

# LEADING THROUGH A COMPLEXITY LENS SOME EXAMPLES OF A PRACTICAL APPLICATION

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Leadership, regardless of the setting, is a complex activity. People and the groups we form are complex (or more accurately, complex adaptive) systems that evolve and change in response to interaction over time. As much as we would like—and have tried—to predict and control human behavior, the fact remains that it seldom works. What has proven effective is to understand and apply principles of complex systems to the way we work with and lead others. When we do, we create environments that are conducive to high performance and human flourishing.

Below I will demonstrate some ways my colleagues and I have connected principles of complex systems with successful practices from leadership literature to support improved leadership outcomes in complex projects. In doing so, we facilitate a departure from the thinking that dominated management throughout the 20th century and invite leaders to reimagine their ability to respond effectively to the dynamic times in which we live.

*"The greatest danger in times of turbulence is not the turbulence; it is to act with yesterday's logic."*

— [Peter Drucker](#)

## Leadership, Emergence, and the Myth of Control

"[Scientific management](#)" [theory](#), made popular by Frederick Winslow Taylor in the early 1900s, used the machine as a metaphor. Each part of the organization, including the workforce, was thought of as predictable, measurable, and controllable. Work was broken down into tasks that were easy to teach, learn, and repeat. Leaders did the thinking, workers did the doing, and managers made sure the job was done right. This mental model has left a powerful legacy, which continues even now to influence how we lead organizations.

The reality today, however, is anything but machine-like. The term VUCA was coined to express the volatility, uncertainty, complexity, and ambiguity that surround most endeavors, particularly major projects. In this environment, pretty much everyone has to make informed decisions with good judgement. Teams need to work interdependently to produce outcomes that support the mission, and individuals require the agency to contribute meaningfully whenever and wherever they are needed. Leadership can, and does, emerge anywhere. And rather than just providing answers, leaders must also ask powerful questions that marshal a broad range of viewpoints to address emerging challenges and opportunities.