

## Coaching for an Increasingly Complex World: *A Cultivating Leadership Whitepaper*

---

Jennifer Garvey Berger and Catherine Fitzgerald<sup>1</sup>

### Abstract

The amount of complexity leaders have to deal with is increasing dramatically, across sectors and across all levels of leadership. In order to support our clients, coaches need to be familiar with the demands this increased complexity makes on our clients. To help our clients thrive in complexity, coaches also need to understand the new patterns of thinking, engaging, and acting that clients may need to embody. In this chapter, we:

- Lay out a way of thinking about the distinctions between the predictable world we are more familiar with and the unpredictable world that is becoming our new reality
- Paint a picture of what this means for how leaders need to think, engage, and act in complex contexts
- Offer some key approaches and questions that coaches can use to support clients in these contexts and
- Muse about how this calls on us as coaches to change the way we think about and navigate the world.

Helping our clients thrive in their specific contexts is always a core coaching goal; with the rise of complexity, nearly all leadership contexts include complex, quickly changing, and ambiguous settings that shape the work of leaders and their coaches alike. The more we, as coaches, can become agile in the new requirements of this complex world, the better we can support our clients.

---

<sup>1</sup> The authors would like to thank a fantastic set of colleagues for the comments that so improved this chapter: Amber Brooks, Carolyn Coughlin, David Kanter, Kate Sermanni, Keith Johnston, Michael Berger, Patrice Laslett, Sharon Kortman, Wendy Bittner, and Zafer Achi.

# Coaching for an Increasingly Complex World: *A Cultivating Leadership Whitepaper*

---

*David has come to coaching because he is feeling strangely unsettled at work. A partner in a professional services firm, he is thriving by all objective measures: he has a large stable of happy clients, he is leading teams to solve problems well, and he is a deep expert in his technical field. Yet he has the sense that the work he is doing is not somehow making traction with his clients' toughest issues. In particular, he serves a series of leaders who run different divisions of a very large global organisation, and while he helps them solve their individual problems, he sees that he has a different vantage point on the whole organisation that none of his clients seem to have. He is beginning to notice that the technical focus on individual problems is feeling a little partial. At the same time, if he wanders away from that technical focus, he gets anxious, knowing that his wheelhouse has always been problem solving—later expanded to supporting teams to problem solve. The issues he's starting to notice not only seem out of his own technical capacity, but they seem to be out of the realm of technical capacity altogether. But how can he solve problems he can't really get his arms around?*

The purpose of this chapter is to make progress on problems we can't really get our arms around, to think in new ways about what the *problems* might be, what the *solutions* might look like. There is much written about the Volatility, Uncertainty, Complexity, and Ambiguity (VUCA) that are becoming business as usual for leaders across industries and sectors around the world. Less is written about what those leaders should do about this shift. Perhaps even more opaque is how those of us who support leaders can change our own thinking and practices in order to help leaders learn not just how to handle the VUCA world, but how to thrive in it. We are hoping this chapter can help us do just that.

## What Is Complexity Anyway?

Before we begin thinking about the ways coaches need to support leaders differently in times of complexity, we need a little background about complexity in the first place. There are lots of different complexity frameworks and lots of frameworks that point to similar ideas without talking about complexity: think of the distinction between technical problems and adaptive challenges, the difference between tame and wicked problems, the difference between those problems that are complicated and those that are complex (Heifetz & Linsky, 2002; Camillus, 2008; Snowden & Boone, 2007). The framework we turn to the most is Snowden's Cynefin framework (pronounced "kenevin"). We like it because it offers useful distinctions that point to both how to recognize complexity and what to do about it. Cynefin highlights the difference between those things that live in a predictable world (where patterns are straightforward enough to repeat time after time) and those things that live in an unpredictable world (where patterns are emergent and are created by such a wide

variety of interacting forces that you can't ever be sure that just because certain factors led to a particular outcome in one case, they will necessarily lead to the same outcome in the future).

In the predictable world, Snowden describes two different domains. Things are "Obvious" if the connection between cause and effect is repeatable and obvious to all. Implementation is a technical issue and people should readily agree on both the desired outcome and the desired pathway to get there. In organisations, things like payroll systems should be in the obvious category. Managers should know exactly what to do to make sure that people are paid what they have agreed to be paid. Imagine if we found our payroll systems touchy or difficult or unpredictable ("Fingers crossed the payroll system isn't out of sorts this week, Brenda! Last time it was grumpy I lost nearly half my paycheck!"). In the obvious domain, best practice can be researched and then replicated—all it takes is to notice the problem and then plug in the appropriate solution.

In the "Complicated" domain, there's a predictable and repeatable connection between the cause and the effect, but there's enough of a lag or enough different steps that you need experts to help figure things out. Different experts might disagree on exactly the right path (so you have to choose the ones you trust or the ones who have a good track record), but all of them should agree on the best outcome. Want an accountant to pay your small business taxes? Ask two accountants to look at your books and you might get slightly different deductions or categorizations, but you'd expect that all of them would mostly focus on the financials, and all of them would share the goal of keeping you out of trouble with the tax authority. If they were paying attention to really different things, you might worry ("In my accounting program, I learned that the tax authority really pays attention to what you wear to defend yourself in court, so I stay away from balancing the books and instead try balance the sorts of colors you have in your wardrobe."). In the complicated domain, there's no such thing as best practice—reasonable experts can disagree—but you can tell good practice from bad (and decide whether you'd like to hire the unusual color-balancing accountant). The leaders we have worked with usually have this as their home base, the domain in which they are most comfortable; it is also our home base and the home base of most of the coaches with whom we've worked as well. It is vital for us to be able to handle complicated things well. The difficulty for all of us whose habits are here is that it can be hard to cross over into the complex space without some real effort.

