



HOW TO TURN **COMPLEXITY** INTO **ADVANTAGE**

David Komlos & David Benjamin

With all the fuss about unprecedented and accelerating complexity,

you'll probably be surprised to hear that today's standout leaders are solving their organization's defining challenges—including the seemingly intractable ones—and achieving their biggest goals at least ten-times faster and with a fraction of the effort than their peers. They have upended conventional wisdom and replaced it with a new underlying logic, from which when understood, there's no turning back. They view challenges through a different lens and tackle them with a different approach. In so doing, they differentiate themselves, free up organizational capacity, and tend to fulfill their hard-earned mandates.

By contrast, others are playing defense—in most cases, unnecessarily.

For most leaders, if there was a specially-formulated Pepto-Bismol® for heartburn brought on by chronic unsuccessful problem-solving and change, they'd keep a bottle on-hand for the daily grind.

But that would just treat the symptoms; what leaders want to be reaching for is a cure.

To talk cure—to appreciate cure—we need to get at the heart of this chronic condition. Because leaders struggling with multidimensional, fast-paced challenges aren't stupid and traditional problem-solving techniques aren't nonsensical. It's just that things have changed.



When we refer to complex challenges, we mean something specific. As Dave Snowden elegantly describes, complex challenges are categorically different from other kinds of challenges. Simple and complicated challenges (the other kinds) are linear problems. They're mechanistic: Solved once, solved forever. Complex challenges, on the other hand, are new each time. They are non-deterministic problems, with many moving, interconnected and compounding parts that can only be untangled and solved for through trial-and-error. These are the defining challenges, the ones that confound leaders, the ones that need new solutions each time. Pushing the ON button in a car is simple. Fixing a car is complicated. Disrupting the automotive industry is complex.

Over time, long-standing truths are replaced by new truths.

NBA teams used to require a 7-foot Center to win. Today, most 7-foot Centers struggle to keep up with the game.

Staying out late to party used to involve a call to a taxi company. Today, find the closest and cheapest ride in the palm of your hand.

In retail, dominant "footprint" used to win. Today's retail strategy emphasizes digital, with "footprint" serving a different purpose than it used to.

And, when it comes to solving complex challenges, conventional wisdom's best-before date has expired. In the past, the biggest brains used to win. Today, top brainpower is abundantly available. It has become merely table stakes, and is no longer sufficient to win.

Today, it's how you're solving the problem that matters most.

Conventional thinking says “don’t try to boil the ocean.” These days, you have to.

Conventional thinking says “talent is scarce.” Now, you have to recognize that it’s abundant and all around you.

Conventional thinking says “go slow to go fast.” Now, you have to go fast at going slow to go fast.

Conventional thinking says “there is no silver bullet” when it comes to solving big problems. Now, you need to believe that there is one.

Boil the ocean. Talent is abundant. Go fast. There is a silver bullet, and in problem-solving and change, that silver bullet is collisions (more on that later).

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Organizations Are Flat-Footed in the Face of Change

Three legacy issues bog down meaningful progress—and you'd better deal with them fast, because there's a lion on your desk.

Issue #1: The organization's nervous system is distributed

Imagine that this morning, when you opened your office door, you were confronted by a ferocious lion sitting on your desk. What would you have done? If you're like most people, you would have slammed the door and fled in the opposite direction.

Your reaction would have been instantaneous. You wouldn't have dialed the IT support line for help, you wouldn't have called in an analyst to study the lion and suggest options, and you certainly wouldn't have brought together a task force or called in management consultants to do a SWOT analysis and recommend solutions.

You can get to action instantaneously because you don't need to include anyone else in your sensing of the lion, absorbing its implications, thinking about options, deciding on the best option, and enacting that option. You can do all of that in the blink of an eye.

