



Reflections on the Future

Reflections on the future: In the here and now

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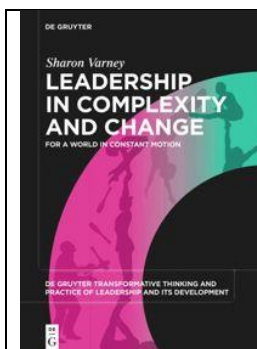
Hello from the here and now

Hello from the here and now. How does it look from where you are? In what ways is it similar to a year ago? And in what ways is it different? Is it what you expected or imagined?

Of course it's not. We could never have precisely imagined the here and now a year ago. Yet not everything is different. Even against the backdrop of a global pandemic, a rather extreme event, many people in many places around the world have managed to recreate many of the familiar patterns of working life. Knowledge-based organisations, in particular, have proved remarkably resilient. It is quite incredible how much has continued amidst major disruption.

But how did this amazing coordination happen so rapidly and so extensively in so many places? That's complexity in action. Complexity in action is such an ordinary part of organisational life that we normally gloss over it. In this short article, I want to pause to explore it.

This thought piece on the theme of 'Reflections on the future' draws on principles from complexity science to explore the connections between the past and the future in the here and now.



The insights I'd like to share in this article are drawn from 'Leadership in Complexity and Change: For a world in constant motion' (Varney, Forthcoming 2021). In this new book, I explore key ideas from complexity science in a straightforward manner, without dumbing them down. Then I share some practical approaches to help you in developing learning informed leadership for a complex world that is in constant motion.

<https://www.degruyter.com/document/isbn/9783110713428/html>

How did we get here?

Looking backwards

Looking backwards we can connect some of the dots about what has actually happened to get us to today into a convincing story. In doing this, we clean up the story by leaving out many of the dots of yesterday that don't quite fit the story that we want to tell today. And, with the benefit of hindsight, we leave out all the little things that we thought were dots, which turned out to be smudges and not dots at all! Looking backwards, our stories and explanations of the here and now often make too much sense. It all seems obvious once we know the answer.¹

The advantage of hindsight

It seems obvious now that bricks and mortar retailers, even small ones, need a good online offering. Yet, if the virus that had hit the world in 2020 had been a computer virus, then it would seem obvious now that online retailers also need physical outlets.

History matters

History matters. What has been said and done cannot be unsaid and undone. Where we are in the here and now is inevitably affected by what has gone before. It creates the current context of what is now possible.

Understanding of the past evolves

Time marches on, but it's the only thing that does. It's important to understand that the link between past and present is not a straight line. It's rather more complex than that. As fellow author in this 'Reflections on the future' series, Chris Rodgers, aptly puts it, the working world is wiggly.² We make sense of the past in the here and now. So, while the events of the past don't change, the meaning of past events evolves to fit what we now know. In that way, the past changes in the here and now as we reflect on it from our new vantage point.

Meaning changes

Let's consider a past decision to buy a diesel car. We used to think that diesel cars were an environmentally friendly choice due to their more economic consumption of fossil fuels. Yet we now know that diesel emissions are hazardous to human health. So, our views on whether a past decision to buy a diesel car was a good decision, or not, may have changed over the years.

What next?

Seeing the future

So, what does the future look like? Well, that's the multimillion-dollar question!!! It's the one that managers in all kinds of enterprises would love to be able to answer.

Reflecting on the future is tricky territory. We need a large dose of pragmatism to avoid being either mystical or statistical. No one can mystically 'see' the future because it is not *out there* waiting to be discovered. Equally no one can statistically predict the future because it is not *in here* waiting to unfold from past events. The future is changing in the

here and now, so predictions and prophecies are merely guesses. And, in a changing world, they are highly likely to be wrong in important ways.

Loops, not lines

The relationship between the here and now and what will become is not a straight line. It's affected and changed by all the things that are happening in the here and now. In the working world, all the things that people say and do as they interact with one another in the normal course of their working lives affects what is possible and what is not. We therefore need to think in terms of loops, rather than lines.

Uncertainty is a certainty

In this wiggly world, small actions or a throwaway comment may have unpredictably large effects – this is known as 'the butterfly effect'. Equally, large efforts may have little or no effect. Precisely what will happen in the future is unknowable, until it emerges.³ Uncertainty is the only certainty!

Resistance or resilience?

Conventional wisdom suggests that when large organisational change efforts fail, the problem is people's resistance to change. Complexity science shows that it can be the complete opposite. Human beings are incredibly creative and adaptable. Facing multiple pressures from a global pandemic, many people, in many places, made many adjustments to how they were working to deliver something akin to business as usual *without anyone being in charge of making it happen*. That's not resistance, it's resilience, and it's incredibly valuable in a complex and changing world.

Back to the here and now

In constant motion

The world is in constant motion. Today is different from yesterday, and tomorrow will be different again. Curiously the here and now is also in constant motion as we adapt and respond to one another in the moment. For example, as we respond to one another in meetings, via email or chat, or even walking down the street, we are engaging in loops of mutual influence. We often refer to this mutual influence as 'leadership'.

Dynamic patterning

The here and now of the working world is not exactly the same as it was. But nor is it completely different. We don't turn up to work each day and find ourselves in completely unfamiliar territory having to learn everything from scratch. (Thank goodness!)

Differently familiar

When the world flipped from in person to virtual meetings, we knew roughly where we were. We understood the conventions of 'meeting' and 'conversation' that we were looking to recreate in a digital space. We probably knew quite a lot about many of the topics of our work conversations and we probably had some familiarity with the devices we were using. Yet, chances are that we were using familiar devices in new ways, maybe we were getting to

grips with new apps, and we were almost certainly navigating new meeting norms with many of our colleagues.

