

Toward a Science of Organizational Change:
Rapid Results, Polycentric Governance, and Evolution

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October 11 2013 Draft

Abstract

This article integrates three bodies of knowledge about organizational change: A method called Rapid Results that originated in the business world, a concept called polycentric governance that originated in the field of political science, and evolutionary science. The three bodies of knowledge are related because all of them are concerned with how complex systems adapt to their environments. Placing a practical method such as Rapid Results on a general theoretical foundation can potentially further improve the method and cause it to be practiced on a more widespread basis.

Change is an imperative for businesses and other organizations, especially in highly competitive and volatile environments. Change is seldom easy. Most organizations are highly complex and the whole cannot be optimized by separately optimizing the parts. Even the best formulated plans can fall victim to unforeseen consequences. Motivating members of organizations to change adds another layer of difficulty. Little wonder that according to some estimates, over half of business change efforts fail (Schaffer and Ashkenas 2007).

This article integrates three bodies of knowledge in an effort to improve organizational change practices. The first is a method called Rapid Results, which originated in the business world and has also proven effective in achieving a variety of objectives in developing nations (Schaffer and Ashkenas 2007; Matta and Ashkenas 2003; Matta and Morgan 2011). The second is a concept called polycentric governance that developed within the field of political science (Ostrom et al. 1961; McGinnis 1999). The third is contemporary evolutionary science.

The three bodies of knowledge are related because all of them are concerned with *how complex systems adapt to their environments*. Evolutionary science provides the most general framework for addressing this topic for any complex evolving system, which might be biological, cultural, or computer-based. The concept of polycentric governance provides an intermediate level of generality that covers any complex human social system. It would be inaccurate to call the Rapid Results method the least general. As we shall see, it can and probably should be used to accomplish positive change in any complex human social organization. As a practical method that originated in a certain sector (business corporations), however, it is the least general in its current application.

Why integrate these three bodies of knowledge? It is interesting to think about ideas as having a distribution and abundance, like a biological species. A practical method such as Rapid Results originates in a certain sector and spreads to a degree based on its success, but then fails to spread beyond certain boundaries or spreads more slowly than it should. A theoretical construct such as polycentric governance originates and becomes established within its academic discipline based on its insights, but fails to spread to other disciplines or even to become integrated with other constructs within its own discipline. Evolutionary science has a way of transcending these boundaries by showing how the dynamics operating in one domain follow from general principles that can be applied to other domains. This kind of integration has been taking place in the life sciences since Darwin but has lagged for the study of human social organizations (Wilson and Gowdy 2013). Thus, integrating the three bodies of knowledge can help to accomplish organizational change more effectively than would take place otherwise.

This integration is a two-way street. A practical method such as Rapid Results has much to teach political and evolutionary scientists by providing a working model of polycentric governance and organizational change in action. In return, insights from political and evolutionary science can potentially help the

Rapid Results method work even better and to be practiced on a more widespread basis.

The Rapid Results Method

The Rapid Results method was the brainchild of a business consultant named Robert H. Schaffer, who observed how hard and well people work together in emergency situations (Schaffer 1990, Schaffer and Ashkenas 2007). Not only do they pull off miracles, but they experience intense pleasure doing it, despite the emergency situation being dysphoric in other respects. The specific event that inspired these thoughts was a wildcat strike that took place at a New Jersey refinery. About 450 supervisors, managers, and engineers were forced to run an operation that normally employed a workforce of 3000, not just for a few days, but for four months—and they did it well.

Could this kind of peak performance be elicited under normal working conditions? Schafer experimented with creating “emergency” situations by challenging small teams within a company to accomplish daunting goals, such as doubling the number of customers for a new product line, in a short amount of time, such as 100 days. He discovered that the teams indeed leapt into action and displayed the same kind of zest as in an emergency situation. Hence, the concept of a “rapid results cycle” was born.

The Rapid Results method produced additional benefits. It turned out that when lower ranking employees most closely associated with a given challenge (such as increasing sales or customer satisfaction) were tasked with solving the problem, they came up with better solutions than what top managers or outside consultants might suggest. This was because they were in a better position to understand the nature of the problem and devise workable solutions. The “emergency” atmosphere also allowed bureaucratic rules to be relaxed. And group members were able to bask in their success rather than all the credit going to their bosses. Upper-level managers sometimes had difficulty relinquishing control and trusting the bottom-up process, but the results spoke for themselves.

