

In Conversation with Prof. Dr. Stafford Beer

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Professor Beer, please define the advantages and special features of management cybernetics.

People want 10 words – you can't say it. It is a different paradigm and therefore very hard to describe in ordinary language. The paradigm the whole of science has had for the last 200 years has been based on reductionism. Our science, cybernetics, is not reductionist. It is holistic. The way people talk is reductionist. Trying to explain holism in terms of reductionism is impossible. If you're trying to discuss holism and begin to describe it by looking at it from 2 sides that is reductionist. Therefore it is meaningless. Fredmund saw that with great clarity. He is the only generalist (I know) who understood that.

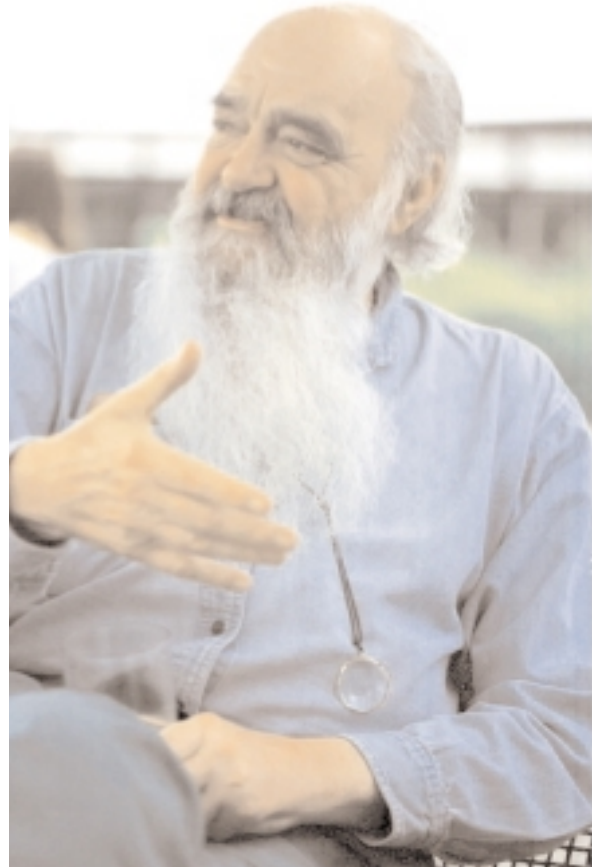
Real problems do not respect the disciplines of academia. Nor do they respect commercial attitudes. To a holist, physics and chemistry are all the same thing because you can't talk about the real world without the other. You can't talk about marketing and leadership separately because they are dependent on each other. You must cover the whole spectrum.

You always dealt with latin, greek and sanskrit language. was this a basic need to detect management mechanisms?

No. I needed to do these things to get a grasp of this world. English is 80 % latin and greek, I wanted to find out what the roots are. I had to learn.

You practice and teach Yoga – would you recommend Yoga to every manager?

Yes, but there are many forms of yoga. I do not teach or practice how to stand on my head or how to put my feet behind the neck. Yoga is all about repose and stillness. The eastern people say: there are 10.000 things that life consists of, yoga teaches you how to forget them. If managers could do that even for a short time management would be a lot better. I practice 1 hour of meditation in the morning and spend some time meditating before I go to bed. I am not proposing that to every manager, but if they were taught properly... (it



would help). For example if a managers before a dreadful meeting ducks himself in for 10 minutes and undergoes certain exercises that I teach, and then goes to the meeting the result will be different.

Your poems were published, your paintings exhibited. In your opinion, are the structures of management readable in all styles of life and art?

Poetry and painting do not refer to cybernetics but to my holistic attitude. Why should not an expert on finances or technology be able to write poems or paint, or why should he not talk about it.

How did you meet Fredmund Malik?

1974 I changed my life – until then I used to live in a big house with a swimming pool and a rolls royce, then I came to live in this little cottage in wales. One day in that year Fredmund Malik arrived on the doorstep without any warning. He came with a group, most of them students of Hans Ulrich. We talked and it became clear that Fredmund was highly knowledgeable of my writing.

And why was it that you changed your life then, in 1974?

For several reasons, most of all for political and spiritual reasons. The political reason was that I became more and more socialist in attitude over the years. With the gap of rich and poor constantly increasing, I decided to quit wealth and live in this cottage. At the same time, the many phases and changes in spiritual matters caused me to move on.

Tell me more about you and Fredmund Malik.

He writes impeccably about my work, he has total mastery of my work. That is quite unusual because an awful lot of what people write about me is total rubbish. When Fredmund wanted to do some strong things with my stuff I saw he understood what I was writing and talking about. Now we are partners. His understanding of my work is impeccable and he has made powerful use of it in his consultancy practice.

Sounds like the perfect match. Was there or is there any disagreement between you in scientific or other matters?

I haven't found it yet. There is no disagreement.

Back to the issue of cybernetics: What is your judgement concerning the problems of new economy and the crash of the stock exchanges?

Those problems arise because of reductionism. People say: Here is a new technology, a market niche, we understand it, let's go. But they have no holistic point of view, therefore nobody knows how to handle it. They knew something about technology, knew all kinds, talked about virtuality – but the whole of the boom was virtual. (that they did not notice.) The alleged value was going up, but people were not founded in a big enough system. People did not know how to define the whole. They just saw a breakthrough in technology and off you go. (They did not take into account that) most of the world have never heard of new economy or new technology. (Africa, Asia, Latin America). (The collapse of the stock markets and the new economy) ...that makes me laugh! These people deserve to suffer now. I'm not concerned about them. I'm concerned about the hungry and sick who don't get enough to eat and no medicine. That is the context we need to look at.

