



Leadership in transformation: the quest for consistency

Introduction into organisational ecology

Who is the strongest leader, if we try to compare Aung San Suu Kyi, the winner of the Nobel Peace Prize who has been under house-arrest for many years in Burma, with the person partly responsible for this, General Than Shwe, chairman of Burma's "State Peace and Development Council (SPDC)"?

One controls virtually the whole country with an army and a mix of secret service agents and collaborators. The other has nothing and yet she seems invulnerable; she is seen by most people as the true leader and has millions who follow her without any coercion being necessary.

The only real weapon for leaders such as Aung San Suu Kyi, Mandela, Ghandi and the like, is consistency. Consistency is everything; it means never deviating from your basic values in order to make a dream come true or reach a goal. This is not the same as stubbornness; it is persistence at a level where everyone can see the consistency in what you stand for. Consistent leaders demonstrate a transparent predictability in behaviour that engenders trust. Dictators, such as the one in Burma, also show a certain degree of predictability, but that predictability is not transparent; it is riddled with secrets, embedded in structures, procedures, checks and power. To draw a comparison from the world of music: the latter plays music dictated by a metronome, the former plays from the heart. One sounds dead; the other lives.

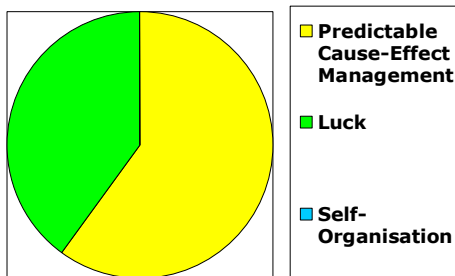
What Than Shwe tries to do is to control a system (in this case the Burmese population) through the literal use of "control". What Suu Kyi does is nothing other than "influencing" that same system. Than Shwe sees the country as a machine; Suu Kyi sees it as a living organism.

Here we have two fundamental movements colliding together: on the one hand the cause-and-effect thinking that has its roots in the followers of, for example, Newton and the general machine thinking that has ruled for several centuries: on the other hand the complexity-thinking that arose after the Second World War (although as a phenomenon it is much older).

These two fundamental movements can perhaps best be characterised in the following figure:

"I am mostly in control, the rest is luck"

"My control is limited, but I can influence self-organisation"



Being out-of-control is perceived to be very uncomfortable

We need to get to the point of being comfortably out-of-control



Than Shwe essentially views the world from the more Newtonian vision in the illustration to the left. “The world is a place that I must have under control” and the rest is simply good or bad luck. Sun Kyi experiences the world from the right-hand point-of-view, in which there are still several matters that have to be kept under control (although far fewer) and in which good or bad luck is also a factor (although to a much lesser degree), but where a very large part of the world exists through self-organisation, which she may not have in her hand but which she can influence very well.

The one starts with control and ecologically speaking is like looking after a park (as shown in the left image below); everything seems ordered, planned and structured, but a groundsman has to attend to it every day otherwise it would turn into chaos. The other starts with self-organisation and looks more like a prairie (as shown in the right image below); it seems as if we have much less control over it, everything just carries on growing where it wishes and yet there is never the need for a groundsman. If there is a fire, the prairie will always return; other plants have no chance, they are not accepted by the system. The prairie below is a photograph of the Fermi lab in Chicago where a great deal of research is undertaken. It has proved possible to rebuild the American prairie, but never through direct control, only by the systematic and consistent influencing of a system that does everything else on its own.



Organisational ecology is the science that tries to describe complex systems, such as countries, organisations, or simply people. Organisational ecology sees human beings as simply an example of a complex system and does not understand the need for a separate reference framework such as psychology. Newtonian thinking is also incorporated, but again inclusively, it is not treated as a separate phenomenon.

Organisational ecology is based on a combination of the same three basic theories which form normal ecology: the theory of evolution, cybernetics and complexity theory. Organisational ecology also includes ethology (the theory of comparative behaviour derived from evolutionary theory – which can now boast three Nobel prize-winners) and applies it to organisations.

Organisational ecology looks at the timeless principles of leadership applied to organisations.