That's because the rules change once the world becomes unpredictable. In the "Complex" domain, there are too many interacting forces to know what is going to happen next. Instead, we can only infer the cause after we see the effect. Much research has been done into complex events to try to find the right answers that will help us predict the next time. We look at a company that has failed and try to understand the warning signs so that it will definitely not happen to us; we look at a company that has done really well and we try to backfill our understanding of why it has been so successful. This can lead to really interesting findings and helpful

approaches, but we have to be careful to not slip into believing that simply because those things worked in the past, they will continue to work into the future in just this way. In the complex domain (sometimes called a complex adaptive system), there are too many moving parts—too many people with opinions and abilities of their own or too many contextual forces that interact to create new patterns. Here, because you cannot know how something will turn out until afterwards, it's vital to pay attention to the patterns rather than attempt to predict the future. It's especially risky to make a big bet; smaller, safe-to-fail experiments<sup>2</sup> are a much better approach at first, as you get a sense of how the system operates. In the complex domain, learning from the system as it changes is the best way to move in a desirable direction.

You can see in these descriptions that much of what leaders need to do is in the complex context. Marketplaces are complex adaptive systems. Business models and business strategy are complex (for all that we often treat them as complicated and knowable). Just about everything to do with people and change—culture change, employee engagement, innovation, etc.—is complex. It's not that everything leaders need to do is complex—lots of important work gets done in the obvious and complicated spaces—but every leader has key portions of her work that are complex. And the rules in complex contexts are fundamentally different from the rules that govern the more predictable world, so leaders need to be able to shift back and forth. Here, because there are so many interacting parts, you have to pay attention to the patterns in a system rather than following our more common (and obvious) cause-and-effect thinking and looking for single causes or anticipating single outcomes. In the complex world, there isn't a clear correlation between the size of an intervention and the size of the effect—which is why a massive roll out of a culture change program sometimes changes virtually nothing (or makes things worse!), but a new app that gets released on an iPhone can spread like wildfire and change the way people communicate with each other. Small nudges in particular directions allow leaders to watch for the emergence of new patterns so that they can encourage them (if they are going in a good direction) or discourage them (if they seem to be going the wrong way).

What's daunting about the complex space is that you can't control or predict what will happen, but you can observe, look for patterns, and intervene with an emergent, experimental approach. Understanding the fairly simple (but not easy) rules of complex adaptive systems means that leaders can use the complexity to their advantage instead of having it always be a force they are fighting against or being surprised by. But because these rules and practices are counterintuitive, leaders are likely to need support to get their heads and hearts and guts around them. It's just

---

<sup>2</sup> Safe-to-fail experiments or "safe-to-fail probes," are aimed at learning more about a complex system while experimenting with intervening in the system.

too easy to fall back into our more ordinary patterns, without noticing we're falling back into anything at all.<sup>3</sup>

## The Perils of Using Complicated Approaches For Complex Times

One of our favorite jokes is the one about the man searching under the streetlight for his keys. When a stranger comes to help and asks, "Are you sure you dropped them here?" the man replies, "No—I lost them in the alley over there, but the light is so much better here."

It's funny because it's absurd—no one would really look under the light when he knew the keys were in the alley. But we very often use complicated methods of predicting and controlling and measuring and rolling out when we're facing complex situations. In a conversation just the other day, the head of assurance for a government agency explained, "You have to be extremely careful with your five-year plans and keep them updated. We know that no one ever actually carries out these plans because things change too quickly, but you always have to have a plan that is updated enough to reflect the current reality and that at least *looks* like you could carry it out if things stayed the same." Why would you need it to look right if everyone knew it wouldn't ever be carried out? someone wanted to know. "How could we make any decisions if we didn't at least have a good approximation of the future, no matter how wrong we might turn out to be?" Sounds to us like she was looking for the keys under the lamppost.

But this manager is not alone by any means. Organizations have complicated approaches built into their DNA. Strategic planning, budgeting, risk management, performance management, compensation, innovation, culture change, leadership development—all of these systems generally operate with the fiction that we can predict and control the future—or at least that we should all look as if we believe we can. Leaders are expected to know which moves to make to change the culture, to grow the business, to innovate in ways that make things better. They are supposed to be able to create business cases and deliver outcomes and create stakeholder value and generally know how to make the world bend to their will. And when they do not know how to do this, we think they're incompetent. As Eric Beinhocker says, "Corporate leaders are expected to be bold generals who forecast the future, devise grand strategies, lead their troops into glorious battle—and then are fired at the first lost skirmish. It takes a courageous executive to push back against this mind-

---

<sup>3</sup> Snowden and Boone (2007) offer a fourth domain in the Cynefin framework—"Chaotic"—for those times when there is no pattern to follow and no relationship between cause and effect. Under those circumstances, the best thing a leader can do is act to stabilize the system, watch the way it responds, and shape your next set of actions in that way. There are many other subtleties to the Cynefin model that space doesn't allow us to cover here, but that are well worth your time to review.

set, admit the inherent uncertainty of the future, and emphasize learning and adapting over predicting and planning” (2007, p. 347).

Taking a new approach to leadership is risky. Yet we know that for many leaders in many sectors, there is a choice between “deep change” or “slow death” (Quinn, 1996). We believe that while change is always perilous, never before has a status quo approach to leadership been so dangerous.