Your organization can't. When it comes to your organization's major threats and its biggest opportunities, the people required to do the sensing, absorbing, thinking, deciding and acting—the 'SATDA' functions—are all distributed. In other words, while your nervous system is intact, allowing you to act so quickly, your organization's nervous system is entirely distributed. So it takes far, far longer to respond to the metaphorical lion, and rarely can your organization do so with unity of purpose. This is a universal truth. You can't re-org your way past that. Incentives

won't change that. You can't agile, design-think, or outsource your way around that. At some point, to address a major challenge and act quickly, the sensors, absorbers, thinkers, deciders and actors need to be brought together in one combined effort: The sensing of what's really happening; the absorbing of the implications; the thinking about options; the deciding on best options; and ultimately the acting. With any one of those five 'SATDA' functions performed in isolation, the whole nervous system slows right down. Which is what typically happens.

Issue #2: SATDA is left to 'the usual suspects'

When it comes to SATDA, conventional habit has been to leave those functions to the usual suspects—the big brains and experienced leaders (whether inside or outside the organization) informed, potentially, by others. With complex challenges, though, there are too many moving parts, too many facets, too much to be sensed and absorbed, too many options, too much pressure, and too much pace to expect that these 'usual suspects' can perform it all and handle it all unaided.

To deal with complexity, you have to open the doors and let a much broader and deeper variety of people into the nerve center: The 'unusual suspects' is where it's at.

Issue #3: The rush to action takes precedence over hard-earned shared understanding

To stretch the lion metaphor, imagine if your arms understood that there was a lion on your desk and knew that the right course of action was to flee, while your feet thought it might be a dog and your legs were asking 'isn't a lion just a cat and aren't cats harmless?' and your ears were arguing with each other because one was hearing 'lying on the desk', and the other was hearing 'lion on the desk'. In that situation, in jumping immediately to action, you'd most likely fall flat on your face. That's called panic.

Shared understanding—of what’s really going on, what really matters, and why—is essential to get to the right, effective actions and critical mass buy-in, but it is elusive because people are distributed and specialized and won’t go looking for it unless they notice its absent and see that as a problem. Even worse, to get individuals to see that “shared understanding” is not the same as “my understanding”, you’re now deep into the human dynamics that make problem-solving and change so hard in the first place.

The leap to action must be quick but skipping over shared understanding, that’s just neglectful. At some point, those who lead, those who influence, and those who act are all going to need to fully buy-in to the plan and capably explain it to others if it’s to stand a chance. Without shared understanding, you’re in for lengthy change management initiatives, persuasion campaigns, passive and active resistance, finger-pointing, and overall inertia. Deciding what to do without first fully understanding the situation is like putting a team on the field without first knowing what sport you’re playing.

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Why Do We Allow These Issues Persist?

Without recognizing and overcoming these three issues that impede complex problem-solving and execution—distributed nervous system, usual suspects, and deferral of shared understanding—you will reliably and repeatedly experience long delays, partial solutions, and weak execution.

So, why are smart people sticking with a formula that fails? What's going on?

Conventional Thinking

First of all, conventional thinking is deeply entrenched and leading you astray: Don't boil the ocean; Talent is scarce; Go slow to go fast; There is no silver bullet. We all grew up with this thinking, we all learned it in school and early in our careers from our bosses, mentors and coaches, and we've come to accept these pearls of wisdom as unassailably true. They're not.

Tools and Models

Second, you've been equipped with tools and models that are wrong for complexity:

- Traditional consulting, hub-and-spoke interview models, linear, step-by-step strategy development methodologies, and so on, were: designed for simpler complex times, where the pace and scale of change and opportunity were not nearly as acute and multifaceted, and built on a talent-is-scarce mindset (i.e. I don't have the people, or enough of the talent, to figure this out—hence I should bring someone in who does).
- More modern approaches—like agile, lean, or design-thinking, for example—espouse new thinking, but fall short in how they deal with these issues, particularly when it comes time

to get large groups of people together to co-create something (whether a spec, a business process re-design, or a new customer experience). Even when they attempt to bring in the unusual suspects, including good coverage of the SATDA functions, they aren't equipped for accelerated, effective, productive work in large groups.

The Complexity Formula inverts conventional thinking, and delivers the models and tools that match complexity:

It's Not The Problem You're Solving; It's How You're Approaching Problem Solving

Bucket Your Problems.

