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Self-organizing social systems: A Japan Society for Organizational Learning Case Study

It is not that something different is seen, but that one sees differently. It is as though the spatial act of seeing were changed by a new dimension. Carl Jung, Preface, [An Introduction to Zen](#) [1]

Aim of blog

The aim of this blog is to describe a social action research study of Japan Society for Organizational Learning as a self-organizing social system and implications for those interested in new management practices.

The blog was inspired by Society for Organizational Learning member, Betsy Hudson, and her contributions to improving systems management practices through understanding social network science. The depth of Betsy's understanding of self-organizing social systems was inspiring. She led by example, always caring and sharing her knowledge and love for life. Betsy made work a pleasure, always collaborating and keeping family, country and mission first. It is in her memory I share this blog.

Introduction

I met Richihiro Oda at the Sweden Society for Organizational Learning Plaza. Sweden SoL had dedicated the Learning Plaza to Global SoL founder, Arie de Gues, who, while speaking in Paris in 2014 offered this invitation.

I think what is needed, what is waiting for you, the next generation, is to find ways to change the internal structures of business and governmental institutions to become much more in harmony with the value systems that have developed since the second world war. That's your job. That's waiting for you and that's a very difficult problem. That's really organizational learning by accommodation. Re-read Piaget. Then you know what you've got to do.

Richihiro and I met during a break at the Global SoL Annual meeting held during the Stockholm Learning Plaza. During our brief conversation Richihiro invited me to practice my social action research with Japan SoL members if they wished to do so. I was delighted.

The biology of cognition and living systems

I remember a special trip to Santiago Chile, in 1998. I introduced Peter Senge to Humberto Maturana over tea, café, water and a beautiful fruit dish brought to our table by the hotel. Hours drifted discussing Humberto's work and the Society for Organizational Learning. At the time, I was a founding research member of SoL while with the University of Oregon's Center on Human Development. Studying the social impact of employing people with developmental disabilities, our team used quantitative methods [2], qualitative methods [3], social network analysis [4] and a local narrative from the workplace [5]. This work was part of a history of ending the practices of eugenics and liberating people with developmental disabilities from unimaginable abuse and neglect. To do so, we had to abandon the logico-mathematical philosophy that portrayed people as being incapable of learning as if they were sub-human. Our new theory of knowledge, or, epistemology, came from our studies of Piaget who saw knowledge as the collective coordination of action in a series of developmental processes. He was aware of the limitations of logic's philosophical position that knowledge and intelligence were physical possessions and the need to look to biology for a new epistemology.

....almost no theorist of logico-mathematical knowledge has thought of explaining (human) knowledge by going back to the obviously necessary frameworks of the living organizations.[6]

A Living Epistemology to see self-organizing social systems

Humberto did just what Piaget saw as necessary and developed an epistemology that turns classic logic theory and scientific materialism upside down and inside out. Victorian era logic philosophers and mathematicians described reality as a collection of various objects with physical properties that exist independent of human observers. This is how most of us were taught to understand reality and the prevailing theory used to understand self-organizing systems.

Humberto's neurophysiological research on the visual system of frogs, salamanders, octopus, and, pigeons led to his epistemological breakthrough which was simple and stunning – we do not have access to an independent reality. Knowing is not an object and according to Humberto, intelligence something that could not be measured by IQ tests [7]. For Humberto and his student Francisco Varela, “all knowing is doing, and, all doing is knowing” [8]. His living systems philosophy, based on his research studies, changed the history of seeing systems through the sum of their physical properties, and brought forth a new understanding.

The greatest hindrance in the understanding of the living organization lies in the impossibility of accounting for it by the enumeration of its properties; it must be understood as a unity. [9]

Systems structure and organization

Humberto wrote Heinz von Foerster in February of 1973 about a systemic distinction he was making between structure and organization.

“This I did by indicating that structure is used to refer to emphasize the components and their relations when talking of a whole; while organization is used to emphasize the role the parts have in the constitution of a whole, and, hence, refers to the relations that constitute the unity. Thus, two systems are equivalent if they have the same organization even if they have different structure; or, a system retains its identity while its organization stays invariant, even though its structure changes with living systems along their ontogeny. An interesting clarification is that this distinction makes it obvious that whenever there is a change of organization there is a change of system; or, in other words, that the identity of a system is bound to the invariance of its organization. The traditional difficulty in talking about a whole and its relations to its parts or components, obviously comes from the confusion of structure with organization. The properties of the whole are determined by its organization, while it’s structure is determined by the properties of its parts, hence, it is obvious that the properties of the whole are not to be found in the properties of its parts.” [10]

Social action research on accommodation

Since its inception, social action research has followed the epistemology of Piaget, and, since 1992, the epistemology of Humberto Maturana’s Biology of Cognition [11].

