

# Foreword

Organizational scholar Etienne Wenger once said that living is a constant process of negotiation of meaning, and his statement illustrates this book. Kaj Koskinen takes us on an exhilarating journey of extending, redirecting, dismissing, reinterpreting, modifying and confirming our beliefs and views about how organizations work.

Standing on the shoulders of giant scholars Maturana, Varela and Luhmann, his tool is autopoiesis theory. Humberto Maturana and Francesco Varela's 1987 classic, *The Tree of Knowledge*, was my first glimpse into the autopoietic view of the world. From the origin of life and through the development of human language, these two scientists gave us a new way of thinking about how we, as individuals, know what we come to know. They concluded that the only world we humans can have is the one we create together through the actions of our coexistence.

Others developed Maturana and Varela's ideas into schemes to describe and explain psychic, social and legal systems, especially Nichlas Luhmann. In the early 1990s, when knowledge management became a fad, I got enticed by these ideas and used them to explore what knowledge is in organizations. With some colleagues I developed a conceptual scheme for "organizational epistemology," which combined insights from autopoiesis and complex adaptive systems theory.<sup>1</sup> Like Koskinen I find great value in autopoiesis theory.

It is important to recognize that Koskinen's book is not about organization as a thing, not even about organization as a group of people. In line with the living systems theory, this book is about organization as a living process of *organizing* and *being organized*. The purpose is simply to give us a better way to understand knowledge production in organizations compared to the ones we know from mainstream organization theory. The consequence is that consciousness, decisions,

---

<sup>1</sup> See von Krogh, G., Roos, J., & Slocum, K. (1994) An essay on corporate epistemology. *Strategic Management Journal*, Special Issue on 'Rethinking Strategy – The Search for New Strategy Paradigms', 15, 53–71; and von Krogh, G., & Roos, J. (1995). *Organizational epistemology*. Oxford: Macmillan.

processes and meaning are the conceptual repertoire in this book. This is what makes organizations “living” knowledge-producing systems.

Without people there are of course no organizations, yet, through the looking glass of autopoiesis, organizations are nothing but networks of communications that produce further communications, and only communications. Herein lies the value of the autopoietic lens – it invites us to fundamentally describe and interpret organizations in ways we otherwise would have missed.

Koskinen has taken the application of autopoiesis theory to new heights by outlining, describing and elaborating on the many macro and micro processes that make up knowledge structures of organizations – identity, memory and culture on the macro level, and sensing, language, sense-making, absorptive capacity, commitment and resistance on the micro level. These are not just nice concepts from organization theory, but *levers for intentionally changing organizations*.

In sum, Koskinen not only takes us on a valuable conceptual journey, he also offers profound advice for how to adapt the organization to changing circumstances.

Enjoy the ride!

Sweden  
February 2013

Johan Roos



<http://www.springer.com/978-3-319-00103-6>

Knowledge Production in Organizations

A Processual Autopoietic View

Koskinen, K.U.

2013, XIX, 172 p., Hardcover

ISBN: 978-3-319-00103-6