



A leader's guide for navigating the coronavirus fallout

This isn't a medical guide, but a guide for navigating the complexity of the coronavirus fallout. And the Covid-19 pandemic makes this a complex situation for leaders to navigate.

It's complex, because there are so many moving parts, rapidly changing events, and conflicting opinions about what to do. So whilst I'm holed up in a deserted ski village in the Austrian Alps, I thought I'd share what I have learned over the past 6 years about navigating complexity.

What do I mean by complex?

Words get bandied around such they lose meaning, or we think we're all using the word to have the same meaning when in fact we're not. Complex, like transformation, has become a buzzword. I'm using Complex here with a distinct specific meaning – and I'm taking that meaning from Dave Snowden's [Cynefin framework](#) – and using Complex as distinct from Complicated. The Cynefin framework looks at the relationship between cause and effect. In predictable settings, even fiendishly complicated ones, we tend to have common agreement about what is causing what. This enables experts to work through a series of steps to arrive at what is generally agreed to be the 'right' answer. Medicine generally falls into the Complicated – it is based on a body of knowledge and expertise, and I would be the first to support listening to scientific advice.

In Complex situations, we are in the realm of the unpredictable; there's too much data to analyse simultaneously, new information is emerging all the time and past patterns don't help peer into the future. Experts cannot agree on the best way forward, often disagreeing on the issue or problem let alone the possible solutions. If we look at governmental responses to the coronavirus these already vary widely. In Asia and now central Europe, drastic measures to contain or slow down transmission have or are being put in place. In Austria, tourism accounts for over 8% of GDP, and the World Economic Forum ranks Austria #1 for the best tourist infrastructure. Yet this weekend, all ski resorts

will close. Two neighbouring villages are in lock down and quarantined off. The approach here is to flatten the peak of the pandemic allowing health systems to cope. In the UK, officials have grappled with not wanting to crash the economy through overreaching and are talking about allowing a more natural spreading and building of 'herd immunity'. In the US, Trump once again reaches for simplistic solutions and has announced (without warning supposed European allies) a blunt, and likely to be ineffective, travel ban. Given he also praised the Irish Taoiseach for the measures the UK had taken, it suggests a poor command of political geography and facts, but I digress.

Complex situations can be characterised therefore as:

- An overload of information and many moving parts.
- No clear relationship between cause and effect.
- An inability to predict the answer with any certainty.
- Disagreement about the issues and solutions.

As leaders, as humans, we like certainty. Given the myriad of genuinely life-threatening events the human brain has to process, much day-to-day thinking is relegated to the default mode network, a kind of autopilot. We can only function in the modern world by assuming certainty in a lot of what we do. And in many, or even most, situations our predictions are right. In complexity, however, we need to lead differently. Leaders do not have any better judgement about seeing around the corner than anyone else does. Suspending our craving for certainty, order and predictability is hard for rational beings. Acknowledging that we don't have all the answers is damn hard when the leadership paradigm usually includes a sense that the leader knows. In complexity you do not know and no matter how much information you gather or how well connected you are you cannot know with any degree of certainty.

Advice tip #1 – suspend your ego

Accept this a rapidly changing situation and you cannot know. If your identity as a leader rests on being able to

A leader's guide to navigating coronavirus

provide 'answers' or being the 'expert' then the present context is going to challenge you like never before.

In 1348 the Black Death caused the peasantry to realise that their supposed leaders and superiors were no more immune from the plague than they. Given the prescriptions from those in authority regarding the disease proved useless, the Black Death is thought to have heralded a whole new view of what had been up until then a very hierarchical society and presaging the Renaissance. How will coronavirus change our society and how leaders are perceived?

Complexity requires a different approach to leading than in predictable, or known, contexts. If cause and effect cannot with any certainty be predicted, any solutions or answers you come up with might strike lucky, might be right for today, but could be wide off target tomorrow. Tread gently therefore and maintain an open mind. Generate hypotheses about what might be going on, but test these, rather than cling to the illusion that these are the right things. If you're the leader responsible for making decisions that affect lots of people and millions of € / £ / \$ 'experimenting' may feel like the last thing you can afford to do right now. It takes courage to say 'we're not sure, but there seem to be several things we could try and we're going to tread gently and do all three of these ideas – simultaneously'. Note, now by 'experiment' I am not talking about endangering people's lives, dispatching ill-considered legal advice, or hazarding your consumer food or drink product – none of these are 'safe to fail' experiments. I am suggesting experimenting with your internal processes, the way you think, relate, and act, and which do not bet the farm, endanger people, or risk you getting fired. Keep experiments under review, be ready to ditch and back out of those where you get signals telling you you're on the wrong path, amplify those experiments that seem to be bearing fruit. At this stage there is no single silver bullet, so be prepared to pull the idea favoured by most, the loudest, or the most senior, in favour of ideas that seem maybe implausible. Get curious and listen to a range of voices, not the usual ones. In complexity, it will be the questions you ask as a leader that will make the

difference, not the answers you think you might have. So, act with a spirit of curiosity and inquiry.

