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Constructing a Positive Turbulence Model

for the Wycliffe/SIL World

Justin Hettinga

Trinity Western University

Dr. Douglas Atha

Introduction

Creativity is something that we too often view as the domain of artists. Creativity and innovation are what separate the ‘mover and shaker’ non-governmental organizations, from those that are defined by the status quo. The basic principles of positive turbulence offer NGOs an opportunity to move from being a mediocre, status quo organization, to a ‘mover and shaker’ organization that will truly be world-shaping.

In this paper I will take a look at what other authors, in various fields, say about some of the principles of positive turbulence found in Gryskiewicz’s text. (Gryskiewicz, 1999) I will also recommend ways in which Wycliffe and SIL, and other NGOs, can apply these principles to their unique contexts in order to create organizations that are truly innovative and world-shaping.

I will start by looking at the worldview that lies behind the concepts of positive turbulence. From there I will look at the ideas of learning and innovation and how we can create a context in which they thrive. I will specifically look at ambiguity, paradox, safety and cross-cultural experiences. Next I will tackle a few of the concepts behind building synergy and teamwork in relation to positive turbulence in NGOs. To end, I will give recommendations as to the application of positive turbulence within Wycliffe and SIL.

From a Newtonian Worldview to Quantum Thinking

Every model, in every discipline, is based upon a deeper worldview. In order for us to give justice to the model of positive turbulence we need to look at some of the basic assumptions of the worldview it is based upon.

In yesterday’s world companies sought to be stable. A successful worker was one who was compliant and showed up on time. In this paradigm the world was predictable and ran like a machine. This was a Newtonian worldview. (Tetenbaum, 1998, p. 22)

But the world is rapidly changing and people's worldviews are also changing. No longer do we view the world as totally ordered. It is necessary that our organizational paradigms change according to the world around us. In today's information age the workplace is changing. Today people work with very little supervision and they live with experimentation and risk. No longer do people use the old time clock since they can work at any time, from any where. The best employees are those that can learn quickly and can work in an interdependent team environment. (Tetenbaum, 1998, p. 22)

Many of the principles of positive turbulence are based upon a new worldview. We need to understand the constructionist worldview in order to understand the concepts that will be discussed in this paper, such as synergy, teamwork and innovation.

A social constructionist worldview says that our perception of the world around us is socially constructed. Our culture and our experiences create how we perceive the world. This worldview addresses some of the key issues in the positive turbulence model such as tacit knowledge, relationships and energy. This is fundamentally different from the cognitive worldview that says the world is one big machine and we all see the same thing. (Von Krogh, Ichijo, & Nonaka, 2000, p. 30)

Quantum thinking is another way to describe this constructionist worldview. Quantum physics offers us a radically new perception of the world which can be referred to as quantum thinking. Here are a few principles drawn from quantum thinking that are particularly relevant to our discussion of positive turbulence. First, a holistic perspective that says the whole is far more than the sum of its parts. Second, everything is related; an idea in one field will have implications in other fields. Third, the concept of duality that makes us embrace opposites and

both/and thinking. Fourth, the principle of uncertainty says that every theory is being constructed as it is being applied to new contexts. (Vella, 2002, pp. 30-31)

Learning and Innovation

Learning and innovation go hand in hand. It is possible to learn without innovating but you cannot innovate without learning. In this section I will look at a few of the concepts of learning that we need to understand and use in order to be innovative. I will look to the field of adult education for how learning takes place in a positive turbulence model. By looking towards other disciplines I am demonstrating a key tenet of learning in the positive turbulence model.

Living with Ambiguity and Paradox

Gryskiewicz says that “ambiguity is a state in which many possibilities exist.” (Gryskiewicz, 1999, p. 36) Most people do not feel comfortable when the future is uncertain. Ambiguity keeps the options open. It allows us to explore and find out the truth for ourselves. Too much ambiguity can be dangerous and unproductive, and border on chaos. We need to be sure that the core vision for our organization is never ambiguous but at times our strategies will be somewhat ambiguous when we enter into something unknown and new.

It is good that you grasp this, and also not remove your hand from the other.

(Ecclesiastes 7:18a NKJV)

Not only is ambiguity necessary for innovation but so is paradox or creative tension. We need to be able to look at new ideas even if they seem to go against everything we think is true. We need to embrace opposites and take hold of both/and thinking. We cannot simply ignore new ideas that seem to disrupt the status quo.

Teaching and learning require a higher degree of awareness than we ordinarily possess—and awareness is always heightened when we are caught in creative

tension. Paradox is another name for that tension, a way of holding opposites together that creates an electric charge that keeps us awake. (Palmer, 1998, pp. 73-74)

Ambiguity and paradox are necessary for innovation in a team context. But ambiguity and paradox need to be counter balanced by safety in order to maintain an innovative learning context.

Safety

Adults generally do not learn well when they feel threatened. Fear is one of the largest roadblocks to creativity. Fear paralyzes innovation. When an employee fears that a simple mistake could cost her her job, she will not take risks. Risks are necessary for innovation. When a person fears having his ideas laughed at, he says nothing. Fear needs to be confronted on many different levels.

