

Chapter 5

The Age/Complexity Factor

The ability to handle increasing levels of complexity is, as I have already stated, the evolutionary characteristic that is most dependent on the seasons of our lives. Although adapting, learning, bonding, and cooperating are all evolutionary competencies that depend on our psychological maturity, they are less influenced by age than our ability to handle complexity. Psychological maturity primarily depends on our ability to individuate and self-actualize, whereas handling complexity depends on our level of exposure to experiences.

As a result of the increase in security, prosperity, and education that has occurred in the Western world and in some of the more rapidly developing middle-income countries over the past fifty years, more and more children have grown up with self-actualized parents. Having such role models and not having had to face adversity has given these children a head start in their own maturing process. Consequently, we are seeing more and more young and middle-aged adults who are well advanced in mastering the first four evolutionary competencies.

The ability to handle complexity, on the other hand, depends more on personal experience than the exposure to role modelling of psychological maturity. Being able to handle complexity depends on psychological maturity and exposure to varied life experiences. Three factors determine our ability to handle complexity: experience, type of mind, and the development of cognitive complexity.

Experience

The ability to handle complexity largely depends on the depth and scope of your life experiences. Your life experiences build up your memory banks, thereby providing more information for your logic to operate on when new situations confront us. This presents a significant advantage in handling complexity, but it cannot be rushed. What this

means for talent management is making sure those who are being fast-tracked for a future position of influence are given multiple opportunities to gain diverse experiences.

Types of Mind

The ability to handle complexity also depends on your ability to develop a self-transforming mind. This ability depends on your level of psychological maturity. Let me explain.

As we grow and develop, our brain/mind changes the way in which it operates. Thanks to the neuroplasticity⁶⁰ of the brain, we have the ability to adapt the way we view the world at any time during our lives. In *Immunity to Change*,⁶¹ Robert Kegan points to two key findings about how we handle complexity from the research in this area:

- The ability of adults to handle complexity generally increases with age.
- There are three developmental plateaus to mental complexity: the socialized mind, the self-authoring mind, and the self-transforming mind.

The socialized mind is a dependent mind. The way a socialized mind responds to a situation or request is strongly influenced by what it believes others are expecting and how it can meet its survival, relationship, and self-esteem needs. It operates from the lower three levels of personal consciousness. The socialized mind prefers to be given instructions and told what to do. In this way, it is able to overcome its anxiety about being judged and being able to meet its deficiency needs.

The self-authoring mind is an independent mind. The way a self-authoring mind responds to a situation or request is by feeding back to others what it needs to further its agenda. It is attempting to further its freedom and independence. The self-authoring mind perceives the world through its belief filters. It hears and sees what it wants to hear or see. What gets through the filters is the information it is looking for to support its plan. It corresponds to the transformation level of

⁶⁰ Neuroplasticity is the natural ability of the brain to form new connections in order to compensate for injury or changes in one's environment.

⁶¹ Robert Kegan and Lisa Laskow Lahey, *Immunity to Change: How to Overcome it and Unlock the Potential in Yourself and Your Organisation* (Boston: Harvard Business Press, 2009).

consciousness. The self-authoring mind wants to be accountable and take initiatives. It will readily accept challenges.

The self-transforming mind is an interdependent mind. A self-transforming mind responds to a situation or request by seeking out more information to further its need to find meaning, make a difference, and be of service. It corresponds to the upper three levels of personal consciousness. The self-transforming mind is not a prisoner to its beliefs, agenda, or position. It is able to witness itself. It is able to look at its own beliefs and ideas objectively, compare them with others, and integrate the best of what it sees into a more inclusive worldview.

The shift from one type of mind to the next is not something that can be easily taught. It is something that evolves to the degree that you are able to minimize your fears and expand your consciousness.

We evolve from a socialized mind to a self-authoring mind to the degree we are able to overcome our anxieties and fears, individuate, and feel confident about our own capabilities to survive and thrive.

