A FORK IN THE ROAD

By Ken Simpson
ABSTRACT: In 2013 we find ourselves at a collective fork in the road, once again considering the path we should collectively take to the future of the discipline. The current choice is between a wider-focused discipline called business continuity, and the 'management systems' highway known as business continuity management.

Moving forward may require embracing multiple alternative paths and destinations. To grow towards a wider focus we need to become a learning discipline. A wider focus on learning means we reflect on what we need to learn and how we facilitate that learning as a holistic discipline.

This paper discusses three ideas that challenge business continuity (management) professionals to think differently about learning, what it means to learn and ways that we can shape future practice.

Author

KEN SIMPSON

Ken has 30+ years’ experience as a manager and leader in both public and private sector organizations. During that time he has led internal risk, DR, BCM teams and recovery operations following a major incident. He is qualified as both an MBCI by the BCI and a Certified Organizational Resilience Professional by ICOR.

Ken also has a BA (Social Sciences), an MBA and has held executive roles as a CIO and CTO.

He is currently an independent management consultant and an active blogger, author and speaker on the subjects of business continuity and resilience.

This experience as practitioner, academic and executive provides unique insights into BCM and ways to improve our practice in the future and create greater relevance to management.
Paths diverging

"Two roads diverged in a wood, and I took the one less travelled by, And that has made all the difference." The Road Not Taken, a poem by Robert Frost.

There was a time when I was the head of business continuity for the Australian Taxation Office. We had state of the art business continuity software, an internationally used methodology and adequate budget for external consultants to augment our small team. We had no concerns about the backing of senior management for our efforts, and the fact that the unit was part of the IT organization was of no concern: it was normal.

But one day I started to think that there must be more to this: what we were doing had little value.

I didn't know what the answer was, only that what we were doing (while considered international best practice) was not "it". So I shredded the methodology, deleted the software, let the Big 4 firm go and worked with a small team to redefine our practice – and some great stuff emerged!

That was a significant fork in the road for me; back in 1991.

Fast-forward to 2013 and we find ourselves at yet another fork in the road, again considering the path we should collectively take to the future of our discipline. The current decision concerns alternative routes, and perhaps destination points. The choice is between the more scenic route (a wider-focused discipline) called business continuity, and the less scenic but better signposted 'management systems' highway known as business continuity management.

Is this constant need to debate and revise future direction just a normal growing pain, or a sign of being lost and adrift?

At times this debate has reflected issue du jour symptoms (e.g. The Great GRC Debate (1)), while some more reasoned perspectives become merely a flash in the pan (Is BCM a misnomer? (2)). We warn of the 'resilience barbarians' at the gate (Why Resilience is not the future of Business Continuity (3)) or simply vent our frustration at some commonly accepted practices! (Is Business Continuity Management a dead-end? (4))

I assert that we are both lost and suffering growing pains. To find our way we must first know what we stand for. To change the focus and position of the discipline we have to change what we do on a day-to-day basis. Ultimately it is these daily interactions that shape the future more than redefined goals and regular re-branding efforts.

Moving forward may require embracing multiple, alternative paths and destinations. To grow towards a wider focus we need to become a learning discipline. Too often our current approach to development reflects a preference for training in the commodity skills of current practice and less
focus on wider thinking and education. A wider focus on learning means we reflect on what we need to learn and how we facilitate that learning as a holistic discipline.

In this paper I discuss three ideas that challenge us to think differently about learning, what it means to learn and ways that we can shape future practice. The ideas are referenced for those who want to read and understand more about the concepts. Even if you do not want to read further I hope you at least reflect on what I have written and perhaps give some of these techniques a try in your current practice.

For the current turning point to matter it must be about actually changing what we do, rather than simple re-branding. What we do is informed by our approach to learning and the way the individual practitioners interact with stakeholders in their organizations. The future will emerge from these interactions for that is what defines what our discipline does, and shapes how others perceive what we do.

"Another turning point,  a fork stuck in the road.

Time grabs you by the wrist,  directs you where to go.

So, make the best of this test and don’t ask why.

