

MASTERING COMPLEXITY WITHOUT LOSING CONTROL

There is an approach that works

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As the Cold War was coming to an end the American military started using the acronym VUCA as shorthand for the more volatile, uncertain, complex, and ambiguous world that they believed would replace the relative simplicity of Cold War dynamics. They were right.

It was not just militaries who might be flummoxed by the new VUCA world. Many businesses and other government organisations would struggle too. The key to understanding VUCA and responding effectively begins with understanding control.

A system or an environment may be *complicated*, in that there are lots of moving parts. However, given time, the logic of the interrelationships can all be understood and the outcomes known. In such an environment it is possible to exercise traditional management control over the system and the outcomes, even though it might be difficult and demanding.

By contrast, a *complex* environment does not have a known logic. It is not possible to know what the outcomes of different interrelationships might be. And so, paradoxically, efforts to exert control over the system or outcomes may result in having less control, and the situation may become even more complex.

What are we to do?

For many of us, control is central to our management style. If we loosen our grip surely we will unleash chaos.

It's counterintuitive but it works

Tennis coaches spend hours getting students to release their tense muscles, to become more flexible, to relax, and to think of their serve more as a dance than a mechanical action. A dance that just so happens to involve a ball. This gives us a clue as to how we best respond to complexity.

Intuitively we may feel we gain greater control by having an even more urgent, furious grip on the situation. I am not advocating letting go altogether. Rather, control over complexity does not come through more power. It comes through the careful distribution of power. It comes through

empowering those closest to the complexity to be able to respond more effectively to the dynamics of complexity.

The theory that developed in response to VUCA advocates a management style that places an emphasis on effective communication, trust building, negotiation and a healthy culture. These are the ingredients that empower people.

Master the recipe

Knowing the ingredients is only half the answer. We also need to know the recipe, and this takes some practice. Faking it will fail.

Building trust takes time. Like any relationship, small steps usually work best. Talking, sharing common interests, holding hands, then maybe trusting each other more on matters of more significance.

Effective communication is open and honest. It includes a feedback loop and there needs to be confirmation from all that there is a shared understanding of objectives and actions.

Similarly, a health culture requires constant stirring. It cannot be created with two minutes in a microwave.

The recipe works by empowering the people close to the complexity to make higher quality decisions. They are not given carte blanche, as there are still controls, but the control is distributed, and people are more aligned.

At risk of going too far with the food analogy, think of organising a dinner party for 100 people. To pull in together in a month is complicated but it can be done. To do it in three days will be complex. Time transforms things.

To do the dinner party in three days will require huge amounts of trust and goodwill from suppliers. It will require precise and persuasive communication every step of the way. There will need to be a clear understanding of the objectives and delegation to make decisions on alternatives if something is not available. And, finally, it will require a balance of the interests of all involved if they are to genuinely care about and invest in overcoming the challenges that complexity presents.

No other approach has a chance of reducing the complexity and the risks of failure that come with it.

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