## **Complex Adaptive Leadership**

As coaches, we once thought that adding complex perspectives to the leadership toolbox was similar to other sorts of difficult but important leadership abilities and skills, such as understanding strategy in a new way as your job gets bigger or making sense of conflicting priorities and shifting stakeholder demands. We believed that understanding complexity and shifting to include some practices consistent with complex issues would take some new information and then some coaching support to be able to implement well.

We have come to believe, however, that using thinking and practices from the complex space is not like picking up a new tool, but like moving to a new country. We do not ever fully leave behind the pulls of our home culture and most of us have to travel back and forth between them, eventually getting comfortable with both. Becoming culturally competent in a new land is surprisingly difficult, though. It is a shift in language and culture, a shift in norms and assumptions about the world, a shift in knowing whether to trust our reflexes or not. And, like a move to a new culture, the move into the complex space illuminates some of our assumptions about the culture that we’ve left behind. The move makes our home culture (in this case for most of us the complicated world) more of an object for our reflection as we develop the capacity to choose which “cultural” norms to follow in which cases.

You can see this in the case of David, who began this chapter. He does not want to lose the cultural competence of the expertise he has honed over the course of his thriving career, but he sees that there is an undiscovered land ahead where the language and thinking he is used to does not seem to apply.

So how do leaders navigate in a complex context? We believe leaders who operate comfortably in the complex space think differently, engage differently, and act differently than leaders who operate in the complicated space.

### **Think Differently**

Leaders who deal well with the complex space think in different ways about people and problems. First, they recognize when they are dealing with a complex challenge and they distinguish it from obvious or complicated challenges for which different approaches are more helpful. They take a breath and redefine their sense of risk,

knowing that in the complex space, it's never possible to know how something will turn out, so researching until you are guaranteed a result or waiting for enough information to be sure is a losing strategy. This means that such leaders tolerate more uncertainty, ambiguity, and messiness while making decisions rather than being paralyzed by those things—or, perhaps worse than paralysis—pretending the complexity isn't there and seeing only the clear issues they choose to see (and listening only to the voices they want to listen to). These leaders stop privileging their logical minds that have them reach for certainty and clarity. Instead they lead with their whole bodies, using their logic but also listening to (but not necessarily always trusting) their intuition and noticing and responding to their emotions.

### **Engage Differently**

Leaders who thrive in complexity understand that diversity of people and perspectives, while important across all domains, is critical in a complex context. They listen to people in different ways and to a different end—listening to learn rather than listening to convince others of their view. They hold different sorts of meetings, each of which is more likely to be fit to a particular purpose rather than simply a reoccurring event with the same players and a similar agenda. They engage more of their stakeholders inside and outside the organisation in more deeply inclusive, collaborative, emergent—and necessarily messy—ways.

### **Act Differently**

In many leadership situations, like in carpentry, it pays to “measure twice and cut once”—know what you're doing and where you're going before you act. In complex situations, there's no way to measure twice before you cut—the context is moving so quickly that a precise measurement (or a piece of research or a committee recommendation) is too time consuming and may also lead to a false sense of certainty. Instead, in complex contexts, leaders try a number of experiments—interventions designed to be light and at the edges of the issue rather than using their root cause analysis to get straight at the heart of things. This way the experiments are designed for maximum learning—and for the possibility that one of the experiments might have a much larger impact on the problem than anyone could have predicted.

## **Coaching For a Complex World**

Coaches can act as guides to the new language and culture of complexity that, for most leaders, is a foreign country. There are many subtle but important shifts in focus and approach that we can take to help leaders to make a different kind of sense of their complex world and to take a different kind of action. Complexity is, well, complex, and it's overwhelming to get our own heads around all the different sorts of "cultural" competencies our clients need for this complex world. To harness

some of that complexity, we’ve found it helpful to think about a few key practices as we support our clients to think differently, engage differently, and act differently.

Think Differently	Engage Differently	Act Differently
Recognize the difference between a complex context and a complicated context (and notice your default setting)	Listen to learn rather than to convince	Meet to create rather than to inform
Choose a direction, not a destination	Engage with your whole self rather than just your head	Encourage experimentation and learning rather than analysis and a search for the best solution
Find patterns in the present messiness and confusion rather than forcing order and clarity	Get comfortable learning in public rather than in private	Don't make complexity complicated

### Supporting Our Clients to Think Differently

We find that our clients often lead with their heads, so introducing some key complexity ideas or tools can help them develop a new kind of logic around this new way of thinking that can otherwise feel sort of illogical. Three key thinking differences in complexity are:

- Recognize the difference between a complex context and a complicated context (and notice your default setting)
- Choose a direction, not a destination
- Find patterns in the present and confusion rather than forcing order and clarity

**Recognize the difference between a complex context and a complicated context (and notice your default setting).** First, when we recognize that our clients might be using a mismatched approach (looking for clarity and certainty in a complex situation), one core support is to offer them the Cynefin or another framework to help them get their heads around the difference between the complicated approach they might be taking and the complex situation they’re



facing.<sup>4</sup> As we begin a conversation about these ideas, we can also uncover our clients' default settings—their preferred ways of thinking and acting—and help make those preferences an object of their reflection rather than an automatic move. For example, Ana needed to get her direct reports to be more entrepreneurial, to work more “on the business” than “in the business.” In a coaching session, she described the two-day workshop she was rolling out across the country that would urge her people to shift their behavior. We helped her see that getting individuals to change their behaviors and their thinking is necessarily complex work and that her design of a single large intervention came from her more familiar complicated default. She wanted to look at the future, decide a “best” answer, and roll out—from the top down—a set of steps to make the change. She went away from the coaching session thoughtful and talked with her team and solicited their ideas. As you'll see below, she and her team eventually created a series of small, targeted interventions that responded to the complexity of the situation.

