

Dynamic Patterning: an interview with Dr Sharon Varney



Kate Alexander



Sharon Varney

Just about everyone I talk to nowadays is caught up in change. There are new technologies, ways of working, and mounting pressures. People are looking for help with change. I'm intrigued to learn more about dynamic patterning and how your methodology can help. So, let's start with the basics: what is Dynamic Patterning?

Dynamic Patterning is a way of describing how change actually happens in organisations. It accepts that change often takes unexpected twists and turns, no matter how well you plan for it, and that unintended consequences arise – outcomes that no one planned.

This is becoming much more common in today's business world as multiple projects and events collide and create unknown interdependencies. If we think about the increasingly fast-paced world in which we work, and the 'always on' generation connecting via smart phones to social media, we can see that the problem of unintended consequences is only going to get worse.

And if we're not specifically looking out for them, it's easy to miss the early warning signs. Opportunities may pass us by and problems can escalate rapidly while we're busy concentrating on the day job.

As experienced leaders know well, when you're working with change, you should expect surprises. But, until now, they haven't had the benefit of practical tools to help them work with the dynamic patterning in change. So, when things go awry, they've had no choice other than to cover their backs or simply take it on the chin.

You specifically mention leaders. I'm wondering if you can tell me, why is it important for leaders to understand more about dynamic patterning?

Leaders and decision-makers might be in charge, but they're not in full control of how change plays out. And that's a difficult place to be.

Yet, the good news is, if they can spot patterns in change sooner, some of which may be very small to the uninitiated, then they can seize opportunities faster and tackle emerging issues before they become a major problem.

For example, we've seen a case in which the senior management team were focusing their attention on critical strategic issues and inadvertently contributed to a disconnect with staff, creating a gulf in

communication and trust, which could easily have led to a highly disengaged workforce. Our Dynamic Patterning diagnostic made this crystal clear, and they were able to take swift action to re-engage, by increasing their visibility and sharing good news stories.

What are the risks of not paying attention to dynamic patterning?

In the past, we've been able to comfort ourselves that, with good planning, spectacular failures and missed opportunities probably won't happen on our watch. But, in a more connected and dynamic world, that's a highly risky strategy. The trouble is that the signs of change are easy to miss early on, but become blindingly obvious with hindsight. Then everyone points the finger at those in charge and asks 'why they didn't see it coming?' And nobody wants that!

As a leader then, what are the practical steps I can take to use the Dynamic Patterning Methodology?

People reading this might worry that it's incredibly complex. But actually it's very straightforward.

One of the easiest things to do is build the process into an existing project or change programme. For example, if you're attempting any kind of culture change – with the introduction of a new strategy, re-branding, or mergers and acquisitions – you'd be wise to embed the Dynamic Patterning Methodology into your project plan. While you can't predict or control the emergent outcomes of change, you can make space for learning what's emerging, and you can help yourself to get ahead of the curve.

You mentioned projects. Does it rely on any specific project or change management methodology?

No. It's a 4-Step process that can plug into any change or project management methodology. And it also stands alone.

It's an ideal tool for PRINCE 2 Project Boards because they're accountable for project risk and they can get a wider scan of systemic issues. But it also works well with Agile and continuous improvement methods, by helping small teams focused on failing fast to recognise wider patterns developing over a longer time-horizon.

Well that sounds very useful. So, as a leader, how is the Dynamic Patterning Methodology going to help me?

Our Dynamic Patterning Methodology helps leaders with two things. First – and this is very important – it shows them where to look for early warning signs of change. And second, our 4-Step process helps

them to discover patterns emerging in change, to make sense of them and to take responsive action.

If you like, it's a structured way of ensuring that you no longer have to leave the 'unplannables' to chance. Very simply it introduces a process that reduces the risk faced by all organisations.

That sounds so easy. Why isn't everyone using it?

Well, they probably will be soon. That's because the costs are low, while the risks of not knowing are potentially huge. As people become more connected and the working world becomes more complex, it's no longer enough to hope that 'it won't happen to us' or that, if it does, intuition will save you.

If you're not actively paying attention to what we call the 'vital signs' in change, then you're more likely to miss weak signals about emerging patterns until much later, perhaps too late. No one wants to be a BP with an ecological and reputational disaster on their hands. Of course, it need not be on that scale. But most companies will want to heed warning signs of people being 'more preoccupied' in their work, for example, and avoid it turning into a disengaged workforce and dissatisfied customers.

Earlier you highlighted the benefits of using the Dynamic Patterning Methodology in projects. Are there other ways to use it?

Yes, the process is very flexible. You can develop leaders and managers to work more effectively with dynamic patterning in change. We run a range of change Masterclasses which do just that.

This approach has the added benefit of developing multiple antennae around your business to pick up on small, everyday, human-scale data that may signify change, such as a dip in a team's energy, or a new story. The Dynamic Patterning Methodology helps organisations make sense of all that data, and consider how they might influence emerging patterns of live change.

And finally, what might an organisation learn about itself?

That's a great question. An organisation that systematically explores its patterns of change can turn qualitative data from people's everyday experiences into usable, actionable insights.

For example, it could discover bright spots of behaviour emerging such as informal collaborations across teams. Leaders might want to amplify these patterns more widely to build resilience. Or, it could find unintended consequences arising from interdependencies in

multi-project environments, such as 'change fatigue', where constant change leads to apathy among staff. Equally, it might discover energy, or potential benefits accumulating from past choices and decisions, with as yet unlocked potential.

But, more importantly, leaders and organisations will learn how to work with the dynamic patterning of change in a working world that is evermore volatile, uncertain, complex and ambiguous (VUCA). And that's a strategic competence everyone's going to need.



Sharon Varney was interviewed by Kate at Kate Alexander PR.



@kate_alex