I have studied social systems by using social network mapping to understand *structure* and qualitative methods [12, 13] to understand *organization*, a practice I call social action research [14, 15].

Departing from the physical philosophy of logic theory, social action research does not view processes used for understanding living and working well together as tools, nor does it depict relational domains such as social systems as containers, or, social networks as fields.

Instead, social action research follows a developmental-cultural approach I learned with others as together we transformed society’s treatment of people with developmental disabilities in one of the most significant large-scale systems change social movements in the US.

The foundation of social action research asks one simple question. *How do we do what we do when we are living and working well together?* What is most important is the quality of listening that follows the question. The question comes from an open and curious mind, not unlike meditation practices, where the aim of the practice is to become aware of the obstacles to our reflective learning including listening from predisposed theories, frameworks and models. Practically this means listening without interruption, judgement, or, reaching conclusions prematurely. Listening in social action research transforms our understanding of our understanding. Understanding is not a claim I make as a social action researcher, but an observation those I listen to make about the quality of my listening. This constitutes my criteria of validation whereby everyone involved in social action research are invited to review, amend and edit my interview notes and social network mapping. In a sense, I am holding a mirror or portrait of the social system arising from our human nature.

This is the third social action research study in a series coming from a practice using Piaget's learning theory of accommodation hosted by Heidi Sparks Guber and I. The first study was of the Cascade Medical Center in Cascade Idaho followed by a study of Hyphn in Portland, Oregon.

For the social action research for Japan SoL I asked, *How do you work well together in Japan SoL?* I interviewed thirteen members, transcribed their answers and invited them to review, edit and amend my interview notes. Once this was completed, I read and re-read the interview notes to identify coherences or regularly occurring comments made by two or more members. This qualitative approach is how I study the *organization* of the system and understand the relational properties of the whole.

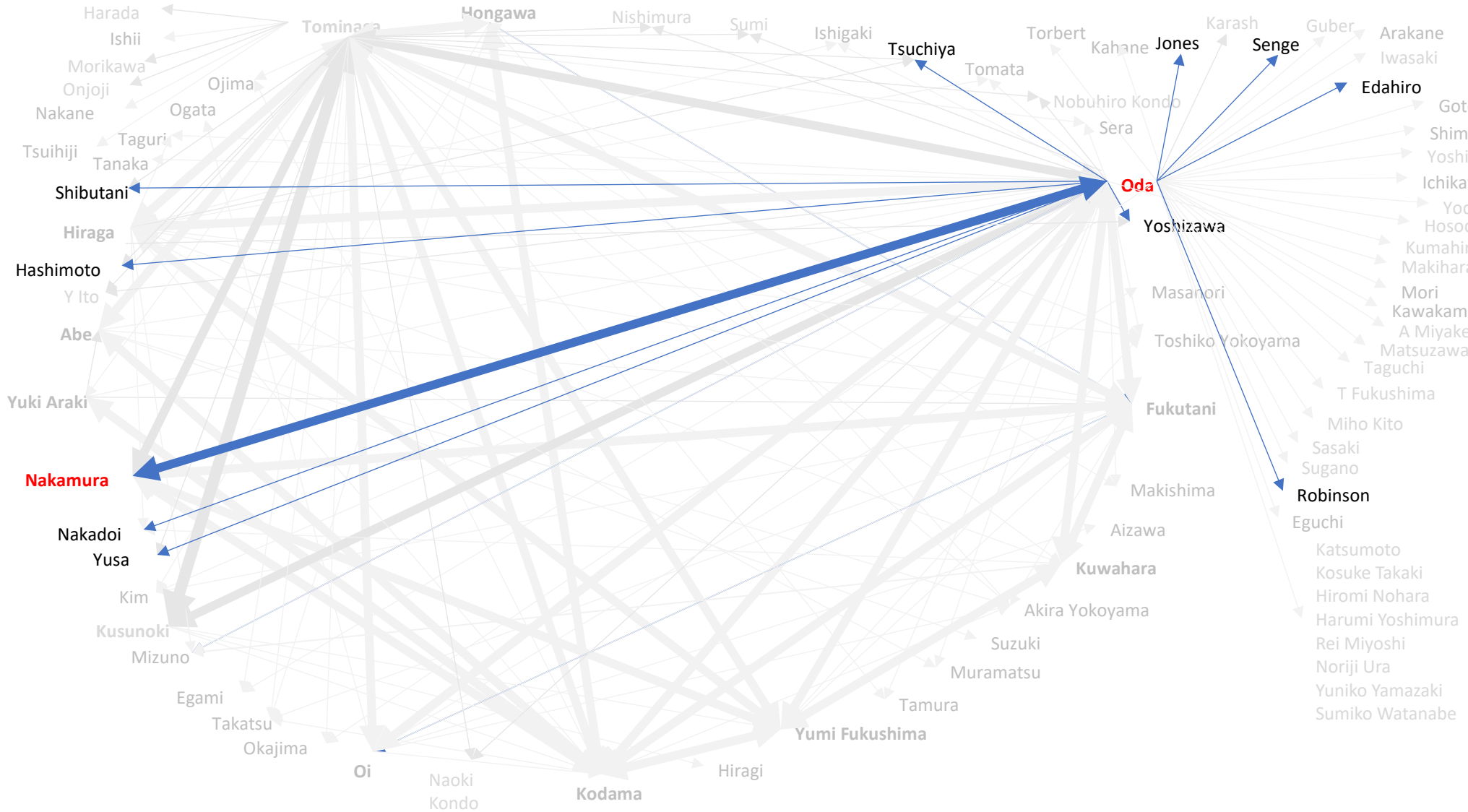
Once coherences were identified I sent each member a social network survey asking, *With whom do you work well together in Japan SoL?* This process generated a map of the *structure* of Japan Sol over time.