*Key questions to ask when your client seems to be using a default setting rather than matching the approach to the context:*

- Which pieces of this problem or situation are predictable? Which have too many moving parts to know what might happen next? How can you target your interventions to the complexity of the situation?
- Where do your preferences for action lie in this situation—in process and solution (obvious domain), in analysis and expertise that leads to a single best solution (complicated), or in learning and experimentation (complex)?
- Are you seeing the complexity and using it to your advantage, or are you trying to dampen it and make the problem or situation appear more straightforward or linear?

**Choose a direction, not a destination.** Leadership is about the future, and leaders are often told that a measure of their strategic power is how far into the distance they can see. Yet in a complex world, imagining that you have foresight can be really dangerous. This means a traditional focus on goals and outcomes (which are so helpful in complicated problems) can narrow the field of play and leave leaders at great risk for missing vital but unexpected cues in a situation. A strategy that seeks to cut through confusion and narrow the focus is seductive but treacherous. Instead, coaches can help leaders notice when their language is focused on a single destination point or target or outcome and can also help them reframe that so that they are not looking for a single point solution, but rather a *direction* towards which they can begin to iterate. Ana, who had found herself in a sector that was being actively disrupted after many years of stability, had been trying to use the tools which had worked for her for so long: sales quotas, year-on-year growth targets,

---

<sup>4</sup> Snowden and his colleagues have many resources available both to clients who may want an initial understanding and to coaches who may want a deeper understanding (see [www.cognitive-edge.com](http://www.cognitive-edge.com)).

and productivity targets to encourage her people to innovate and squeeze all the waste out of the system. She realized that she was still trying to name and plan with precision—and to create systems and processes that would hold her people to account in the way they were all used to. Complexity coaching helped her see that in this uncertain space, it was probably at best a waste of energy to focus on clear targets and specific plans—and at worst a distraction from being more innovative and entrepreneurial, the very thing she wanted them to do. Instead she set a direction: *Let's all write the next chapter of our business*<sup>5</sup>. Instead of a push for fixed budgets and growth targets for innovation projects, she experimented with asking her colleagues to tell her the ways they were working to write the next chapter (while retaining the budgeting process and the growth targets for their more traditional work).

*Key questions to ask when you hear your client talking about targets or a particular destination:*

- Is the goal you have set flexible enough to allow for a wide range of responses?
- Are your measurements suitable for a wide range of paths that might take you in the right direction<sup>6</sup>?
- Have you created the conditions for people to take action, learn, and adapt rather than being locked into planning and deployment?

**Find patterns in the present messiness and confusion rather than forcing order and clarity.** Most of us have a deep desire for clarity and order; when we see a mess, we want to clean it up. This might be especially true for those who have made it into the leadership ranks; their success has often rested on their ability to create order out of chaos and to make decisions and solve problems. Often clients spend as little time as possible paying attention to the present conditions and leap instead to a neat and tidy future solution with lightening speed. As coaches, we don't want our clients to lose their wonderful problem-solving capacities, but neither do we want them to be held captive by them. In complex situations, novel discoveries and innovative solutions are often found in the mess of detail about what's really going on *right now*. This means a key piece of our job is to help our clients hold on to the possibilities that come from paying attention to the patterns of the present—noticing where there are different perspectives and ideas that might be expanded in small experimental ways. Specifically, in the case above, Ana reversed the direction of the information flow. Instead of a program that told people things about being entrepreneurial in the hopes that would help them change their thinking and

---

<sup>5</sup> Notice that Ana is using a metaphor ("chapter") rather than metrics here—very helpful in the complex domain because metaphors can hold meaning without being too narrowly focused on an outcome.

<sup>6</sup> You might also support your clients to expand what they think of as "data" they can collect—thinking in qualitative terms of stories and rumors as well as the more qualitative number focus.

actions, she and her team set out to ask a lot of questions of a diverse set of stakeholders—some who were known as very entrepreneurial already, some at the other end of the scale, and some in between. They found that the stories people told were often about barriers to entrepreneurship—ironically some of which Ana and her team had set up in order to encourage it (e.g., reporting requirements, decision-making authority, etc.). They used what they learned to begin to design experiments that would loosen some reporting requirements, offer more decision making power closer to the customer, and create spaces where people could talk about what they were learning.

*Key questions to ask when your client needs support to look for patterns in the present:*

- What stories are people telling now about this issue?
- What do they not talk about?
- What stories might you hear more of/less of if things were improving?