The dynamic discussed at the beginning of this article, between a dictator and a leader is a good subject for organisational ecology, but so too is the management of a commercial or not-for-profit company. The principles are essentially the same.

It is not improbable that Suu Kyi will at some time lead a major transformation. Her consistency will make all the difference.



Common sense dictates that three things must happen in a major transformation. A transformation leader must first hold the people involved together amidst the turbulence surrounding them, second s/he must be a motivating influence to them, and third, s/he must bring shape to the new situation. We will look at consistency from these three perspectives.

Consistency as the power for bonding

Consistency creates bonding from within

Suu Kyi creates a strong emotional bond with millions of fellow Burmese. It may not, at the moment, lead to her shepherding Burma through a transformation as Ghandi did in India, but it seems right to assume that the forces are strong; slumbering and waiting for a point where the relationships in Burma are radically shifted. Her opponents still have power, but the power seems as fragile as bone china, and the way it is maintained is comparable to the method used by a small child who wants to prevent a pile of bricks falling over - carefully placing a fresh brick asymmetrically on the top so that the pile *just* avoids falling over (until, of course, it actually does).

The consistency of Suu Kyi is eternal; the predictability of the dictators temporary.

The bonding that Suu Kyi achieves with her style is a bonding from within; the way in which the dictators keep their “disciples” together is largely exerted from outside. If the dictators stop filling people with fear, everybody will turn their backs on them.

Consistency as core of leadership in research

Collins indicates in the research published in his book *Built to Last* that one of the most important things revealed by his research is “consistency and alignment”. In other words being consistent in leadership and united around the objectives.

If consistency generates such a unique bonding power, why is so little attention paid to it in transformations? Transformations that turn a company on its head, or in a merger or acquisition - with all the uncertainties that such events instil in the employees, it would seem logical to pay attention to the enormous binding strength as a counter-balance to the almost self-evident centrifugal forces that arise in such radical changes. Leaders want to keep the company together, but the uncertainty often causes people to disconnect, detach themselves; many of the best leave and many of the discouraged remain.

If history shows us how strong a binding force consistency can be, it would seem patently obvious that leaders should concern themselves with it.

Many will say that the consistency of a Ghandi or a Luther King, a Mandela or an Aung San Suu Kyi is simply not for everybody. These are examples of people who strive for greater aims than simply keeping an organisation going, getting an organisation to grow, or shepherding it through “just a transformation”.

The laboratory for consistency in leadership: the family

I think that consistency is within everyone’s grasp and doubt whether it is reserved for the mighty of this world. Anyone who has children is confronted with the term ‘consistency’ and the power it has. The family seems to be the ultimate laboratory for leadership. Parents are not friends of their children; they are much more than friends, they are leaders. Every parent knows that one of the biggest mistakes they can make as a parenting duo is to be inconsistent in more than a dozen core themes in upbringing, such as the way they deal with homework, sex, discipline, keeping agreements, handling money, being honest, alcohol, drugs, smoking, having respect for others, health etc.



If parents do not share the same opinion about one of these essential themes and exhibit this to their children, then every perceptive and involved parent will know that the only possible consequence is that children become uncertain and often manipulative and play the parents off against each other. This is not because the children have suddenly become evil, but because they wish to regain, through control, the certainty they have lost as a result of inconsistency. Parents also know that bad news (e.g. a serious illness) is often taken remarkably well by their children, unless information is given in a way that is not consistent with reality and parents try to maintain a façade; this will actually make their children uncertain and afraid. Good parents are Ghandis in miniature.

Children will attach themselves – and gain trust – by experiencing consistency in the world of their carers in their first years of life. These first attachment relationships provide a blueprint for how meaningful attachment relationships will take place in the future.

The principles that people attach themselves when they experience consistency are true in both an organisation and a family. The situation in an organisation, however, is more complicated. We discuss this in the following paragraphs.

Consistency as the power for motivation

Safe attachment provides room for the exploration instinct

The bonding of people to each other takes place through an instinctive system that developed more than 200 million years ago in our evolution – a science that has become well known for more than half a century - the attachment system. This system is a simple, instinctive system and it works no differently from, say, the system that ensures that we eat, drink, have sex, sleep, stay at the right temperature, keep our blood pressure correct and so on. All these systems are simple feedback systems. The attachment system is no more complicated; it begins with our parents, to whom we generally attach to a greater or lesser degree. After that we use these early experiences to give shape to our later relationships. These relationships, whether in human-beings or in animals, do not necessarily have to be other people; attachment is possible in both animals and human beings with other animate or non-animate things.

