

Occupy Complexity: Using Complexity to Examine the Occupy Wall St. Movement

ABSTRACT: The Occupy Wall St. movement started off slowly in September of 2011. After a few short weeks, however, it appeared to be everywhere. This movement, which seemed to come out of nothing before spreading across the planet, has a great deal to offer the careful observer. By looking at the history of the Occupy Wall St. movement and its emergence out of a chaotic and complex environment, it will become apparent that there is much we can learn from complexity science that can be applied to this movement. Additionally, we will see that these lessons also have important implications in leadership as well.

A group called Operation Empire State Rebellion called for an occupation of Zuccotti Park to occur on June 14, 2011. When the date and time arrived, four people showed up (Bennett, 2011). Fast forward three months to September 17, 2011 and a new group called for an Occupy protest. This time close to 2,000 people showed up and occupied the very same place, Zuccotti Park (Schneider, 2011). What changed? What allowed for two similar calls for protest to go out with one drawing only enough people for a doubles tennis match and the other drawing enough people and attention that it has since spread throughout the United States and the world? It can't be due to the specific leadership and demands of the original protest as it had neither (Schell, 2011). While on the surface it would appear to have "come out of nowhere, like a virgin birth" (Schnell, 2011, 4) it actually came out of complex and chaotic environment that unfolded throughout the summer of 2011. By looking at the history of the Occupy Wall St. movement and its emergence out of the chaotic and complex environment, it will become apparent that there is much we can learn from complexity science that can be applied to this movement. Additionally, we will see that these lessons also have important implications in leadership as well.

According to Castellani and Hafferty (2009), it is important to understand the external forces that have an impact on any given social system. By doing this it is possible to understand the forces against which the social system being studied is reacting too. In the case of the Occupy Wall St. movement there are several external factors that have allowed this movement to emerge. While many of these external forces existed when the much smaller protest on June 14, 2011 occurred, there were a few key factors that were missing. We will examine these after discussing the environmental factors that both had in common.

The national unemployment rate began to rise sharply in 2008, when it was at the low rate of 4.8%. By September 17, 2011, the date the Occupy Wall St. movement began the

unemployment rate was at 9.1% and had been over 9% for just over two years (Bureau of Labor Statistics). This is a long time for so many people to be out of work. In fact, there hasn't been an unemployment rate over 9% since 1983 (Bureau of Labor Statistics). As a result of this extended period of high unemployment, it is only natural for people to begin becoming frustrated with the current state of the economy and the prospects for the future. However, the United States has had bad economies before and hasn't seen this sort of movement, so there must be something more. In addition to the external force of the economy is the impact of the global revolutions that took place in the spring of 2011 which has come to be called "The Arab Spring" (Schneider, 2011). After seeing the success of the numerous revolutions that took place in North Africa, it only makes sense that a frustrated populace would see beginning a protest movement as a viable option. While very different in nature, no one in the US need fear being killed for protesting, the concepts are similar; a populace feels it isn't being heard and has decided to do something about it. While both the Empire State Rebellion and the Occupy Wall St. protests shared the initial conditions, it is obvious that something else was necessary for the emergence of a global movement. For an understanding of this we turn to a final need beyond the right conditions, the right people.

Earlier it was mentioned that the Occupy Wall St. movement didn't owe its success to one specific leader, and this is true. It did however, have a very specific types of people or groups of people that allowed it to explode into the movement it is rather than ending with the same lackluster showing of the Empire State Rebellion. Castellani and Hafferty (2009) along with Plowman and Duchon (2008) noted that independent agents are necessary for complex realities to emerge. In explaining their understanding of social systems, Castellani and Hafferty (2006) introduced the concept of dynamics noting that it is the "process by which agents in a

complex social system use the web of subsystems to create, organize, and change the system in response to the demands of the external environment” (p. 11). In the case of Occupy Wall St., it is clear that the agents involved are reacting to the external environment of the economy and the results of the Arab Spring. What made Occupy Wall St. unique in comparison to the Empire State Rebellion is the presence of specific agents performing specific functions.

