

Lifecycle of Emergence: Using Emergence to Take Social Innovation to Scale by Margaret Wheatley and Deborah Frieze

Despite current ads and slogans, the world doesn't change one person at a time. It changes as networks of relationships form among people who discover they share a common cause and vision of what's possible. This is good news for those of us intent on changing the world and creating a positive future. Rather than worry about critical mass, our work is to foster critical connections. We don't need to convince large numbers of people to change; instead, we need to connect with kindred spirits. Through these relationships, we will develop the new knowledge, practices, courage, and commitment that lead to broad-based change.

But networks aren't the whole story. As networks grow and transform into active, working communities of practice, we discover how Life truly changes, which is through emergence. When separate, local efforts connect with each other as networks, then strengthen as communities of practice, suddenly and surprisingly a new system emerges at a greater level of scale. This system of influence possesses qualities and capacities that were unknown in the individuals. It isn't that they were hidden; they simply don't exist until the system emerges. They are properties of the system, not the individual, but once there, individuals possess them. And the system that emerges always possesses greater power and influence than is possible through planned, incremental change. Emergence is how Life creates radical change and takes things to scale.

Since its inception in 1992, The Berkana Institute has been experimenting with the lifecycle of emergence: how living systems begin as networks, shift to intentional communities of practice, and evolve into powerful systems capable of global influence. Through our work with communities in many different nations, we are learning what's possible when we connect people across difference and distance. By applying the lessons of living systems and working intentionally with emergence and its lifecycle, we are demonstrating how local social innovation can be taken to scale and provide solutions to many of the world's most intractable issues—such as community health, ecological sustainability and economic self-reliance.

Why we need to understand networks

Researchers and social activists are beginning to discover the power of networks and networking. And there is a growing recognition that networks are the new form of organizing. Evidence of self-organized networks is everywhere: social activists, terrorist groups, drug cartels, street gangs, web-based interest groups. While we now see these everywhere, it is not because they're a new form of organizing. It's because we've removed our old paradigm blinders that look for hierarchy and control mechanisms in the belief that organization only happens through human will and intervention.

Networks are the only form of organization used by living systems on this planet. These networks result from self-organization, where individuals or species recognize their interdependence and organize in ways that support the diversity and viability of all. Networks create the conditions for emergence, which is how Life changes. Because networks are the first stage in emergence, it is essential that we understand their dynamics and how they develop into communities and then systems.

Yet much of the current work on networks displays old paradigm bias. In social network analysis, physical representations of the network are created by mapping relationships. This is useful for convincing people that networks exist, and people are often fascinated to see the network made visible. Other network analysts name roles played by members of the network or make distinctions between different parts of the network, such as core and periphery. It may not be the intent of these researchers, but their work is often used by leaders to find ways to manipulate the network, to use it in a traditional and controlling way.

- * What's missing in these analyses is an exploration of the dynamics of networks:
- * Why do networks form? What are the conditions that support their creation?
- * What keeps a network alive and growing? What keeps members connected?
- * What type of leadership is required? Why do people become leaders?
- * What type of leadership interferes with or destroys the network?
- * What happens after a healthy network forms? What's next?

If we understand these dynamics and the lifecycle of emergence, what can we do as leaders, activists and social entrepreneurs to intentionally foster emergence?

What is Emergence?

Emergence violates so many of our Western assumptions of how change happens that it often takes quite a while to understand it. In nature, change never happens as a result of top-down, pre-conceived strategic plans, or from the mandate of any single individual or boss. Change begins as local actions spring up simultaneously in many different areas. If these changes remain disconnected, nothing happens beyond each locale. However, when they become connected, local actions can emerge as a powerful system with influence at a more global or comprehensive level. (Global here means a larger scale, not necessarily the entire planet.)