Table 2: Questions to Ask to Support Clients to Think Differently

<p>Recognize the difference between a complex context and a complicated context</p>	<p>Which pieces of this problem or situation are predictable? Which have too many moving parts to know what might happen next? How can you target your interventions to the complexity of the situation?</p> <p>Where do your preferences for action lie in this situation—in process and solution (obvious domain), in analysis and expertise that leads to a single best solution (complicated), or in learning and experimentation (complex)?</p> <p>Are you seeing the complexity and using it to your advantage, or are you trying to dampen it and make the problem or situation appear more straightforward or linear?</p>
<p>Choose a direction, not a destination</p>	<p>Is the goal you have set flexible enough to allow for a wide range of responses?</p> <p>Are your measurements suitable for a wide range of paths that might take you in the right direction?</p> <p>Have you created the conditions for people to take action, learn, and adapt rather than being locked into planning and deployment?</p>
<p>Find patterns in the present messiness and confusion rather than forcing</p>	<p>What stories are people telling now about this issue?</p> <p>What do they not talk about?</p>

order and clarity	What stories might you hear more of/less of if things were improving?
-------------------	---

## Supporting Our Clients to Engage Differently

Leadership is about engaging with others so there are important aspects of engagement in both of the other sections. This section is specifically about engaging by *learning*. So often leaders lead with their authority and their certainty—especially when they are engaging with others. One key to navigating complexity is engaging to learn. Coaches can support leaders in engaging to learn by helping them to:

- Listen to learn rather than to convince
- Engage with the whole self rather than just the head
- Get comfortable learning in public rather than in private

**Listen to learn rather than to convince.** Listening is a key leadership skill no matter how complex the situation is. Listening well gives leaders new information, helps them make better decisions, and builds relationships. In the complex domain, though, listening is not just an additive skill: it is perhaps the most central of all of the leadership skills. To help leaders understand that, coaches need to frame listening not just as a skill to be practiced or as a kind of interpersonal technique; we need to frame listening as the lifeblood of the complex space, the most central way for the leader to be able to lead well. Our typical patterns of listening to problem solve or listening to defend our own arguments are often sufficient in other domains, but in the complex domain no one person can ever hold the complexity of the system. Thus, listening deeply to others—listening to learn—becomes foundational (Jentz, 2007). Coaches need to support leaders to put their sense of certainty on hold before beginning a conversation so that they can intentionally listen for things that surprise or unsettle them rather than reflexively resisting new ideas.

It's not just *how* our clients listen but also *to whom* they listen that we can help them expand. Often people listen to those who agree with them—plus maybe one or two colleagues or mentors that offer acceptable challenges. We can help our clients make maps of their current relationships and notice the holes in the pattern of the people they're talking to. We can encourage them to listen well to those they have discounted or written off—or to those we can see are not on their radar at all. For example, Dario was a VP of a not-for-profit organization for several years before being appointed CEO. Although he knew the players and the issues intimately—or perhaps *because* he knew the players and the issues intimately—Dario's coach suggested a process for listening into the organisation in a new way—first by paying

attention to what Dario was really curious about rather than the many things that seemed clear to him. They made a relationship map of internal and external stakeholders—both people he knew well and those who were on the edges of what Dario had considered his work and thus much more mysterious to him. Dario set up a process to spend 45 minutes listening deeply to each of the people on his list and watched the way his reflexes kept leading him towards correcting mistakes or trying to convince people he disagreed with that their ideas or perspectives were at least a little off. Because this was a specifically listening-oriented interview, though, he was able to resist his reflexes in those meetings, with the benefit of bringing his reflexes more into control in other places. He found these meetings challenging and exhausting, but he was shocked at how much he learned about an organisation he thought he knew inside and out; he said he had never learned so much in his life.

*Key questions to ask if your client seems to be listening to convince:*

- Who have you written off as uninteresting or unmovable and what could you learn by listening to that person rather than trying to tell him something?
- Which people or groups do you know little about and how could you find out more?
- Whose perspective are you most certain about and how could you be wrong?

**Engage with your whole self rather than just your head.** In addition to calling us to engage with others, complexity calls on us to engage in a different way with ourselves. Our reflexive responses are likely to involve a more complicated approach: helpful when dealing with a complicated issue but much less helpful in complexity. We need our entire selves to lead in complexity. We can help our clients listen to and begin to understand the signals that their bodies send them, to gain new insight or to resist falling back into old habits. Noticing when a tightness in your chest leads you to reject a solution—not because it is bad but because it makes you anxious—can help you engage in what Kahneman (2013) called “system two thinking,” our more thoughtful, careful, less reflexive approach. As Dario had the conversations with others and noticed his reflexive responses, he began to watch the way those reflexes lived in his body. For example, he noticed that as people began to criticize initiatives he had set up as VP, his face would flush and he would lean forward, preparing to dive into a defensive response to what he heard as accusations and wrong judgments. With coaching, he began to think differently about these embodied signals and to break the defensive cycle he found himself in. When he’d notice that he was leaning forward and getting ready to pounce, he used that as his cue to lean back and listen more intently and carefully than before.

*Key questions to ask when you find your client engaging with just his head:*

- What are you noticing in your own body as you cross into the more uncertain, complex space?

- When you are able to show up as your best self in the complex space, what does *that* feel like?
- When you find yourself slipping into unhelpful patterns, what do you notice about where you feel that in your body?

**Get comfortable learning in public rather than in private.** We've found an interesting paradox in the leaders with whom we've worked: when we ask leaders to talk about the most influential and significant leaders they've ever had, they often talk about those leaders as learners—people willing to be vulnerable, to say “I don't have any idea,” to ask for help. Yet when they talk about the sort of leader they themselves want to grow into, only rarely do they want to move in this direction themselves. In fact, an inadvertent move in this more vulnerable direction can cause these leaders to feel regret about their imperfections rather than pride at becoming the kind of leader they most admire. It is probably true that the invulnerable, all seeing leader was always a myth (and perhaps not always a good myth), but during complex times a leader who isn't learning—and who isn't demonstrating that learning—may be dangerously closed-off to new information or perspectives. Even better is when leaders work to create the conditions for their own learning—when they begin to design new ways of meeting and listening to the perspectives of others rather than tightly controlling the agenda and convincing others that their perspective is right.