Even in times of fairly major disruption, we tend to know roughly where we are and roughly what to do. There is some recognisable pattern to it, albeit that pattern is continuously changing in expected and unexpected ways as people say and do things in their everyday working lives. I call this ‘dynamic patterning’ to highlight the constant motion of familiar patterns.⁴

Changing in the here and now

If we want to get to grips with the future, then we must pay close attention to the here and now.

We are co-creating the future through our everyday words and actions. But as our words and actions get entangled in the dynamic patterning of organisational life, surprises, puzzles and unintended effects are common. That’s why even the best planned change projects often take unexpected twists and turns.

We cannot simply set a course for the future because it is changing in the here and now. It’s changing in front of our eyes and behind our backs. The future is in constant motion:

“The future is a dance between patterns and events” (Boulton et al., 2015: 29).

Reflecting on the future

Hindsight

So, what strategies do we have at our disposal to reflect on this changing future?

Looking backwards, we use hindsight to tell a coherent story about how we got from then to now. There are valuable lessons to be learned from hindsight. No one wants to keep on making the same mistakes, or missing opportunities that could be grasped. But lessons don’t stay learned if they sit in the past. We must bring them into the here and now so that we can evolve the learning in a changing world.

Better hindsight does not give us better foresight because the relationship between past, present and future is not a straight line. It’s full of loops.

Foresight

Foresight is a slippery thing. What will be possible is changing in the here and now. For example, while we envisioned a future direction of travel for The Henley Forum (see below), the world delivered rather more opportunity, rather more quickly, than we could have anticipated.

Henley Forum – seizing emerging opportunities

In late 2019, I was in a meeting room with other members of the Henley Forum team to design our 2020-21 members' programme. We wanted to add in shorter networking sessions and to be able to involve more international participants and speakers because we knew that those things would add value for our members. We decided to look for opportunities to introduce some virtual elements into our programme, so it was easier for people to participate from wherever they were in the world. We'd already been experimenting with Zoom and Teams and they looked promising. But how could we convince people to join us?

OK, so you know what happened next. In mid-March we flipped our whole programme to the virtual space and opened our doors to the world.

Our visioning activity did not give us foresight about what would happen. But it did prime us to spot emerging opportunities as they arose in the here and now. Our experiments with new technology did not give us certainty about what would happen. But they did prepare us to seize the opportunities. And the relationships we had already begun to nurture with potential speakers from other countries enabled us to move quickly.

Insight

Rather than relying on hindsight to steer us forwards, or striving for the impossible goal of accurate foresight, what we need is *insight*. That means focusing on the emerging future that is *in sight* on the edges of the here and now.

Paying close attention to the dynamic patterning of organisational life in the here and now helps us to develop insight into the future *as it is emerging*. We are looking out for are emerging issues and opportunities that are hidden in the here and now. They're hidden because they are not quite the same, but nor are they completely different. This 'not quite-ness' is fertile ground for spotting the vital signs of change sooner.

Five top tips

I would like to close by offering you 5 top tips for reflecting on the future:

1. If you want to reflect on the future, then you must pay close attention to the here and now.
2. The future is emerging in the leading edge of now, so accept that it is likely to be ambiguous.
3. We learn in the emerging future by spotting clues. So, look out for the vital signs of what's changing in the here and now.⁵
4. The future is unlikely to come into view right in front of you. So, look around and expand your field of view.
5. In a complex world, we all see part of the picture. So, invite other perspectives.

About the author

Dr Sharon Varney is Director at space for learning ltd and has been involved with The Henley Forum since 2015. She is a specialist in leadership and organisation development (OD). Working at the sharp end in large, global organisations sparked Sharon’s curiosity about the complex dynamics of leadership and change. Insights from her award-winning doctoral research are now available to all in her new book: *Leadership in Complexity and Change*.



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Curious to know more?

If you want to explore these ideas in more depth, there are several good books you can read:

Boulton, J. G., Allen, P. M. & Bowman, C. 2015. *Embracing complexity: Strategic perspectives for an age of turbulence*, Oxford University Press.

Kahneman, D. 2012. *Thinking, fast and slow*, Penguin Books.

Klein, G. 2013. *Seeing what others don't: The remarkable ways we gain insights*, Nicholas Brearley Publishing.

Rodgers, C. 2021. *The wiggly world of organization*, Routledge.

Stacey, R. D. 2012. *Tools and techniques of leadership and management: Meeting the challenge of complexity*, Abingdon, Oxon, Routledge.

Varney, S. Forthcoming 2021. *Leadership in complexity and change*, De Gruyter.

Watts, D. J. 2012. *Everything is obvious: How common sense fails*, London, Atlantic Books.

¹ For more on the underpinning thinking behind these ideas, see Gary Klein (2013), Daniel Kahneman (2012) and Duncan Watts (2012).

² Chris Rodgers talks about the ‘wiggly world’, his term for complexity (Rodgers, 2021).

³ Ralph Stacey explains that the future is unknowable because the things we are each saying and doing are entangled in a process of gesture and response (Stacey, 2012). This entanglement (Varney, Forthcoming 2021) is one reason why the future is better thought of as “a dance between patterns and events” (Boulton et al., 2015: 29).

⁴ You can read more about dynamic patterning and how to engage with it in Varney (Forthcoming 2021).

⁵ More of “the vital signs of change” and how to spot them in Varney (Forthcoming 2021).