Another benefit of the rapid results method was more subtle. Large companies are highly complex systems with many parts that must work in a coordinated fashion to function as a whole. The whole system cannot be optimized by trying to separately optimize each part and nobody is smart enough to anticipate all of the interactions among the parts. Accomplishing positive change in a large company is therefore a formidable task and top-down efforts are more likely to fail than succeed. The changes produced by rapid results cycles were small enough to be integrated with the larger business operation. Far from nibbling at the edges of fundamental change, rapid results cycles could become an engine of fundamental change in an incremental fashion, producing short-term benefits along the way and without requiring expensive outside consultants. This combination of benefits might seem too good to be true, but it has been documented repeatedly and major corporations have adopted rapid results cycles as their main change engine (Matta

and Ashkenas 2003; Schaffer and Ashkenas 2007). It is important to stress that this requires both a bottom-up process (the Rapid Results teams) and a top-down process (a strategy for employing the teams in a way that results in a long term systemic goal). Either process by itself would be inadequate.

Based on the success of the Rapid Results method in the business sector, it was attempted in a very different sector—international aid—with even more dramatic results. As one example, previous efforts to persuade women to visit family planning clinics in Madagascar resulted in gains of only a few percentage points over a fifteen-year period. Rapid results teams committed to the seemingly impossible goal of increasing the percentage by 30% in 100 days. Not only did the groups meet their goals, but some achieved gains as high as 500% (Matta and Morgan 2011). The rapid results method is currently being employed in over a dozen developing countries on problems as diverse as child malnutrition, HIV/AIDS, and corruption.

To summarize, Rapid Results is an impressively successful method for accomplishing both small-scale and large-scale change in organizations as diverse as business corporations and developing nations. The method is easy to understand—in fact so easy that a typical response upon encountering it for the first time is “Why didn’t I think of that?” It would therefore be exaggerating to call it new, and similar independently derived practices can be found in the business world (e.g., Ulrich et al. 2002). In some respects it has become well publicized through books and articles in prominent venues such as the *Harvard Business Review* (Matta and Ashkenas 2003) and the *Stanford Social Innovation Review* (Matta and Morgan 2011). Nevertheless, it is not nearly as well known as it deserves to be. In my own experience, most heads of business organizations who would benefit from using it have not heard of it. Returning to the analogy of ideas having distributions and abundances similar to biological species, the Rapid Results method is a rare species that deserves to be more widespread than currently the case.

The same goes for developing nations. One might think that a spectacularly successful and easily understood practice would spread on its own merits—and this is happening to a degree. Some of the ministries that were introduced to the Rapid Results method continue to use it and it has even spread across sectors and nations. This is encouraging, but more is required for this eminently useful practice to become as widespread as it deserves to be. Providing a theoretical rationale for the method might help.

Polycentric Governance

Polycentric governance is a concept developed by Vincent and Elinor Ostrom and their colleagues at Indiana University’s Workshop for Political Theory and Policy Analysis (Ostrom et al. 1961; McGinnis 1999). Very simply, modern life consists of many spheres of activity. Each sphere has an optimal scale. Effective governance therefore requires finding the optimal scale for each sphere of activity and appropriately coordinating among spheres. Stated this way, it can scarcely be

otherwise, but that is not how most governments and their agencies are structured. As an example, Elinor Ostrom studied metropolitan police departments at a time when consolidation was the conventional wisdom, as if economies of scale always favored large over small units. She discovered that there was no single answer to this question; it depended upon the sphere of activity. It made sense to have a regional forensic lab, for example, but it also made sense for police precincts to be local (Ostrom and Parks 1973).

An important part of polycentric governance is that *small groups are the optimal scale of governance for many spheres of activity*. Much that is currently being managed at larger scales would be more effectively managed at smaller scales. Elinor Ostrom's research on common-pool resource (CPR) groups, for which she was awarded the Nobel Prize in Economics in 2009, is a demonstration of this fact (Ostrom 1990, 2010). Conventional economic wisdom held that commonly utilized resources such as pastures, forests, fisheries, and irrigation systems are inherently vulnerable to the tragedy of overuse and that the only solutions are privatization (when possible) or top-down regulation. Ostrom and her associates compiled a worldwide database of CPR groups and showed that many of them were effective at managing their own affairs, sometimes for centuries. In contrast, top-down efforts by government agencies tended to work poorly. One reason was that each group inhabits a unique environment, which dooms cookie-cutter solutions to failure. Nobody knows what is required for positive change better than members of the group who are immersed in the details.