Japan Society for Organizational Learning

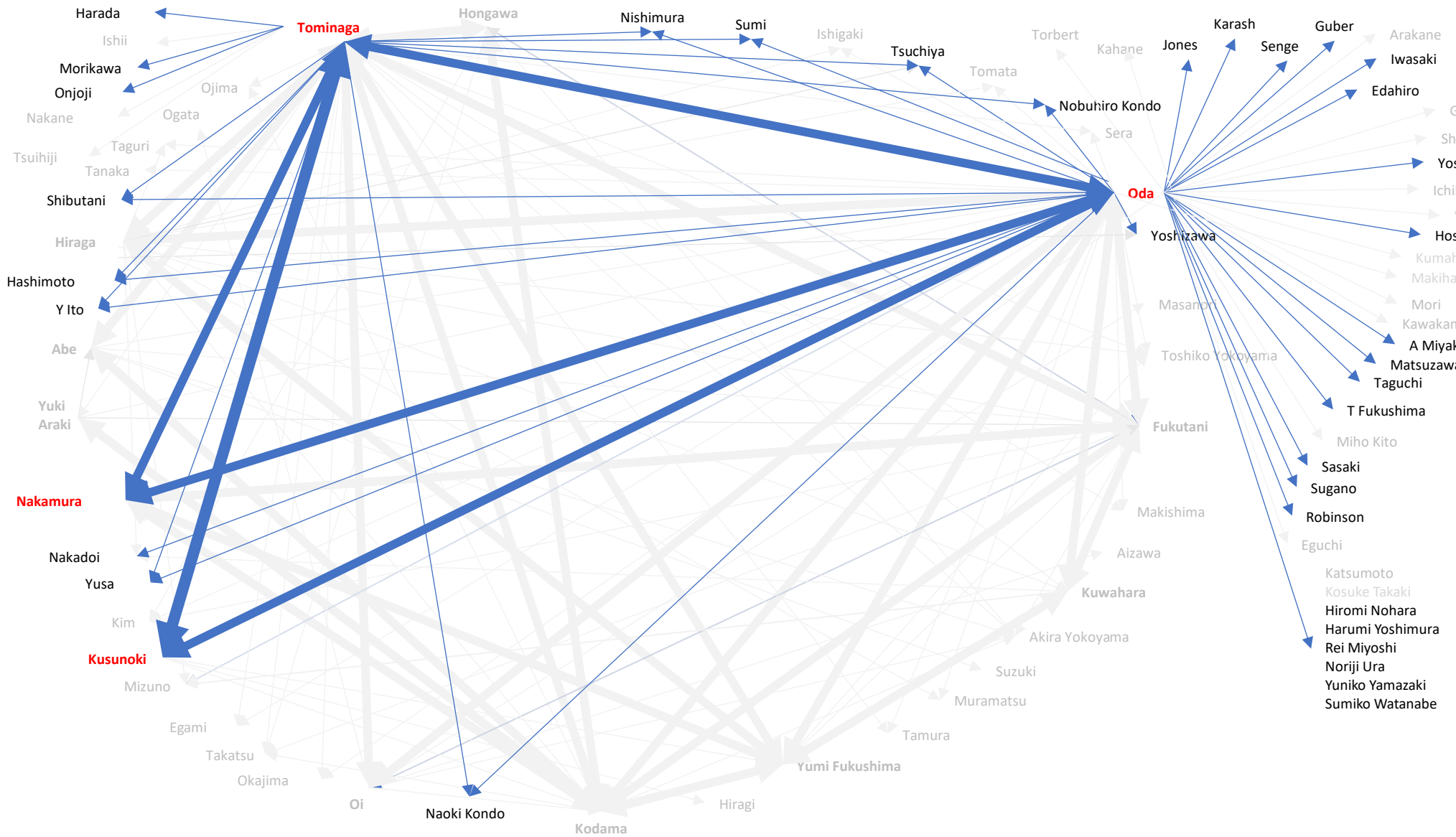
Structure

We can see the structure is changing in the social network time series map and becoming more cohesive over time. But what we cannot distinguish are the relational behaviors bringing forth the changes in the network. That requires studying and understanding organization.