Within the positive turbulence model it is necessary to build relationships with people in a team context. In order for ideas to flow in a team, protective walls need to come down. For many people this is a scary process.

We fear encounters in which the other is free to be itself, to speak its own truth, to tell us what we may not wish to hear. We want those encounters on our own terms, so that we can control their outcomes, so that they will not threaten our view of world and self. (Palmer, 1998, p. 37)

We need to create what Von Krogh et al. refer to as a knowledge enabling context. A context where people feel free to share ideas, explore new ideas and take risks. (2000, p. 7) Jane Vella says, “Adults have shown that they are not only willing but also ready and eager to learn

when they feel safe in the learning environment.” (2002, p. 71) The use of active listening and empathy help to create an environment of freedom and trust.

Synergy and Teamwork

What makes a good team?

For many people today the word team is overused. Lots of people have had the unpleasant experience of simply being thrown into a group of people and being told to work as a team. Teams do not automatically form when people come together. A team is a group of people working together in interdependent relationships, towards a common goal. (Salas, Burke, & Cannon-Bowers, 2000, ¶ 7) “If the team is to be more than just a collection of individuals grouped around a common task, then a conscious and concerted effort to develop and nurture the team is needed.” (Lawford, 2003, p. 24)

A good team is characterized by trust. Interdependent relationships require a high level of trust. A good team also has people from different fields or disciplines. These people from different fields and disciplines need to be able to listen. The skill of listening is perhaps one of the most important skills in the process of innovating in teams. Teams need leadership but they need a listening, facilitator type leader rather than a top-down autocratic leader. When all of these factors come together we hope that synergy will be created.

Synergy

Synergy is one of those buzzwords that the cynics among us hate to hear. Along with the word team, synergy is overused. Synergy, like a good team, cannot just be created by following ten easy steps. Synergy is relational, unpredictable and difficult to create or re-create. To a person with a black and white, Newtonian worldview, synergy seems like a figment of people’s

imagination. To understand synergy you need to see the world as an unpredictable organism where everything is somehow connected. So what exactly is synergy?

Synergy or synergism, most often refers to the phenomenon of two or more discrete influences or agents acting in common to create an effect which is greater than the sum of the effects each is able to create independently.

The opposite of synergy is antagonism, the phenomenon where two agents in combination have an overall effect which is less than the sum of their individual effects. (Wikipedia, 2005, ¶ 1)

When synergy happens, “Everything begins to fall into place in an apparently effortless, seamless fashion. Team members are able to anticipate the needs and actions of their fellows, often without specific verbal communication; and their spirits soar.” (Lawford, 2003, p. 24)

Synergy does not just happen when a team comes together. In fact, antagonism is far more common in teams than synergy. We need to create a caring trusting environment where people can let down their guards, listen and interact with one another and the new ideas. In this type of context the chances of synergy happening are increased.

