

New Pathways to Resilience Series

1: Making Disorder Generative

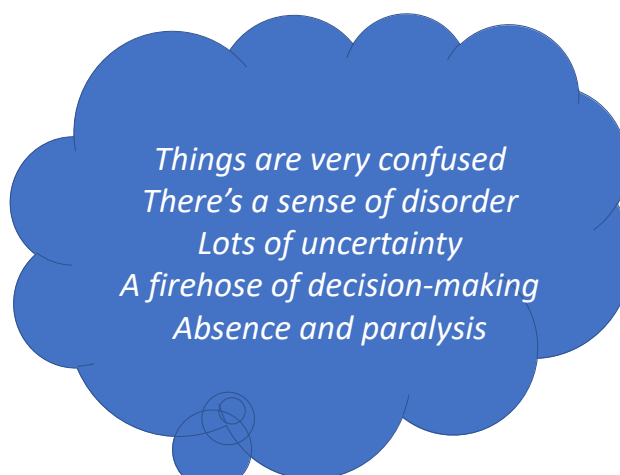
Making sense of the context around you and taking good decisions about what to do next

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Looking beyond crisis management, there's a world of great complexity for us all out there, new ways of doing things that we probably can't yet imagine, but which we can try to grapple with – in part to keep us from being overwhelmed, to give us a sense of positive purpose, a shared direction to pull us together; and also a way to involve others, to build new networks for the future, even to celebrate how art can shine light on our common humanity.

Conditions of Disorder

From everything we've heard and experienced ourselves, we know that there's a good deal of confusion and uncertainty around in the midst of this crisis. We're all trying to survive amidst conflicting advice, shortages in public services, closed buildings, no foreseeable income, staff layoffs, organizational grief, and much more.



The starting place is to recognize and accept all this – a compound of lots of different dynamics. And then to seek productive and emotionally feasible ways to move beyond this disorder, rather than give in to the flood of detail or to helplessness. You're going to need different types of decision-making for different kinds of challenges – so I encourage you to try not to lump everything together into a single insurmountable problem in your mind.

It's important not to let the confused nature of things right now induce a deer-in-the-headlights feeling (a kind of manic paralysis). Nor, on the other hand, to act too quickly or decisively in all areas, when the likely results may in some cases be very unclear. Neither type of response on its own will be effective overall. Rather than being overwhelmed by the confusion, uncertainty and lack of resources, our job, I think, is to make the situation as “positively puzzling” as we can. This means, first of all, adopting a questioning mindset about almost everything.

I want to suggest that you look at the full range of different aspects of your current reality to determine what kinds of decision-making, and what kinds of action, will be best. Look hard at the various types of moves you might make. Include in your consideration not just your

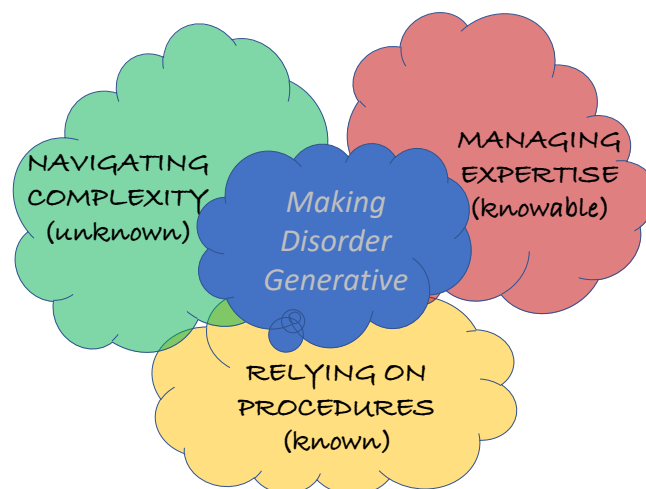
programs and public services, your staff and organizational structures, but also your financial construction and the communities that place social capital in you and your work.

The overall challenge, I think, is to sort out which challenges belong where, so that you and your organizations can move forward with effective responses, rather than be overwhelmed or depressed. With some of the challenges you face, it may be clear enough what you should do. With other challenges, you may have to bring in some experts to help you sort out those complicated things. Some other aspects of the whole situation are undoubtedly complex, and demand you find ways to adapt and do things differently, unlike how you've ever done anything. And some challenges you face may indeed be chaotic, and triage followed by creative re-imagining will be needed.

If we can make some sort of sense of the different parts of the unfamiliar territory you're facing, it's more likely that you'll be able to move forward productively, in ways that suit the different features of this unprecedented landscape. And I think you'll find it more possible to give your staff, artists, trustees and other constituents a sense of purpose and meaning, and specific new ways to get involved. Momentum is precious, and needn't cost much. This is how we can make disorder generative.

Moving on from Disorder

To move on from this central place of Disorder – to make it a transitional state, not a permanent one – I reckon there are three main approaches you'll need to consider and decide between, for different aspects of your situation.