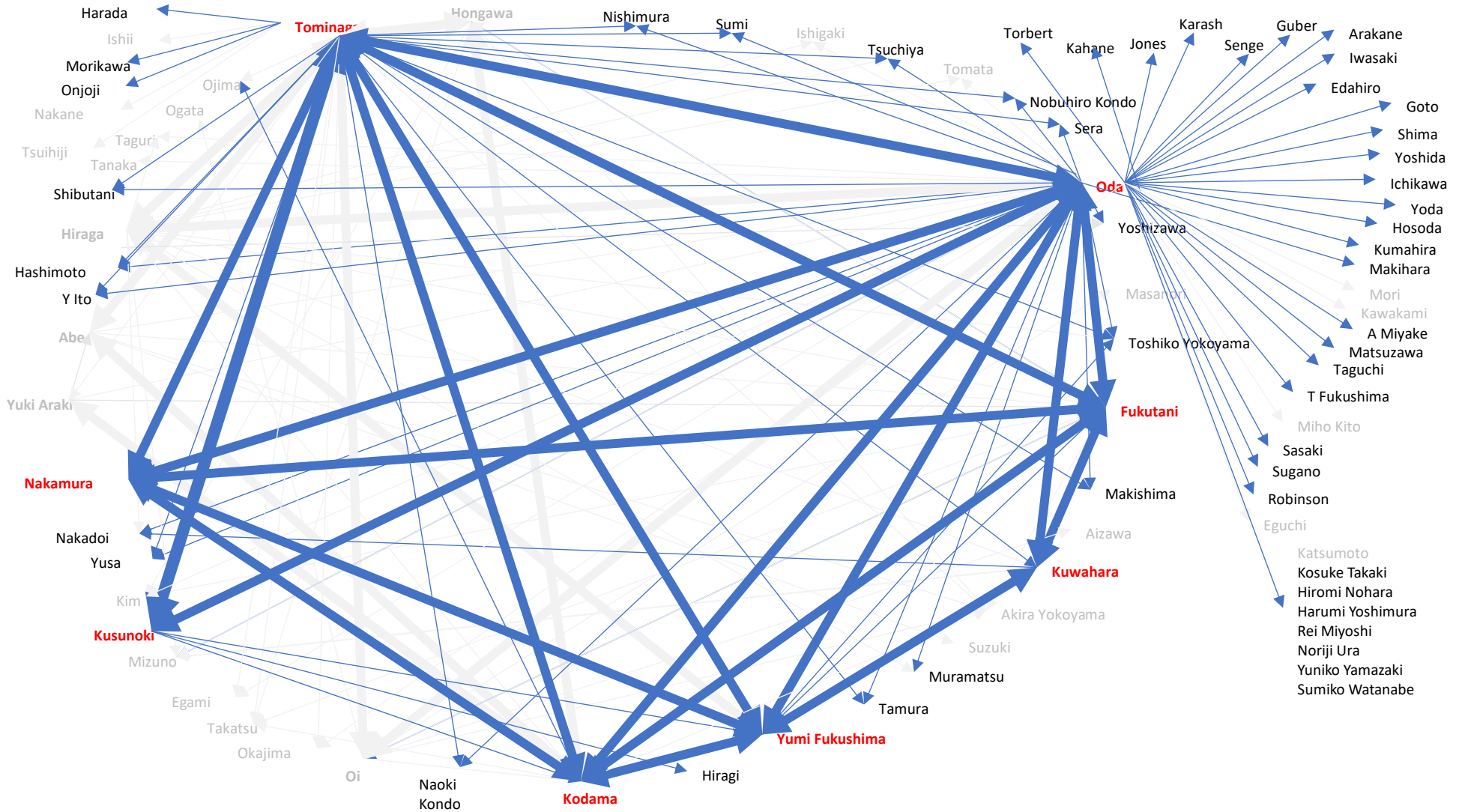
Structure 2006



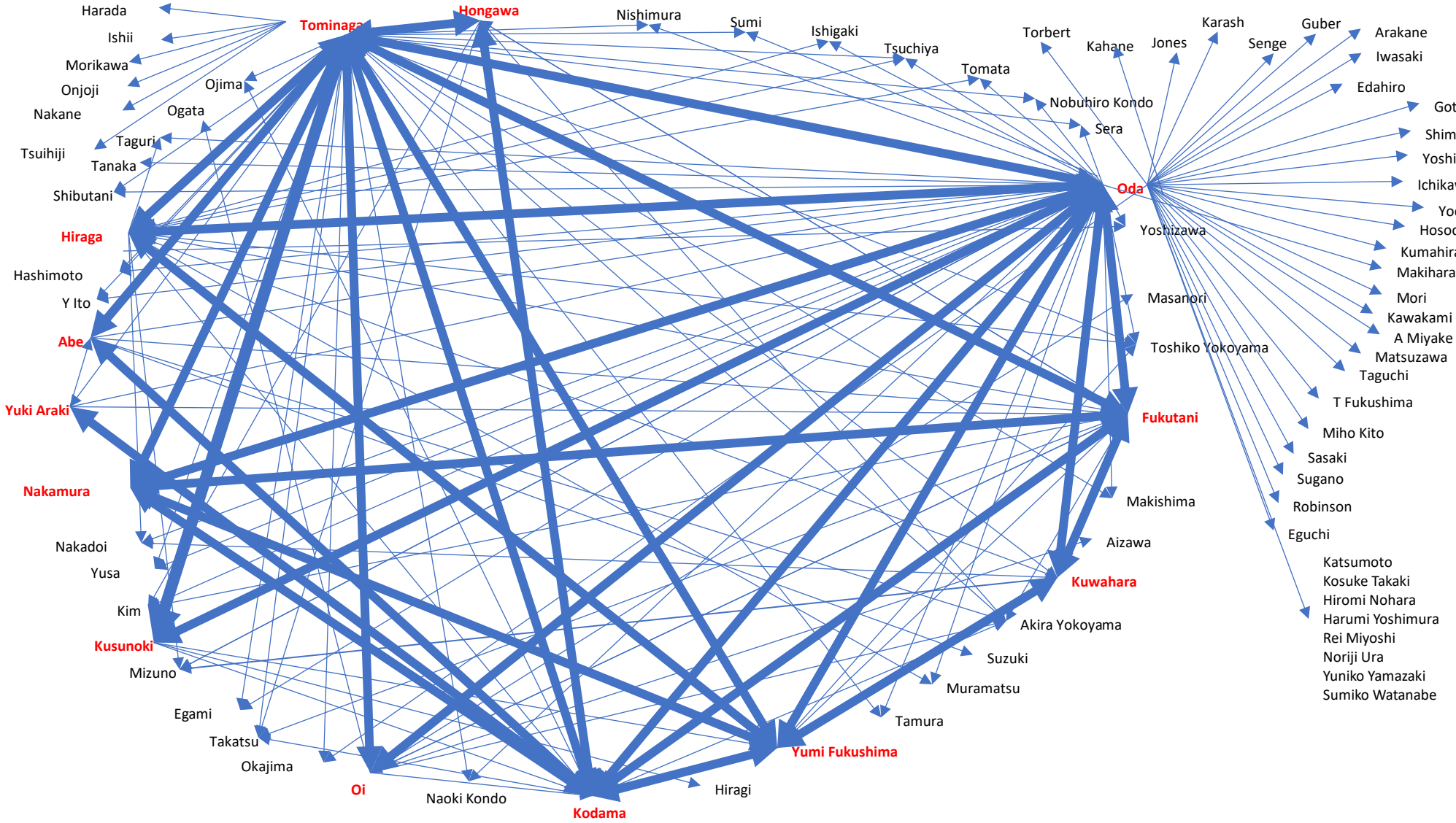
Structure 2008



Structure 2013



Structure 2022



Japan SoL Social Network Structure

From year to year there are changes in the social network structure highlighted by the bold blue lines showing reciprocity amongst SoL members. As an example, Oda identified Tominaga in his survey (Oda => Tominaga), while Tominaga identified Oda in his survey (Tominaga => Oda) as someone he worked well with in Japan SoL. Mapping the social network I use bold blue lines to show Oda ↔ Tominaga. This is a measure of social cohesion. Over the years we can see the cohesion in the network constantly developing.

While we see changes in the social network structure over time we really do not understand why the structure changed. Did the system change the structure? Was there some field invisible to those in the network that changed the structure? Perhaps there was an event in the environment that required the social network structure to change?

To understand the changes in the network structure, I study *organization* to understand the properties of the whole, including the systems structure. As Humberto explained, organization is invariant while the structure of the system can undergo change. And, organization in social systems can only be understood by listening to everyone and discovering coherences in how they all describe how they do what they do when they are living and working well together.

Japan SoL organization.

