



Interview: John Chapman

The Ambiguity Advantage

SM	<p>Hello, this is Steve Macaulay from the Learning Services Team at Cranfield School of Management. I am talking today about an important topic that was raised by the book <i>The Ambiguity Advantage</i>, by David Wilkinson.</p> <p>Ambiguity and leadership, they are very important and yet much of the time we spend trying to reduce ambiguity. Now I am talking today with John Chapman who is a Visiting Fellow at the Praxis Centre who has done a lot of work on leadership. So how important do you believe ambiguity is to managers?</p>
JC	<p>Well, it's interesting to first of all distinguish between managers and leaders and I think one of the things that I see a lot in organisations is a tendency for managers to focus on reducing ambiguity. That tends to be – the managerial job is to define things, plan things, eliminate uncertainty and deliver results.</p> <p>Leadership is in a different category of activity and I think at its most creative and most demanding, leadership is really about not only tolerating ambiguity but looking for opportunities to exploit it, to really take an organisation somewhere that it really couldn't imagine for itself before an opportunity arose. So I think that it is important to first make that distinction that there are occasions when it's very important to eliminate ambiguity within an organisation and at other times actually, its very important to pay attention to it and to regard it as a friend rather than an enemy. And of course that gives people in organisations a real challenge, because how do you know when to do one and when to do the other?</p>
SM	<p>So largely, what you seem to be saying is, if you are looking to the future, if you look in times of change, then ambiguity is something that you need to be well tuned to, be comfortable with, to be able to handle?</p>
JC	<p>That's right Steve, and when we looked at the environment that organisations are operating in, whether it's a public sector organisation or a private sector organisation, whether it's a small organisation or an international organisation, what you see is conditions of increasing complexity, increasing interdependence and a huge amount of ongoing dynamic change and those three things are happening at rates which were unknown to us ten or twenty years ago. So the environment is actually generating large amounts of ambiguity through these factors of interconnectivity, complexity and change, and unless organisations can learn how to get to grips with this environment, simply trying to eliminate it isn't going to work.</p>

SM	<p>So, you have spent a lot of your time developing leaders, so how do you develop skills in this area? I mean, it's all very well saying you need it, my guess is that not many people have got this ability to tolerate that huge amount of ambiguity.</p>
JC	<p>That's absolutely right. I can't remember who it was that said our job in life is to survive our education and it's a nice little one liner, but there is an element of truth in that because we are trained and educated in our cultural environment to really give emphasis to the rational, logical part of our brain and that is how we are brought up in our schools and universities. That is what is given precedence, and it's given priority, is honing this wonderful part of our brain – the human neo cortex which is the gift of cognitive rational conscious thought. But there is a problem there because that is not everything and it is not wholly the basis for how we make decisions and choices. This is something that brain science is just beginning to uncover. So the neuro scientists are beginning to identify the underlying mechanisms by which we make decisions and actually we find that it is as much an intuitive and emotional and imaginal process as it is a rational process, and we don't have much of a tradition of training ourselves to absorb, develop, appreciate and hone these wider cognitive skills. And they are important for dealing with uncertainty, because what we know about what is needed to really identify and exploit ambiguous situations is that it is a combination, a combination of thinking skills and a combination of emotional intelligence which is about managing one's own emotions and learning how to communicate at an emotional level.</p> <p>So, at a practical level what that means is having the strength of mind to suspend judgment, suspend our critical faculty and keep an open mind in order to really sense the environment and appreciate exactly what is out there so that we can start to discriminate the things which are important and the things which aren't, because what we are trained to do by and large with our rational thinking processes is to funnel down, narrow down, come to a conclusion, and that is part of our evolutionary heritage. That is part of how we learn to survive as human beings, is to identify difference and discriminate so that when we are walking through the forest we can distinguish between a stick and a snake very quickly. Now part of learning to appreciate the value of ambiguity is being able to see the stick and the snake, and not jump to an immediate conclusion, and think about the implications of the stick and the snake in business. It's the difference between a threat and an opportunity for example. And at the emotional level it's not actually being railroaded into reaching a conclusion or jumping to a decision simply because we feel emotionally uncomfortable or threatened, and that is again something that is quite clear in the research – the extent to which we all tend to have these defensive behaviours and we all tend to, at one level or another, resent certain kinds of change and we build defences to resist it and these defences are largely built on a set of emotional responses. So actually developing emotional awareness, as well as developing open mindedness, quick thinking is really important.</p>