It’s not a question, but a lesson learned in time.

It’s something unpredictable,  but in the end it’s right.

I hope you had the time of your life”

Good Riddance (Time of your Life), Billie Joe Armstrong, Green Day.

Tiers and fears

The alternative paths on offer are defined in ISO 22301 and reflected in the BCI’s new Good Practice Guide:

- Business continuity relates to the capability of the organization to continue delivery of products or services at acceptable predefined levels following a disruptive incident
  - Although, we may want to drop the reference to the disruptive incident if we intend to move into the arena of strategic threats to continuity.

- Business continuity management is the old definition of ‘holistic management process’ and the framework. This would be perceived as the narrower path, focused on the business continuity management system (BCMS).

At this stage it is unclear if the real difference will simply be between the outcome-focus (i.e. the capability), and the process-centric roles. A real sign of growth and clear direction may be if these two paths evolve as different vocations.
If we look at the history of professionalizing (the social process that a trade or occupation follows when trying to become a profession), then establishing multiple tiers is common:

- Medicine has doctors, nurses and orderlies/technicians,
- Accountants have bookkeepers,
- Architects have draughtsmen.

Harold Lewinsky studied the history of professionalization and described it in this way;

“It is in the further self-conscious definition of the core tasks that a pecking order of delegation of tasks occurs. The doctor allocates much of his job to less trained nurses and laboratory and X-ray technicians; the nurses as they seek to professionalize, allocate much of their less attractive work to practical nurses, aides, and nurse assistants; ... A similar tendency exists among all professional groups in short supply ... all of whom are redefining their functions upwards and at the same time are sloughing off the dirty work, that is, their less-technical or less-rewarding tasks.” (5)

To follow this path of professionalizing we would need to create different entry criteria and education for the two paths. You do not move from orderly to nurse based on the number of bedpans you empty, nor from nurse to doctor based on your technical competence as a nurse. In the real professions you need to re-qualify via the education system and then gain admission to the professional association for the higher order roles. For the recognised professions, you get that education in universities and specialist business/medical/legal schools, not as a form of vocational training.

My guess is that we will not embrace this option, and I do not highlight it as a means to denigrate anybody's efforts. If we are to embrace a wider focus, then maybe we need to adopt a wider concept of learning - to think not just outside the box, but at times to think outside the building! (6)

As a discipline we have been down the renaming path a couple of times before. We rationalised the value and contributions of BC(M) by the new name, but we still did much the same thing (recovery planning). You will no doubt see examples of this same behaviour in your own organization, when managers profess to support business continuity but act as if they do not really care. You can impress your HR colleagues by referring to it as a conflict between their ‘espoused theory’ and ‘theory in use’. (7)

We all have a mental map of how we will behave in certain situations; unfortunately few people are consciously aware of their map. These maps are what Argyris and Schön refer to as "theory in use". Do not be confused by the term theory, this is about how you act.

We also have a theory that we use to describe, or rationalise, to others how we act - that is ‘espoused theory’. Again you may see this in your current practice if you do a plan walkthrough and people tell you what they 'would' do, but somehow in a real incident they do things entirely differently.
To learn and improve, either collectively as a discipline or as an individual business continuity / crisis management team, we need to recognise and challenge the conflict between espoused theory and theory in use. This is achieved using a technique called Double Loop learning.

Learning, according to Argyris and Schön, involves the detection and correction of errors. The common approach is to simply look for another strategy, without any questioning of our goals, values or frameworks. The focus is on making techniques more efficient and the strategy more effective. They call this Single Loop learning.

Double Loop learning occurs when we also reflect on and challenge our underlying norms, policy and objectives. An example might be my proposal of a two-tier profession. It may not be the right answer, but hopefully it would encourage people to reflect on how we frame the problem, rather than simply how to address the problem as it is currently framed. This form of learning can apply at both individual and at the organizational level - perhaps even at the accreditation organization or peak body level. It is certainly applicable at the collective level to shape;

"those sorts of organizational inquiry which resolve incompatible organizational norms by setting new priorities and weightings of norms, or by restructuring the norms themselves together with associated strategies and assumptions." (8)

Science in use

Many of the norms and assumptions in our current discipline flow from the model of science in use. Our discipline grew out of the engineering-centric world of IT, and we perceive ourselves as part of 'management'. So we embraced the 'sciences of certainty' as part of our professionalization in the same way that the wider management discipline had done previously.