This is the list of coherences from listening to members answer the question *“How do you work well together in Japan SoL?”*

- Freedom
- No hierarchy
- People come and go
- Openness
- Support
- Listening and being heard
- Intimate relationships
- Safety
- Events
- Metaphor
- Systems thinking
- Learning Organization
- Celebration
- Dialog
- Checkin Checkout
- Annual retreat

Oda

The coherences bring us new insights into the properties of self-organizing social systems. The members explained that freedom, not hierarchy, being listened to, supporting each other, openness, and people coming and going, among other coherences, were how they worked well together.

The Japan SoL, Cascade Medical Center and Hyphn social action research data are similar with respect to organization. Shared coherences include freedom, support, openness and family-intimate relationships. This is fascinating! The structure, those in the Japan SoL, Cascade Medical Center and Hyphn, are completely different while the organization is the same.

Self-organizing social systems

What is a social system? To understand self-organizing social systems, I will describe a social system as a preference we have to live and work well together arising from our human nature to collaborate.

We do not have access to a reality independent of us, but see the world outside determined by the structure of our nervous system. This seems perplexing until we realize that humans live in language and through language we develop a shared reality and collective knowledge guiding our daily living.

We live in language - the coordination of action and collective actions. Our conversations weave our feelings, emotions and our language together in our collective coordinations of actions in networks of conversations that form the development of our relations.

In this development, we follow our natural preferences to develop together in a social network where everyone in the network is seen and heard by everyone else in the network. This is a social system we see developing in the structure of the Japan SoL network.

What is a self-organizing social system?

When we ask, *How do we do what we do when we are living and working well together?*; and study organization we discover that freedom and the absence of micro-management are among the most common explanations and key to self-organizing social systems.

A self-organizing social system is a cohesive social network where everyone in the network sees everyone else in the network as a being part of the network and are free to come and go, share openly, care for each other, and are free from social controls including micro-management and management hierarchies. By focusing on the organization of Japan SoL we learn about the self-organizing nature of the whole.

Managing self-organizing social systems in the Global Society for Organizational Learning.

The Society for Organizational Learning was designed to be a *self-organizing* and *self-governing* society following principles including:

Drive to learn: All human beings are born with an innate, lifelong desire and ability to learn, which should be enhanced by all organizations.

