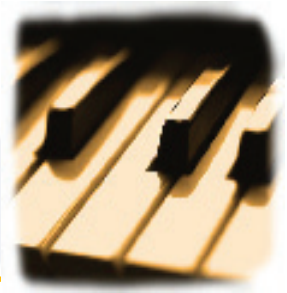


The five easy steps to solve incredibly complex problems

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The Burning Question

Nothing is more difficult to take in hand, more perilous to conduct, or more uncertain of success, than to take the lead in the introductions of a new order of things. - Machiavelli

I have three daughters who are at various stages of their post secondary education. Margaret has already switched universities and subsequently decided this year to take the year off and travel, largely because she is now not so sure if she shouldn't be making a second switch. Erica has just decided to not only switch universities but is now re-evaluating her preference of curriculum. Alannah, my youngest is entering university next year and has changed her mind as often as my dog when she wandering around our yard trying to decide where to bury her bone.

On the surface, it may appear my girls lack clear direction but I have other theories. To begin with they are not afraid to abandon a path they are on when it is clear to them it is not the right one. That does not mean clarity comes easily, but it does mean that they have a good sense of who they are and want they want. My girls, like all of us are pretty complex so despite my wishes as their parent for them to have their path clearly laid out for them, it is not so simple.

That wish as a parent is not unlike the propensity of all us when we get tempted to apply simple solutions to complex scenarios. Simple solutions, like assembling IKEA furniture, are repeatable and we can expect the same result every time we follow the easy instructions. (Perhaps for some, IKEA is a bad example). Complicated solutions, like building a house, are also repeatable but require many more steps, and have more variables to consider. Complex challenges, like raising three girls, are not resolved by repeating the same steps and expecting the same result. While most people I share this with get that point right away, their bookshelves are stacked with authors who promise the 5 easy steps to ... and the 7 essential elements of ... That come-on from the publishing industry is there because they know what we really want is simple solutions to very complex problems.

If raising a child is complex, what about having deep meaningful relationships? running a country or a company? leading a group of people towards a new way of doing thing? Take in for a second our ridiculously complex and interconnected global financial system that helped cause the recent economic catastrophe, throw in the degradation biosphere and all that means, deepening poverty and growing conflict in the third world, etc... and complexity takes on a different meaning from the relatively easy, and yet still complex task of raising a child.

Dee Hock created the word chaordic in his seminal book *Birth of the Chaordic Age* because he felt complexity is too small a word to describe the challenge of massive change required for business and society to become sustainable. The term also implies that order, which we seek, emerges only from the chaos, not from a single leader or centralized intelligence. And if you do not see that massive change is now upon us, you have not been paying attention. Our problems are getting bigger and happening faster than we seemingly have the ability or the will to solve them. As I have said in previous essays, adding another blade to my razor is not the scale of innovation I am talking about.

For too long we have been falsely seeking stability, at the expense of resiliency. When our businesses become 'stable', they stagnate. Even, and perhaps especially, when they enjoying high rates of growth. You become a 'victim of your success' when you are too busy counting the cash pouring it and cannot change fast enough when the tap starts to drip. A resilient company is one focused on continuous change. They change well before they are forced to. If your organization was working on 'what's next' versus applying more steam to whatever success that has now had its day, then you are much closer to being resilient and your ability to weather these economic storms are not so daunting. Complex systems lose resilience when it cannot adapt and learn – or perhaps more importantly, unlearn. The challenge of the day in my mind is for organizations is to set aside and get beyond our current concepts of organizations in order to make space for new and different way to operate.

How married are you to your Strategic Plan? Or even having one? How can you as an individual within your organization anticipate opportunities and be ready to act on them? Who in your organization has the courage to challenge the status quo? Whoever they are, they should be listened to very carefully in the coming days.

In complex situations there are no final answers. Clarity, objective metrics and control is what business strives for, but it is not the reality of complex living systems. We are relying way too much on our leaders and experts to have all the answers. If one thing is clear that has resulted from our fiscal malaise, the 'experts' really do not know the way out.

So ... The first step of my five easy steps to solve ridiculously complex problems is to ask the right question. We are a society of experts who are conditioned to have the right answers. This is of course fine, so long as we have the right question. We are not so deft at this. So here is the burning question for you to reflect on. What if ... we abandoned any thought or dialogue on what has gone wrong, what is wrong and even what could go wrong and focus on what ought to be? Start there. The other four steps are up to you and those trusted advisors that support you.