Coaches can help their clients find safe ways to begin to learn in public and can support them in developing ways to manage their own anxiety about doing it. They can also help clients create the conditions for more public learning spaces for themselves and their colleagues (see our section below on meetings to create rather than to inform for more on this idea). For example, after Dario talked with a diverse set of people, he invited all of them—as well as people he hadn't gotten to spend one-on-one time with—to a large meeting. At the meeting, he didn't share his “findings” as much as his confusions. He invited others to think along with him, to push back on what they had heard, to come to different conclusions, and to represent the perspectives he had inadvertently left out. He was a little worried about “going public” with what felt like such a mess of ideas, but he was overwhelmed by how positive the response was. The public learning he demonstrated also created an unexpected shift in the culture as others began to share their emerging ideas with one another—as they had seen their CEO model in occasionally tentative but overall very impressive ways.<sup>7</sup>

*Key questions to ask if your client seems to be learning in private rather than in public:*

- What pieces of this situation or problem are you still confused about? Whose voices are missing?

---

<sup>7</sup> This entry process comes from Barry Jentz (2012).

- How could you bring your confusion or uncertainty to a wider audience and how could you enlist support in getting a bigger picture?
- What would be at risk for you in learning publicly and what might help make it feel like a safer experiment?

Table 3: Key Questions to Ask to Support Clients to Engage Differently

<p>Listen to learn rather than to convince</p>	<p>Who have you written off as uninteresting or unmovable and what could you learn by listening to that person rather than trying to tell him something?</p> <p>Which people or groups do you know little about and how could you find out?</p> <p>Whose perspective are you most certain about and how could you be wrong?</p>
<p>Engage with your whole self rather than just your head</p>	<p>What are you noticing in your own body as you cross into the more uncertain, complex space?</p> <p>When you are able to show up as your best self in the complex space, what does <i>that</i> feel like?</p> <p>When you find yourself slipping into unhelpful patterns, what do you notice about where you feel that in your body?</p>
<p>Get comfortable learning in public rather than in private</p>	<p>What pieces of this situation or problem are you still confused about? Whose voices are missing?</p> <p>How could you bring that confusion or uncertainty to a wider audience and how could you enlist support in getting a bigger picture?</p> <p>What would be at risk for you in learning publicly and what would help make it feel like a safer experiment?</p>

### Supporting Our Clients to Act Differently

While thinking and engaging are actions in themselves, leaders also often need to shift their focus on the *doing* pieces of their job. We can help them make sense of which actions are most helpful in the complex parts of their work. Specifically, we can help our clients:

- Meet to create rather than to inform
- Encourage experimentation and learning rather than analysis and a search for a best solution

- Don't make complexity complicated

**Meet to create rather than to inform.** As we've said, most organizations have complicated approaches build into their DNA and the kinds of meetings typically conducted in organizations express that complicated gene. In most places, meetings tend to be focused on facts and analysis and to be conducted mostly within hierarchical groupings. In a complex context, however, the leader's job is to create environments and experiments that allow patterns to emerge, increase levels of interaction, generate ideas, and encourage conflict and diverse opinions (Snowden & Boone, 2007). To do that, leaders need to think more flexibly about creating meetings with real meat—with issues about which there are a range of opinions—and encouraging the voicing of those different opinions. Rather than picking the best opinion and aligning around it (which is helpful in the complicated space), when leaders deal with complex issues, they can agree to disagree about the best option and can find multiple ways to explore these different opinions using safe-to-fail experiments. Our clients tend to struggle with creating spaces where there can be diversity of perspective and respectful but deep disagreement. For example, Liang was the chief executive of a public sector organisation who became deeply interested in complexity. At first she noticed her expert-based desire to bring experts to her leadership team and then cascade ideas and programs through the organisation. As a result of her coaching, she took a different series of approaches, combining different—and sometimes very large—groups of stakeholders for different kinds of meetings. At some meetings she and her senior colleagues practiced the deep listening to diverse perspectives that she knew was so vital. Some meetings were designed using Liberating Structures<sup>8</sup>, social technologies for getting large groups of people to share ideas and information and to create sets of experiments. For example, by using a Liberating Structure called twenty-five ten, a group of 250 leaders from across the organization were able to generate more than 250 experiments and select their favorite ten in less than an hour.<sup>9</sup>

*Key questions to ask when it looks like your client is holding meetings to inform rather than to create:*

- Do you have the right people in the room to get a wide variety of opinions and perspectives?
- Whom do you expect to learn something new at this meeting? How could you design the meeting so that everyone learned?

---

<sup>8</sup> Lipmanowicz and McCandless (2014) and their colleagues have developed an extensive set of meeting designs for collaborative, inclusive meetings that are explicitly designed for navigating a complex space. Their designs, called "liberating structures," can transform the way organizations conduct their meetings.

<sup>9</sup> Specifically, see <http://www.liberatingstructures.com/12-2510-crowd-sourcing> for a description of and instructions for this Liberating Structure.



- How can you increase the odds of an unimagined possibility emerging from this meeting?

