

Complexity Made Simple

BY JENNIFER RONEY

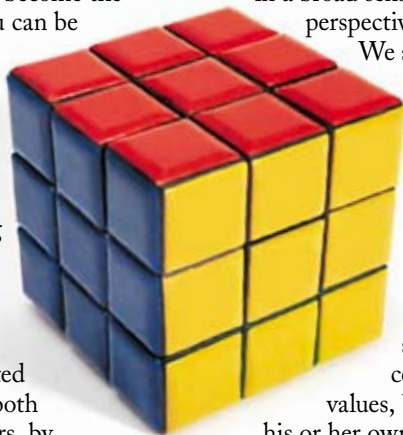


AS COMPANIES GROW, the complexity of their environment — both internal and external — grow as well. In addition, the world is changing at a rapid rate and the number and type of interactions we deal with each day is increasing exponentially. This growth and change leads us to feel as if we are in a state of uncertainty, ambiguity and even chaos.

Often our first response is to turn to more control. Research shows us, however, that implementing control mechanisms — more structure or more autocratic leadership — can limit opportunities for growth and creativity. It often is desirable to find a very delicate balance between chaos and controlled order, coined the “edge of chaos.”

This edge may feel stressful and uncomfortable. Rather than reaching for the control mechanisms, try the following:

1. Connect with your core values. At times of uncertainty and change it is more important than ever to reaffirm — both verbally and by your actions — the core values of your firm. These core values become the guidelines by which you can be flexible and can adjust quickly to a changing environment. In many ways these values can substitute for structure and control mechanisms. Accepting and reaffirming them, however, is more than just stating them or posting them on the walls. They must be acted on and recognized, by both employees and customers, by setting aside time to “do or share them.” For example, if your core values include “going beyond the expected for a customer,” priority should be given to telling stories of employees that did just



that. This embeds values into the culture, making them self-regulating and giving employees the power to improve service in new situations.

2. Look at the forest and the trees. When we are growing and changing we tend to get swamped by the details and no longer see the forest. Our tendency is to try to control these details. But often we lose track of the fact that the total can be something different from the sum of its parts. Interestingly, we are learning that in organizations, the stock market and in ecosystems alike, you can see simple patterns by stepping back. For example, in organizations you might see a pattern where employees are resisting change when presented in one way, but are less resistant when presented a different way.

3. Rethink diversity. Diversity in your organization is good for many reasons, especially since it helps us deal with change. We need to start thinking about diversity, however, in a broad sense, such as diversity of perspective, experience and mindset. We are all much more than our ethnicity, gender and age. We have experiences at work and in life, with people, with what we’ve read, in education, through hobbies and in our travels. This makes us unique resources ready to deal with new and changing situations. We may share certain core principles and values, but each individual brings his or her own perspectives to the table. Supporting diversity — in all its forms — provides robustness to your organization, particularly in times of change.

4. Make new connections. The last thing we would tend to think of doing when we are bombarded with a confusing set of work inputs is to add more. However, I would encourage you to think about doing so. Take the time to create a new link in your network to help you address the issues you face. When we are overwhelmed with change and complexity, we may be missing a piece of the puzzle. We need to find resources to fill the gap. Developing long-term but flexible relationships, is critical to growth of organizations. These provide potential short-notice resources for the future if managed well.

Some of the most exciting opportunities in business occur when we meet challenges of growth and changes head-on. When we don’t know the immediate solution, we are forced to figure it out along the way. In our complex world, the “figuring it out” requires speed, flexibility, skilled and trusted employees, bravery and a release of complete control. Focusing on core values, taking a broader perspective, embracing diversity and strengthening relationships limit our need for control and prevent us from falling over the edge in times of chaos and change. ■■■

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