What if the real choice of direction here is to embrace a different model of science? The sciences of uncertainty and complexity.

Business continuity is a discipline that should be able to deal with uncertainty - surely that is part of our stock in trade? Increasing uncertainty and complexity are offered as reasons why our discipline is needed.

Despite this we do not generally understand nor embrace uncertainty and complexity. Instead we apply the logic of certainty and engineering. We seek to eliminate uncertainty with plans, procedures and uncomprehending use of the language of complexity to justify our current theory in use.

Complexity thinking requires us to accept a model where the connection between cause and effect is unclear and potentially only able to be perceived in hindsight. Where the future of our practice,
discipline or organizations is not pre-determined by executives and mission statements, but emerges from our numerous interactions and the way we adapt! This concept of 'emergence' is central to complexity theory. It is not a new fad, even Aristotle discussed the subject, so perhaps it is time for it to be understood within business continuity.

Consider the recent, ongoing, economic crises. How could this occur when organizations have invested so heavily in 'best practice' and quality management systems? Nobody set this outcome in their vision statement or goals; nobody did a gap analysis, defined this as the desired future state and steered their organization to this result. There is surely a contradiction between the model of management that asserts executives choose a vision/destination and exert control over direction and the variable outcomes we observe.

"there is a major contradiction between the organizational reality of uncertainty and the beliefs that we have about the capacity of executives to know what is going on and be in control." (9)

Ralph Stacey, a Professor of Management at the Business School, University of Hertfordshire in the UK, traces the history of management and the science of certainty, and makes a reasonable (albeit very academic) case to consider an alternative view. He is one of a large number of writers who are exploring the application of complexity sciences to organizations.

As a discipline that should embrace the science of uncertainty, we need to entertain the idea of organizations as Complex Adaptive Systems. A special case of complex systems, full of human agents with the capacity to change, learn and adapt as a result of their interactions. This may be even more applicable during an incident response than during routine operations.

As business continuity (management) practitioners we operate in a nested hierarchy of complexity and agents with the ability to adapt. These include: individual practitioners, their networks, the global institutes, our crisis management teams and the rest of the organizations we work and practice within. To learn and grow as a discipline we need to recognise that these ideas apply not only to the organizations where we work, but also to our vocational organizations (like the BCI or DRII). To change the future practice of the discipline we need to change the current conversations and interaction, at the local and macro levels of our practice.

"Organizations are fundamentally conversational in nature, and they stay more or less unchanged when conversation is stuck in repetition but have the potential for change when conversation is more fluid, more complex." (10)

If we want a wider focused discipline we can start by promoting new thinking and conversations about our own education. Promoting and discussing 'emergent practice' may become more significant to promoting and shaping the discipline than formally endorsed ‘good’ and ‘best’ practices.
Art and artistry

"A bend in the road is not the end of the road ... unless you fail to make the turn." Unknown.

A wider focused practice also requires a shift of focus to the art, rather than the science, of our discipline. Especially when it comes to education and learning for the individual practitioner. We can only teach science: the art will come from practice and learning.

“we need most to teach students how to make decisions under conditions of uncertainty, but that is just what we don’t know how to teach” (11)

We are at a stage in the 'science of the discipline' where the techniques being taught have attained commodity status. You can see this in both the risk and business continuity domains. The management systems approach and standardisation ultimately lead us down this path. The differentiation, and the value add, comes not from the techniques themselves but from the ability to think on your feet and to implement;

"... and in order to think and implement risk you need to understand a variety of aspects of risk – some quantitative but most qualitative. Additionally you need to be creative and flexible in your thinking. Unfortunately the business schools and financial engineering schools (and corporate training programs that produce cookie cutter analysts and consultants) are very good at disseminating knowledge, facts and frameworks, but knowledge, facts and frameworks are not the same as the ability to think and do!” (12)

The quote comes from Rick Nason who was writing about risk management, and I think his comments apply equally to business continuity (management). Nason promotes the idea that we need a portfolio of skills, the commodity techniques and scientific skills along with creative, artistic and humanistic skills. He refers to this ability to think in liberal arts terms, in addition to mathematical terms, as "the new black in risk management."