**Encourage experimentation and learning rather than analysis and a search for the best solution.** When dealing with a complicated challenge, our typical habits of researching, designing perfect interventions, piloting them, and then rolling them out is a fantastic approach. In the complex world, leaders need to encourage experimentation and continual learning—which are usually far from typical organizational habits. Coaches can help clients watch their impulses toward a complicated approach and can also help them develop alternative approaches. When clients talk about putting together a group to provide a solution through research, for example, we can encourage them instead to design safe-to-fail experiments that will potentially start moving the system while also learning about it.<sup>10</sup> When clients talk about designing a pilot, we can encourage them to look for several different experiments that they could run. When clients feel frustrated at the lack of alignment about a particular issue or solution, we can encourage them to use the diversity of perspectives as a benefit that can help them design a series of small experiments, each taking advantage of the different legitimate perspectives of their colleagues. When Liang turned towards approaches based on complexity in order to create new possibilities in her department, she followed up from a few experiments with large groups of people (like the one described above) to try and create what she called a “heat map” of the folks who were already moving in a promising direction. “Follow the heat and spread the fire,” became her motto, and she used a diverse team to build and spread a diverse set of experiments to those areas of the company where there were signs that the heat was already there. In this way, she was able to follow the momentum that already existed and amplify that momentum rather than trying to create motion from scratch.

*Key questions to ask when your client is gets caught in search for analysis and best solutions:*

- How might you use the diversity of perspectives about a situation or problem to create a wider and more diverse set of possible experiments?
- Which part of your organisation is most free to experiment? Least free?
- What can you do as a leader to make it safer for people to do experiments that might not succeed?

**Don't make complexity complicated.** In addition to encouraging the use of experiments, leaders can enhance their organization's effectiveness in complex

---

<sup>10</sup> There are some resources that offer specific guidance for creating experiments. Snowden and his colleagues provide direction for creating safe-to-fail probes ([www.cognitive-edge.com/methods/safe-to-fail-probes](http://www.cognitive-edge.com/methods/safe-to-fail-probes)). Schrage (2014) suggests a general approach to experimenting in organizations that he calls the 5 fives: give a diverse team of five people, five days to create five experiments that they can carry out in five weeks for less than \$5000.

contexts by changing the way they provide direction about things to be done—through the deliberate use of less-detailed directions. The instincts of most of our clients are toward control: helpful in many cases in the complicated world and unhelpful in many cases in the complex world. If leaders are really going to encourage innovation and learning at all levels of the organisation, they need to increase the size of the field on which people can play and the flexibility with which people can approach their work. Rather than figuring out all the many specifications that it would take to satisfy the leader (which might lead the person toward doing something as close to the leader's way as possible), figuring out what the *minimum specifications* are for a project or an experiment can mean the leader can take advantage of the creativity and initiative of others.<sup>11</sup> Coaches can ask questions to help their clients uncover whether it's a maximum specification situation (in the simple or complicated world) or a minimum specification situation. The point is that, in the complex space, an excess of controls is likely to increase the complication; simplicity, action, and learning are the keys to success in complexity. As people began to talk about complexity inside Liang's agency, she noticed that there was some backlash against the idea of complexity as people felt overwhelmed and out of their comfort zone. She found that the response of many people was to try to order the complexity by creating a series of complicated rules around experimentation and evaluation. Her plea to managers was to notice whether the issue really was complex and if so, to use the minimum number of rules or requirements as possible (while, of course, staying within policy and regulatory constraints). As people began to understand the simplicity that can live comfortably inside complexity, they were able to take small safe steps to learn about the system, while slowly exploring and experimenting to identify areas of leverage where larger interventions might have the most success.

*Key questions to ask when your client seems to be making complexity complicated:*

- What is the minimum amount of specification you need in order to be sure that a project or experiment will fulfill your expectations, at least approximately? If you really pushed yourself, could you come to an even more minimal set of specifications?
- What is the most junior level of the organization you could trust to make key decisions about a project or experiment? What would it take to allow someone even more junior to make that decision?

---

<sup>11</sup> Lipmanowicz and McCandless (2014) and Zimmerman and Lindberg (1998) and have detailed directions for using a "min specs" (i.e., minimum specifications) approach. See <http://www.liberatingstructures.com/14-min-specs/> and [http://216.119.127.164/edgeware/archive/think/main\\_aides7.html](http://216.119.127.164/edgeware/archive/think/main_aides7.html).

Table 4. Key Questions to Ask to Support Clients to Act Differently

<p>Meet to create rather than to inform</p>	<p>Do you have the right people in the room to get a wide variety of opinions and perspectives?</p> <p>Whom do you expect to learn something new at this meeting? How can you design the meeting so that everyone learned?</p> <p>How can you increase the odds of an unimagined possibility emerging from this meeting?</p>
<p>Encourage experimentation and learning rather than analysis and a search for the best solution</p>	<p>How might you use the diversity of perspectives about a situation or problem to create a wider and more diverse set of possible experiments?</p> <p>Which part of your organisation is most free to experiment? Least free?</p> <p>What can you do as a leader to make it safer for people to do experiments that might not succeed?</p>
<p>Don't make complexity complicated</p>	<p>What is the minimum amount of specification you need in order to be sure that a project or experiment will fulfill your expectations, at least approximately? If you really pushed yourself, could you come to an even more minimal set of specifications?</p> <p>What is the most junior level of the organization you could trust to make key decisions about a project or experiment? What would it take to allow someone even more junior to make that decision?</p>

### Coaches for a Complex World

If you've been paying attention to the amazing number of ways our clients need to flex to operate well in the complex world, you might begin to wonder: "Dealing with complexity seems so hard for my clients—what are the implications for *me*?" We know that, throughout this chapter, we have suggested that you become a cultural guide to a land that you yourself are unlikely to feel entirely at home in. Indeed, we have both been challenged over the last 15 years to make sense of the complex world around us and of the counter-intuitive ways that we need to think, engage, and act as we alter our own habits of using complicated approaches to complex issues. This is just about the hardest work that either of us has ever done, and each day we are learning more, while continually bumping up against our own limitations. The better news is that starting to get our heads around the new rules for a complex world is also one of the most exciting and important ways of thinking

we've ever encountered and, as a result, we have been able to support our clients in ways that they (and we) could not have previously imagined.

