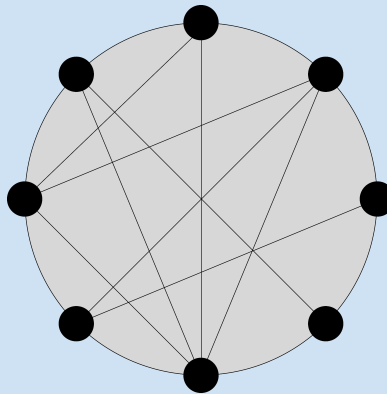


Spannungsfeld SIG

Outline for *Spannungsfeld: The New Approach to Management and Organization*

What I would like this group to work towards is an open, collaborative book on management based on the following interrelated ideas: tensions, incentives, feedback loops, protocols, conflict, trade-offs, tensegrity, swarms, knots, uncertainty.

Rather than inventing an entirely new view of organizations, this book would be like an extension of Gareth Morgan's *Images of Organizations*. You can view a business as a machine, as an organism, as a mind, as a prison... Each has its strengths, weaknesses and limitations. How could you make an image of an organization as a series of protocols or tension knots, and what could you gain from doing so?



In terms of a book structure, there are plenty of options. A series of mostly independent essays plus practical elements like checklists, frameworks, and audits is probably the most straightforward. This group has a healthy quantity and diversity of experience that would lend itself to a comprehensive set of case studies.

In order to get to a point where there's enough raw material to work with, we could study our way through a matrix like this, drawing on books, personal experience, and a handful of case studies along the way:

Org Function / Concept	Human Resources	C-Suite, Strategy	Marketing, Sales, Comms	Operations, Facilities	Engineering	Compliance, Governance	Information Technology
Tension							
Protocol							
Feedback Loop							
Incentive							
Conflict							
Trade-Offs							

Tensegrity								
Knots								
Swarms								
Uncertainty								

Another way to work our way through the idea space is to recast traditional org functions as tension knots or bundles of tensions. Which tensions does each function manage? How do they assess and maintain the protocols needed to do so? Do they have a roadmap for *Whiteheading* those protocols?

Either way, those who would like to co-author the book could then each propose an essay, with a synopsis, and indicate which elements (Org Function x Concept or Tension Knot) their piece would touch on – to make sure we have comprehensive coverage of the underlying ideas, while maintaining plenty of flexibility for each essay.

Publishing could be done via Metalabel or a more lightweight thing, even an open PDF, though it would be cool to use a protocolish tool. A hypothetical table of contents, just to illustrate how this could form a cohesive whole:

- 1. Introduction - The Organization as a Spannungsfeld**
 - a. Map: org functions as tension knots
- 2. Essay I - Mapping tensions**
 - a. Tool: tension map
- 3. Essay II - Engineered Argumentation**
 - a. High conflict arena workshop template
- 4. Essay III - String Theory: Don't Push It**
 - a. Audit: are you pushing or pulling?
- 5. Essay IV - Protocol Monster Manual**
 - a. Checklist: identifying cursed problems
 - b. Canned openings
- 6. Essay V - Uncertensions**
 - a. Principles: protocols for risk vs. uncertainty
 - b. Tool: coordinate leadership - how to collapse structures, tensegrity-style, in emergencies
- 7. Essay VI - Gaseous Strategy**
 - a. Case study - Chess vs. Go
 - b. Case study - Military Swarms
- 8. Essay VII - The Shape of Protocol Organizations**
- 9. Conclusion - Applications, Limitations**

A couple things to keep in mind during the process:

- Focus on real case studies and an approach that is reverse-compatible. People need not create a fundamentally new org structure – just view theirs with infrared rather than x-ray.
- This is experimental but has some great upside if we do it well.
- Like a heavy canoe, it will be a surprisingly easy lift with 6+ authors.
- The hard part (which we might have to compromise on) is how cohesive of a whole it will be; but we should lean towards a book where people can easily jump around, rather than read from front-to-back.
- Those essay titles above are placeholders, though I'm genuinely interested in all of those subject.

Questions to answer before starting

- Who's the primary audience?
- How do we coordinate illustration styles and diagram standards?
- Licensing – CC-BY or something else?
- How to deal with tone divergence?
 - ~3000 words per essay
 - Plain language, present-tense
 - Implementable on Monday
- Roles: 6-12 Writers, 1 Editor, 1 Cartographer (owns map, tracks connections, keeps cross-references up to date), 1 Illustrator.

