Leadership Bites:
Thriving in uncertain and complex times
LEADERSHIP LEARNING IN 20 MINUTES

NHS Leadership Academy
South East

Introduction

The past can't always predict the future – but we can still try! In a time of shape-shifting problems, organisations and people's behaviour, our ability to find the core or see over the horizon is drastically reduced. This guide will help you understand what complexity is and how it differs from being complicated, and what you can do to succeed when the future's unclear.
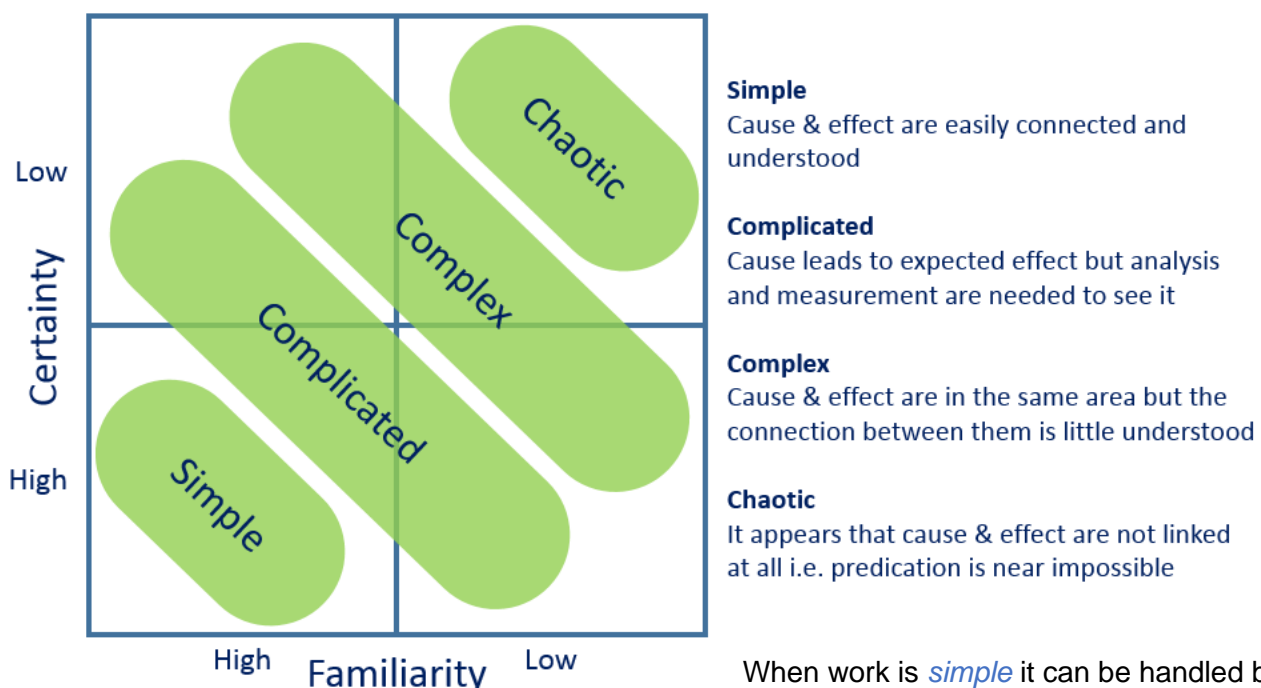
You can't absolutely control the future but many of us are more comfortable believing we can. When talking about complexity you'll likely experience one or more of these types of complexity:

- o **Structural** – *describes the number of 'parts' involved and interactions between those parts*
- o **Socio political** – *a complexity created by the people & stakeholders involved and their agendas, alliances and expectations*
- o **Emergent** – *deals with lack of predictability [the unknowns and the unknowable's] and a reduced planning horizon i.e. how far in the future you can accurately predict*

Learning to 'knit the fog'

The more complex a situation the more uncertainty it can create. For some people the unplanned, spontaneous and "let's see what happens" attitude is thrilling and exciting. For others the lack of a plan, key metrics and a master to-do list is a stressful and tiring time. Regardless of a person's preference the reality is that planning for future events and needed action is necessary for communicating on and delivering work to the desired standard.

When you're in the 'fog' and complexity is causing uncertainty it's useful to think about the situation as a whole, but also to break it down into component work packages and categorise them using the below grid. This allows you to use the right approach and energy to solve issues and have the right governance for the situation.

Simple
Cause & effect are easily connected and understood

Complicated
Cause leads to expected effect but analysis and measurement are needed to see it

Complex
Cause & effect are in the same area but the connection between them is little understood

Chaotic
It appears that cause & effect are not linked at all i.e. predication is near impossible

When work is *simple* it can be handled by normal processes and your focus can be on

making the work easier by reviewing how that work is flowing and getting done [or not]. 6 Sigma is popular for creating efficient processes.

