



CREATING CONFIDENT COMMUNICATORS

The Leader's Decision Making Dilemma Part 2 of 2

Last week, we addressed the first two types of decisions leaders face when approaching circumstances that require direction: Simple and Complicated contexts. Given the fact that many leaders are creating best practices rather than relying upon them, most of the decisions you face as a leader fall into the **Complex** or **Chaotic** categories.

In the Complicated context, it was determined that at least one right answer exists. Unfortunately, in the **Complex** context, a right answer may exist but it cannot be "ferreted" out – it must evolve or emerge over the course of time. For a leader used to traditional patterns and approaches, i.e. crisis management, allowing a resolution to evolve rather than instituting it can be very stressful and awkward.

Most situations become complex due to a major change – a shift in management, a merger, etc. That change introduces unpredictability and flux. Sound familiar? In retrospect, the how and why becomes apparent in a Complex situation; unfortunately, the how and why are not clear as the process evolves. Which is why the leader must take a risk to conduct experiments or new practices that are safe to fail. Instead of imposing a course of action, the leader must allow the path or solution to present itself. *The Complex solution cannot be forced – it must emerge.*

In their HBR article, Snowden and Boone refer to a scene in the movie *Apollo 13* when the astronauts encounter a crisis that becomes a complex situation. A group of experts is assembled with a wide assortment of articles that are accessible aboard the space capsule. The experts are told: "this is what you have – find a solution or the astronauts will die." None of the experts have an established method or "right answer" to use in this situation. They must depend on their problem-solving skills rather than past practice. As a result, a solution emerges from the materials at hand – and they successfully brought the Apollo 13 crew home.

In a **Complex** context, the leader must *probe*, then sense, then respond. This is probably not what you want to hear, particularly since many of you are under intense scrutiny, both from the public and other agencies. Given the ambiguity of a Complex situation, here are recommended guidelines to manage and lead effectively:

- 1) **Open up the discussion.** Complex situations require more interaction than any of the other contexts. Innovative ideas are generated through brainstorming and communication.
- 2) **Set barriers.** Ground rules are needed to moderate and delineate behavior. Once in place, the system can self-regulate and flex accordingly.
- 3) **Stimulate "attractors."** Attractors are trial probes or stimuli that resonate with others. Think of it as the "trial balloons" used in marketing and political campaigns. You run an idea by a limited group and then assess the results. If the idea is well accepted, proceed to a larger implementation.

Keep in mind that the probes may morph into differing aspects based upon the reception by case groups.

- 4) **Encourage dissent and diversity.** Reviewing ideas to allow dissent and formal debate often lead to evolved patterns and ideas. Since the Complex domain is an exploratory and developmental process, evaluating, critiquing and asking 'what could be done better?' are powerful tools in finding the appropriate solution.
- 5) **Manage starting conditions and monitor for emergence.** In the Complex domain, a leader's influence is "hands off" in many circumstances. In order for a solution to emerge, the leader must create an environment that instills opportunity for new ideas versus trying to initiate predetermined results.

If the environment is forced in a Complex situation, it's very possible to overlook opportunities that arise unexpectedly. A classic case is 3M, which implemented a rule that allowed researchers to spend 15% of their time and budget on personal projects that interested them. One result was the Post-it Note®. Interestingly enough, the engineer who designed the self-adhesive note was turned down by 3M marketing execs, who thought the product conflicted with 3M's scotch tape. The engineer persisted, and the rest is history...

Pitfalls for leaders in Complex situations include the urge to revert to traditional command-and-control management styles. Doing this can lead to the "doom loop" scenario where expectations are not met, and methods are consistently changed, creating frustration and lowering morale. Leaders who do not understand the developmental process of a Complex domain become impatient and may find it difficult to accept a crucial step of the Complex solution: failure. The Complex context is very much a trial-and-error process. **Leaders who try to impose order or total control in the Complex environment will fail.** *Those who set the stage, step back, allow the process to emerge and determine which patterns are desirable will succeed.*

If the Complex context can be labeled as the domain of emergence, the Chaotic context is the domain of rapid response. **In the Chaotic context, unknowables rule** – turbulence is continual and the parameters constantly shift. Looking for the right answer is pointless. The leader's immediate job is to stop the bleeding.

A chaotic environment pulls heavily upon crisis management skills. **The leader must first act to establish order, then sense which areas require stability, and then respond.** For those of you with FEMA onsite experience or military training, this management style is inherent. It should be noted that the most effective communication styles during a Chaotic context are direct top-down or broadcast; time does not exist to solicit input from other sources.

The challenge emerges when this crisis management leadership mode is continued past the crisis. The good news is that true chaotic situations do not endure for long periods of time – instead, they move into the Complex or Complicated domains, which means your leadership skills must flex. As a matter of fact, Chaotic situations are often the best circumstances to inspire creative problem solving and innovation. Snowden and Boone recommend a technique to manage chaos and at the same time, encourage innovation: the minute you encounter a crisis, select a reliable manager or team to resolve the issue. Simultaneously appoint a separate team and direct its members to focus on alternative solutions or to improve the quality of the process. The teams are not in competition and in fact compliment each other. The original team is charged with problem solving while the second adds quality analysis. Snowden and

Boone suggest that if you wait until after the crisis to implement the second team, it may come across as criticism and the opportunity is lost.

True leaders are open to change and know how to identify the context they are working in, and are able to shift gears and flex their decisions to meet the context style. They also prepare their teams to recognize and understand the different contexts and the conditions for successfully transitioning each.

As a leader in the Complex, you will often be called to act against your instincts. Few of us have experience in developmental leadership and yet each of you are creating a new foundation that many people will follow in the future. It will be uncomfortable; it will be nerve-wracking; it will be a life-changing event for the better. And remember, in the hindsight of the Complex, the how and why are apparent. Your job is to trust the process, trust your people and trust yourself. Be forgiving and be flexible; the Complex response includes failure – do not take it personally, it's simply part of the process. Remember, *new circumstances require new ideas and efforts!*

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