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# *Complex Adaptive Leadership*

Embracing Paradox and Uncertainty

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# Preface: What's This All About?

'Complex Adaptive Leadership – Embracing paradox and uncertainty' is an intriguing title. This book may well change your view of what leadership is, and what to do about uncertainty.

If you've just picked the book up for a quick look, perhaps it would be best if each of the five key concepts of 'Complex' 'Adaptive', 'Leadership', 'Paradox' and 'Uncertainty', as treated in this book, are afforded a brief introduction.

**'Complex'**. Complexity science and chaos theory are two sides of the same coin – sadly the coin itself lacks a name and many argue whether chaos is a subset of complexity or vice versa. For many the two are synonymous. Complexity suggests many interconnecting parts each affecting each other in an open interactive and iterative process which cannot be controlled or fully predicted. Complexity science shows that under seemingly simple things there is a complex dynamical system at play. So the cup of coffee on your desk may seem simple, but for it even to be there, with the myriad of interconnected events and people at play to bring it all together, is complex. At the same time complex dynamics can have some simple underlying rules. The human genome is very complex but is just four strands of DNA repeated many times. So simplicity and complexity, order and chaos, are interconnected in a dynamic rather than being two different and contradictory states – a paradox. Complexity is not necessarily complicated. Indeed, in trying to deal with complexity many leaders make things unnecessarily complicated. This book will show that some simple rules and understanding can help manage complexity, and get more for less.

**'Adaptive'**. This suggests something which can make itself more suitable to a changing environment. It assumes a process which can measure and use feedback to change and be fit for the environment which is changing around it. So linking the first two concepts, 'Complex Adaptive' means a dynamic involving an organisation or organism of many interconnecting parts which improves to meet changing circumstance, and which has complicated underlying dynamics to produce visible simple results.

**'Leadership'**. This book treats leadership in an unusual way. When one says 'Leadership' the usual automatic sense more often than not is that leadership is something done by leaders.<sup>1</sup> When we talk about 'strong leadership', role models such as Churchill spring to mind. When we talk about a 'lack of leadership', what we seem to bemoan is the need for a person to take control in a decisive way. In other words, the underlying assumption is usually oligarchic (i.e. 'a small group of people having control').<sup>2</sup> We mostly

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1 *The Oxford English Dictionary* defines the term 'leadership' as a derivative of the word leader which it defines as 'the person who leads, commands or precedes a group, organisation or country'.

2 <sup>2</sup> Oligarchy as defined by *The Oxford English Dictionary*; the word comes from the Greek *oligoi* 'few' and *arkhein* 'to rule'. '-archy' words such as oligarchy, monarchy (itself another form of oligarchy) hierarchy (frequently an expression

assume that leadership is something done *by* the (hopefully talented) few, exercised *over* the many. Such an assumption is not unreasonable and indeed has been fairly constant for thousands of years. However, this assumption is becoming increasingly strained. This book is about seeing leadership differently – it does not see leadership as something done solely by leaders but proposes a form of leadership which is an adaptive, complex and *seemingly* chaotic dynamic involving all. This is a more polyarchic view (leadership of the many by the many – a seeming paradox). This viewpoint will probably challenge some of your comfortably held beliefs about leadership and give you something to think about. Hopefully it will encourage you to enhance your current skills and do what you do in a more effective way.

**‘Paradox’.** Paradox is a self-contradiction which exists contrary to expectation. It is when two opposite states co-exist in seeming harmony. We like to have things black and white, and cling to the concept of ‘either/or’ as a child might cling to a blanket for comfort. It is easier to consider right vs. wrong – right vs. right is much harder. Yet the world we live in is full of paradox and to embrace this means having a different mind set. It is not so much ‘either/or’ thinking but ‘both/and’, and realising within most paradoxes a deeper truth exists. In this book the key paradox is that leaders need to be able to follow well, and enable others to take the lead, rather than just provide the lead themselves, expecting others to follow. The paradox is that in enabling others to lead, and being able to follow, one can best lead. Paradox, as treated in this book, is when two opposites co-exist, indicating a deeper, less obvious, hard to define yet powerful truth.