SM	So how have you been able to develop people's insight and skills in this area?
JC	<p>Well, one of the fundamental things is to provide people with a place and a time and a space where they can really take the time to reflect on their own leadership style. So, creating that space as a learning environment is the first step.</p> <p>The next step is helping them out in the real world, back in their organisations, to create similar kinds of spaces where they can stop and think about what is going on, and actually also feel what is going, sense what is happening in the organisation rather than just plough on in this continuous process of dealing with whatever the organisation throws at you.</p> <p>So the kind of personal discipline about creating your own space for reflection is really important. It's something that, by and large, leaders and managers don't allocate the time to do – they aren't used to doing it and they don't give it a priority, so what we try and do is work with people to appreciate the value of what that can bring them in terms of opening up perspectives about themselves and their organisation and then helping them create the disciplines that will enable them to do it when they are back in the workplace. So, that is one way.</p>
SM	So, it's kind of coming off autopilot and having the confidence to say I need to stop, I need to see what I have got here, I need to know how I am feeling, I need to be able to differentiate the different things that are happening in the environment and make sure that my response is the right one.
JC	<p>That's right. And to appreciate that the value of a gut instinct and an intuition can be as important as a cognitive rational thought process and that the emotional content of decisions – how we are feeling about what is facing us – is also significant information and being able to take an overview of all those three things and observe what is happening rather than be submerged in it to the point where you actually don't have the perspective to realise what is going on. So actually, if you like, taking the individual slightly out of themselves so they can see themselves as, if you like, an operating system, operating with these three levels, so they can just have a bit of objectivity about what is happening to them, rather than just ploughing forward.</p> <p>I think another thing that we try and do is also get people to appreciate the value and the nature of imagination and creativity – how that really works – because only if you can allow your imagination to operate can you really explore new ideas and possibilities. So, accepting that there is a valid place for experimentation and exploration and that in that place of exploration explanation, which is classically an area where you can play with ideas or play with possibilities, is that there isn't such a thing as failure, there is only learning. So you are really getting people to appreciate that leadership is a learning environment, and a learning environment where the individual will</p>

	always be outside their comfort zone if they are genuinely leading.
SM	So don't be afraid to experiment, and recognise that sometimes it won't work, but it will still provide learning?
JC	<p>That's right. So it's really taking yourself, the leader, as almost like a learning project. How as a leader do I learn and what am I learning? Am I using it? Getting that kind of perspective and almost forming a running commentary on your own development is really important.</p> <p>I mean we have three basic tenets of development that were first given to us by Carl Jung – the great psychiatrist and psychotherapist – and he said those three things first of all are insight, which is part of what we will do with individuals to help them understand who they are and how they work; the second one is action – something has to be done differently and again, most organisations recognise that, we all use action planning in our jobs and ourselves. So something has to change.</p> <p>The third thing is the most important thing and he said that was endurance. It's just keeping going. And the endurance element is the interesting one because it's the most challenging, because we have all committed to give up smoking or go on a diet on New Year's day and within a week or two we are struggling to keep going with it and this is the endurance problem. And it's the same with any form of change because any form of change is by its nature uncomfortable – it's going to be difficult to sustain. There will be reasons why we want to give up, but when you look at people who genuinely do change their organisations or transform themselves, they have developed this capacity to endure and keep going and it's keeping going through that uncertainty of not knowing whether you are going to succeed or even at times whether you are making any progress.</p> <p>Great athletes, for example, understand this and the greatest athletes are the ones who have developed that capacity just to keep going through the pain barrier of constant practice in the knowledge that progress is not linear – that we have setbacks.</p>
SM	Now, if I look at the research that is talked about in the book that says there are different types of problems and different levels of leadership required – I mean I would like to ask your thoughts on that. Do they make sense to you and what are the implications for managers?
JC	Well, I think it does make a lot of sense and in a way it's very easy to understand the different levels because a simple metaphor is taking your car to the garage to be fixed – at one level there may be a technical problem, the engine might need a new part and the mechanic can do that for you, so that is a technical problem you can fix very easily. And most of us in organisations start at a level where we are trained and developed to identify those kind of

	<p>straightforward problems, apply knowledge we already have or give them the knowledge to solve a problem and as the problems come up that is what we do, we apply our knowledge to them.</p> <p>The next level of problem requires slightly more sophistication and that is where, for example, the mechanic can fix our car, but there needs to be a contract involved in that I need to remember to put diesel in it rather than petrol. So there is some cooperation there required in order for the car to carry on functioning. And again in organisations what you tend to see is that happening where the same kind of identifiable solutions are required, but we might be working across the value chain with other organisations so there is a certain amount of cooperation required, of coordination of agendas, but essentially we are trying to hit the same target.</p> <p>And again, as we go forward on the third level, which David Wilkinson refers to as the collaborative level, that is really where we are looking to almost identify different ways of organising and that is where we may be each giving up something, and that is slightly more difficult because we are then in the area of having to actually create some novel solutions where they didn't exist – so that is the area of adaptability, where we are having to kind of change. So, if my car is too expensive to repair, well, my choices are I'm going to have to find a way to get to work by another means of transport or I might have to buy another car, a cheaper car. So I am going to have to adapt my thinking process, or my objectives in order to cope with the situation.</p> <p>And the final level, which David calls the generative leadership level, the kind of problems there are where we are in a situation that is completely new, we haven't encountered before and somehow we are going to have to reinvent the notion of transport.</p> <p>So if I am a car mechanic and all of a sudden people aren't bringing their cars to me because they are abandoning their cars because it is too expensive, well what do I do? Well I might decide to retrain as a web engineer in order to facilitate remote commuting by people, so that actually the people who are no longer travelling to work and don't need their cars repairing have a need which is different and that is what I need to retrain myself to do in order to do that. So, that really is a question of seeing an opportunity in the threat and overcoming the uncertainty. Maybe resisting the temptation to say, well I am a car mechanic therefore all I ever do is fix cars and if these people aren't coming to me well that is their problem.</p> <p>We all know people who get stuck into a rut and a framework, a mindset of that kind and really struggle to shift out of it. Well, part of what needs to happen at that level is that the mindset needs to shift and that is where we come back to the power of critical thinking skills and emotional intelligence and resilience in order to be able to move away from positions without inappropriate attachment to them.</p>
SM	<p>I would be interested to hear out of the people you have dealt with, the situations you have come across, have you got any examples of people that</p>