Start by separating your problems by category. The simple and complicated ones you can deal with relatively easily: Solve them yourself or assign them to experts. Put the complex ones in a different pile and approach them the right way.

Name All the Right Players.

Think through who the relevant sensors, absorbers, thinkers, deciders and actors are/should be/will be. And then think more aggressively about who else you likely need to include for additional variety: futurists, market experts, cynics, optimists, customers, partners, envoys from parallel realities (e.g. other industries, other geographies), and so on. The people who comprise your SATDA may be too insular, too native to your organization, too weathered, and too harmonious to fully develop fresh insights and innovative options on their own.

Treat SATDA as One Effort.

Bring everyone together to combine what they see, hear, and believe, align on what it all means, discuss options, and recommend the best ones. We're not talking about a restructure or a temporary re-assignment even; we mean convening them in one place temporarily—two to three days, max—when triggered by the lion, with the urgency of the lion.

Put Shared Understanding before Action.

Take a deep breath, have your group take a deep breath, and force them to tell stories, to express anger and frustration, to describe what they see going on from every angle, and to level-set on language, before releasing them to ideate and discuss solutions. Make it okay to flounder and gripe. Build tension and frustration and make it okay to spin wheels. Just do it fast and make sure everyone is listening to each other and challenging each other. Once they've primed their own pipe with data, information and knowledge that they've collectively expressed, the resulting shared understanding will produce explosions of progress.

Make Collisions the Fuel for Solving.

And finally, we get to collisions—the 'method of action' for the cure. Those explosions of progress? They are fueled by collisions—everyone colliding with everyone else in high volume. Not haphazardly or by chance, but in a coordinated, ordered, comprehensive, and systematic way. Make these collisions between everyone iterative. Trigger them once for shared understanding, a second time for idea generation, and a third time for deciding. An abundance of controlled, high-speed, high-quality, high-impact, high-volume collisions—they're what fuel your brain and have you running for the door in the blink of an eye, and they're what will fuel your organization's quick response to anything complex.

Inside the Brain of a Complexity Master

Boil the ocean. Go fast. Talent is abundant. There is a silver bullet, and in problem-solving, that silver bullet is no longer brainpower—it's collisions.

The leaders producing great impact at ten-times speed have mastered complexity. They have reframed how to rapidly deal with their biggest challenges from:

Who do I hire? What's it going to cost? How long is it going to take? How will I get everyone bought-in? How will I drive change management?

To:

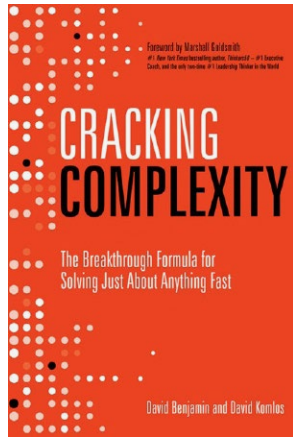
Who are all the right players? How do I level-set them? How do I engineer the right number of high-quality, high-volume, high-speed collisions amongst them? How do I quickly launch them based on their insights, new plans, new alignment, new-found energy and trust and desire to execute?

They are no longer confounded, perplexed, frustrated, and held hostage by those big problems. They have turned complexity into an advantage for themselves and for their organizations. Master complexity and this is what you'll be known for. You'll open up possibilities that you couldn't possibly otherwise achieve. It's just a matter of deciding which of your challenges to get after first.

Over to you. 📧



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David Komlos, CEO of Syntegrity, is an entrepreneur, early-stage investor, and speaker who has helped change the way many global leaders approach their top challenges. From Fortune 100 transformation to international aid, content creation in sports and entertainment to improving access to life-saving products, David advises top leaders and enterprises on how to dramatically accelerate solutions and execution on their defining challenges. He frequently speaks on topics related to complexity, fast problem-solving and mobilization, and scaling talent.

David Benjamin is the co-founder of Syntegrity and the chief architect behind its implementation of the Complexity Formula. David regularly guides leaders and their teams through their application of the formula, helping them get to decisions and action in days, no matter the industry, type of challenge, or nature of the organization.

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