In addition to local expertise, Ostrom identified eight design features that enabled CPR groups to effectively manage their own affairs (Ostrom 1990). Very briefly, these are 1) A strong sense of group identity and boundaries of the resource; 2) Proportional equivalence of costs and benefits, to insure that some people don't do all the work while others free-ride; 3) A decision-making process that is by consensus or otherwise regarded as fair by group members; 4) Monitoring, so that misbehaviors can be detected; 5) Graduated sanctions against misbehaviors, that start with friendly reminders and escalate as warranted; 6) A fast and fair process of resolving conflicts among group members; 7) authority to manage their own affairs; and 8) appropriate relations with other groups that reflect the same principles as interactions within groups. When these design principles are in place, it becomes difficult for some members of the group to benefit at the expense of others, so that working together as a group is the main pathway to success. The core design principles provide a recipe of sorts, but they are not a cookie cutter solution because the group must decide how to implement them and how to collectively solve the particular problems at hand.

While "smaller is better" for many spheres of activity, other spheres can only be accomplished at larger scales. As one example, early research by Elinor Ostrom documented how a group of stakeholders in southern California worked out an arrangement for managing their water table—but a national agency (the U.S. Geological Survey) was required to determine the boundaries of the water table (

Ostrom 1990). As another example, the core design principles were used to organize a disadvantaged neighborhood in Buffalo, New York, but the city was required to impose sanctions on residents who refused to conform to milder sanctions applied by their neighbors (Oakerson and Clifton 2011; Wilson, Ostrom, and Cox 2013). Polycentric governance requires the strategic employment of bottom-up *and* top-down processes.

There is a striking correspondence between the Rapid Results method and the principle of polycentric governance. Both recognize the power of small groups, in part because people who are closest to a given problem are best qualified to solve the problem. The Rapid Results method emphasizes the energizing effect of surmounting a formidable challenge in a limited period of time. Ostrom's core design principles emphasize the need to suppress disruptive forms of self-serving behaviors on a routine basis. Both recognize that some top-down governance is required to appropriately harness the bottom-up power of small groups.

The two bodies of thought also have much to learn from each other. Groups engaged in a Rapid Results cycle are highly motivated to work with each other, but they are still likely to benefit from the core design features, as outlined in more detail below. And business organizations that practice the Rapid Results method provide a working model of polycentric governance that could potentially be applied to other large-scale social organizations, such as city governments and their agencies. Casting the Rapid Results method in terms of polycentric governance can help to clarify its active ingredients and establish its generality across many different types of social organizations.

Before proceeding to the next level of generality, it is instructive to examine the "distribution and abundance" of the polycentric governance concept within the field of political science and related academic disciplines. As a good idea that was formulated over fifty years ago, one might hope that it has become widely known and taught, but this is not the case. Rather than trust my own assessment as disciplinary outsider, I consulted with Dr. Michael McGinnis, a close associate of the Ostroms and editor of the most authoritative volume on polycentric governance (McGinnis 1999). His assessment is worth quoting at length (personal communication).

As to your depiction of polycentricity as a "minority concept" yes that is correct. Most political scientists prefer to see well-organized systems with clear chains of authority, so citizens can hold leaders accountable. Most policy scholars realize that their policy area is very complex, but still hold out hope that a more simple and logical arrangement can be devised to make the system more comprehensible, and thus, more subject to manipulation or improvement... And, as Lin [Ostrom] so often said, many policy analysts have a favorite type of institutional response (build markets or add regulations, etc.) that they treat as a panacea. Lin and we Workshopers are unusually willing to embrace complexity, and may

perhaps be too sanguine about the costs of such complexity.

There are a few places in the policy literatures where something like polycentricity has emerged, although it tends to have different names in each of those areas of application. I have often wondered about the lack of communication across these islands of enlightenment, if you will... Those in each island find it difficult to gain acceptance in their own core disciplines or specialties, because of the ways in which that discipline is dominated by professional norms reflecting a general preference for thinking we can affect policy outcomes, but they also find it difficult to communicate with similarly minded folks in other specializations, because of the general lack of communication across disciplines.

In short, the concept of polycentric governance and analogous concepts are “rare species” in the academic world, much as the Rapid Results method and analogous practices are “rare species” in the worlds of business and international aid. Merely having merit is evidently not enough to become widespread. Alternative theories and rationales stand in the way, even when they are not as efficacious. Perhaps a still more general formulation of the concepts will help.

Modern Evolutionary Science

Evolutionary thought developed more or less continuously in the life sciences since Darwin but experienced a case of arrested development in relation to human affairs. A renewed attempt to rethink the human-related disciplines from an evolutionary perspective didn't gather steam until late in the 20th century. Now it is in full swing and profoundly relevant for improving our capacity for organizational change in a practical sense. More lengthy accounts are available elsewhere, including a special issue of the *Journal of Economic and Behavior Organization* titled “Evolution as a General Theoretical Framework for Economics and Public Policy” (volume 90, supplement; Wilson, Gowdy, and Rosser 2013) and a major review article with commentaries titled “Evolving the Future: Toward a Science of Intentional Change” (Wilson et al. 2014). Here I will provide a brief summary of points that are most salient to the Rapid Results Method and polycentric governance.

