

# Refiguring agency: OD's role in a new activism

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What does it mean to be an activist in the current times? How do we think of our agency, that is our ability to make a useful difference, in the context of the complexity of our current times? I propose that we need a radically different notion of these things, and how our practice of organisational and personal change can make a valuable contribution.

One criticism of the work of organisational development is that our work can appear to be solipsistic; that is overly focused on our individual story, and less on the impact we have on a wider set of changes. Whilst there may be some truth in this, I prefer to see this turn to the self as partly the function of the very system that we are trying to shift. The mental structures of our current society are individualistic and therefore tend to view this turn to self-awareness as a kind of individualism. The opposite can also be true: when we focus on our own make-up, we potentially liberate ourselves from the thrall of a system which reifies individualism. Rather than remaining fixed on our image like the gaze of narcissus, we see through the pool to a window on the world.

Is this supposed solipsism (which may be its opposite) a yearning to break away from an enslavement to a system that regularly acts out of a *lack* of self-awareness? To explain this further: there is no doubt that we need urgently to consider how we can make a difference in a world that is increasingly complex and feels out of control in the face of these complexities. Take climate change, for example. For many of us, we are stuck between a sense of personal disempowerment and global indifference. So we struggle to imagine how we might make a difference between these two poles. But, perhaps this sense of a lack of control is not necessarily a bad thing.

The futurist Jamais Cascio proposes that we live in a 'BANI' world, which stands for 'brittle, anxious, nonlinear and incomprehensible'. What Cascio is arguing is that each of these symptoms of the current age are backed by a set of illusions. 'Brittle' relates to the *illusion* of strength. 'Anxious' relates to the *illusion* of control. 'Nonlinear' relates to the *illusion* of predictability and 'Incomprehensible' relates to the *illusion* of understanding. I would argue that these illusions have always been with us, but it is only the world viewed through the narrow telescope of modernity, and its emphasis on the individual, favouring the gaze of a select group of more privileged people, that has given us any sense that we weren't always labouring under such illusions. Yuval Noah Harari, in his significant work *Sapiens*, put this individualism down to the post-enlightenment humanism that dominates our thinking. He suggests that the U.S. Constitution, with its invocation of 'life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness', exemplifies a yearning for personal immortality, total individual freedom, and the assumed birth-right of personal bliss. These aspirations have reached a zenith of usefulness. We can see this in how we are surrounded by

the complex issues of conflict, environmental degradation, racial and other discriminations, and a kind of moral bankruptcy in our democratic and other institutions. The managerialism that dominates most organisations fails to address the pace and complexity of their contexts. The mood of many organisations is one of disappointment, in that they never seem to live up to a kind of perfected performance. In my view, these are about pervading narratives rather than actual experience; a recognition that the stories that we have created, stories measured against the dream of personal empowerment, have run out of currency.

I want to offer a balanced view here: modernism and humanism and the individualism it prioritises has served humanity well in many ways. Billions have been pulled out of poverty and into relative material comfort. The proposition of individual rights has offered an important dignity to us all. There is no doubt that modernism's technological prowess has served humanity well, despite its clear cost to the more-than-human world. But as Einstein famously said, "*The thinking that got us to where we are is not the thinking that will get us to where we want to be.*" We need a new view, a new way of looking at ourselves, and indeed a new set of stories about many of the givens that we have taken for granted. And central to this is a new way of thinking about what it means to have agency and to be an activist for useful and meaningful change, an activism that is less associated with individualism.

If the atomised agency of individualism no longer serves us, perhaps the complexity that surrounds us suggests a different set of moves or gestures in order to be useful. The first of these moves might be to develop a kind of self-awareness that tends towards the universal rather than the solipsistic. In simple terms, the more I learn about myself, the more I can get out of my own way and be useful to a system that is out of control in its complexities but whose complexities may be attended to with a more universal gaze.

Linked to this is an evolution in how we construe what constitutes 'action'. The mid-20<sup>th</sup> Century social and political thinker, Hannah Arendt, who is known for her the phrase 'the banality of evil' in respect to the Holocaust, also wrote at length about action. She recognised that it is vital in social change, but unfortunately, in her terms, the most meaningful action is invisible, intangible and less measurable. It is an ephemeral phenomenon compared to what that might look like change in the conventional sense. In organisational terms, this is where the project plan dominates over the relationships required to make the project work. Significant 'action', in Arendt's terms, is something that resides in the realm of relationships, *between* people rather than *in* individual actors. The problem is that the quality of relationships is hard to measure. How do we value friendship, connection, personal contact and even love when we cannot 'see' them? Yet we know these are the things the qualities that make a difference; that constitute the significant factor that will prompt change, or at least the kind of change that we might want to see. Sometimes this is minimalised as the politics of change with a small 'p', but this suggests such is an epiphenomenon rather than the main game in town. How often do we hear

people decry 'more talking when we need action', when it is good quality talking that we need more of?

