

THE COMPLEXION OF COMPLEXITY

Written in February 2017. Having read about the inner life of a bomb disposal expert.

Where does the search for a simple solution get you in a complex world? Potentially the end of that world, and not in a good way.

“The science of vague assumptions, based on debatable data, taken from inconclusive experiments, with instruments of problematic accuracy, by persons of questionable mentality.”

Any guesses? It’s actually a saying from the world of bomb disposal that I came across recently—though it struck me it could equally serve as a definition of the complexity of our lives right now. The bit about bombs just adds a sense of drama, which we’ll get to later...

A cause for our confusion

Complexity befuddles us. It brings out a natural reflex, deeply engrained in the human psyche, that raises particular problems for leadership: the urge to counter complexity by searching for a simple and single cause of events.

Unfortunately that search is frequently marked by a rush to judgement and the pointing of fingers of blame (or just as dangerously, the premature celebration of victory). It’s so tempting to determine the guilty party or the heroic saviour that we lose the dispassionate distance that enables us to explore what might really be going on. It’s not helped by living in an age of immediate answers, instant gratification and low boredom thresholds.

Brilliant leadership academic Keith Grint uses a story of JFK and the 1962 Cuban Missile Crisis to illustrate this issue of complexity.

Kennedy was under huge pressure from his military advisors, as a new and young president, to take decisive action against the Soviet fleet. The advisors saw the situation as having a single cause (Soviet aggression) and a simple (and very violent) solution. Sink some ships, invade Cuba, and destroy the silos one way or another.

With momentous self-control JFK stepped back and looked for clues, testing different ideas. Just as well. It turned out that the Soviet Union already had nuclear-armed missiles on Cuba with standing instructions to launch them at the USA if Cuba were to be invaded.

It's a demonstration of how leadership in the face of the unknown meets complexity with experimentation and adaptation as the best way forward. In 1962 this leadership style saved the world. Talk about bomb disposal!

A cause to rally around

But when our brains are boiling with the impenetrable complexity of what we're attempting to do, there is something else that can come to the rescue and prune the mental bramble. Something infinitely more useful than finger pointing or blame storming.

A cause.

A common purpose in healthy organisations gives meaning to the work of individuals and teams alike. It is the flag around which we rally for a relieving shot of simplicity.

A common cause helps to create a community of like-minded colleagues and stakeholders, and can defuse bureaucracy and silos. It enables complexity-busting questions like "in whose service are we working?" or "how is our cause furthered by this course of action?" And it makes work worth getting out of bed for.