We begin with a fundamental problem confronted by all social species. Members of a group must coordinate their activities and perform services for each other to produce collective benefits, but these “solid citizen” activities are vulnerable to exploitation by more self-serving activities that benefit some individuals at the expense of others within the group (Sober and Wilson 1998; Wilson and Wilson 2007). In most animal societies, including our closest relatives the chimpanzee, group members cooperate to a degree but are also each other's main rivals. Even cooperation often takes the form of alliances that compete against

other alliances within the same group. In short, animal societies often fail to function as corporate units because of internal strife.

Humans are unique among primates in their ability to suppress disruptive competition within groups, enabling the group to function as a corporate unit (Boehm 1999, 2011). The capacity for teamwork is the signature adaptation of our species. In fact, virtually everything that sets us apart from other primate species, such as our capacity for symbolic thought and for transmitting learned information across generations, can be understood as forms of teamwork (Deacon 1998; Tomasello 2009).

A panoply of psychological mechanisms are required for human groups to function as corporate units, many of which operate beneath conscious awareness. A short list includes the capacity to create, monitor, and enforce norms; for social status to be based on reputation rather than physical domination; to make decisions as a group; and to have a collective memory. In addition to mechanisms that obligate members to behave for the good of their group, there are positive emotions such as empathy, sympathy, and love that make people want to benefit others as a psychological end in itself. Most of the activities that we associate with the arts and religion, such as music, dance, decorations, storytelling, and ritual, play an important role in the functional organization of human groups (Wilson 2002).

These psychological mechanisms are richly context-sensitive. We think very differently in fear-inducing situations compared to situations that invoke safety and security, for example (Damasio 1995; Sapolsky 1998). Our willingness to work on behalf of our groups is sensitive to both social and external factors. Whenever we feel that our efforts will not be credited to us, that others will be able to free-ride, or that the fruits of our efforts will be unfairly appropriated, we withhold our commitment to the group, switch to self-serving options ourselves, and seek to join other groups. Conversely, when protections against within-group exploitation are in place, we work tirelessly for our groups and experience it as more like play than work.

The costs and benefits of working in groups are highly influenced by external factors. Some tasks are best performed by individuals or small groups, while others require mass action. Creative activities require different kinds of coordination than routine activities. Some situations call for rapid decision-making by a few individuals on behalf of the group, while others call for lengthier and more inclusive decision-making processes (Wilson 1997). Emergency situations that threaten the existence of the entire group have occurred throughout our evolutionary history. We are genetically adapted to respond to these situations with an outpouring of effort. We temporarily suspend our concern for within-group exploitation, which occupies so much of our thought during normal times. The outpouring of effort is accompanied by a feeling of euphoria and unity, as if we are finally coming together as a group. Anyone who has lived through national calamities such as 9/11 or Hurricane Katrina has experienced this euphoria and outpouring of effort for themselves. For all its intensity, it is pale compared to the experience of soldiers in

wartime situations, where the feeling of unity is so great that individuals are prepared to die for each other (Hedges 2002).

Our psychological adaptations for group life evolved in the context of relatively small groups, which were the *only* groups for most of our evolutionary history. The evolutionary psychologist Robin Dunbar (1996) has documented that our capacity to keep track of personal relationships breaks down in groups that exceed approximately 150 individuals. The great social theorist Alexis de Tocqueville (1835) observed that “the village or township is the only association which is so perfectly natural that wherever a number of men are collected it seems to constitute itself.” When human groups became larger with the advent of agriculture, a mere ten or fifteen thousand years ago, culturally derived mechanisms were required to interface with our genetically evolved psychological mechanisms for group-level functionality to be maintained. Human history provides a fossil record of this process, with societies that managed to coordinate their activities and suppress the self-serving behaviors of individuals and factions outcompeting less coordinated societies, leading to the mega-societies of today (Turchin 2005). Many of the culturally derived mechanisms evolved by a blind process of cultural evolution rather than intentional design. We are no more aware of them than our genetically evolved mechanisms.

The eternal conflict between activities that cause a group to function as a corporate unit vs. activities that benefit some individuals or factions at the expense of the common good operates as forcefully at the scale of nations (e.g., Acemoglu and Robinson 2012; Pickett and Wilkinson 2006; Turchin 2005) and major corporations (e.g., Jackall 2009) today as it did for our hunter-gatherer ancestors in their tiny groups.