First impressions

- Sachin → Scope might be too broad – main message might lose itself in all of the terminology. Words that catch my attention are: tension, protocols, tensegrity, swarms, knots. Other words come with a lot of baggage / prior work.
- Rich → Interested in helping with editorial role, potentially some cartography work. Would be good to define two things upfront: who is the primary audience and whether or not we have a conclusion in mind, and if so what is it?
- Rafa → Overproduce content and select a subset. Prefer to focus on the question, rather than a specific conclusion. That question emerges from the study of the different cases, so we will have to muddle through.
- Martin → Would prefer the motivation of the book to be a bit more provocative. For e.g. we could say that modern organizations are governed by competing metaphors (IT vs. HR). Columns in table seem fine, rows have some overlap or redundancy, lack of uniformity in scale.
- Kakooza → Images of Organizations was very divergent, could use some focus.
- Eric Alston → Any general take on organizations runs the risk of attempting a grand theory of human interaction. You need to select a productive sub-message and a target audience, so that you can construct something sharply useful in the huge literature existing on this subject. With a deep heterogeneity of contributors, we'll need to tie in the divergence somehow.
- Amita → Excited about it and interested in contributing. Good to have a clear outcome for a study group. Next step for group could be to figure out what draft idea process could be.

Meeting Notes and Exercises

July 14th - Conflict, Book Concept

Topics: Conflict, Book Project

Case Studies:

[SHOWDOWN AT APPLE](#) | *Founder-visionary (Jobs) versus professional-manager (Sculley)*. Jobs wanted to double-down on bold, design-led bets (e.g., a next-gen Macintosh), while Sculley — under pressure from unsold inventory and the first quarterly loss in Apple's history — pushed for margin discipline and traditional product-line management. The power struggle peaked in April–May 1985:

Sculley asked the board to strip Jobs of operating authority; Jobs attempted (and failed) to stage a boardroom coup; the board sided with Sculley and exiled Jobs to a figure-head role, prompting his resignation and the founding of NeXT.

[DAIMLER CHRYSLER MERGER](#) | Billed as a “merger of equals,” Daimler-Benz and Chrysler envisioned economies of scale and technology sharing. Instead, day-to-day integration ran aground on deep cultural ruptures: hierarchical, process-heavy Stuttgart versus egalitarian, fast-moving Detroit. Communication styles, decision-rights, pay structures, even meeting etiquette clashed, derailing synergy projects and eroding trust. By 2007 Daimler sold 80 % of Chrysler to Cerberus for a fraction of the original deal value.

Exercise I:

Map the Jobs x Sculley situation two ways. First, as a tension dyad. Second, as a Pick-2-of-3 Triangle. Add your name and your map (or description) below:

-
- Timber
 - Tension Dyad: Radical Empowerment vs. Divide and Conquer | The fundamental tension here was owned by the board of directors, and made itself visible in the form of a dilemma – **whether or not to appoint 26-year-old Jobs as the CEO**. Jobs wanted the title and authority to steer, but lacked some important skills. The board wanted a reliable flywheel, but no ideal candidate.
 - Pick 2 of 3:
 - Δ Product Leadership Δ CEO Skill Coverage Δ Operational Tidiness
 - Today's market supplies candidates, as well as governance structures, that could push on all of these fronts. The board attempted to keep all three by ignoring Jobs' objections, rather than handling them.
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July 28 - Protocol-Based Org Charts

Topics: Protocol-Based Org Charts, Tension Knots

Case Studies: Ethereum Foundation (EF) Chart, U.S. Federal Aviation Administration (FAA) Chart

Potential References

- Governance as Conflict: Constitution of Shared Values Defining Future Margins of Disagreement by Eric Alston ([link](#))
- Real-world experience (Natural resources, gaming, International Relations, Megaprojects, Markets, Public health, backcountry adventures).
- Landscape Theory of Aggregation (Bennett and Axelrod)
 - Very good paper on how to use a tension-based approach to modeling alliances in a competitive landscape. Has since been updated by others, but this is a good conceptual starting point.
- Agonistics - Think the World Politically (Chantal Mouffe)