	handled ambiguity well, and maybe badly too, to give a contrast?
JC	<p>Well, I think certainly if you look at businesses in the world today, one of the ones that has grown from nowhere to being a powerhouse, both financially and in terms of industry they are in, is Google. Here was a situation where all of a sudden the worldwide web explodes in terms of content and there is too much for anybody to evaluate or handle, and Google come along with a method of searching that huge, chaotic mass of information. I think it is an excellent example of how you can really create a huge amount of value by identifying an opportunity within a chaotic situation. Of course, half a generation ago Microsoft did something very, very similar with the deal that they struck with IBM to develop the operating systems for the PC and that was also a very significant recognition of a shift in the marketplace which has huge implications for the industry, and which they identified and took advantage of before anybody else did. So those are two examples of organisations that have got it right.</p> <p>I think there are some interesting examples of organisations that have got it wrong and one that we work with quite a lot here is the example of the Apollo Moon Shot Programme – OK its twenty or thirty years ago, but it was at the time the most advanced, complex, scientific, technological programme on the planet. It was huge and it was highly complex and the approach to it was to try and eliminate uncertainty and when you look at the problems they experienced, both in the Apollo Programme and in the Space Shuttle programme with Colombia and Challenger and Apollo 13, what you see is, what you come across all the time are, the limitations of the rational, cognitive process. I mean, it's very powerful and it got them a long way, got them to the moon, but it was a huge effort to simply keep things on track. And another example would be more recently the example of Shell with the Brent Spa oil rig disposal, where they identified the technical solution for disposal of Brent Spa and it was the best technical solution and they had the best chemical engineers on the planet working on this solution. What they failed to appreciate was the wider context of how that decision was going to be taken by the NGOs, the environmental organisations, who up until that point Shell had not really given any time to and the response of those organisations was so swift, so impactful, that within a short space of time Shell had had to completely renege on that decision, despite the fact that subsequently they received an apology from the NGOs because they had identified the correct environmental disposal solution. So I think that is an example of how simply working within a very technical environment to solve a problem really doesn't actually – and ignoring the ambiguity which was out there around what were these NGOs saying and doing, really didn't help solve the problem.</p>
SM	So, if we were to sum up advice that you would give people to handle what we acknowledge is necessary ambiguity, what advice would you give them to handle ambiguity successfully?

<p>JC</p>	<p>Well, I think the first thing is to take the process of developing your own curiosity seriously, is allow yourself to be taken by your curiosity to where it needs to go and don't try and direct it. That doesn't mean that you have to spend all your time doing that, but just allow parts of your time to be relatively unstructured and see what you can uncover for yourself.</p> <p>I think under pressure a key piece of advice, one that I always remember from an RAF pilot who flew Phantom jets, was when the emergency light goes on in the cockpit, why do you watch before you make a decision? So actually developing the presence of mind to stop and give yourself a few seconds to think about what is going on, rather than intervene too quickly because you might be missing something that is important. So that stopping and standing still, giving yourself some reflective time, is really also very, very important.</p> <p>Treat yourself as a project. If you are a leader in an organisation you are no longer your own property. Everyone is looking at you, everyone is looking to you, they are relying on you. So you need to take that reliance seriously and you need to be developing yourself as a priority and have a commitment to developing yourself because the only way your organisation is going to go forward is if you develop yourself as a leader because you can only take people as far as you go. And, if you are the leader, you are out there in front going into the unknown, so you will need to develop yourself, develop the resilience that is required to be in that unknown territory and cope with whatever that turns up for you. In other words, it's where your curiosity will take you. So you need to be prepared for where your curiosity is going to take you, and taking your own development seriously is a really important step.</p>
<p>SM</p>	<p>OK, John, that is extremely useful advice and we have talked very usefully around this – so thank you very much indeed.</p>
<p>JC</p>	<p>OK, you are welcome.</p>



Produced by the Learning Services Team
Cranfield School of Management

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