How the Evolutionary Paradigm Adds Value to the Rapid Results Method and the Concept of Polycentric Governance

The evolutionary synthesis outlined in the previous section is new within academia, so it is only starting to be applied to practical settings such as business organizations and developing nations. It is especially new against the background of neoclassical economic theory, which assumes that people can be understood entirely as self-interested utility maximizers. The business world has been too eager to embrace this paradigm, leading to excessive reliance on individual monetary incentives and market processes. Against this background, there is tremendous scope for businesses and other social organizations to improve their performance by paying attention to the panoply of psychological and cultural adaptations that motivate people to work in groups and protect against corruption from within. Individual monetary incentives and market processes remain important, but they do not fully substitute for the other mechanisms.

Part of the allure of neoclassical economics is its status as a formal theoretical framework. Everything else seems like a hodge-podge of practices and limited rationales by comparison. Knowing *why* something works is better than

merely knowing *that* it works. Knowing why it works in a deep sense is better than knowing why it works in a more limited sense. Unfortunately, neoclassical economics achieves its status as a formal theory only by making assumptions about human preferences, abilities, and social environments that are at odds with actual people and their social organizations. Evolutionary theory offers an alternative framework with proven generality in the life sciences, which is now extending into the human-related sciences (Wilson and Gowdy 2013). The practical implications of this paradigm shift are explored in detail in the aforementioned special issue of the *Journal of Economic and Behavior Organization* and review article titled “Evolving the Future: Toward a Science of Behavioral Change” (Wilson et al. 2014). My brief overview in the previous section enables me to draw a number of conclusions most relevant to the Rapid Results method and the concept of polycentric governance.

First, the evolutionary paradigm explains the *importance of small groups* in a way that neoclassical economic theory never addressed. As Tocqueville wisely observed, people are more likely to work well together in small group settings than any other setting—but only if the groups are constructed the right way. Ostrom and her colleagues made a start delineating the design features for the efficacy of groups with her empirical work on common pool resource groups and the concept of polycentric governance, but the evolutionary paradigm provides a deeper and more general explanation for why the eight design principles required by common pool resource groups are likely to be efficacious for most groups, why they might be unnecessary in some situations, and why they must often be complemented with auxiliary design principles (Wilson, Ostrom, and Cox 2013). Businesses would do well to examine their current organizational structures with this theoretical framework in mind.

Ostrom’s core design principles are most important in routine situations, such as the use and maintenance of an irrigation system, where “solid citizen” efforts must be protected from more self-oriented behaviors that don’t benefit the group. Many business situations are like this. Robert Schaffer “discovered” and harnessed another facet of human psychology that is normally expressed in emergency situations. Both sets of practices fit easily within the evolutionary paradigm. The Rapid Results method already works well and it will be interesting to see if it can be further improved when examined from an explicitly evolutionary perspective. Even if the evolutionary paradigm “merely” provides a more general theoretical rationale, this can help to expand the “distribution and abundance” of the Rapid Results method beyond its current boundaries.

Another insight of the evolutionary paradigm is that any social organization larger than a hundred or so individuals must have a culturally derived structure that interfaces with our genetically evolved psychology. Current organizational structures are a product of past cultural evolution. Some aspects of our current organizations are intentionally planned and implemented, but other aspects emerge from what Joseph Schumpeter called creative destruction—many inadvertent social experiments, a few that hang together. Our current social organizations work, to the

extent that they do, in ways that we don't necessarily understand, any more than we understand our genetically evolved psychological adaptations.

In addition, what worked in the past need not work in the future. Modern businesses, international aid efforts, and other social organizations must develop new strategies for adapting to their changing environments. Rational analysis and implementation will always play a role, but will never be fully sufficient, given the complexity of the problems that need to be solved. Variation and selection processes therefore need to be implemented within the organization in a way that allows new practices to be integrated with the organization as a whole. The use of Rapid Results cycles as a way to evolve the practices of a larger social organization is ingenious, but can almost certainly benefit from an explicit evolutionary formulation.

Retrospective analyses are never fully convincing. The best proof that an explicitly evolutionary perspective can add value to organizational change efforts is for evolutionists to join experts employing other perspectives who are attempting to improve the performance of businesses, developing nations, and other social organizations. I look forward to the day when the added value of an explicit evolutionary perspective can be established on the basis of its track record, in addition to its ability to make sense of practices and concepts that were derived without evolution explicitly in mind.

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