We evolve from a self-authoring mind to a self-transforming mind to the degree that we can detach from the outcomes we think we need and live in the expectation that we will get exactly what we need to get to the best outcome. This way of being aligns with a spiritual approach to life: the ability to trust in a beneficent universe, the ability to dissolve your attachment to a specific outcome, and the ability to remain at ease with uncertainty.

Forty to fifty years ago, industry and business leaders wanted employees with socialized minds. They wanted people who were good team players, pulled their weight, were loyal to the company, and could be counted on to conscientiously follow the directions or instructions given to them by their bosses.

Today, organisations want employees with higher levels of knowledge, people who are able to act responsibly, take initiatives, and work independently. Business and industry needs confident self-starters, people with self-authoring minds. But who is going to lead these people?

For that task, we are going to need leaders with self-transforming minds, leaders who are able to step outside their own ideology or framework, view its limitations, and integrate aspects of other ideologies or frameworks into their own worldview. The problem we face is that this type of leader is in short supply.

Two large studies^{62,63} of middle-class, college-educated professionals in the United States show that 58 percent of them had not yet reached the level of the self-authoring mind and only about 6 percent of them had moved beyond the self-authoring mind to develop a self-transforming mind.⁶⁴

This research led Robert Kegan to make the following conclusion:

Complexity is really a story about the relationship between the complex demands and arrangements of the world and our own complexity of mind. When we look at this relationship we discover a gap: our own mental complexity lags behind the complexity of the world's demands.⁶⁵

In my opinion, Kegan raises an important point. To meet the leadership needs of the complex world in which we now live, we need to:

- Find ways to accelerate the human capacity for handling complexity by accelerating the evolution of human consciousness
- Provide mentors/elders for our young leaders so they can access the wisdom of those who are experienced in their roles
- Develop our capacity for bonding and cooperation at a global level so we can access the collective intelligence of our global society via the Internet and social/business networking

Cognitive Complexity

In *Executive Leadership: A Practical Guide to Managing Complexity*,⁶⁶ Elliott Jaques, a Canadian-born organisational psychologist, suggests that the ability to manage complexity is the most important competence for a leader to possess. Jaques's key message is that we must match a leader's level of cognitive complexity to the level of task complexity he or she has to perform.

⁶² R. Kegan, *In Over Our Heads* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1994).

⁶³ W. Torbert, *Managing the Corporate Dream* (Homewood, Ill.: Dow-Jones, 1987).

⁶⁴ R. Kegan, *In Over Our Heads* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1994), 27–28.

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, 30.

⁶⁶ Elliott Jaques and Stephen D. Clement. *Executive Leadership: A Practical Guide to Managing Complexity* (Malden, Mass.: Blackwell Business, 1991).

Forty years of research has led Jacques and his colleagues to define seven levels of role complexity that relate to “time spans of discretion.” This is the time horizon for the most important decisions that need to be made for a particular task or in a particular role. The seven time spans are three months, one year, two years, five years, ten years, twenty years, and fifty years. Jacques’s seven levels of organisational complexity are shown in Table 5.2.

Cognitive Complexity	Time Span	Private Sector Role	Public Sector Role
	Fifty years		
VII		President/CEO	President/Prime minister
	Twenty years		
VI		Executive vice president	Minister
	Ten years		
V		Vice president	Director general
	Five years		
IV		Department manager	Chief director
	Two years		
III		Unit manager	Director
	One year		
II		Section manager	Assistant director
	Three months		
I		Operator	Administrator
	One day		

Table 5.2. Cognitive complexity and time span of different roles.

Jacques believes that the art of facilitating leadership development involves taking note of the rate of growth of an individual’s ability to

handle complexity and providing work opportunities that are consistent with that ability. His approach is cognitively hierarchical. He gives little credence to the role of emotions and pays little attention to human motivation, either from an ego or soul perspective. For Jaques, incentives are simple. All managers need to do is recognise good work, encourage it, pay fairly for it, and provide opportunities for everyone to get on with work that benefits their potential. There isn't a word about passion.

