

Complexity as normality



"Life moves so much more rapidly than it did before...the huge acceleration in the rate of growth of facts, of knowledge, of techniques, of advances in technology...

To put it bluntly, we need a different type of human being...able to live in a world that changes perpetually, which doesn't stand still...who are able to face tomorrow not knowing what's going to come, not knowing what will happen, with confidence enough in ourselves that we will be able to improvise in that situation which has never existed before.

The society which can turn out such people will survive; the societies that cannot turn out such people, will die."

In their relevance to current circumstances, Maslow's words could have been written in response to the situation wrought around the globe by Covid-19.

For most of the populations in developed economies, this was the closest experience we have had to a genuinely existential crisis. At a societal scale, Maslow's depiction of an unpredictable world requiring improvisation as the key to dealing with situations that had not existed before is startlingly accurate in describing the challenge now before us.

The same is much less true for organisations however. Uncertainty, unpredictability and the need for improvisation to make sense of situations without precedent have been characteristic of the business environment for decades.

In 2007 Dave Snowden and Mary Boone explored this issue in A Leader's Framework for Decision-Making, distinguishing 'domains' in which decision-making takes place:

Simple (now renamed Obvious) domains, in which cause and effect relationships are known in 'one right answer' and best practice can be applied;

Complicated domains in which expertise is applied to determine cause and effect relationships from multiple possible 'right answers' and then good practice applied;

Complex domains in which cause and effect relationships must be discovered and learned by probing the system with experimental actions, and emergent practice results; and

Chaotic domains in which there are no discernible cause and effect relationships, or those that are there change so rapidly and unpredictably that there is no point in trying to understand them. Here, action is paramount, in an effort to gain whatever control or stability is possible over parts of the system.

Before the advent of Covid-19 there was already ample evidence that many businesses were being drawn into the Complex domain. Rapid shifts in regulatory environments, technology-led disruption, changing consumer (and employee) expectations and competition arising from new and unforeseen quarters exposed the limitations and misalignment between leadership and management practices from the Complicated and Obvious domains for a Complex environment. The coronavirus made that shift more pervasive, and possibly permanent.

So what?

There are three implications of this reality:

1. We will need more and more of Maslow's 'new type of human being... able to face tomorrow not knowing what's going to come, not knowing what will happen, with confidence enough in ourselves that we will be able to improvise in that situation which has never existed before' to perform work that

the World Economic Forum and other organisations project will be increasingly about collaboration and creativity to solve complex problems.

2. The work of leaders will shift further to emphasize creating and sustaining the conditions in which people work effectively together to solve complex problems - not to undertake mundane, repetitive tasks. (Heifetz reference?)

3. Work environments will need to foster resourcefulness (to be able to find solutions to novel problems with inadequate resources); resilience (to be able to deal with adversity, difficulty and a far less predictable environment) and relational effectiveness (to be able to leverage the resources of others working with you, not just for you, whose collaboration and support is essential to turn your intentions into reality via collective action).

Where are we going to find these people, and what will it take to nurture, cultivate and sustain the confidence and self-reliance to deal fluently with continuously evolving complexity and improvise solutions to complex, unfamiliar problems and challenges?

Contact us to find out how we can help.