Otherwise the whole planet is dying. This is what it is all about. Look at what happens with Kyoto.

Speaking of Kyoto, the international institutions seem to try to create global systems to improve what you are describing – what are they doing wrong, why doesn't it work?

The institutions don't know anything about cybernetics. It is always the same answer.

About Austria/government:

I remember it from the anschluss which was part of the original raping by Hitler – but I do not know enough about Austria today. Details on that I would leave to Fredmund. I recommend management cybernetics to every government – things would go a lot better if politicians knew about the way systems work. Unfortunately they don't, in no country. Governments generally make a mess of everything they touch because they don't understand systems, they don't know what a system is. There is huge amount of knowledge but they don't draw from it. Again it is the problem of reductionism. To put it in a nutshell is impossible.

From the point of view of cybernetics: what can be said about large scale mergers like the current one of Dresdner Bank and Allianz?

I do not know anything about these banks, but people keep doing this in order to make more money and reduce costs. That is a narrow target. And they forget about everything else. That is irresponsible.

We have no social conscience any longer. If people would know about systems, and include workers and clients in one system, there wouldn't be one disaster after another happening. In the end that's going to make the monopoly more or less universal. You end up with globalism and that is the most frightening of all. Which is happening. It is the end of democracy. The world will be run by capital. Nobody cares about elections on a local level. Governments have no clout. The only ones with a clout are the global oil companies and such.

In 1992, "World in Torment", you wrote "...we are governed by an oligarchy, it is an oligarchy of power, greed and terror. In the most extraordinary way, we are blind to this." Would you say that today, too?

Oh yes – more so! It grows – there is nothing to stop it. 10 years later it is worse. It was a correct forecast.

You also say that "The collapse of Soviet Communism was formal,As in the East, dysfunctional over-centrality has underwritten disaster: diagnosis uncovers the same cybernetic illness, only in the West the symptoms are different." (World in Torment) Is there a healing and how? Or, must capitalism collapse as well?

There would be a healing if anybody knew systems and cybernetics. It is not a magic wand. You need infrastructure. There is no wise man saying "if you do this..." all you can do is keep on saying this: (learn) cybernetics and (create) conditions in a systemic order. Raising interest rates is voo-doo. You can't deal with a global system problem by trying to solve it with this. (The same applies to) crime: prisons are no answer. When I was director in a steel production firm I raised productivity by 30% only by applying cybernetics. Also, all the studies I made for hospitals proved that costs can be reduced by 30% through cybernetics. No one on their own can do this. You need infrastructure and a group.

In your early experiments you proved that hierarchical structures are too mighty for one particular person to overcome. does this mean that the basic condition for flat hierarchies is always a broad consent, in the beginning?

In Team Syntegrity I invented a mathematical method to create joint knowledge. Interestingly, the knowledge of syntegration is spreading in Switzerland and Holland, these nations are not hierarchical. There is no understanding in Britain and America, because they are no democratic places in my opinion. They only make fuss about their being democratic, but they are not. It (syntegrity) is not about broad consent. That is too bland. It is not about the lowest common denominator, that won't result in any activity, because it is too bland. It is about the highest common factor. And you have to hold it. It takes time – a week. People say "we can't do that" – but they can take a gulf course for a week.

Flat hierarchies do not always work satisfactorily. What is going wrong? What is the replacement for authority which usually ensures functionality?

My solution is syntegration. People are not willing to think. They want instant answers on the back of an envelope. They ask me what is the essence of your teaching. Well, in essence it's ten books, written in ink. People ask me "do you have a 7 minute video?" I say no. There is no seven minute video on my teaching of cybernetics.

From your view, what is or are the most frequent management mistakes?

The most frequent management mistake is that managers don't think in systemic terms. That they think in reductionist terms because that's all they know and business schools teach reductionism. I know how they operate, I have been teaching in 20 or more business schools.

What drives organisations and what slows them down?

It used not to be like that but now what drives organisations is primarily greed and the hypocritical attempt to be liberal. What slows them down is mostly the lack of social conscience. It is of no interest to anybody in spite of the fact that this is a huge potential of the systems, a huge benefit of social good.

From the cybernetic point of view, the lack of information means negative decisions. how can information be arranged more efficient?

If people were starting to think and abandoning in answering the last e-mail. Managers are like the swines jumping over the cliff (parable from the bible) busy answering e-mails and phone calls. There is no magic wand for arranging information either.

Flat hierarchies do not always work satisfactorily. What is going wrong? What is the replacement for authority which usually ensures functionality?

Flat hierarchies don't work at all. Flat hierarchy is equally stupid as hierarchy, it is only changed from top down to a horizontal model of hierarchy – it is still hierarchy. It has only the appearance of being consensual. Unless people are willing to change, there is no solution. It's got to start with individuals. My friend Margaret Mead said "look at any major change in the world, it started by a group of friends". That's how it is. Fredmund and I are gathering a group of people who know. It is small but it is a start.

An interview from Pia Pausch with Prof. Dr. Stafford Beer on April 16th, 2001.