I believe Jaques has made an invaluable contribution to understanding the fundamental underpinnings of organisational theory and practice. However, I believe his approach was the approach of his times. Jaques died in 2003 at the age of eighty-six. His significant contributions came in the fifties, sixties, seventies, and eighties, before the importance of emotional intelligence was fully recognised and well before the role of motivation in organisational theory was well understood.

I believe Jaques is right in denouncing “the great leadership shortfall” as having to do with regimented hierarchical structures that have “a deleterious impact on human creativity, innovation, cohesion, pulling together, satisfaction and morale.” What he proposes instead is a managerial and leadership hierarchy based on maturity of cognitive complexity—mapping the cognitive complexity of individuals to the complexity of the role.

I think he is also correct in his assertion that “the widespread fixation upon the lives and practices of great leaders, and teaching about them, as a way of improving leadership skills is incorrectly posited on the notion that effective leadership calls for certain specialized personality characteristics and personal qualities.” He argues this approach “has led to the widespread use of spurious leadership training by means of a bastardized mass psychotherapy administered to all managers.”

From my perspective, his theories and work correctly identify one of the five evolutionary characteristics, the ability to manage complexity. What he failed to do is give equal recognition to the importance of adaptability, continuous learning, bonding, and cooperation.

Another theoretical approach to handling complexity and responding to change, backed by significant evidence and research, can be found in Bill Joiner's and Stephen Josephs's book, *Leadership*

*Agility: Five Levels of Mastery for Anticipating and Initiating Change.*⁶⁷

Stages of Leadership Agility

Joiner and Josephs have developed a model of five stages of leadership agility based on a synthesis of the work of William R. Torbert, Robert Kegan, Don Beck, Chris Cowan, and Ken Wilber, and their own research. The five levels of leadership agility are as follows:

- The Experts are motivated to develop subject matter expertise. They assume a leader's legitimate power comes from expertise and positional authority. Joiner and Josephs estimate that approximately 45 percent of all managers operate at this level. This type of person corresponds to level three in the seven levels of consciousness model.
- The Achievers are motivated to accomplish outcomes that the institutions to which they belong value. They realise that a leader's power not only comes from expertise and authority, but also from motivating others by making it challenging and satisfying to contribute to important outcomes. They estimate that approximately 35 percent of all managers operate at this level. This type of person corresponds to level four in the seven levels of consciousness model.
- The Catalysts are motivated to create a participative culture based on a vision that inspires people in the institution. They are open to change, willing to rethink basic assumptions, and have a visionary orientation. This type of person corresponds to level five in the seven levels of consciousness model.
- The Co-creators understand that everything in business and the rest of life is interdependent and are committed to the common good. They have emotional resilience and a natural inclination to dialogue and creating win-win situations. This type of person corresponds to level six in the seven levels of consciousness model.

⁶⁷ Bill Joiner and Stephen Josephs, *Leadership Agility: Five Levels of Mastery for Anticipating and Initiating Change* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2007).

- The Synergists enter fully into the moment-to-moment flow of their present experience. They have a present-centred awareness that allows them to remain calm in the midst of contentious and chaotic situations. This capacity facilitates within them the ability to bring forth synergistic intuitions that transform seemingly intractable conflicts into solutions that are beneficial for all. This type of person corresponds to level seven in the seven levels of consciousness model.

Joiner and Josephs state:

Each of these levels of leadership correlates with a stage of personal development. Decades of research have confirmed that human beings move through these stages in a particular sequence ... leaders don't skip from Expert level to Co-creator level. To operate reliably at the Co-creator level of leadership agility, you first need to master the Achiever and Catalyst levels. So far, we've found no exceptions this pattern.⁶⁸

They go on to state:

To develop organisations that are effective in anticipating and responding to change and complexity, we need agile leaders—not just at the top but at all organisational levels. Yet we face a significant leadership gap: About 10 percent of today's managers still operate at Pre-Expert levels, 45 percent are experts, and 35 percent are Achievers. Only 10 percent [operate at Catalyst, Co-creator and Synergist levels].⁶⁹

The levels of leadership described by Joiner and Josephs correlate very closely with the seven levels of leadership model that I describe in chapter 7. For my own interest, I have taken their approach and blended it with seven levels of leadership model, described in chapter 7, to create a generic seven-stage behavioural model of leadership.

