

A photograph of several business professionals in a meeting. In the foreground, a man with a beard and a woman are looking down at documents. Other people's hands and arms are visible in the background, some holding mobile phones. The scene is brightly lit with a soft, natural light.

» OXFORD LEADERSHIP

# Making Sense of Strategy in an Uncertain World

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Transforming Leaders *for Good*

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In Nova Scotia, we recently elected a new provincial party. Not long afterwards I heard one of the government’s new ministers respond to a question about his intended policy by saying, “We should begin by following the adage to ‘do no harm’.”

When the questioner countered that he expected more from this government – proactive policies and solutions – the minister referred to some of the community innovations that were already taking place in the province, which we had all just been hearing about. He said, “We need to be careful not to squeeze the life out of what is already there.” I thought this response was refreshingly candid and courageous.

Increasingly government and other leaders are realizing that many of their best-intentioned plans, strategies, and efforts haven’t produced the desired results. In fact, many have produced the opposite. Especially in large, complex systems, by the time a study has been done and a strategy crafted, the whole situation has changed.

Or top-down solutions alienate the people they are intended to benefit. “Helping agencies,” overcontrolling bosses, and imposed restructuring processes breed apathy and resentment among those who have been “done to,” and helpless frustration among the well-meaning agents of change.

So what does effective strategy look like in a complex, continually emergent world? How do we engage all the players involved without becoming paralyzed by endless process? How do we exercise decisive leadership within the context of the true collaboration and high levels of engagement needed to manage complexity?

These are critical questions for our time. Part of the answer lies in our approach to planning. In highly complex, emergent systems we need to replace linear strategic planning with three-dimensional design thinking.

Christopher Alexander coined the term *pattern language* as a way of describing good design practices within a field of expertise. His own field is architecture, but the term has also been used in other domains, such as computer science and pedagogy.

Alexander inventoried a set of universal patterns, based on examples from many cultures around the world, both ancient and new. As a researcher, his radical premise was that we all have an innate ability to distinguish “what gives life and beauty” as opposed to what has been created from a more arbitrary or relative intention – for example, with a primary focus on efficiency, fashion, or the architect’s self-expression.



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Alexander maintains that “each pattern describes a problem which occurs over and over again in our environment, and then describes the core of the solution to that problem, in such a way that you can use this solution a million times over, without ever doing it the same way twice.” (*A Pattern Language*, 1977)

While Alexander remains a controversial figure, his ideas point towards the kind of fluency that is essential when working in complex, challenging environments. How do we design organizations, projects, and change processes that support life – that support and nourish people and their work over time? What are the patterns and solutions that can be used “a million times over, without ever doing it the same way twice?” As the architects of social space, we ignore these patterns at our peril. Our efforts will fail to ignite passion, imagination, and commitment. It will be as if we are pushing our agenda uphill, rather than connecting with the life force that is already present.

Emergent design is defined by creative paradox – by a tension between freedom and constraint, chaos and structure. This is an age-old tension, and potential harmony, that is expressed in Taoist literature as well as the recent fields of social innovation and strategy. We could say that these “new” approaches to social design create “minimum structure” in order to avoid too much rigidity and harness the innate intelligence, creativity, and capacity for self-organizing and self-actualizing in people and groups.

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Today’s uncertainty is not the simple kind of uncertainty, where we can wait for the game to play out according to well defined and widely accepted rules. No, it is radical uncertainty in which the rules, even the game itself, are transforming in surprising ways.... not only do we not know what the future holds, but we don’t know how to think about what the future might hold!

Glenda Eoyang

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Christopher Alexander



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Too much planning, structure, and intervention will stifle adaptive capacity. Too little structure will leave a system vulnerable to the entropic forces of habit, conflicting self-interests, and lack of vision and direction. A good strategic design is elegant in its simplicity, with well-defined parameters, clarity of purpose and success criteria.

Such a design also provides a way to discern the needs of the future by reaching deeply into the evolving patterns of the present, rather than simply projecting the assumptions and lessons of the past. The learning and data gathered in the past may be useful but will also have diminishing relevance in a rapidly changing

environment. Also, these learnings will no longer hold the fresh energy needed to engage current players in robust forward movement.

