managerial Style
Automatic	Maintaining physiological stability	Physiological	No conscious value system - values purely reactive	No conscious value system - values purely reactive	Nurturing
Tribalistic	Achieving stability	Assurance	Traditionalism	Safety	Friendly parent
Egocentric	Living with self-awareness	Survival	Exploitation	Power	Tough paternalistic
Saintly	Achieving peace of mind	Security	Sacrifice	Salvation	Authoritarian
Materialistic	Controlling the world for personal ends	Independence	Rationalism	Materialism	Bargaining
Personalistic	Living with the human element	Affiliation	Relationship	Community	Group process
Cognitive	Restoring viability to a disordered world	Existence	Accepting	Existence	Facilitation
Experiential	Accepting existential dichotomies	Experience	Experiencing	Communion	Facilitation

Table 2

These descriptions are, of course, highly simplistic and individuals as well as groups are obviously complex, unique and capable of a range of behaviours drawn from different levels. The key is to observe the stimulus and response. For example, an Egocentric type, if approached by a manager using an open, participatory, non-directive style, might see a weak leader deserving no respect. At best, the leader will be ignored; at worst, ridiculed. On the other hand, the Personalistic individual may see in the same person an enlightened manager – not driven by a desire for power or an excessive concern for authority. In the first case, the manager’s approach does not match the subordinate’s level of existence. Just as clearly, no-one involved will benefit from this situation. The second case shows a more congruent

style, the subordinate and manager will relate well, but the organization in the long run may not benefit.

The area of concern to management is a small part of the psychology of the individual or the group – that which is manifested in work. However, most people seen within this area will function consistently from a single level over a significant period of time. The manager must seek clues to, and adjust the style of management to be congruent with, the individual's level. More important, it will be apparent that the style, culture and structure of the organization as a whole will have an impact on the effectiveness with which the individual or group operates at work. Management's function, then, is to accomplish the organization objectives through others by providing the structure, framework and management style that the individual or group wants in a manner that will allow the opportunity for individual growth.

Appropriate management styles

Spiral Dynamics talks at length about the congruent management styles for each level and the consequences of mismanagement. In the context of triarchy, it may be enough to draw out just a few, relevant characteristics.

Automatic – Nurturing:

It is often said that there are virtually no examples of the Automatic style in the western workforce. While this may be true, it perhaps discounts the operation of Automatic drivers and motivators at an unconscious level or when the individual or group is operating under extreme duress. In any case, a nurturing approach and environment is seen as the only one that can be effective.

Tribalistic – Friendly parent:

More common as a group behaviour than might be imagined, the Tribalistic style demands a “friendly parent” approach, which will not lend itself to heterarchy or responsible autonomy. Of course, the question in triarchical terms becomes whether one should attempt to educate Tribalistic groups to become more self-reliant and autonomous.

Egocentric – Tough-paternalistic:

This level of existence is more familiar. It is also responsible for the failure of many an initiative designed to empower employees or engender autonomous working or responsible self-management. So long as this is the favoured approach of a significant number of employees, a strong, hierarchical management style and structure will be required. The manager must assign tasks to subordinates in a “tough” manner – providing enough specific detail to define the desired end results, establish limits to subordinate discretion

and set the completion date. Performance measures will be important here and trust may often not be repaid. Equally, a too restrictive, authoritarian (Theory X) management style or structure can be counter-productive.

Saintly – Authoritarian:

At work, this approach is frequently found. Since it virtually begs for an authoritarian management style and a clear hierarchical structure it can be difficult to see why different management and organisational styles and structures should be put in place, unless a triarchical approach is felt to be ethically more appropriate. The disruption involved in trying to change such a culture will certainly be counter-productive in the short term.

Subordinates at the Saintly level may frequently perceive job enrichment programmes as personally threatening and laden with insecurity. They may respond with neurotic behaviours or by sabotaging the productive effort.

Materialistic – Bargaining:

Here is a level of existence very familiar in western organizations. The Materialistic employee expects compensation based on results and might appear to be the ideal candidate for an organization that fosters responsible autonomy. However the primary danger is of irresponsible autonomy as any means that will achieve the desired outcome are acceptable. This, too, is the style favoured by the non-ethical, capitalist corporation of Socialist mythology and, often enough, observable reality. The Bargaining style of management should allow the Materialistic employee to be free to operate unrestrained, but only after clear rewards and working guidelines have been agreed.

Personalistic – Group process:

The employee at this level is concerned with social rather than material matters and is the ideal candidate for a heterarchical, participative organizational style. The proportion of employees at this level in western organizations today is probably the highest and is likely to increase as societies more widely endorse this approach.

Cognitive – Facilitation:

With their recognition of the value of knowledge and its role in a knowledge economy, and their acceptance of changing project groups and rotating leadership based on knowledge, employees at this level seem best suited to a triarchical approach where the proportion of hierarchy is negligible.

Experiential – Facilitation:

A group of people rarely found in conventional organizations, the experiential type also lend themselves to an organizational structure and management style that is low on hierarchy.

Conclusion

Spiral Dynamics is an approach born in the middle of the last century and some of its assumptions about order and progress sit uncomfortably in a post-modern world (though business is not famous for its adoption of postmodern thinking). That said, the spiritual and psychological overtones that accompany the “progression” from Automatic to Experiential are, in many ways, more popular than ever. Given that these overtones inform the thinking of much of the population – including that of many people who control and/or work in organizations – the perspective offered by Spiral Dynamics may offer a useful contribution to our thinking about how and where to attempt to introduce a more heterarchical structure with provision for greater responsible autonomy.

Andrew Carey

www.triarchypress.net

ⁱ Fairtlough, G., *The Three Ways of Getting Things Done* (Dorset: Triarchy Press, 2005)

ⁱⁱ Beck, D. and Cowan, C., *Spiral Dynamics: Mastering Values, Leadership and Change* (Oxford, Blackwell Business, 1996)

ⁱⁱⁱ Fairtlough, G., *Cultural Theory and Triarchy Theory*. Retrieved March 2013 from <http://www.triarchypress.net/cultural-theory-and-triarchy-theory.html>

^{iv} Tables 1 and 2 and some of the accompanying definitions and thinking are closely based on:

Graves, C., Madden H. and Madden L., (1959). The Congruent Management Strategy. *The Historical Collection of the work of Dr. Clare W. Graves of William R. Lee*. Retrieved March 2006, from http://www.clarewgraves.com/articles_content/Madden/CG_madden_1.html

Links

<http://www.spiraldynamics.org>

<http://www.spiraldynamics.net>

<http://www.clarewgraves.com>

<http://www.possibilityperspectives.com>