Schön promoted the ideals of the architects’ design studio and the musical master class as the most effective models for the development of our professional craft. These models encourage the student to learn by doing: in an environment that is more akin to coaching than teaching. It is the non-routine situations of practice, as with the non-routine periods of management following a disruption that are learnable and coachable: but not teachable.

Coaching is a more active model than mentoring and may be what we need to explore to achieve that wider focussed discipline. The more hands-off model of mentor is fine when our techniques work – but sometimes we are surprised by an outcome of our action. The familiar technique does not work, or we get an unexpected result. Our reflective practice can occur in two ways;

• 'Reflect on action'
  o something that we do after the interaction
    ▪ in many ways the personal version of the ‘after action’ debrief we might use with our incident teams.
o we can reflect on how our techniques and interactions may have caused the unexpected outcome
  ▪ it may also be a reflection that allows us to improve our technical skills and expertise, as well as our interpersonal skills.

- 'Reflect in action'
  o a case of thinking on our feet: something we do in the midst of our practice that lets us change the interaction and hopefully the outcome.
  o often is about detecting and acting on weak signals: another key attribute claimed for our discipline.

Professional artistry is best understood in the situation of ‘reflection in action’. Where a professional is able to perform competently in uncertain situations and with non-routine problems and challenges.

How will we teach this? How do we create the opportunity for a new practitioner to learn by doing and to gain from the accumulated experience of others? Craftsmen take apprentices, they demonstrate, advise, question and critique the work of the junior.

A wider focussed discipline may need to address the different contexts in which our practitioners learn their craft: certification is acceptable for the commodity knowledge, but how are we educating for real world practice?

Perhaps this is a great opportunity for local chapters of our institutes to ‘think globally and act locally’? After all, it is via this practice of the ‘discipline in action’ that others perceive our relevance and which will in turn constrain how the future will emerge.

Conclusion

If we do what we have always done, then we will get what we have always got. But at least it will have a new name!

The choice is not about the route to follow to a pre-defined future; it is about how we will experiment to constrain and shape the present. It is about the choices we need to make for our own individual and collective learning and development.

If we want to become a wider focussed discipline, then we need to increase the relevance of our practice to a wider audience (13). Our relevance will be determined by how the people we interact with perceive us, not by how we formulate our own espoused theory:

- We cannot become the organizational discipline that claims to enable a response to uncertainty if we do not actually understand it.
- We need to question our norms and assumptions, the constraints that shape our current practice and interactions.
- We need to open ourselves to new ideas about learning by doing and the artistry that will only come from good coaching.
To paraphrase Mark Twain, we need to promote that education is self-learning and something that you want to do; while training is something that others make you do.

Perhaps the final word about choice of paths should go to Donald Schön. He also framed the problem in terms of debate between two paths; the high road of rigorous scientific knowledge and systems, compared with the low road that runs through the messy, confusing swamp. Again we are confronted with the choice of the path of relevance, or:

"The irony of this situation is that the problems of the high ground tend to be relatively unimportant to individuals or society at large, however great their technical interest may be, while in the swamp lie the problems of greatest human concern. The practitioner must choose. Shall he remain on the high ground where he can solve relatively unimportant problems according to prevailing standards of rigour, or shall he descend to the swamp of important problems and nonrigorous enquiry?" (14)

References

10. Stacey, 2010 [Kindle Location 5058]
12. Schön 1987[Location 306]
13. I have written about being relevant to our Executive Management in a previous article. "Putting management into BCM", BC and Resilience Journal, Quarter 3, 2012
14. Schön 1987[Location 96]