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COMPLICATED VS COMPLEX: WHAT'S THE DIFFERENCE AND WHY DOES IT MATTER



BIG IDEA In A Few Words

Change is no longer the biggest challenge of leadership; it is the complexity in which change management occurs. Creativity is the most important leadership competency for those responsible for leading an organization in an increasingly complex world. The three driving factors of complexity are multiplicity, diversity and interdependency. Multiplicity asks, "How many variables are there?" Diversity asks, "How different are the variables from each other?" Interdependency asks, "How do the variables relate to each other?" Leading in complex times makes it harder to manage change, risk, information and people. Perhaps God is using complexity to encourage mutuality.

In 2010 IBM released a report documenting the results of a global survey of over fifteen hundred CEOs, general managers and public sector leaders from different sizes of organizations in sixty countries. In three previous global surveys senior leaders had reported their biggest challenge was coping with rapid change. The 2010 study introduced a new primary challenge: complexity.

Nearly eighty percent of those surveyed believe complexity will continue to rise and they question their ability to deal with it. A primary limiting factor in dealing with



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complexity identified in this survey is the difficulty finding requisite creative leadership to produce the innovation needed to reinvent outdated processes and business models.

My experience engaging church and mission leaders suggests change itself is no longer the biggest challenge of leadership. It is the complexity in which change management occurs. And creativity is the single most important leadership competency for those responsible for leading an organization in an increasingly complex world.

Two Metaphors – Three Complexity Factors

I want to share a few thoughts about complexity but first let me make a distinction between complicated and complex. Perhaps the simplest way to illustrate this is with two metaphors.

The first metaphor is a very difficult math problem, one that covers the entire white board and uses nearly every letter in the alphabet to list the variables along with mathematical symbols that could be confused with hieroglyphics. Problems like this are complicated, but also static and predictable. The problem is static in the sense that if you fall asleep working on it and wake up fifteen minutes later everything will be as you left it and the correct answer will not have changed.

The second metaphor is the screen of an air traffic controller. Imagine a large monitor with dozens of airplanes coming from every direction at various speeds and altitudes. This is complex, dynamic and unpredictable. The controller's screen is dynamic in that if you fall asleep and wake up fifteen minutes later everything will not be as you left it and both the problem as well as the solution will have changed dramatically. There is a difference between complicated and complex.

With that basic distinction I'd like to explore three important factors affecting complexity. In doing so I'm borrowing and adapting from Rita Gunther McGrath's writing in the September 2011 *Harvard Business Review*.

The first complexity factor is *multiplicity*. The multiplicity factor asks the question, “How many variables are there?” Are there five planes or fifty planes? Are there two runways or ten runways? Is there one fuel truck on the tarmac or is it teeming with activity?

The second factor affecting complexity is *diversity*. The diversity factor asks, “How different are the variables from each other?” Multiplicity deals with the number of variables and diversity deals with the nature of the variables. Diversity doesn’t look at how many planes but rather how many different kinds of planes? How many different kinds of vehicles are on the tarmac?

The third factor affecting complexity is *interdependency*, which asks, “How do the variables relate and connect to each other?” To stay with the airport metaphor, when does the passenger on this plane have to be on that plane? Which crew members need to move from this plane to that plane? How does this piece of luggage get from this plane to that plane? Where is the fuel operator for this truck and which plane needs to be refueled first?

Of course I’m not really interested in the operation of an airport. I’m focused on how the quantity, diversity and interdependency of the variables in mission today greatly increase the complexity of our work. And because I’m primarily engaged with church and mission leaders it only makes sense to ask, “How specifically does complexity impact the challenge of leadership?”

The Impact of Complexity on Leadership

Increased complexity makes leadership more difficult in at least four ways.

Increased complexity makes it more difficult to *manage change*. I am not referring to the difficulty of producing desired outcomes; I am referring to the difficulty of predicting undesired outcomes, or what we commonly refer to as unintended consequences. The interdependency factor of complexity makes it exponentially more difficult to predict how our change initiatives will impact seemingly unrelated aspects of our ministry.

Increased complexity makes it more difficult to *manage risk*. The important question is not how fast the world around me is changing but how fast is my risk profile changing? And there is a difference. Some changes increase our risk of being irrelevant or under-resourced more than others but complexity makes it harder to know which ones.

Increased complexity makes it more difficult to *manage information*. The world of information scarcity that inflated the value of gatekeepers is gone forever. We now live in a world of information abundance with greater demands for transparency than ever before. The pressure to wikify your ministry is not going away anytime soon.

Increased complexity makes it more difficult to *manage people*. The more interdependent people are with others the less dependent they are on leaders. This is why we are seeing the emergence of headless movements like the Arab Spring or the London riots or occupy Wall Street. This is very disturbing for politicians and journalists, who show up saying, "Take me to your leader," only to discover they don't have one.

One of the lessons we are learning from the Arab Spring is even leaders with lots of hard power who treat complex situations as if they were merely complicated discover their risk profile was changing much faster than they realized and people who seemed to be powerless yesterday become unmanageable today.

All of this is disturbing for leaders but it is important to consider who is behind these complexity factors when it comes to global mission. Isn't God behind the increase in the quantity of Great Commission variables? Isn't God behind the increased diversity of the Great Commission harvest force? Isn't God behind the increased interdependency of His body in our globalized world?

Complexity Driven Mutuality

So how should leaders respond to complexity? I would like to answer that question with another question. What if God is using complexity to encourage mutuality? To embrace mutuality leaders

must find the vulnerability and authenticity to admit no individual or organization has the capacity to accurately predict the unintended consequences of our actions and how they may affect our collective risk profile. Therefore we have to engage more deeply with each other than we have in the past.

By embracing mutuality we discover that the multiplicity and diversity and interdependency of the global body are both the problem and the answer. It is the cause and the solution for the complexity we are facing in global mission today.

So let me close with a few questions and ideas for application. If creativity is the most important competency for leading through complexity, what are your sources for new ideas, especially in the area of business process innovation? What does increased mutuality look like in the diverse set of Great Commission relationships that span from donors to churches to other organizations and international partners from the majority world?

Finally, consider spending some time with your team focusing on the multiplicity, diversity and interdependency factors. How many Great Commission variables are you facing? How different are those variables from each other? How do they relate and connect to each other? How does this impact your strategy?

Sieze the Vuja de is a compilation of transcripts from Learning @ the Speed of Life, the video blog of Missio Nexus, by Steve Moore. Missio Nexus was formed out of the merger of CrossGlobal Link and The Mission Exchange and is the largest network of Great Commission oriented evangelicals in North America. For more information visit www.MissioNexus.org.

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