

Leading the Dynamic between Complexity and Clarity

A number of years ago I was called by a client because “things are falling through the cracks.” Suspicious that the issue was systemic (rather than technical or due to poor performance), a systems analysis was performed.

The world today is so interconnected and interdependent that leaders need to differentiate situations that are Complex from those that are complicated – think Everglades (Complex) versus Rolex watch (complicated) or customer relations (Complex) versus financial spreadsheet (complicated). Situations that are complicated produce problems that can be solved, creating the jigsaw puzzles of business that most leaders are prepared to analyze and handle.

On the other hand Complexity evades solution. There are too many interdependencies and feedback loops to control the system. Push here and the effect is felt on another continent. Constrain the system financially and it responds by innovating, producing unpredictable new products and services. Complexity is now such a large part of business that the [2010 IBM CEO](#) study focused on it and management academics research and publish Complexity Leadership Theory (CLT)[i]. Today I am setting the stage for further exploration of CLT by looking at the dynamic between Complexity and Clarity.

With a few basic principles of physics and network analysis under their belt, the stakeholder team began the process of revealing the Complex system they were embedded in. The Complexity ∞ Clarity dynamic, like the others, is like a [mobius](#) strip – Complexity giving way to Clarity that suddenly turns back on itself and ends up in Complexity again. Unlike fixed solutions to problems Clarity exists for a period of time and then fades back into the Complex tangle of the system.

But Clarity re-emerges, sometimes when you least expect it. Our analysis began by mapping the system from the perspective of all stakeholders. This produced a wall of maps. The system seen by the leadership team was simple, had only three moving parts and clearly displayed their removal from the work being done. Internal stakeholder maps (company marketing teams) had up to 20 moving parts and feedback loops. Where the systemic Complexity was revealed, however, was in the vendor maps. These had up to 50 elements, interconnections, interdependencies, and systemic rules, such as:

- When a change is made at point G go back to point C and start again.
- If a hand-off from Vendor X is delayed cancel work to this point and wait.
- If a customer response is negative, stop everything until it is straightened out.

The wall walk by the stakeholder team was sobering and enlightening – the Complexity

of the system visible for the first time, creating murmurs of “You do all that,” “Why are these two connected?” and “No wonder things are falling through the cracks!” Using the systems diagrams as a roadmap, the team found Clarity with support from other VUCA Prime elements:

- What is the purpose of this system? Vision
- What are we really trying to do here? Understanding

As Clarity emerged levers, redundancies, unnecessary loops, and bottlenecks were seen and changed. Over time, and many iterations of Complexity ∞ Clarity, the system was redesigned to improve information and product flow.

Lessons for Leaders

- “A system is anything that talks to itself.” [Kevin Kelly](#), in *Out of Control*. Look for ways that the organization can talk about the Complexity you face. In conversation Clarity emerges.
- Go slow at the beginning so you can go fast at the end. This adage from decision analysis is a mantra for the Complexity ∞ Clarity dynamic. Clarity only emerges when you take time to see into the Complexity, find the levers, and shake out the knots. Stop fire fighting long enough to *sense* the whole system, *test* your hypothesis, and *adapt* to what you are learning.
- What you see is the reality you know. To find Clarity you have to see the parts *and* the whole, the trees *and* the forest. As you “expand reality” you increase your ability to act.

Next Blog Post

Leading the dynamic between Ambiguity and Agility.

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Carol challenges leaders and their organizations to think differently about the world and how they can achieve their fullest potential in it. Her unique background unites business and biology, psychology and physics, bringing them into creative tension and generating tools and applications for all levels of the organization – from the C-Suite to the manufacturing floor. Carol has worked as an entrepreneur and an executive in Fortune 500 companies, always introducing fresh ideas that produce innovation and change, locally and organization-wide. She holds a degree in Psychology/Education, a Masters in Human Ecology/Interpersonal Relations, and a Doctorate in Veterinary Medicine.

[i] Mary Uhl-Bien and Russ Marion (eds), *Complexity Leadership*, Information Age

Publishing, Charlotte, North Carolina, 2008. Stephan Haeckel, *Adaptive Enterprises*, Harvard Business School Press, Boston MA, 1999. J. Goldstein, JK Hazy, and BB Lichtenstein, *Complexity and the Nexus of Leadership*, Palgrave Macmillian, NY, NY, 2010. Margaret Wheatley, *Leadership and the New Science*, Barrett-Koehler, San Francisco, CA, 1994.