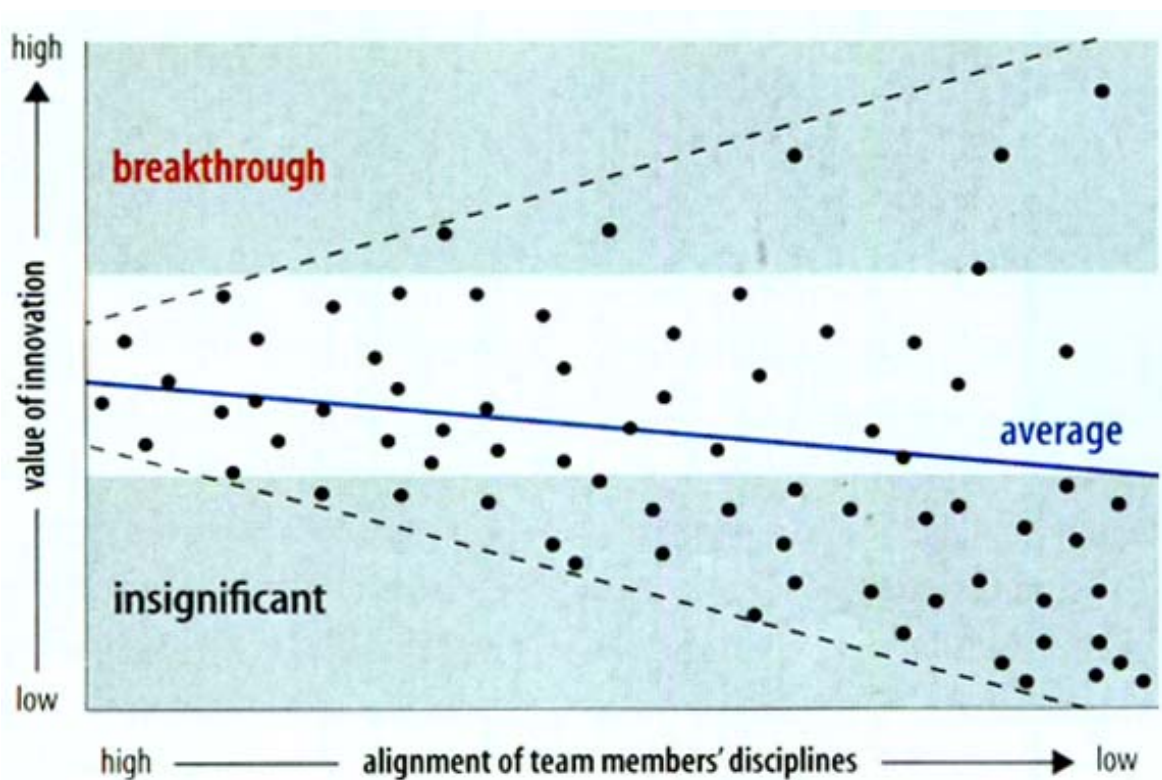
Cross-fertilization

Cross functional, cross-fertilization or cross-pollination are necessary components to a positive turbulence model team. In order to create new innovations we need to create teams that are made up of people from different fields and disciplines. When SIL puts together a team to work on a new language project they need to create a team made up of people with a variety of backgrounds, from linguistics to administration, from reading theory to marketing.

Lee Fleming from the Harvard Business School has some very practical research that helps us maximize the impact of a cross-functional team, even though initially they seem to contradict the idea of cross-functional teams.

...as the distance between the team members' fields or disciplines increases, the overall quality of their innovations falls. But my research also suggests that the breakthroughs that do arise from such multidisciplinary work, though extremely rare, are frequently of unusually high value--superior to the best innovations achieved by conventional approaches. (Fleming, 2004, p. 22)

Table 1



(Fleming, 2004, p. 22)

Fleming's research can be understood by chart 1, where each dot represents an innovation. In this chart you will see that as teams' disciplines become further apart, the number

of low value innovations increases, but the number of breakthrough innovations also increases, although they are still rare. Does this contradict one of the fundamental principles of positive turbulence that says we need to create multi-disciplinary teams? I do not believe that it contradicts this principle but instead it makes us sharpen the principle even more.

The occurrences of high-value breakthroughs can be increased when team members come with a deep understanding of their given field rather than a simple broad understanding. When team members have a deep understanding of their field and are teamed up with others from very different fields, their innovations will be of a higher value than if everyone had a broad understanding of various fields. (Fleming, 2004, p. 23)

In order for innovation to come from a multi-disciplinary team, associative thinking needs to take place. Associative thinking is when people connect seemingly unrelated ideas. This is 'out of the box' type thinking that is essential for innovation. (Amabile, Kurtzberg, 2000-2001, p. 286)

In most situations the typical NGO does not have the opportunity to customize their teams. We generally need to work with what we have. But this research can be helpful when we are in the recruiting process as well as in the process of re-assigning personnel.

Trust

Trust is one of those things that is hard to develop but easy to destroy. Trust is ultimately a lack of fear. A context of trust is absolutely necessary for a team to function well in a model of positive turbulence.

Trust means that team members can have the reasonable expectation that their associates will not do anything purposely to harm them. Trust cannot survive long in the old paradigm of power based on control. (Lawford, 2003, p. 26)

How can we develop a context of trust within our teams? We need to support one another, not only in work but also in emotional and psychological ways. We need to have open and honest communication. Regular 360° reviews are one way of keeping things open and honest, if they are done in a supportive, non-competitive manner. We also need to use our active listening and empathy skills. Taking every opportunity to build interpersonal relationships by attending team social events, sharing life-stories and celebrating each other's major life events, will build a significant sense of trust and unity in our teams. (Lawford, 2003, p. 26)

Cross-cultural experiences

Most international NGOs have staff that are well traveled and have been exposed to many different cultures. People who have traveled extensively tend to have a much broader worldview than those who have not. (Gryskiewicz, 1999, pp. 49-50) Those who have lived extensively in foreign countries, have learned other languages and have adapted their lifestyles to a new culture are more likely to be open to new ideas and understand the perspective of people different from themselves. NGOs are unique in this way and need to tap into this tremendous resource that lies within them in order to maximize innovation.

Conclusion

The positive turbulence model, as described by Gryskiewicz, (Gryskiewicz, 1999) lacks some sensible relational principles that could create a context where new ideas and change are better received and where team synergy is created. In this paper I have added some of these principles so as to present a model of positive turbulence that is relevant to the Wycliffe and SIL family of organizations.

Positive turbulence as presented by Gryskiewicz may seem somewhat extreme for many NGOs. The positive turbulence model tells us that if it's not broken, break it. This dissatisfaction

with the status quo is exactly what we need in the Wycliffe and SIL world. We have placed in front of ourselves an ambitious vision that is completely impossible if we continue with the status quo. To start a Bible translation project, by the year 2025, in every language that needs it (around 3000), is a status quo crushing vision. In our Vision 2025 statement we have committed ourselves to breaking away from the status quo. The positive turbulence model gives us principles that we can apply throughout our organizations so that we can discover the creative ideas and innovations that will be necessary for us to fulfill Vision 2025.

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