

Context, context, context

Barry Oshry's latest book, reviewed

David McAra

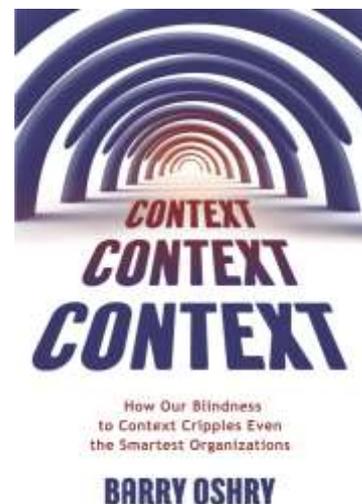


Context, context, context

How our blindness to context cripples even the smartest organisations

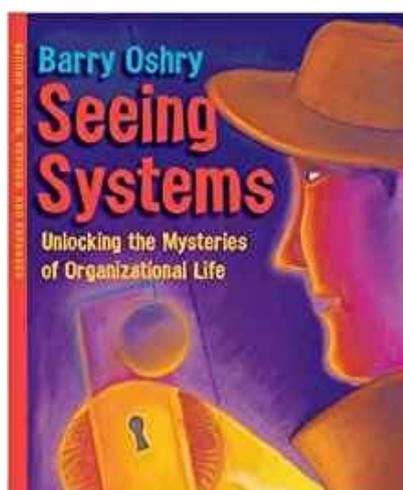
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Overcoming 'system blindness'

Our wonderful friends at Triarchy Press were kind enough to send me a copy of Barry Oshry's latest book: *Context, Context, Context* for review. But I don't want to review it, I'd rather write a fan letter. Other fans will know Barry's earlier book, *Seeing Systems*, in which he describes the repeating patterns of behaviour he has been observing for decades in his 'Power Lab' workshops where participants are assigned roles in a generic corporation making generic products for generic customers. He concludes that the behaviour emerges from the power relationships between the roles and not from the rational, free choices of the players.



More important than how an individual is categorised by the Myers-Briggs Type Indicator, Belbin's Team Roles or their astrological star sign, is whether they are a Top, Middle, Bottom or Customer and how their world appears to them from that perspective. Fruitless and unhelpful it is then to blame individuals or to call for best endeavours and push key performance indicators.

"Once a system falls into a pattern, that pattern shapes how members experience themselves, others, their system and other systems. And then members behave consistently with that consciousness. All of this happens without awareness or choice."

Oshry, 2018, p22

Here lies the genius of Barry's generic metaphor. None of the activities, services, products, markets - and especially, individual character traits of the people involved - is relevant. What matters is the interaction between the players and the distribution of power. It is impossible to dismiss these insights on the grounds that any particular situation is unique. The whole argument is presented from first principles.



Barry Oshry. Source triarchy.net

Not 'What?' but 'How?'

The new book examines a generic response to the generic organisational problems from the perspective of a generic, change management consultant. It lays out a dialogue between HE, a newly hired team member and SHE, 'Chief Contextual Thinker' of MICROSCOPE, Inc. They are discussing their assignment with Dynamics Unlimited to support the implementation of THE PLAN. Again, no specific approach is discussed. OD consultants, Six Sigma 'Black Belts', Theory of Constraints 'Jonahs' and Lean process analysts: all will recognise their own experiences in the unfolding of the generic PLAN.

Crucial to successful change is an understanding of the systemic tensions endemic to any organisation, tensions and conflicting priorities which arise from the different perceptions of the different levels. With elegant, simple, hand drawn graphics, Barry works through each position, describing three particular aspects of their perspective:

- The distinguishing characteristics – i.e. what everyday life is like for Tops, Middles, Bottoms and Customers
- How THE PLAN is seen from each point of view and
- The reflex responses that are triggered, unwittingly by that understanding – the Dance of the Blind Reflex in Barry's elegant phrasing

MICROSCOPE, Inc. won the assignment, not by offering a new plan but by acknowledging the validity of the proposed plan and addressing the implementation quite differently. 'Awareness and choice' is the refrain.

“Organisations are whole, organic systems and systems within systems. Transformation entails transforming whole systems. This means helping the members of each system see their system as a whole, in its immediate context and help it master whatever challenges that context raises.”

Oshry, 2018, p63

To work well, the parts of a system must be good at performing their specific function for the whole and at joining up with the other parts. The whole system must continuously adapt to the changing demands of its environment while maintaining the fundamental character of the system. In Barry's concise and poetic language “robust systems zestfully individuate, integrate, differentiate and homogenize.” I fear my attempt to summarise may make it sound obscure.

Rather than setting out to 'manage' the desired change, MICROSCOPE, Inc. consultants don't even pretend to understand the nature of their client's context. Their (and Barry's) goal is to educate us all in the importance of context so that we start to notice and pay attention to the patterns we are trapped in and then make better choices.

Towards the end of the book, HE asks SHE, “Will it last?” and offers the best answer I have found to the question we were examining in the [Spring 2017 edition of e-O&P](#) – ‘*In the rare instances where we have seen astonishing transformation occur, why does it so seldom endure?*’ As I feared, it seems to be, not a defect but a feature, intrinsic to our organisations. And yet, presented here, with such clarity, perhaps we can see it ... and if we can see it, perhaps we can make better choices and escape the traps that our reflex actions so often lead us into.

AMED 2020

This book could be the AMED Manifesto. In its generic simplicity I hear echoes of my own experience of speaking with other AMED members. We quickly become engaged in impassioned conversation about the *processes* rather than the *content* of work. Somehow we recognise shared beliefs, curiosity, mutual respect beyond the superficial. “Aha! Here is someone I can connect with!” Only after some time, does our curiosity provoke us to ask, “So what did you do before getting involved with learning and development?” The answers are completely unpredictable: lawyer, journalist, local government, engineer, marketing, etc., etc. It really doesn't matter.

So we embrace Barry Oshry as a kindred spirit and were proud to publish his article introducing some of the ideas explored in this book. ‘*What would Homo Systemicus do?*’ appeared in our Summer 2012 edition. (You can still download it [here](#).) He is still a champion of the cause in his ninth decade. Never give up!

Links

Triarchy Publishing: www.triarchypress.net

Barry Oshry websites

Power and Systems: <https://powerandsystems.com/>

Organisation Workshop on Creating Partnership: <http://worldwideweekofpartnership.org/>

About the reviewer

David is a recovering engineer, systems thinker and organisational learner. He is a member of AMED Council and the e-O&P Editorial Board.