The key principle is that if I am strongly attached to somebody, this generally feels like trust. If children are safely attached, they will explore more. Exploration is a second instinctive system and, in fact, twinned to the attachment system. Once we are safely attached, we start exploring and are more open to change.

It is simply common sense that attachment and exploration are twin instincts. It is well known that our earliest forefathers lived in groups, but it would of course be extremely dangerous for survival if people remained internally focused on the group. In common with today's organisations, all the dangers, and also all the opportunities lie outside the group. Once we feel safe in the group, a signal must go off in us that says "and now into the outside world!"

There is a direct link on an instinctive level that makes people who feel safely attached become more open: more inquisitive about the outside world, more courageous and more open towards each other and towards people outside the organisation, and then they can start thinking about customers, about innovation or transformation.

The strength of consistency is a biological phenomenon that is deeply rooted in the human nervous system. Consistency yields safe attachment and that in turn encourages exploratory behaviour. This means that people will start exploring outside the organisation, become more flexible, and receive more information and ideas. Consistency is, in essence, the first and shortest way to motivate people from the inside. But it cannot be done by short cuts - by force, quickly or in a predictable manner. It must be done step-by-step.



Consistency as the power for shaping the values

We have no values. We are values or we are not.

How do you discover whether somebody has values: whether somebody is honest, result-driven, has respect for people or is genuinely customer-oriented and quality conscious? Time is required for that - often six months or more. You must get to know the other through a whole series of small events in which the value plays a role. Such examples help you get to know each other and together give the feeling of whether somebody has a value. It is the same as a bunch of flowers. The beauty (the value) of the bunch is not in a single flower, but in all of the flowers arranged together.

Values are characteristics of systems such as organisations or people, which become visible when the components of the system work together in such a way that they become more than and especially different from each of the components separately. A cause-effect reaction is not required here (one flower does not make a bunch). It is a complex and chaotic process that is known in ecology as an “emergent property”.

We are so accustomed to emergent properties that we may no longer be conscious of them. We are like a fish in water that is no longer conscious of the water.

Although the flowers can only generate an emergent property together at the same moment, humans cannot do that. We cannot only act in one way at any one moment. We cannot, for example, convince somebody of a value such as honesty in one go. That is why we need time “to plant” in the memories of others many examples so that an emergent property grows in their image of us. Often this takes half a year, a year or longer. Just as a single dead flower destroys the whole, so a wrong example can make the value disappear. If on one occasion I really lie, then years of honest behaviour will not set this right. The emergent property will then not arise in the image others have of me.

If we can see values as emergent properties, we will understand why they can never be captured in words and why on the one hand they are so intangible and on the other can make such an impression. Values are characteristics of the whole system.

What is true for people is also true for organisations. Customer-orientation as value, for example, is NOT a single behaviour and it can NEVER be encapsulated in one behaviour or described in one behaviour. Customer-orientation as a value is the result of a whole collection of small interactions that work together in the right way. It is the same as an ants’ nest. No single ant builds an ants’ nest, but if they all work together, it appears. The core values of an organisation can be considered, just like an ants’ nest, as an emergent property.

We therefore do not *have* values, we *are* values. Neither does an organisation have values: an organisation is its values or not. There are no half emergent properties; just as we cannot “half live”.

Just like a plant, the leader cannot pull transformation from the ground

Leaders in transformations, complex changes, or leaders in organisations that are simply enjoying a period of quiet growth, must understand that all the good aims they draw up for achieving the optimum organisation, can never in any way be achieved by behavioural directives, competence profiles, education, training and whatever else you would like to mention.

Emergent properties such as the core values of the organisation are only in all their simplicity the proof that everything works together in a well integrated manner.



Leaders must influence the conditions of self-organisation and they do this largely by following great examples of consistency.