Advice tip #2 – test the waters, experiment

Generate multiple hypotheses and put in place multiple 'safe to fail' experiments. Don't cling to any ideas with any certainty.

Asking questions and keeping an open mind whilst others maybe panicking around you doesn't require nerves of steel, but it does require you keep a cool head, even if others are losing theirs. In the past few years I've learned so much, largely from my female colleagues who seem so much better connected between mind and body, I wonder if it is biological and not just socialised behaviour patterns that makes the difference. For my fellow males – breathe! Centre-ing yourself through breathing (3-4 long inhalations and 3-4 deep exhalations) will help your body make better decisions. A walk in nature can calm jangled nerves. Walking here in the Alps, with the timelessness of mountainous hard rock and calming blankets of snow, has been great for perspective taking. Take a break from calls, emails and screen time, and let the outside flood yourself with calm, and new insights that can come when you step away. Complexity and uncertainty can invoke a range of emotions such as anger, fear or anxiety – paying attention to these can be another way of slowing down and checking our responses are right for the complexity that we are facing.

Advice tip #3 – act somatically

Your best decisions will come from your whole body, not just your head. Use your body sensations to notice when you could be jumping to conclusions, needing to take rapid action, feeling nervous or angry. Some use feelings like butterflies in their stomach, or an ache in their throat, to realise they are acting from a habit and they need to pause and think about other ways of responding.

When we're at our best and most expansive selves we can ask questions, inquire, remain calm and notice dilemmas. When we're pressed to make quick decisions that have seemingly large consequences, we can fall into thinking traps – we default to past patterns or habits, based on our biases and assumptions about the world. Remaining cognisant of a pattern bias is again hard when

there's a seemingly overwhelming mass of other things to consider. Your own pattern bias and judgements will be influencing how you receive or rather perceive what's going on 'out there' as much as they will inform the decisions you make, which in turn will influence the context 'out there'. The outer world and your inner world are interconnected – they mutually inform one another. That's especially true of relationships. Given the enormity of what might seem to be 'out there' the one piece you can pay better attention to, is what's going on within.

Now coronavirus is not a polarity to be navigated but rather a problem to be solved. In dealing with the pandemic however you and your business may face numerous dilemmas:

- Short-term :: Long-term – to take drastic measures immediately vs a more phased approach over time.
- Control :: Empowerment – with staff working increasingly from home / remotely, how much to trust them to get on with work vs devising new ways of controlling or managing productivity when people are out of sight.
- Health and physical wellbeing :: economic survival – for those in the gig economy and working zero hours contracts this might literally be a dilemma between health and hardship, for those in salaried jobs the dilemma may be less sharp, but nevertheless painful – to reduce productivity / profitability or to stay clear of infection through social distancing.

As with any polarity (where two ends of a pole inform one another) the trick is to get the best of both, not fall into solutions which 'solve' the issue by moving to one end of the pole but which bring all the associated downsides in addition. We live in polarising times and the external world can seep into our organisational discourse. Smart leaders will avoid dilemma traps and polarisation by seeking 'Both / And' and not 'Either / Or' solutions.

Advice tip #4 – Is this a problem to be solved or a dilemma to be navigated?

A leader's guide to navigating coronavirus

Step back and consider both ends of the choice. How can you secure the benefits of both, whilst mitigating the risks or your worst fears?

As F Scott Fitzgerald remarked, "The test of a first-rate intelligence is the ability to hold two opposed ideas in mind at the same time and still retain the ability to function."

In all walks of life, in business and in government, the present pandemic will test leaders' ability to navigate complexity. Whilst some may get lucky, make the right judgements and thus be held up as heroes (victor's justice), many will be found wanting. Navigating complexity isn't naturally instinctive for those of us raised in a more predictable world, with a defined set of rules. There is, however, sufficient research on the capabilities that can aid navigating complexity. As the UK 1980s AIDS adverts warned – Don't Die of Ignorance.

In my journey of working with complexity, Dave Snowden, Jennifer Garvey Berger and Karen Ellis have been helpful teachers. Some references / links to their ideas:

1. Dave Snowden, Cynefin - <https://cognitive-edge.com>
2. Jennifer Garvey Berger, Simple Habits for Complex Times <https://www.sup.org/books/title/?id=23673>
3. Making sense of complicated and complex challenges - <https://mdvconsulting.co/wp-content/uploads/Making-sense-of-complicated-and-complex-challenges-FINAL.pdf>
4. What in the world is going on? <https://mdvconsulting.co/experience/videos/>

For more information please contact:
Mike Vessey mike.vessey@mdvconsulting.co

MDV

Leadership and talent consultants

www.mdvconsulting.co