This asks us challenging questions about agency and activism, and the tools and qualities we have at hand to make a significant difference towards the change we want to see (and be) in the world. As a function of patriarchy, traditional agency has a masculine quality, befitting of a sense of dominance (with sometimes even destructive outcomes), based on this narrative of individualism.

But as Anthea Lawson argues in her very excellent book, *The Entangled Activist*: "*We are entangled in the stories that our culture tells about heroes and saviours, and hard work and the value of doing over being.*" Such a lack of self-awareness and reflexivity leads to an ironic (yet often experienced) phenomenon in an activist community. As Lawson goes on to say: "*We are entangled activists when we are talking about human rights, yet are treating other people - colleagues, collaborators or opponents, horribly.*" Behind this common experience sits a set of assumptions about action, which suggests it resides in the individual as a universal unit of change rather than in the relationship where action occurs. Lawson again suggests: "[there is a]... *universalising tendency which presumes that the experience of one's own 'we' are more worthy of attention or can encompass and speak for the experience of anyone else's 'we' [which] is one of the foundational assumptions of whiteness.*" (And I would add, *individualism*).

I suggest that we need a completely new understanding of agency, action and activism in our age, one that resonates with what Erin Manning calls the 'minor gesture'; that is the often disappeared but significant move towards utility and repair in relationships; the invisible, intangible yet meaningful action in Arendt's terms. This is of course OD's territory.

So what might this agency and activism look like? What type of 'action' does this BANI age require of us? What story might we tell about how we can usefully contribute to meaningful change, beyond our patriarchal and individualistic view?

Let's take each of Cascio's illusions as a starting point. If the illusion of strength has become so overwhelming, in that individuals, organisations and communities have become brittle, then our agentic gesture would be to embody flexibility, to offer our communities around us a set of pliable gestures and a mood of inquiry over advocacy. In our ability to bend and shift, we can provide support in a flexible way. Taking the illusion of control, then the agency here is to contain and safely process anxiety; to enable the system and people within it to manage their anxiety healthily, avoiding the acting out of anxious or even hysterical whorls of hyper-reactivity we too often witness in our organisations and communities.

Considering Cascio's illusion of predictability, maybe the agentic move is to be able to foresee how some of the patterns of anxiety, pressure and brittleness may be addressed. This isn't to become all seeing and all knowing, but to be reassuring about

the archetypal patterns of human dynamics to which we have a considerable amount of insight, after a century of psychological investigations. This isn't to say that the *outcomes* are predictable, but the patterns of interaction are. Again, OD does this insight into these patterns well.

Finally, if we are confronted, as Cascio might suggest, by an illusion of knowledge and understanding, then we can fall back on age old insight, from Tao to the Talmud, which encourages us to be wise in the face of our not knowing. This is the paradox as exemplified in irony and paradox, for the greatest quality of leadership, as the Tao says, is one where the people say 'Look! We did it ourselves!'

Perhaps all of this could be illuminated by a story. Imagine encountering an organisation where the expectation is of a further restructure to solve some of the complex problems that it faces. They invite a consultant to come in and support them with this change, but the consultant is imbued with a mindset that is suggestive of this post-individualist type of agency, so their moves are to build trust and connection and to help manage and contain anxiety. What they do is to offer flexibility and reassurance. They help by listening, reading the patterns of interaction, and offer preference for suspension, noticing and inquiry over jumping to immediate conclusions. They embody a willingness to stay in uncertainty and not knowing, building connections in order to enable the system to understand itself better, find together a new meaning in the patterns that exist. This saves an awful lot of work that might have gone into project planning a restructure.

Of course, this may not look like the type of change the leaders we're looking for, and indeed they may fail to appreciate it, because it doesn't look like the kind of agency they are used to. This gives us a problem, but one we can address with compassion and patience. Because we know this type of change is subtle and relational, rather than performative and heroic. And maybe in the course of our time with them, they wake up to this too and change their own view about what their agency looks like. Meanwhile, more voices are heard in the system now and different connections made, and a resilience to face further uncertainty that was previously lacking. And different less individualistic stories prevail.

So there is potential here for a new, and perhaps more fitting type of agency in our current hyper-complex world, one that is more about holding than pushing, about connecting rather than cutting through, about saving the world, one relationship at a time, which may be the only action that really makes a difference in these times.

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