Gladwell (2002) discussed some of the agents necessary for an idea to gain momentum. He wrote that for any idea to truly spread a few select types of people need to be involved performing specific functions, people he called connectors, mavens, and salesmen. In the case of the Occupy Wall St. movement all three of those agents were present and that is what allowed it to spread to the size it has. According to Gladwell, a connector is someone who knows a lot of people in different social groups. This characteristic allows the connector to bring together people and ideas that might not otherwise find one another. In the case of the Occupy Wall St. movement a small Canadian magazine called *Adbusters* was able to function in the role of connector. On July 13 the magazine sent out a very simple email to its 90,000 member distribution list with the hashtag #OccupyWallStreet, a date, September 17, and a question, “What is our one demand?” (Schneider, 2011). While the concept of one clear question did not take hold, the idea of the date and the name certainly did. *Adbusters* was able to take an idea and get it to a lot of people, something that the Empire State Rebellion wasn’t able to do. This, however, is just one of the agents necessary for an idea to spread. Gladwell (2002) also talked about Mavens, the people who are “information specialists” (p. 59). Gladwell explained that “just as there are people we rely upon to connect us to other people, there are also people we rely upon to connect us with new information” (p. 59). For the Occupy Wall St. movement this person was David Graeber and he introduced the idea of the general assembly to the people who

were early participators in the planning of Occupy Wall St. As Bennett (2011) explained a general assembly is:

a carefully facilitated group discussion through which decisions are made – not by a few leaders, or even majority rule, but by consensus. Unresolved questions are referred to working groups within the assembly, but eventually everyone has to agree, even in assemblies that swell into the thousands. (p. 67)

The idea of the general assembly was not widely known to those who were planning the Occupy Movement, but it has since become a cornerstone for how decisions are made in many of the Occupy sites (Bennett, 2011). As a Maven, Graeber was able to offer his knowledge of how to facilitate a general assembly to the group. The final agent that is necessary according to Gladwell (2002) is the salesman, the person “with the skill to persuade us when we are unconvinced of what we are hearing” (p. 70). For the Occupy Wall St. movement this role was played by a group of hacktivists known collectively as Anonymous. In August of 2011 they took hold of the idea that *Adbusters* had proposed and began spreading it throughout cyberspace by flooding social media networks with their videos and ideas (Schneider, 2011). They became the unofficial salesmen of the Occupy Wall St. movement. As mentioned earlier, the right agents are necessary for an idea of a movement to take off and emerge from the complexity. However, it does not need to be specific people, but rather certain types of people, in this case connectors, mavens and salespeople, performing specific functions. Now that an understanding of why the Occupy Wall St. movement was able to emerge, let’s turn our attention to the inner workings of the movement and how it has been able to last.

Earlier the presence of the general assembly in the early stages of the movement was mentioned. Once September 17 arrived and the initial protest began, this form of decision making continued. As a result, it helped to facilitate a key aspect of emergent complex systems, the connection of independent agents. As Plowman and Duchon (2008) explained:

each person in a network is a “node” and through talk and interaction “connections” among the nodes are formed. The addition of new nodes or changes in the nature of the connections between the nodes can lead to changes that have enormous consequence. (p. 132)

The use of the general assembly in the Occupy Wall St. movement allowed for each person, or node, involved in the movement to communicate with other nodes. In doing so, strong connections were formed among these nodes. These connections serve two important functions. First, as Castellani and Hafferty (2009) explained, complex social systems are made up of sets of attracting clusters. Each cluster is formed by independent agents. Because this is the case, the general assembly’s of the Occupy Wall St. movement allowed for independent agents to interact and form these clusters. This happened in many ways, but one key way these clusters developed was through working committees. If a problem couldn’t be solved in the general assembly, a working committee was formed to continue working on the problem with the goal of reporting back to the general assembly. What results is a subset of clusters based around specific issues (Bennett, 2011). The second function these connections served is that when disruption occurs within the movement, instead of splintering the movement, they, through the connections, serve to add energy to the movement. Plowman and Duchon (2008) explained this result when they commented that:

when disruption occurs in organizations, people talk, controversy or interest mounts as connections among individuals and groups tighten. In the midst of disturbances these tightened connections make it easier for information or gossip or ideas (energy) to amplify and move through the system quickly. (p. 132)

So, the connections made during the general assembly and the working groups, provides the structure necessary to endure and thrive through disruptions. This second aspect of the connected nodes is important as we consider the impact that disruption has had on the movement since it began on September 17.