Learning is social: People learn best from and with one another, and participation in learning communities is vital to their effectiveness, well-being, and happiness in any work setting.

Learning communities: The capacities and accomplishments of organizations are inseparable from, and dependent on, the capacities of the learning communities that they foster.

Aligning with nature: It is essential that organizations evolve to be in greater harmony with human nature and with the natural world.

Core learning capabilities: Organizations must develop individual and collective capabilities to understand complex, interdependent issues; engage in reflective, generative conversation; and nurture personal and shared aspirations.

Cross-organizational collaboration: Learning communities that connect multiple organizations can significantly enhance the capacity for profound individual and organizational change. [16]

The Japan Society for Organizational Learning has, in this recent social action research, contributed to our learning about managing self-organizing social systems. A strong theme in studying the organization of the social system was Richihiro Oda who sees himself, with others as being a *steward*. Insights from the theme help us better understand how a steward looks after a self-organizing social system:

- *First I think what helps SoL Japan work well is the presence of Oda.*
- *Like the earth it's all there all the time if you need help Rich is there.*
- *Thanks to Mr Oda we have a sense of being a member of Global SoL*
- *First of all, it has lots to do with our leader Rich Oda*
- *Mr. ODA has a personality so people feel safe and hold space that is soft. So we have a sense of safety in SoL Japan.*
- *Sol is working because of Oda.*
- *Oda helped me and started with my mental models.*

For SoL, this social action research study validates design decisions taken by those acting as stewards during the formation of SoL, but it also asks the Global SoL network a compelling question. Concerning Global SoL's design decision, a June 15, 2001 white paper written by Peter Senge, Arie de Gues and Goran Carstedt shared the stewards thinking behind Global SoL's design.

This thinking has led us to a particular strategy for how to organize SoL as a global network. One way to approach this would have been to extend internationally the work that has been done in the US-based institutions -- building outward from the Founding SoL based in Boston, keeping it as a hub for the network. However, this would be inconsistent with the self-organizing principles embodied in SoL. Instead, we believe that it is important to build "inwards from the outward circle," by creating conditions for initiatives in other countries and cultures. This permits local initiatives to take the form that suits them best. And, it will allow for rapid growth of a global community shaped by the possibilities of each local community. [17]

This evokes the compelling question for today's Global SoL. If the unity of SoL arises in its organization as the structure constantly changes, what is the role of the governing council? And, what if the feeling of working well together at the local level is different from the working together in the governance council? Interestingly, the knowledge of living and working well together I live locally, as the Japan SoL organization data shows. What happens in the governance processes, where this local knowledge is no longer conserved?

The design stewards valued subsidiarity – where decisions are made and actions taken at the most local level. What might an alternative look and feel like?

Self-organizing social systems are psychic spaces where we are free to come and go, free from hierarchical controls and free to share and support others. It is not physical space, but a relational social system where people feel safe, supported and collaborate, living together in a constantly changing present - a relational network where they can learn, develop, and celebrate their accomplishments. Self-organizing social systems cannot be understood by focusing on their parts but by listening to everyone in the network, hearing the coherences and understanding the whole. So if it feels different, perhaps in an undesirable way, in the governing council, feeling the imbalance in the systemic symmetry and can lead to conserving feeling well when working together.

For Global SoL, practicing social action research with each local and asking *How do you do what you do when you are living and working well together?*; will bring forth a larger self-organizing whole and restore systemic symmetry as a balance in the organization of the system.

Managing self-organizing social systems in private and public organizations

Arie de Gues described the choices management have to create a culture of command and control or a culture that fosters social cohesion.

Because such a policy forces the company to operate “skills-for-money” contracts, which lower loyalty and mutual trust, the result is less commonality of goals and reduced levels of trust, which then require a management style based on stronger hierarchical controls. Stronger controls reduce the space for innovation and lead to lower learning abilities of the company as a whole. Lower levels of learning in the post-industrial society reduce a company’s life expectancy in a world in which success depends on the ability to maximize the use of the available brain capacity.

On the other hand, creating the conditions of mobility, the space for innovation, and an effective system of social propagation—recruiting with cohesion and continuity in mind and developing the ultimate potential of the community’s members—creates the conditions for faster institutional learning in the New Economy in which success depends on that learning.