For *complicated* work put effort into eliminating wastes such as: doing too much, fixing errors, time delay and not using the resources you have available well enough. Lean methodologies are perfect for challenging the norm and removing high effort, low value activities.

Complexity & Uncertainty

Complex work, where certainty and familiarity are lowered, the focus ought to be on rapid prototyping and high iteration. Cycles of plan, do, check, adjust lead to fast adaption. Here, agile is the key mind-set for success.

But how??

Think about how to create psychological safety, a climate that people [including you] feel it's okay to try something new. Also, consider how to encourage collaboration and interactions with new people for fresh ideas. With complex work, fear of failure is the biggest risk.

Chaotic situations and work are constantly in flux and often frenzied, with unreliable cause and effect relationships. This is the realm of the 'unknowable's', those factors that you only discover after they've happened. The speed of change in chaos means that by the time you've establish a precise rule it's already out of date. To succeed in the chaotic situation, look to find patterns and 'rules-of-thumb' principles that allow rapid intuitive judgement. Look for what's working best at that moment, not what's working 100% as planned.

Thriving in complexity

The simplest thing to do if you're in a highly complex and uncertain situation you find challenging……..?

**Well…. Go and find someone who doesn't find it so challenging… Why? Just because you find it complex and uncertain it doesn't mean it is, or it doesn't mean everyone finds it complex…**

We all have different backgrounds, knowledge, experience, skills and perspective so it's possible that your challenging situation is simple or straightforward for someone else. If that doesn't work or help, or you want more structure, the below approach will help you.

Here we can see that foresight, insight and action are all linked. The framework is depicted as a continual loop with no defined start of end, meaning your way forward could begin at any point in the cycle.

For example, you may have noticed that online banking activity drops to a low at a certain time of the day but have no reliable data as evidence. At this point it's just intuition, which you reflect on and try to make sense of and gain some insight. From this you create a goal to test what's happening, using a specific testing strategy.

From this comes action which you adapt until you're testing the right member behaviour. From the data collected you get an understanding of the cause and effect relationship [i.e. what's causing the drop in online banking activity at a specific time of day] and notice that usage drops at exact the same moment as the banking system is running its daily back up routine. This gives you the foresight that there's a possibility that usage drops because of a system issue rather that member behaviour. As you can see, this approach is much more structured and formulaic but really helps improve the likelihood that you're facing the right way in the fog!
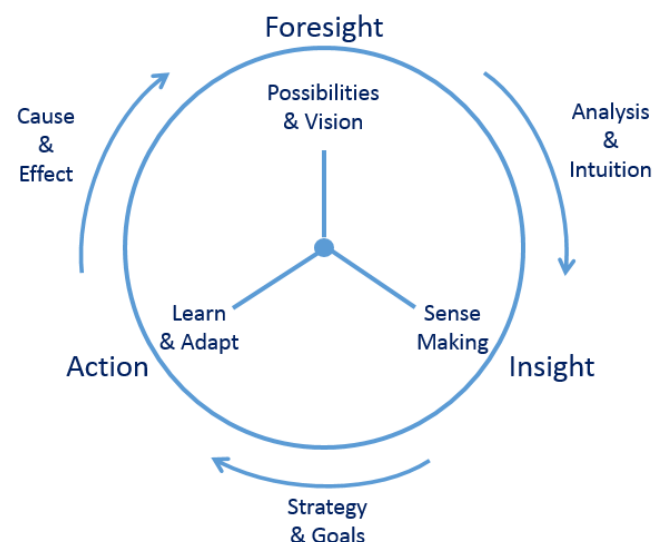
If however, you just want some basic principles to help you cope with complexity and uncertainty, here they are:

- o **Deal with it more often** – learn to be more comfortable feeling uncomfortable about the lack of clarity. Get more exposure with uncertainty and you'll quickly develop your own strategies for dealing with it
- o **Reframe what you see** – flex your perspective and ask yourself "how else could I see this" more often
- o **Find what's working** – sometimes it's okay to lower your standards and know that 100% isn't always a good thing. Sometimes all you can do is improve the probability of being right rather than being absolutely right
- o **Right approach for the problem** – if you're facing a complex situation and you're applying the same approach you would for a simple piece of work it's likely you'll spend more time being frustrated and wondering why it's going wrong, rather than being flexible, learning fast and adapting to find the solution!

Time to reflect...

Take some time to note down your thoughts on what you've learned;

What resonated?

What has made you curious?

What small changes could you make to start having an impact differently and quickly?

What might you need to share with your team, and commit to 'testing and learning' together?