- Antagonism minus the ant- the violence or hostile element
 - Agonist - etymology: early 17th century (in the sense ‘a competitor in games’): via late Latin from Greek agōnistēs ‘contestant’, from agōn ‘contest’.
 - In real life, there are high stakes (including from external forces), which produce hostility. Thread to explore: internal incentives within games
- The ETTO Principle (Erik Hollnagel)
 - Universal trade-off that you can use as a “here, find a version of this in your field”
 - Can be treated as an *opening* across several domains
 - Example of a pattern-like tension; symptoms like people focusing on externalities (thoroughness) vs. metrics (efficiency) - “solved conversation”
 - Whack-a-mole awareness
- Micromotives and Macrobehaviors (Thomas Schelling)
 - 2 seconds of rubbernecking -> 20 minute slowdown
 - Unmanaged tension field, symptoms, signs, and micro mechanisms to control macro outcomes
 - Using micromotives as a steering mechanism to navigate a spannungsfeld. Two examples: incentive spaces in game design (like hiding player scores) and pandemic response (building codes in Beijing that require a removable partition to divide skyscrapers in two).
 - Things to watch out for: replicating nudge theory, underlying computational complexity (simple rules ≠ simple outcomes)
- The Parasite (Michel Serres)
 - Threshold between rent-seeking and hosting
 - Deep dive into the relationships between people and patterns of interpersonal conflict
 - Bonus points for being an esoteric edition to the reading list
- Images of Organizations (Gareth Morgan)
 - Protocol as a new metaphor / image
 - Portraying spannungsfelds as different things: games, ecosystems, landscapes, minds, cities, etc.
- Cursed Problems in Game Design (Alex Jaffe)
 - Constantly evolving frontier of cheating and glitches to correct
 - Minorities with intransigent preferences for game styles can produce equilibria that the majority is not interested in
 - Problem with using games as a model is you can keep adding metagames to them
 - Core tensions that will eventually break the game stack
- Only Openings (Frank Chimero)
 - Ecological flavor, very muddy lines between predator vs. prey (e.g. flipping the dynamic when weird interspecies adoptions occur)
 - Games are far more stylized with clear roles, positions
 - Map vs. territory problem in theories of evolution
- Polarity Management (Barry Johnson)
 - Based on the title there are likely some obvious parallels and useful case studies to be found. All about “unsolvable problems”. Likely a good source of *openings* that we could match to spannungsfeld patterns.
- The Normal and the Pathological (Georges Canguilhem)
 - Too complex to become games
 - Tensions between what we use as a benchmark for “healthy”
- Maintenance: Of Everything (Stewart Brand)
 - Repair as a separate form of maintenance
 - Rather than solving compliance 100% upfront, but triggers when things fail
 - Information of maintenance protocols is empty - usually nothing wrong, but super important

- Lost Ways of Knowing (John Vervaeke)
 - Procedural knowledge vs. other types – what type of knowledge is necessary to be good at navigating these tensions quickly and come up with good protocols?
 - Being in the world → knowing the landscape's perceptual *gestalt* → integration with the world → ability to manipulate individual objects effectively
- The Risk Society (Ulrich Beck)
 - Extremely rich case study of the tensions inherent in safety. If we get too far down the gaming rabbit hole, this will be a good “high stakes” reference to pull us out.
 - Good bridge to “wicked problems” in planetary governance. Not that we need to go there.
- SoP24 Case Studies
 - Each case study included a central tension, so we'll spend at least one session going through these and trying to synthesize some insights.
- Radical Candor (Kim Scott)
 - Managers control emotional spectrums as a technique, e.g. push a team into firefighting mode – groups interpret instructions based on their standard emotional state.
 - Sometimes you must poke the elephant in the room to make progress on managing tension. If conflicts don't boil over to the point where they become a problem, there's actually very little incentive to do anything about it, despite chronic costs.
- Dynamic Non-Events (Karl Weick, Erik Hollnagel)
 - Term of art in safety and org psych.
 - Safety = continuous absence of accidents (events)
 - Quality = continuous absence of defects (events)
 - A consistent theme of this study group will be protocols as tools to generate non events.
Especially events that take you out of commission, ones that we might call protocol monsters
- Cultural indexes (Hofstede and Trompenaars)
 - Uniquely good playbook for tense spaces in a social sense - now that I think about it, unusually popular for businesspeople. Maybe a good case study or two.

Boundaries + Challenges

- Developing a *feel* for a spannungsfeld is a necessary but insufficient condition for success (however one might define that) in a complex decision-making environment. You also need resources, charisma, domain specific skills, knowledge, free time, ethics. This is just one component of a very wide, squishy, semi-random set of desirable characteristics.
- Adjacent disciplines: economics, cybernetics, complexity “science”, chaos theory, Cynefin... let's not reinvent the wheel, but also try to do something new
- Don't teach birds how to fly
- Avoid an exploding list of tensions. We need some way to reduce candidates down to parent tensions, in order to create a usefully short list. We'll create a nested list to manage this at first.

Aspirations

- *Useful* tools and ideas
 - Excellent series of articles in Protocolized
 - Many, many avoided headaches
 - Application areas: Org psych, planetary governance, tech and health policy.
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Book Tinkering Log

Please add a new row after each iteration.

Version #	Snapshot	Format	Summary of Changes
Template	Title: Topic: Audience:	E.g. Book, Article, Blog Post, Interview, etc.	Please list substantial changes to keep track of the tinkering path.
v1.0	Title: Revisiting the Apple Bomb Topic: Conflicting Styles of Management Audience: [Testing]	Substack Article	Narrow scope to one concept, apply to one case study, track who responds with interest.