Below we will, after a few remarks about inconsistency, list a whole series of issues that leaders of transformations must take into account if they wish to realise their aims.

Inconsistency as the stealthy killer of living systems

In the laboratory of leadership, aka the family, virtually every parent knows within a day when they have been inconsistent; in organisations this often takes a little longer. There it can sometimes take weeks before the inconsistency has eaten its way to the surface and like a sort of cancer or underground bush fire suddenly reappears.

Human fear of inconsistency is greater than fear of danger

Fear is a feeling that has developed during evolution not primarily as a response to direct danger. If we were scared of danger, we would no longer exist as a species – because we would not adapt. Throughout evolution, our ancestors have constantly lived in an extremely dangerous world. Fear, on the other hand, is first and foremost a reaction to inconsistency.

The explanation is not complicated. Just think of millions of years ago when our instincts developed into what they are now (and today we still function as if we were living millions of years ago). When, in that time, a young social animal went exploring, it had no idea of what danger was. All it saw was something that was different from normal. It would approach it, as long as it felt protected by the group in which it felt safe. But once there were too many unknown things, or if it felt alone, the animal became scared and quickly retraced its steps. These two circumstances “too much unknown” and being “alone” have become the real triggers for fear and not the danger that statistically could be associated with it. If you are alone, the chance of meeting a lion that eats you is much greater than when you are in the group. But you didn’t actually know what a lion was... and so evolution has used the statistics of millions of years and millions of animals to give us, through natural selection, a sort of built-in traffic light. If something is “too unknown”, we become scared and then we return to the group. Even if the “too unknown” is not dangerous, it might still be better to go back.

Inconsistency in organisations, in changes, or in parenthood simply generate so many unknowns that people become scared because of this, even though, rationally, it doesn’t seem at all dangerous. This effect will not be removed from the human genetic material for the coming hundreds of thousands of years, so leaders and parents will simply have to take it into account.

Inconsistency is like smoking. You never know which cigarette causes the cancer.

Parents in families know immediately when they have been inconsistent. They are manipulated by the children, played off against each other or at least critically questioned, in most cases within 24 hours.

For leaders it is somewhat more complicated. Why is that? In the first place because the scale is larger. The lines of communication run through many links and a large degree of uncontrollable self organisation of information arises where cause and effect are difficult to find.

In the second place because a leadership team often consists of some 5 to 9 team members. It takes a whole lot of dialogue to achieve consistency in such a team.

The dialogue demands mutual trust that makes open conflicts possible and almost always team members of boards of management and management teams take far too little time for this.



Building confidence and an open dialogue directed at achieving alignment and an absolutely consistent behaviour and communication by the whole team towards the organisation often seems like an enormous waste of time.

Yet this investment in time would result in employees in an organisation becoming safely attached, loyal and regain confidence.

Even though no-one will ever be able to indicate a one-on-one cause-effect action between the good team work and the trust inspired by it, the influence on the system is large and fundamental.

In many cases it comes down to this: if leadership teams have not been able to fight out the conflicts, the opposing interests and such like within the seclusion of the team, inconsistency will quickly be visible in all details for the organisation. But it is not at all pleasant to fight out conflicts and it costs time - often a lot of time. So if the team is always trying to maintain a good atmosphere and rather superficially tip-toes over leadership issues, the effect, of insecurity, will emerge often weeks later. There is no recognition, however, that the team behaviour is the original source.

The meetings appear so smooth that the team can sincerely have the feeling that they have done well enough, yet under their leadership the organisation is rotting away.

It is just like smoking. The team meetings (smoking a cigarette) are not unpleasant (at least for the smoker), but you never know which action really disheartened the organisation (caused the cancer).

Inconsistent organisations can still earn money, even lots of money

A short interlude for the shareholders. From the above you would draw the conclusion that good leaders are consistent leaders. That is true. But the conclusion that good leaders create great shareholder value and bad leaders correct little is untrue.

Thanks to the ACT-cube[®] (a tool to measure organisational integrity, strategic responsiveness and competence diversity), we have various consistency profiles for large companies that all score below 10% for consistency (and are therefore extremely inconsistent) including, for example, a reputable trio of world-wide organisations, namely an airline, a telecoms company and a broadcasting company. All greatly satisfy their shareholders and yet corruption scandals about them appear regularly in the press and customer satisfaction has dropped to zero.