Each stage is a way of being that corresponds to a different level of consciousness. The way of being at each stage is pervasive in everything the leader does. The shift from one stage of leadership to the next follows the motivations that are endemic to the seasons of our

⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, 12.

⁶⁹ *Ibid.*, 225.

lives and can take a whole lifetime to complete. This seven-stage model is not intended to replace the seven levels of leadership model, but is simply a different perspective on the same topic. As you will see in the following description, the first three stages describe people who are leaders in name only. Their operating styles are more akin to management roles rather than leadership styles.

Stage 1: The Survivor

The survivor is not a leader in the true sense of the word because pure self-interest ultimately motivates the survivor. The survivor finds it difficult to trust other people, so they will control and verify everything. Consequently, survivors prefer to work on their own or in very small groups with people they can manipulate or order around. They usually manage the people who report to them through fear. They demand loyalty and may take revenge on anyone who tries to double-cross them. They are not interested in feedback at all.

Stage 2: The Paternalist

The paternalist communicator is also not a true leader because he or she finds it difficult to trust people who are not blood relatives. The paternalist communicator expects loyalty, and they also expect people to conform and adhere to their ideas. They don't want people taking initiatives without their approval. They are usually the founder or first-generation leaders of family-run businesses. Paternalist communicators are not so much focused on their own self-interest as the interest of the family as a whole. Unless it is offered discretely, they are reluctant to receive feedback because they see it as a challenge to their authority.

Stage 3: The Expert Manager

The expert/manager commands respect through their knowledge and experience. They are usually subject matter experts who, because of their high level of expertise or seniority, have been thrust into a managerial position. They prefer to work with people who follow instructions without too much questioning. Logic drives them. They thrive on measurement and problem solving. They take pride in improving efficiency, productivity, quality, and excellence. They consider it important for their people to focus on their professional growth. They do not usually have well-developed interpersonal communication skills

and therefore prefer to avoid giving or receiving feedback. They prefer to be supervisors than managers.

Stage 4: The Outcome-driven Achiever

The outcome-driven achiever has a strategic orientation and is focussed on getting results. They understand that, to achieve their goals, they need to be able to empower and motivate team members by giving them challenges that help them grow and develop their skills. The outcome-driven achiever wants to be accountable and responsible for his or her initiatives and will strongly defend his or her views. They orchestrate meetings to get people to buy into their ideas. They understand the importance of interpersonal skills and are therefore willing to support and coach their people in their personal growth. They are more open to giving and receiving feedback than the previous leadership stages because they know it will help them achieve their desired goals.

Stage 5: The Purpose-driven Self-actualizer

The purpose-driven self-actualizer is driven by a cause or vision that they communicate with passion, thereby gaining followers who gladly become adherents to the cause. They are willing to question their underlying assumptions and will actively seek out and include diverse points of view. They are not afraid to tackle difficult issues, and they practice direct open communication that nurtures transparency and builds trust. They are more skilled at exercising their emotional intelligence than previous levels and can easily switch from being assertive to being accommodating. They recognise the important role that culture plays in helping them achieve their goals. They are proactive in seeking and applying feedback and believe it is important for other members of their team to do the same.

Stage 6: The Co-creative Servant Leader

The co-creative servant leader collaborates with others to develop mutually beneficial synergistic outcomes that are more significant than they could have achieved on their own. They recognise that their ability to deliver is a function of the quality and motivation of their people. Consequently, they become a servant to those who serve them, providing coaching and mentoring to enable others to find fulfilment by becoming all they can become. They develop empathetic

relationships with other leaders and stakeholders to promote what is best for the common good. They recognise that the organisations or institutions that they lead are integral part of society and therefore consider the impact of the decisions they make on the local communities where they operate and the surrounding environment.

