

A Tinguely in the House?

"Differentiation" is one of the favourite words of the followers of Luhmann's systems theory: systems differentiate themselves further and further – sounds somehow exhausting, I find. As if everything was fraying and becoming more and more complicated and complex. Which is probably the case; after all, the second law of thermodynamics still applies. In a nutshell, if I understood correctly: the disorder in a system only increases if you don't intervene. We know that, children's rooms and such.

But mess can also develop quickly in organisations: when the organisation is founded, everything is still simple and direct. Then the organisation grows. At some point, someone should take care of human resources, and over time specialists and specialised departments emerge, each taking care of an important facet of the company.

Unfortunately, they also often look after themselves too much: professional cultural islands develop, and the specialists come up with solutions that are as easy to implement as possible and optimised within their own special field. But whether they also ideally serve the big picture is another matter.

What is optimal for IT may be a nightmare for the users. What is nirvana for sales drives compliance crazy and accounting along with it. What is great for support, leaves customers in queues...

Specialisation, however, cannot be avoided and is constantly progressing: the specialisations within themselves are also becoming more and more differentiated, and so fragmentation grows with specialisation. In the absence of a coordinating and guiding force in this situation, organisations begin to resemble a work of Tinguely more and more: always on the move, funny to look at, and lacking any sense of determination. Or one is reminded of the Monty Python sketch with the hundred-metre run for men with no sense of direction....

What to do about it? Tidying up every now and then is one option. Quite exhausting, but probably not entirely avoidable. Of course, it would be nicer if everyone kept things tidy themselves all the time. This is possible if there is a high level of awareness everywhere for higher-level guiding principles and for interactions between one's own field and the rest of the organisation – and of course the reward systems are not tailored to optimising self-interest (fragmentation ahoy) ...

This in turn requires quite a lot of communication, exchange and dialogue, i.e. first of all effort. The bet here is that this effort will pay off in the long run, and I find this bet quite plausible. The reasons for not making this investment are often unconvincing and sound something like "I don't have time to get the excavator, I have to shovel".

If you build lively interdisciplinary exchange into your organisational design, you are likely to have great advantages in the long run. So maybe you should go and fetch an excavator and go to the museum to look at the Tinguely – both are fun if you leave them where they belong.