Consistency and making money are by no means mutually incompatible. Inconsistency and making money can go well together. Bad people often earn good money. A good organisation earns a lot of money, but a bad (inconsistent, directed by fear) organisation certainly does not need to make its shareholders less satisfied. Burma earns good money with its oil.

That sounds somewhat reactionary, but an organisation cannot have its cake and eat it. Inconsistent leadership always reveals where people free-load on a system outside the organisation: the employees have too much to do, the customers are disadvantaged, suppliers are squeezed to the limit, the company lives off its fat, there is not so much innovation etc.

Over-control and bureaucracy as the stealthy killer of consistency and values

More than a century ago, Franz Kafka showed in his book *The Trial* how horrifyingly a maximum bureaucracy can function and allow the individual to be destroyed by it.

When structuring organisations there is a certain optimum. To a certain degree, structure (= control) provides the advantages of communication, integration and efficiency; however, every form of structuring process is a feedback process and always requires energy and time to maintain its stability. Every feedback is always at the cost of flexibility, speed and contact with the environment.



If this rises above an optimal point, the organisation becomes bureaucratic, slow, more internally directed than outwardly directed and generally ends up on the road to irreversible decline.

This delay to all movement in the organisation means that it becomes less possible to maintain emergent properties and the core values of an organisation are at direct risk in every structure that encourages bureaucracy.

All these control processes cause enormous disturbance in the system and employees gain little feeling for any consistency on the part of the leadership (if it was ever there). This causes fear - thoughts turn inwards and there is a priority to survive, which only accelerates the decay.

It is not without reason that in organisations that operate exclusively on financial control and/or are over-bureaucratic, actions constantly emerge that offend all ideas of value or even give rise to corruption.

Enron is no exception. Enron is the rule.

Leadership in transformation: the art of consistency

If consistency makes it possible at the same time to influence the attachment of people, the curiosity and the building of values, then mastering the art of consistency is a core competence for leaders.

Self-knowledge

Consistency means, first of all, knowing yourself. If leaders do not know how they are perceived by others, the chance is great that even their best intentions can still lead to misunderstanding and a perception of inconsistency.

The key is therefore feedback and then some more feedback. This should take place through dialogue and in no other way. Yes, instruments are also used and these can be very handy; good instruments are those based on solid science and therefore predictable and comparable, but more is needed; as important as the feedback itself is for others to see how leaders react to the feedback.

Exemplary behaviour

Leaders must show exemplary behaviour in everything and they must, as it were, plant this in the memories of the people with whom they work; if they do this frequently enough in a consistent manner, then attachment, exploration, and the values will appear automatically. You don't have to do anything more about it. 1000 small things matter.

Strengthen exponential consistency through "teamship"

For leaders, consistency means that they must strengthen their influence exponentially. You can't do that without a close-knit team.

If 7-9 leaders in a team can fight things out with each other so that they genuinely trust each other and know that there are no gaps in their external communication, the influence of the team will become exponentially greater. Frequently, just one or several cascades of team work are necessary to influence the whole organisation.

To achieve consistency throughout the whole organisation, my rule of thumb is 70:1000. When 70 leaders fully understand consistency, the rest will follow through self-organisation.

Again a 1000 small things matter; they bring an organisation step-by-step out of balance, until a defining moment creates a tipping point, starting the change to speed up.



Create an open system dialogue in the organisation

What a board of management, executive committee or management team must do is keep alive a constant open dialogue via a cascade of smaller team-builds, logically interspersed with large-scale meetings. The larger meetings are perfect moments where consistency can exercise its maximum influence.

There are two types of large-scale meetings. The first is largely made up only of those who are actually responsible and are, in fact, a large-scale check and dialogue on execution. The rhythm of these meetings (generally 4 per year) follows the business cycle.

The second is looser in make-up and can deal with wider matters, wider groups and actually gradually moves into leadership programmes and the like.