The relatively recent fields of Complexity Science, Theory U, and Chaordic Design all provide frameworks of “just enough” structure. When you design a process using one of these frameworks, you may not know where you will end up, but you do know why you are embarking on this project, what you hope to achieve, and the general direction you are headed. Then you set out on a journey and build the road as you walk it, staying flexible and responsive to the changing terrain along the way.



Proceeding on such a journey begins by gaining an understanding of the territory – the dynamics and patterns within a system. This understanding will be informed by available data and analysis, but in complex systems it is impossible to map all the interconnected, changing variables at play. To complement this analytical understanding, the adaptive leader is also immersed in the system with other parts of his or her neurological system (other ways of perceiving and knowing) switched on, so that an intuitive way of knowing the whole is also activated. The inner capacity of “knowing the whole” supports the outer practices of emergent strategy and action. In other words, three-dimensional design and strategy calls for three-dimensional leadership.

### Contagious Momentum

In 2001, Phil Cass, CEO of a long-standing and much-respected medical association and foundation in Columbus, Ohio, was on a quest. He wanted to

understand how he could engage his organization and its stakeholders in more meaningful ways and how he could let go of degrees of control without letting go of accountability to his board and to the community at large.

This quest took him to the Authentic Leadership in Action (ALIA) Institute in Nova Scotia, Canada, which specializes in tools and practices for emergent strategy and action. In the following years Phil returned to ALIA each June, with growing numbers of fellow travelers accompanying him each year.

Gradually Phil’s organizational culture was transformed, as new ways of thinking and organizing seeped into the system. A 2007 doctoral project later studied these changes and reported “higher-level social learning, unlearning, and development, resulting in increased service to the community.... The energy and momentum are contagious as evidenced by community response to open assemblies for optimal health solutions, attendance at learning workshops, and the expressed enthusiasm from board members.”

The report concluded that the combination of Phil’s authentic leadership, his clarity of purpose, and his ability to design processes that engaged a broad spectrum of employees while staying responsive to emerging needs and trends all contributed to these dramatically positive trends.

Building on this success, Phil began experimenting with emergent strategies outside the organization. In March 2005, a group of 36 invited community leaders who spanned sectors and generations spent three full days learning the art and practice of “hosting strategic

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conversations.” When the group reconvened in October, each person told a story of how this new seed had begun to germinate in their work and life, in some cases dramatically. Many were now inspired to go forward with further training, and to host a community gathering. One member, Matt Habash, who at the time was both President of the Columbus City Council and Executive Director of the Mid-Ohio Food Bank, applied his new skills to convening a community dialogue on hunger.

From there the initiative has grown through expanding circles of engagement and spin-off projects. Over 500 people in Columbus have attended “strategic conversation” training sessions, the most recent sessions being led by early graduates. In every case, those who participate are learning not only the skills of convening but also how to strengthen their authentic leadership and how to design emergent change processes in their home context.

Phil reports that in recent encounters around the city, conversations often end with, “Oh, by the way, we recently engaged our community/stakeholders to...” The sentence is completed with stories ranging from “create a new public policy on pathways and bikeways” to “identify what career-oriented skills are needed in our community” to “create a neighborhood health coop” to “create a master plan for our city’s growth (at a fraction of the cost and time needed for the previous plan)” to “establish the key competencies in a university-level nonprofit leadership curriculum.” With a mix of wonder and exasperation, Phil concludes, “We have no idea how many ‘oh, by the way’s’ are out there!”



With some detective work, many success stories in Columbus could be traced back to Phil’s leadership and example. At the same time, many of these linkages may never be seen or publicly acknowledged. And this is the other side of Phil’s story. The most effective strategy is often the strategy that spreads leadership, that works in the background to create culture shifts and tipping points, and that increases the overall intelligence and resilience of teams, organizations, and communities.

To work effectively in this way, leaders need to know how to let go of degrees of control without losing coherence and forward movement. They also have to be willing to share leadership and power, and sometimes to forego personal recognition. This requires a high level of personal mastery and integrity, the hallmarks of authentic leadership.



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