Every management team has a choice. [18]

Once again, we need an alternative to management control that creates a culture where employees are free, both individually and collectively, to collaborate and make their greatest contributions while conserving their human nature to live and work well together. How might managers bring forth such a culture?

Performance is the act of behaving in a particular manner that generates a valued accomplishment for an organization. Unfortunately, many management practices focus on behavior, and, indeed are advised professionally to do so. For example, the Society for Human Resource Management defines culture as “proper way to behave within the organization” while, at the same time, making it clear that culture “is a nebulous concept and is often an undefined aspect of an organization” [19]. Culture defined in this way has management responsible for the behavior of their employees. The problem here is that managers do not have an adequate background in behavioral developmental psychology to positively change behavior in a manner that generates value and productivity.

Instead of studying performance through the lens of behavior, *What are you doing?*, managers can ask, *How do you do what you do when you create value?* This question should be concrete and contextualized. For example, in a bakery, a manager might ask, *How did you create that delicious cake?* Employees might reply, *We used 2 cups of honey instead of white sugar.* Here we learn that *data* is language, the collective coordination of actions and, hence, data is

knowledge when it is timely, relevant, actionable and accessible to all in the network of conversations.

Cultures are networks of conversations and organizational cultures are networks of conversations that create value while conserving our human nature to live and work well together. Studying self-organizing social systems creates a culture of high performance and social wellbeing. This in contrast to following a logic theory that uses analysis to identify the parts of a theory of wellbeing. Instead, managers create bring forth a learning organization that identifies valued accomplishments and ask their employees how they achieved the accomplishment using social action research to study and understand the structure and organization of the systems, discovering that our preference is to be free to collectively coordinate our actions and in doing so, prefer to live and work in self-organizing social systems.

Addendum – an unexpected gift

Global SoL being a self-organizing social system arising from an organization of local stewards occurs in the unity of local SoL fractals. This being the case, this addendum on *satori* is very important to me. SoL processes grounded in a theory of knowledge should begin with the local cultures theory of knowing. In Japan, this brings us to Zen.

The social action research with Japan SoL closed a wonderful circle for me. When I was 15 I read DT Suzuki's Introduction to Zen Buddhism. I was deeply moved and set the course of my career to study nature, first as a biology major, and then, to study human nature and development, majoring in psychology and education. The similarity between Piaget's accommodation and Zen Buddhism's *satori* is striking. Here is Suzuki's description of *satori*.

This acquiring of a new viewpoint in Zen is called *satori* (wu in C.) and its verb form is *satoru*. Without it there is no Zen, for the life of Zen begins with the "opening of *satori*". *Satori* may be defined as intuitive looking-into, in contra- distinction to intellectual and logical understanding. Whatever the definition, *satori* means the unfolding of a new world hitherto unperceived in the confusion of a dualistic mind. [20]

In the Preface to Suzuki's Introduction to Zen Buddhism, Swiss psychiatrist Carl Jung described *satori* as a practice of seeing the world anew.

Satori comes as something unexpected, not to be expected. It is not that something different is seen, but that one sees differently. It is as though the spatial act of seeing were changed by a new dimension. [1]



Satori, as I understand it, is a practice for allowing nature to appear. In this practice I discovered love is the relational space for allowing our own human nature to appear. Through the practice of satori, I came to understand the circular flow of our loving social nature. I discover the whole of living and a philosophy of knowing beyond our physical existence. Practicing satori, I practice Piaget's accommodation as I become aware of our human nature, not through theory, frameworks, models or algorithms but by quieting our minds and releasing our judgement and opinions formed by our mental schemas.

One of Japan SoL members told me that they could not form the wellbeing they find in Japan SoL in private organizations. This was Aries' concern as well. Practicing satori at work seems ridiculous. After all, what value can doing nothing other than reflecting upon our human nature provide? Actually, quite a lot of value can be gained by aligning an organization's performance system with our human nature and our preference to care for each other, be free to self-organize and being open and transparent.

Continuing my collaboration with Heidi, we have discussed three paths of reflection triggered by the social action research at Cascade Medical Center, Hyphn and now Japan SoL.

How do we do what we do when we are living and working well together?

Now that we know we know how we do what we do when we are living and working well together, how will we do what we do when we are living and working well together?

What if we asked the same question at the same time and heard the same answer?

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