There are also parallel channels such as central works councils or, and this is something I like to do, the personal assistants of the top managers who attend the top management teams who should consult together about whether the decision-making is consistent. They are people in key positions and in fact a sort of thermometer of consistency throughout the whole day. If all of these elements are consistent with each other and align with strategy they can positively influence the impact of the leaders.

Other channels of communication must be used, but these must always support and affirm the direct communications.

If there are employees dealing with the theme of internet communication in a company, they must always be directly anchored in the top-team. The mission of such a department is to monitor consistency - nothing less.

Forget perfection

The mistake that is often made is to assume exemplary behaviour means that you must always act perfectly. Nothing is farther from the truth. Aiming for perfection is, for leaders, a cure for success.

Nothing in nature and complex systems is perfect. It is always somewhat messy, careless, and imperfect. Consistency is actually achieved by simply making imperfection visible and transparent.

It is many times more effective if leaders show how they solve dilemmas and good-versus-good decisions rather than they solve them perfectly.

Use defining moments to reveal the values, to test them and to shape the organisation

People see the values through the consistent struggle that the leaders wage to achieve them and not in the assignments and orders to unite two or more incompatible values or objectives.

A board of management of a company with more than one hundred thousand employees recently asked how customer-orientation could be really implemented in the company. Two core ideas were engraved in the objectives. Guarantee the financial objectives of the shareholders and in several years be number one in customer-orientation in the industry.

The result of the financial objectives was that business units and cost centres constantly had to compete with each other in order to achieve their local targets. The remuneration system of top management was also consequently directed at achieving financial results.



For the customer-orientation, people wanted to introduce a culture programme, because the philosophy was that customer orientation had to do with behaviour.

At the basis of the organisation, at the place where the customers had a real impact, this naturally resulted in a classic soft-hard problem: “We must talk about customer-orientation until it costs money.” This sentence, which was heard spontaneously in various places, characterises the total confusion and maximum inconsistency of the leadership’s message.

Yet the board continued to assert the importance of meeting the two directives. Setting up two aims alongside each other, which had little to do with each other operationally, and as it were, managing them separately, is the result of many years of training in cause-effect thinking that has held sway, implicitly or explicitly, in most of the business schools in the west for many years.

Culture, a buzz word that too many leaders erroneously believe is something that you can approach from outside yourself and manage like an automation project, is in fact a very simple phenomenon; it is the emergent property of the company. It is not connected to the parts that make up an organisation in cause-effect actions, but it is directly dependent on how the components of the organisation work together with each other.

If this latter happens consistently, a strong dynamic unity will emerge and that is what we call “culture”, “the values”, the “identity” and “image” or other things which are, essentially, interchangeable and are one, because they are all emergent properties and are dependent on the degree of consistency that the leaders of the organisation can achieve.

In the business example above, a seemingly paradoxical answer is that the only solution was not to stress the two aims as if they were two independents, but to show that these two aims constantly translate themselves into all sorts of critical incidents that deal with having to take good-versus-good decisions - call them super-dilemmas.

Sometimes you will not be able to give a customer everything because it is simply too expensive (and also dare to tell the customer that) and sometimes you will give the customer everything even if it costs a lot more (and then also tell the customer about that).

In both cases, the frontline of the organisation must feel so safely attached that they have the courage to take these never-perfect decisions.

If an executive committee, a board of management, a management team, an operating committee etc and the teams under it show themselves that there is never one perfect answer to the two (or more) aims (or values) and that this can only be achieved in the chaotic reality through their own responsibilities, the employees will recognise the values of the company and will then execute them as such.

The moments when values and objectives collide are the critical incidents that occur a thousand, if not tens of thousands of times in larger companies.

If employees can see how leadership approaches the good-versus-good decisions, they can translate thousands of critical incidents into defining moments that reveal and test the values and further build on the character of the organisation.



Consistency is the driving influence

Consistency is the driving influence behind all this, without anybody ever knowing which moments of consistency have caused which moments of customer-orientation. Leaders must be able to distance themselves from the necessity of translating everything into cause-effect conclusions and learn to use the constant power of self-organisation.

Leaders want control, but forget far too often that complex systems control themselves. With relatively little control, relatively little energy, much more effect can be achieved than by stubbornly holding on to the idea that an organisation is a machine that we can do with as we like.