


A

is for
Ambiguity



A close-up photograph of a hand shaving with a safety razor in a blue basin of water. The water is covered in white foam, and the razor is positioned diagonally across the frame. The background is a deep blue, and the lighting is soft, highlighting the texture of the foam and the metallic surface of the razor.

"I would not give a fig for the
simplicity this side of
complexity, but I would give
my life for the simplicity on
the other side of complexity"
-Oliver Holmes



Ambiguity is the quality of being open to more than one interpretation. It results in the haziness of reality; the potential for misreading and mixed meanings to conditions. We can no longer see what is behind things, events just happen and they remain open to a number of different interpretations as to why.



Single Perspective

Traditionally we search for linear cause and effect models to explain phenomena within our environment, reductionism in management reduces our description of phenomena to a single dimensional perspective, this creates very brittle models that are black and white, either right or wrong.



When environments become more complex our traditional linear cause and effect models start to breakdown, become redundant and even worse a hindrance to the acceptance of not knowing. The end result can be a shock, aka a reality check. Due to their black and white nature linear models do not fail gracefully.



Context Is King

Complex environments require us to invest more in developing models that capture the context within which events play-out. This means a switch from trying to analyse and understand the events themselves in isolation to understanding the space around them that gives them context (what artists call the negative space).



This is where systems thinking comes in. Systems thinking places a greater emphasis upon understanding the relations that give an object or event its place within some broader environment it is a part of.

Systems Thinking

Instead of trying to describe and understand the event by describing its properties, systems thinking reasons backwards, by first having an overview to the environment we can understand a system through its connections to other systems within that environment and thus understand it with respect to its place within the whole environment it is a part of





By looking at the whole environment that the event or object is a part of, we can gain multiple different perspectives (through each of its different connections) each perspective will give us a richer and more robust multidimensional understanding.

The net result is a containment or confinement of ambiguity to a limited set of possible interpretations. Even if we do not fully understand the phenomena, by having a deeper understanding of the context we are able to have some parameters within which to interpret individual events...





Decisions Without Facts

...thus it is still required that we learn to make decisions without absolute knowledge and information and are able to hold two contrasting ideas. Leaders in complex environments need to be able to handle ambiguity and make judgments when the 'facts' are unclear or evolving, in other words not be overly dependent upon quantitative, fact based methods of reasoning in supporting their decision making, but be able to respond to the overall context instead

Summary

- In relatively simple environments we can have simple linear cause and effect models that are the product of a single perspective with a single right or wrong, black or white description for events.
- In complex environments linear reductionist thinking breaks down, the causes behind effects get lost to our vision in the haze of complexity.
- This requires us to invest more in understanding the overall context within which we are operating and this is where systems thinking comes in.
- Systems thinking tries to understand systems within the context of the overall environment they are a part of, using multiple different perspectives to building up a description of events or objects.
- In this way we can become better at contextualising events and less reliant upon a single, fact-based, description.



Complexity Lab



**creative
commons**