First, **Managing Expertise** – We're surrounded by experts right now, so we need to look carefully at the advice we're getting and decide whether to take it on board or not. This could be new advice about what to do during and after the pandemic; or it could be knowledge you've had for a while, but have chosen to ignore. If you move in this direction, it'll be with responses that, for you, are "knowable."

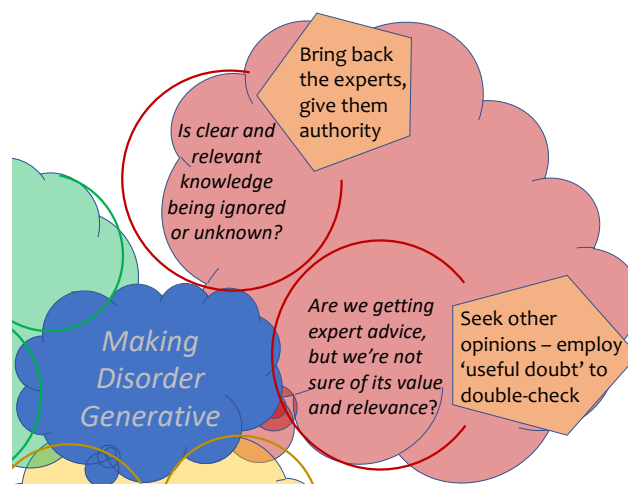
Second, **Navigating Complexity** – This is about responding to the unpredictable, unplannable newness of things, where we need to come up with strategies and actions we've never used before, departing sharply from what was, until recently, "business-as-usual." Right now, these pathways forward are "unknown," so we have to explore and discover them.

Third, we may decide that some issues can be settled by **Relying on known Procedures** – This means using established best practices, whether in short-term crisis management, or by returning to aspects of the past. This is a very strong attractor as a way out of Disorder, but it can also be a trap, if we stay there too long, or too single-mindedly.

Six Questions, Six Action Steps

So, let's look at all this in a bit more detail. Here are six questions to help you map and make sense of many different aspects of what you're facing now. For each question, I'll suggest the type of action you can usefully take. This approach owes a lot to Dave Snowden, creator of the Cynefin Framework and one of the thought-leaders whose work has inspired our own. We acknowledge and thank him for his thinking and writing about the pandemic, and on leading in chaos and complexity.

Managing Expertise



1. **Are there issues where we're getting definite expert advice, but we're not totally sure of its value and relevance?**

Perhaps you see those issues as puzzling and uncertain, but the experts you normally rely on (internally and externally) are still insisting their advice is sound. If so, then rapidly setting up a debate between those experts and others from different backgrounds creates a form of useful doubt that allows you to rapidly check the advice you're getting. If it holds up, follow it. If questions remain, you can then return as necessary to the central domain to generate more investigation. (This two-way street between the transitional domain of disorder and testing specific kinds of response also holds true for the other action steps you might take.)

EXAMPLE: As no-one can be in our building, our artists' residencies are completely closed down as well as our gallery. As a result, everyone says we can't support artists in selling their work, a vital part of their livelihood. But we found we could partner to set up an online sales gallery, invite many more artists into it, and promote it through our national network. Sales have gone up dramatically.

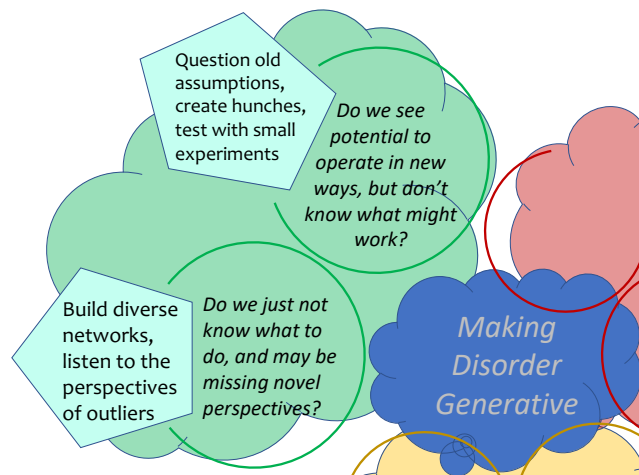
2. **Is there any aspect of the situation where we'd say there's a clear and obvious body of definitely relevant knowledge that we are either ignoring or do not possess?**

This is a hard one to acknowledge, and requires honest, impartial dialogue. We all have a strong tendency to avoid expert advice if the consequences are unacceptable at the time.

So bring back the experts (whether they're internal or external), apologize and give them some authority to get on with it. In terms of difficulty, this is complicated work, but no more than that. It's not complex.

EXAMPLE: We should take the earlier advice of our marketing department to use our rich video archive of shows as a way to reach people, something we didn't prioritize before. OR: We resisted offering informal staff reactions to paintings in our collection as undermining scholarship, but they were right and we can show ourselves in a totally new light.

Navigating Complexity



3. Are there issues where there seems to be a lot of potential for us to operate effectively in new ways, but we can't know now which ways might work?