Stage 7: The Holistic Visionary

The holistic visionary views the world as a web of interconnectedness full of potentialities for manifesting the vision that represents their life purpose. They live in a state of present-centred awareness that allows them to stay calm in the midst of uncertainty. They consider the big picture (the whole system) and the long-term consequences of everything they do. They equally consider all stakeholders, embracing the highest ethical standards and socially responsible practices that support the sustainable evolution of humanity. They are sought out for their wisdom and compassion. They bring a sense of humility to everything they do. They have the ability to sense the underlying energies in a situation, align with them, and move with the flow. They are not self-serving. They prefer to stay in the background and support and promote others in the work that they do.

The Implications for Leadership Development

The ability to handle change and complexity is perhaps the most important and rapidly growing necessity for leadership in the twenty-first century. Every aspect of the world we live in is going through unprecedented change. Every aspect of human life is requiring us to adapt to increasing levels of complexity where more and more choices face us. As the problems of existence become even more global, the demand for leaders who can handle change and complexity will reach unprecedented levels. This leads me to three important conclusions.

- A leadership development paradigm that is based on three universal stages of evolution and the seven levels of human motivation has never been more important for our collective future than it is at this time. Unless we find a way to accelerate the number of leaders who are able to demonstrate the five evolutionary competencies, our collective survival and quality of life may be significantly compromised.

- We must find a way to significantly accelerate leadership development (the evolution of human consciousness) and make it not just a business imperative, but also a societal imperative. At the moment, leadership development is seen as a tool for maintaining and enhancing the pool of talented individuals that an organisation can draw on for its future success. It is not seen as means of evolving human consciousness, and its potential contribution to the continuance of 14 billion years of evolution is not understood.
- The role of mentors who are used to dealing with complexity will gain increasing importance as the population demographics associated with the baby boom generation bite deeper and younger leaders take the reins of power.

The way forward is not easy.

1. We have to change the way people view leadership development. The concept of self-leadership makes a significant contribution in this regard because it builds a bridge between personal growth and leadership development. For me, personal growth is what the character part of leadership development should be about. Far too frequently, we hear of politicians and business leaders who fall from grace because they lacked the essential human qualities of honesty and integrity. Put simply and bluntly, they had not developed the skills and capabilities necessary to lead themselves. Having learned how to lead yourself, then it becomes possible to do a much better job at leading others.
2. We have to find a way of democratising evolutionary leadership development by making it affordable (the right price) and accessible (Web-based) to everyone in the world who has access to the Internet and wants to improve themselves and their opportunities for leading a successful life. Leadership development, at least the self-leadership aspect, should not be a candy reward that is handed out to the most deserving professionals in an organisation. It should be available to everyone who wants it at a price that he or she is

able to personally afford, so, if the organisation does not offer it, they can do it for themselves.

Currently, the leadership development programmes that universities offer are not evolutionary and not accessible to the masses. They are only available to elites. They pay little attention to self-leadership, and they base their content on the old paradigms of leadership that have been found lacking.

The situation is worse in the developing nations. The problems they face are more acute, and the number and quality of leadership development programmes is significantly limited. Most leadership development programmes in developing countries are modelled on Western universities and old paradigm concepts.

“Houston, We Have a Problem”

This popularly accepted misquotation of Apollo 13 astronaut Jack Swigert’s communication to NASA headquarters concerning a severe technical malfunction of the lunar service module, in my opinion, aptly summarises the current global situation with regard to leadership development.

Even if we did have all the formal evolutionary training programmes we wanted in place, the leaders we would be producing would be too young to have developed the level of cognitive complexity (life maturity) to deal with the global issues we are now facing. These are not twenty- or fifty-year time span issues. The issues we are currently facing could affect humanity and the planet for centuries to come.

Thus, the question we urgently need to answer is, “How can we develop a global cadre of hundreds of thousands of forty- and fifty-year-old leaders with the cognitive complexity of a group of sixty- to seventy-year-old elders?” Of course we cannot. We can, however, do two things.

We can accelerate the pace of human self-actualization (self-leadership) by setting up an evolutionary leadership development programme on the World Wide Web. Through this portal, we can provide coaching and mentoring to support these young leaders in making decisions that stretch the limits of their cognitive complexity.