**‘Uncertainty’.** This seems to be a dirty word, and one which most MBA courses work hard to dispel! We try hard to eradicate uncertainty and many tools and techniques are geared to do just that – reduce uncertainty and enable a more predictable and managed outcome. Project management techniques and forecasting tools are good examples. This book does not in any way intend to denigrate such tools and techniques – they are useful and often vital.<sup>3</sup> However, reality is often more complex than many predictive tools can cope with. It is only relatively recently in science that the paradox between deterministic outcome and deeper uncertainty has become apparent. This book is intended to complement the more predictive and deterministic tools that exist, by enabling a deeper appreciation for the dynamics of uncertainty and complexity. Uncertainty is treated in this book as a necessary part of life, and a natural part of dynamic improvement and progress.

Let’s make it clear at the very beginning – Complex Adaptive Leadership is not about throwing away traditional leadership wisdom, and getting rid of oligarchic assumption completely. It is, however, about challenging the underlying assumptions of leadership and seeing leadership in a different way, which means letting go (but not necessarily abandoning) some long held beliefs. The paradox is that although both oligarchic and polyarchic approaches may seem contradictory, they are in fact complementary. And as a polyarchic approach is more ambiguous, an ability to understand and embrace uncertainty is key.

So this book will appeal to you if:

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of oligarchy), anarchy (no ruler – hence chaos), polyarchy (rule by the many), and others share the same Greek root. ‘To rule’ is not a term used much nowadays and is thus replaced by ‘To lead’ for the purpose of this book.

<sup>3</sup> My last book *Practical Business Re-engineering – Tools and Techniques for Achieving Effective Change* was full of such models – and they can be very useful. But they are not the whole story!

1. You think that something fundamental is changing in the world and there is a deeper shift that you cannot yet quite explain – this book won't give many ultimate answers, but it will offer some insight.
2. You wish to understand why leaders often struggle, and why organisations are often sub-optimal. This will give some ideas at an organisational level to improve sustainable performance.
3. You are interested in leadership, and wish to understand how to lead better – this book will give some everyday actions which can be used to good effect, to gain better results for less effort.

The book is in four main parts, and is designed to encourage action by the end. The first three parts look at:

- **Why** is there a need for Complex Adaptive Leadership (CAL), and why it has evolved in the context of polyarchy (leadership of the many by the many),<sup>4</sup>
- **What** it (CAL) looks like at the organisational level, and
- **How** can it be applied day to day by individual leaders at the personal level.

The final part gives a suggested template for you to put into practice what you have learnt. There are also appendices of additional interest.

**Part I** (Chapters 1–4) is about *why* Complex Adaptive Leadership has emerged. It is about the *context* and how the flow of change is creating opportunities for leadership to be practised in a new and dynamic way:

- Chapter 1 explains that polyarchy is really a fusion, or natural evolution, of anarchy and oligarchy, and that Complex Adaptive Leadership does not mean that traditional approaches have to be thrown out. It may *seem* a revolutionary approach to leadership, but in fact it is an evolutionary phenomenon. The paradox is that two contradictory views of leadership co-exist and can operate at the same time.
- Chapter 2 explains the emergence of polyarchy and that the need for Complex Adaptive Leadership is due to the massive pace of technological change. It highlights the natural discontinuity which has occurred because our assumptions about leadership have not changed as fast as the context within which it is practised.
- Chapter 3 shows the organisational context, and explains the need to evolve or die. It explores how organisations which survive are successfully evolving from traditional 'functional silos' through 'matrix' towards 'complex adaptive system' structures.
- Chapter 4 exposes the leadership charade played by many, with leaders pretending to know solutions to the problems of the organisations they lead, and followers expecting them to know. This state of affairs persists despite the fact that most of the time followers know that the leaders know that they do not know!