If this is the case, these challenges are complex, and you need to adapt – to do something different that you've never done before. You can make progress by questioning your prior assumptions in this area, identifying a series of hypotheses or “hunches” around what might work – contradictory hunches if possible, so you don't put all your adaptive eggs in a single basket. You'll need to identify champions for each hypothesis, and they will design and carry out a rapid series of experiments to test them. (We think of this as “the antidote to planning.”)

These “safe-to-fail” experiments will influence your understanding of each challenge, so that sustainable solutions will emerge and become clearer. We call these “small experiments with radical intent,” and each one should deliberately cost little or nothing, and take a tiny amount of time to carry out.

EXAMPLE: We'll ask a lot of people outside our sector how we might use our resources to engage people in their homes in current circumstances; we'll filter the results to create multiple hypotheses; and carry out experiments. We'll convene a virtual Innovation Team of people whose day-jobs are on hold.

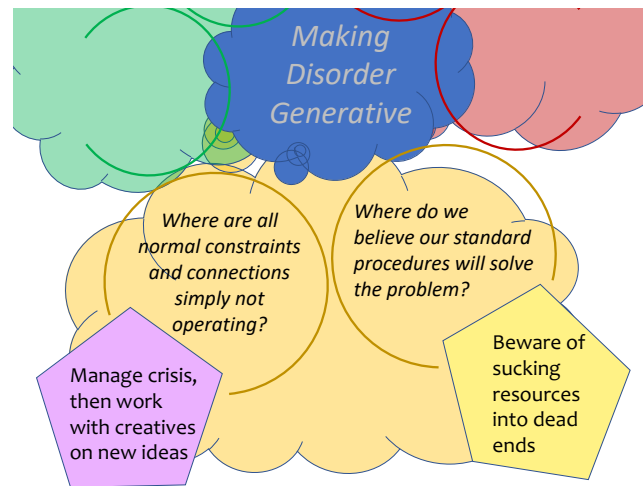
4. Are there issues where we just don't know what to do, and feel we may be missing the kinds of novel perspectives that are simply unavailable to people inside the organization?

Where this is the case, you're on a kind of boundary between complete chaos and deep complexity. What can be useful here is to rapidly develop and animate far-flung (local) networks to identify different perspectives on the issue – and, critically, perspectives from a minority – that you might otherwise be ignoring. Outliers are key here as they are far more

likely to see potential solutions than the currently dominant views from your “usual suspects.” You can then test these possibilities by shifting to #3 and navigating their complexity.

EXAMPLE: If our musicians are used to seeing themselves as a single large unit, how they be deployed differently to reach people in as many varied ways as the creativity in our community can come up with? How might their talents be used and recognized other than as performers? Let’s gather virtually the most disparate small groups we can across town – people with no obvious link to our organization – and ask the question.

Relying on known Procedures



5. Is there some aspect of the conditions where all normal constraints and connections are simply not operating?

If so, then these challenges are indeed chaotic. You will have to move quickly into the draconian and restrictive approaches of crisis management. Then you should try to engage highly creative individuals from different sectors to work with you on new and original ideas arising from the wreckage. For its coherence and clarity, this a strong attractor, but don’t stay just here! It’s often necessary for leaders to be heroic, certain and authoritative in the early days of a crisis. But you can’t afford for it to be the only approach you take, now you’ve looked at the full situation and broken it apart into its component parts.

EXAMPLE: We’ve basically shut down completely, furloughed two-thirds of our staff, closed the building, and put everything on hold. All we’re focusing on now is seeking extraordinary grants to stem the red ink. Where do we go next?

6. Are there unresolved issues where we genuinely believe that our standard processes and procedures properly applied will solve the problem?

This means relying on established best practices, and trying to return to familiar routines. There is a tiny, tiny chance that this might be correct, and a small possibility that it might prove to work accidentally. But it is a high-risk strategy, as the likelihood of time being well spent is very low, and the danger of sucking resources into dead ends is high.

EXAMPLE: Choosing to reinforce the usual chain of command for ideas and decision-making (they’re done exclusively by the Board and ED) – might restore order, but it could also disastrously limit access to potential new and original thinking.

The tendency to snap back

Finally, I encourage you to recognize the larger danger for our organizations that lies not far beyond our current conditions. As the crisis reduces in urgency and restrictions are gradually lifted, we may well emerge exhausted and suffering from “decision fatigue” (we may also experience a kind of euphoria in having got through it). Either way, the idea of returning to business-as-usual, to the normalcy we know (and know used to work) is deeply attractive. However, “snapping back” to customary behaviors, structures and patterns of thought is a lure that will seduce us into failure, even as we clear the immediate hurdles.

Humankind has a long history of acting in this way. If we do so, in a few months’ time, we will miss the real opportunity for generative change. By conveniently ignoring the truly complex challenges for our organization that the crisis has revealed, we will relapse into a more gradual decline. Those demands for adaptive thinking and action won’t actually go away – they will just return in a few months or years, in stronger, more chaotic, forms that will be more difficult to deal with, may even then have become intractable.

So, summon your courage and stamina, reserve some organizational energy for exploration and discovery, and give a high priority to navigating complexity after, as well as during, the immediate crisis. That’s where your future awaits you.