Like leading for complexity, coaching for complexity requires more than learning a new set of tools and approaches; it requires us to grow into a whole new way of seeing the world—both conceptually and instinctively. It requires us to redefine what coaching is and what expertise is. And it requires us to actually live these principles and ideas ourselves.

These changes are not just about *what* we know. This chapter offers a set of ideas, but none of them are useful without the mindsets and awareness to feel into the ideas, to live them. Theories of adult development (Kegan, 1994; Torbert, 2004; Berger, 2012) give us one lens for understanding the way adults change and grow over time in their capacity to take multiple perspectives, see systems and interconnections, and cope with paradox and ambiguity. While there is not a straight line between a person's form of mind in an adult development sense and a person's capacity to cope well in complex situations, our hunch and experience is that these capacities are connected in some significant way. This means that, in our practice, a working knowledge of adult development and of the way coaches can support clients to grow developmentally is a key ingredient in the mix (Petrie, 2014; Berger, 2012; Kegan & Lahey, 2009). In other places, Jennifer has written about the habits of mind that support leaders as individuals to stretch into these more complex ways of seeing and interacting with the world (Berger, 2012; Berger & Johnston, 2015; Achi & Berger, 2015). Familiarity with these ideas can be a valuable complement to an understanding of complexity.

We began the chapter with David, who was trying to solve what he couldn't quite get his arms around. And over the course of these pages we have offered ideas for the way that the Davids of the world might be helped to make sense of a changing world and the knowledge that we'll never get our arms around it all (which is why we also need our heads and our hearts and our bodies and our relationships). This is hard work, but our clients tend to find it exciting work; in fact, many clients have talked to us about the redemptive power of complexity. Although they can be frustratingly hard to encounter at first, the new perspectives and tools presented here have allowed leaders to make progress on challenges that have stumped them for years—without simply trying to use the same tools and approaches they have used in the past (exhausting themselves by pushing harder and harder).

The demands made on us as coaches, though, are at least as significant as the demands made on our clients and we might find ourselves getting weary as well. As foreigners ourselves in this new land, we are challenged to work alongside our clients, to become co-explorers in this space, and to define and create a new way of working together with our clients and our colleagues.

And in many ways, this is the whole point. At its core, the call of complexity is to approach the world in more open and curious ways. It is about loosening our need

for control and certainty, relinquishing our illusory image of our work and our lives as knowable and predictable. This is difficult work, but it is incredibly rewarding. As we become more agile at crossing between the complex and the complicated realms, we are often able to flow with the currents of the water rather than fighting against them. We can begin to make use of the quickly changing, ambiguous world rather than wishing it would go away. We can also become more able to engage those best parts of our humanity—our compassionate, connected, and curious selves.

### Bibliography

- Achi, Z., & Berger, J. G. (March 2015). Delighting in the possible. In *McKinsey Quarterly*.
- Beinhocker, E. D. (2007). *The origin of wealth: The radical remaking of economics and what it means for business and society*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard Business Review Press.
- Berger, J. G. (2012). *Changing on the Job: Developing leaders for a complex world*, Stanford, CA, Stanford Business Books
- Berger, J. G., & Johnston, K. (2015). *Simple habits for complex times: Powerful practices for leaders*. Palo Alto: Stanford Business Books.
- Camillus, J. C. (May 2008). Strategy as a wicked problem. In *Harvard Business Review*, 99-106.
- Heifetz, R. A., & Linsky, M. (2002). *Leadership on the line: Staying alive through the dangers of leading*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard Business Review Press.
- Jentz, B. (2007). *Talk Sense: Communicating to Lead and Learn*, Acton, MA, Research for Better Teaching.
- Jentz, B. C. (2012). *EntryPlan Approach: How to start a leadership position successfully*. Leadership & Learning, Inc., available from [www.entrybook.com](http://www.entrybook.com).
- Kahneman, D. (2013). *Thinking, fast and slow*. New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux.
- Kegan, R. (1994). *In Over Our Heads: The mental demands of modern life*, Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Kegan R. & Lahey, L. (2009). *Immunity to change: How to overcome it and unlock the potential in yourself and your organization*, Boston, MA: Harvard Business Press.
- Lipmanowicz, H., & McCandless, K. (2014). *The surprising power of liberating structures: Simple rules to unleash a culture of innovation*. Seattle: Liberating Structures Press.
- Petrie, N. (2014). *Future trends in leadership development* (White paper). Greensboro, NC: Center for Creative Leadership.
- Quinn, R. E. (1996). *Deep change: Discovering the leader within*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.
- Schrage, M. (2014). *The innovator's hypothesis: How cheap experiments are worth more than good ideas*. Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press.
- Snowden, D. J., & Boone, M. E. (November 2007). A leader's framework for decision making. In *Harvard Business Review*, 69-76.

Torbert, W. R. (2004). *Action inquiry: The secret of timely and transforming leadership*. San Francisco: Berrett-Koehler Publishers.

Zimmerman, B. J., & Lindberg, C. (1998). *Edgeware: Lessons from complexity science for health care leaders*. Irving, TX: VHA Incorporated.