The use of general assemblies and working groups also allowed for what Vaill (1998) called process wisdom. Vaill explained that “the term *process wisdom* is intended to capture the feeling of moving *through* situations and problems and yet somehow acting ‘wisely’ in relation to them” (p. 25). According to Vaill, process wisdom is both necessary to good leadership and profoundly missing. It is a reflection of the presence of time in any organization and incorporates the reality that things happen in time in an organization. As a result, it is necessary to be able to react, respond and plan while things are happening instead of trying to isolate things and plan ahead of time. Attempting to plan ahead of time denies the reality that it is not possible to step outside of time within an organization in order to respond to what is happening. Instead it is necessary for all within an organization to respond in real time, while things are happening. What is amazing about the Occupy Wall St. movement is that they have been able to develop a system that allows for in-time responses to both internal and external stimuli. By doing this they are able to fluidly move forward instead of feeling a need to stop and regroup. The general assembly’s allow everyone to understand what is happening and to react while things are

happening rather than after the fact. This is an important feature as we will see, because there has not been a lack of external stimuli for the Occupy Wall St. movement.

Shortly after the movement took root in Zuccotti Park, reports of police interaction with protesters began to surface. Since that time police have cleared the occupations in cities such as Portland, Oakland and even New York. While on the surface it would seem that these police interactions would serve to weaken the movement, in fact, it has had the opposite impact. The interactions between the protesters and the police serve to create what Plowman and Duchon (2008) called “disequilibrium” (p. 132) and Vaill (1996) called the “permanent whitewater” meaning “the complex, turbulent, changing environment in which we are all trying to operate” (p. 4). Although, as Plowman and Duchon (2008) explained, disequilibrium is not necessarily a bad thing. They wrote:

when adaptive tensions increase and push a system toward disequilibrium, the system is injected with energy and information, and rather than dampening energy, it is dissipated through the system, breaking up existing patterns and creating disturbance... [and] most argue that it is only as organizations move into disorderly states that emergent ideas about new adaptations are possible, and so give rise to innovation and creativity. (p. 133)

So, rather than creating conditions where the movement disintegrates, continued police involvement will only serve to strengthen the movement as the creation of disequilibrium will allow for new ideas and approaches to be considered, providing new energy to the cause.

While all of this may be interesting in terms of understanding the Occupy Wall St. movement and how it has come to be, these ideas seem to be counter to traditional leadership theory (Northouse, 2007). Can anything be learned about leadership from complexity and how it

has impacted the Occupy Wall St. movement? For that, we must return to Plowman and Duchon (2008). When speaking about how disequilibrium can be used in organizations, they explained:

As complex adaptive systems, the disequilibrium-learning-feedback cycle in organizations at the local level creates a kind of perpetual novelty. Sensitive to initial conditions, those nonlinear interactions can often occur far from an assumed stable pattern and surprise is likely. People and groups interact, exchange information, and take adaptive actions without the intervention of someone occupying the role of central controller. Each interaction, exchange, and adaptive reaction, changes the organization in unexpected ways, calling into question the purpose of leadership, as it is traditionally viewed. (p. 134)

For leaders, it is important to understand that people will interact in organizations. As discussed earlier, people begin to cluster around one another and this allows for the exchange of ideas. These clusters cannot be forced, and are often not what is expected. When these clusters arise, they will react to changes in the system, or to disequilibrium, and the outcome cannot be predicted. It is important, however, to remember that rather than being a bad thing, disequilibrium injects energy into a system allow for adaptation and creativity. Because of this reality it is important for leaders to know that disequilibrium is not something to be avoided at all costs, but instead is to be seen as something that can be an asset to the organization, resulting in innovations that might have otherwise never been possible.

In addition to understanding the nature of disequilibrium, it is also important for leaders to understand how ideas travel. As discussed earlier, for an idea to really take hold, the presence of key roles is necessary. It is the mavens, connectors and salesmen that spread ideas and allow

them to take hold. If these roles are not filled, it will be difficult for an idea to take hold and spread. This is important for leaders to realize, especially if the complex task of organizational change is being undertaken. As a leader, find and indentify who these people are in your organization. Once you know who they are, be willing to tap into their specific skill set whenever necessary. Not everyone will be one of these people, but if you can find them, they can be the difference between four people getting on board and thousands of people getting behind and providing momentum for an idea.

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