Leading in Complexity

During a lifetime of leadership we will each encounter a few especially complex challenges, and our formal leadership training (if we've had any) will probably not have equipped us for these. What makes some situations inherently complex? How do we make sense of what's happening in the midst of that complexity? How might our leadership approach need to adapt at these times? And what principles and tools might help us to navigate the complexity with wisdom, grace, and integrity?

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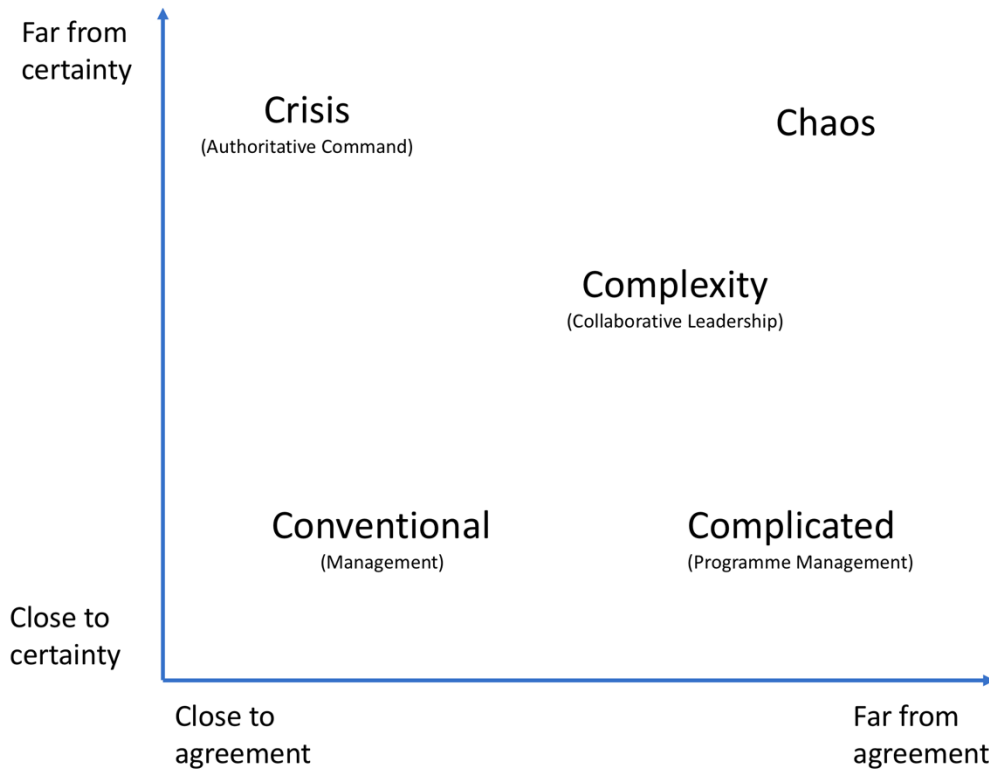
1. Introduction

- We weren't expecting this!
- 'Radical acceptance'?
- Background: Complexity science and its contribution to organisational science

2. Definitions

We might call it:	What it looks like:	What it needs:
Conventional	fairly predictable conditions, fairly aligned perspectives	
Complicated	multiple dimensions or perspectives, but interacting in fairly predictable conditions	
Crisis	Sudden loss of certainty, often accompanied by tight alignment	
Complexity	Enduring uncertainty, divergence of perspectives	

We can map each of these against two dimensions:
the degree of **certainty**, and the degree of **agreement**.

So – first understand what kind of territory you're in!

Far from certainty

Crisis
(Authoritative Command)

Chaos

Complexity
(Collaborative Leadership)

Conventional
(Management)

Complicated
(Programme Management)

Close to certainty

Close to agreement — Far from agreement

How we 'frame' the problem determines the acceptable approach(es) to solving it:
- Complicated (management - calculated compliance) – *I know how this works!*
- Crisis (command - coercive compliance) – *Do what I say, now!*
- Complex (leadership - normative compliance) – *I've never seen this before; we'll have to work it out!*

3. Understanding Conditions of COMPLEXITY:

- Multiple, independent 'actors'

- Dynamic:

- Interconnected:

- Emergent:

4. Leadership Strategies in Conditions of COMPLEXITY

- As a general principle, it takes two (seemingly opposite) approaches deployed together:

TIGHT	**AND**	LOOSE
FIRM	**AND**	FLEXIBLE
(on a few key things)		*(on many things)*
Clear, high level goals		A range of 'containers'
Simple rules		Freedom; permission to experiment
Strong clear messages		Rapid, visible feedback loops

'Not knowing':
Frame good questions
Identify positive deviance
Embrace uncertainty
Use many sources, but develop simple themes

Community ('Whole system') intelligence:
Define purpose rather than fix roles
Permission to question (constructive dissent)
Run participatory processes
Beware of individual genius
Simple rules; strong signals

Emergent decision making:
Bounded experimentation: try several things, expect some to fail
Clear and frequent feedback routes
More reflection than reaction
Crystallise gradually and carefully

Be a *'bricoleur',* not an industrialist!

5. Notice and work with POLARITIES:

- Apparent opposites which are both necessary
- Start by seeing them and labelling them
- Be active in keeping both strong
- Avoid overdoing one side at the expense of the other

Examples:

Activity and Rest
Safety and Risk
Innovation and Tradition
Structure and Freedom
Fast and Slow
……………. and ……………..
……………. and ……………..

	Higher Goal		
Upside if we do this well			Upside if we do this well
	LABEL	LABEL	
Downside if we overdo this at the expense of			Downside if we overdo this at the expense of the
	Deeper Fear		

Learn more at https://www.polaritypartnerships.com/#home

Further Reading and Resources

I have listed key publications here; however most of these authors and researchers also have useful materials available online:

- Crouch, A. Keilhacker, K. and Blanchard, D. 2020 *Leading beyond the Blizzard: Why every organization is now a startup*

- Grint, K. 2008, *Wicked Problems, Clumsy Solutions: The Role of Leadership* here or presentation here

- Johnson, B. 2014. *Polarity Management: Identifying and Managing Unsolvable Problems*

- Kahneman, D, 2011. *Thinking, Fast and Slow*

- Oshry, B. 1999. *Leading Systems*

- Owen, H. 1997, *Open Space Technology*

- Stacey, R. 2015. *Strategic Management and Organisational Dynamics*

- Wiesbord, M and Janoff, S, 2000. *Future Search*