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<sup>4</sup> Polyarchy is a Greek word, and hitherto has been limited to the more esoteric regions of political science. In that field polyarchy is often seen as similar and even interchangeable with democracy. This book sees democracy as an expression of polyarchy (not the other way around as is normally viewed in political science). Polyarchy challenges traditional assumptions and, for some, deeply held beliefs about what leadership is. It defines leadership as a dynamic rather than just an attribute, or an 'art', practised by leaders alone.

**Part II** (Chapters 5–7) is about *what* the underlying features of Complex Adaptive Leadership are. This part takes a more strategic view and shows that the underlying organisational principles to manage *complexity* and *chaos* are, in fact, simple:

- Chapter 5 considers how chaos theory and complexity science has emerged, and is aimed at enabling you to be more comfortable with chaos and complexity, and underlying paradoxes and uncertainties.
- Chapter 6 should help you connect with complexity on an emotional and experiential level and introduces the simple Four + Four principles which can help govern organisational complexity.
- Chapter 7 shows examples of the Four + Four principles in action, and how they can operate within an organisation.

**Part III** (Chapters 8–10) is about *how*, in a practical day-to-day sense, one can exercise Complex Adaptive Leadership. This part takes a more tactical view. It looks at *leadership* and suggests a dynamic approach using a new and simple model.

- Chapter 8 suggests that the so-called difference between ‘Management’ and ‘Leadership’ exists mainly due to oligarchic and hierarchic assumptions. However, such a distinction can lay some useful foundation of ‘complementary opposites’ to build on. A new model (which is inspired by the older Situational Leadership model) is used to show the dangers and pitfalls and how leaders can often end up working/trying too hard.
- Chapter 9 looks at the flipside of leadership and shows various ways of looking at followership. It suggests leaders get the followers they deserve, and vice-versa.
- Chapter 10 indicates how one can combine the leadership roadmap and the followership viewpoint in a powerful and simple way for both individuals and organisations.

**Part IV** (Chapter 11 and Appendices) looks at the *future* and the wider significance of Complex Adaptive Leadership and polyarchy.

- Chapter 11 suggests a template to follow for further reflection, and to put some of the lessons you take from this book into action.
- Appendix A looks at Taoism and how a basic appreciation of this Eastern philosophy can help understand the underlying dynamics of Complex Adaptive Leadership. It looks at some of the aspects in the book and applies the Taoist Yin/Yang model to show how the natural paradoxes of Complex Adaptive Leadership can co-exist in a powerful way. The Yin/Yang symbol occurs in some parts of the book to enable a deeper understanding of paradox and shows how ‘both/and’ thinking can be applied to leadership, and how complementary opposites can exist at many levels.
- Appendix B looks at how polyarchy can be applied to traditional leadership models. By considering one such model in detail (John Adair’s), the appendix shows that polyarchy is not another leadership model but a fundamentally different leadership *assumption* that can be *applied* to traditional models to gain further insight. In other words it can add to the usefulness of traditional leadership models.

- Appendix C looks at the implications of polyarchy for politics. In mature democracies the turn-out of voters is in steady decline – whilst many put this down to ‘voter apathy’ there might be other more significant reasons, which may call for a new approach to government itself.
- Appendix D suggests some leadership development paths that could be taken in order to thrive in a polyarchic environment. These skills are needed by leaders *and* followers, many of whom are stuck in an oligarchic assumptive organisation but surrounded by fast emerging polyarchic realities.

The book is laid out in a classical way but in front of most chapters there is a suggested exercise that you can do. Some involve thinking, some involve action, and some involve both. The exercises are designed to warm you up to what follows in the chapter, and open the mind a little bit more. Some of these exercises are vital for those who would journey the road, others are more for fun – all are recommended.

At the end of each chapter there is a brief summary of the main points. These summaries are aggregated as ‘quick breathers’ at the end of each section.