



## SIMPLICITY SELLS, BUT DOES IT ALWAYS SOLVE?

### Checking that you're considering complexity

1. What professional frame might you be imposing on the context? For example, an engineer's perspective on problem solving is largely shaped at university. Yet, even though a linguist also refined their problem solving at university, their professional problem solving styles are quite different. So, in the same context, professional framing is likely to deliver different perspectives. While differences can be problematic, diversity of thinking can also deliver innovation.
2. What explicit theories apply to the matter you're considering? You're likely to have a repertoire of evidence-based (theoretical) frameworks to help you make professional sense of a context. Again, these differ according to professional background and also, perhaps, on when you learned the theories (some may be outdated).
3. What implicit theories do you hold about a context? These are sets of patterns that you've come up with to help make sense of things. You may not even be aware you're using them unconsciously. It's helpful sometimes to make them explicit.

### *Seeking simplicity*

It's the cold and flu season yet, despite the annual flu jab, a rather nasty cold still took hold! Having held out for a few days, ardently partaking in natural remedies, it was finally time to visit the doctor. The primary aim was to secure a course of antibiotics that would surely chase away the lurg and its unpleasant side effects. What could be more simple?

Well, my plans did not coincide with the doctor's, who steadfastly stuck to the medical guidelines which said "no antibiotics" in the current context. "Colds are complex. And there is no silver-bullet for fixing them at present", she said. "And", she pointed out, "there's also no evidence that over the counter cough syrup works any better than a placebo" (that's a fact, check out the research on the internet).

What a let-down that was, especially in light of the discussion we had that I could return in a few weeks if the horrible cough or drowning sensation from the post nasal drip hadn't cleared. But, among the outline of possible worst-case scenarios was advice that the symptoms were likely to clear, to a point of relative comfort, within a few days. Without antibiotics. Without the silver bullet I wanted.

It's interesting to reflect that, like humans, the health of organisations is also complex. Much of UGM's work relates to organisational health of one form or another, and it's pretty clear for most challenges that the causes, and solutions that might work, are complex. Yet, understandably, prospective clients often initially want the magical potion (the silver-bullet). That is, until they step back with our help and review their own context more strategically and thoroughly. Unfortunately though, while the common disappears in time, poor organisational health often needs a portfolio approach to fix it.

### *Bias highlights our desire for simplicity*

Of course, it's people that actually run organisations, and their desire for simple solutions comes from the way brains are wired. Humans are basically unable to consciously process all of the massive stream of sensory data to which they're constantly exposed. In fact, research suggests that conscious sensory bandwidth is less than 1% of total sensory bandwidth, so pretty much most of the incoming data are processed unconsciously.

The notion of bias has received increased prominence as one of the reasons organisations are unable to achieve gender balance or the cultural diversity they'd like. This has become known as unconscious bias, but in fact the correct term is implicit bias. One reason we'd want to be accurate about the term is so that we can take in that more than 170 cognitive biases have been identified. And they all have to do with unconscious brain processes!

A bias is a shortcut that the brain takes to cope. Mostly, these biases work well for us but, given the complexities of organisational life, they don't always. For example, a range of biases help us to deal more effectively with others, especially those who are like us. Problem is, in a multicultural world, we're often dealing with people whose different experiences result in them seeing and interpreting the same cues differently!

Among the biases are the primacy effect, which means we tend to recall what we first saw. But, then there's also the recency effect, where we recall what we last saw. Another is the anchoring effect, where we may be tempted to assess a quantity is smaller than it is, if we're presented with a series of lower numbers; but we assess it as larger than it might be if we're presented with a list of larger numbers instead. A compelling way to dispel any doubts about the effect of bias is available on the internet. Google 'colored squares illusion' and see how a square seems to have different colours, based on its context.

### *Context is complex*

If you haven't ever seen the coloured square illusion referred to above, please take a few seconds and do that now. The returns on that small investment of your time will be exponential. It will, literally, change how you see context in future.

It is not an exaggeration that the world is becoming much more complex, organisations included. In 1909, Henry Ford made the now famous quip, "any customer can have a car painted any colour that he wants so long as it is black". Two important observations. First, that there was little choice back then (so reduced complexity) and, second, there was no gender balance either!

There is massive value in building organisations that are crafted and customised in ways which deliver the greatest benefits to their customers, with the least effort and biggest returns. The downside is that even those organisations, which operate in a similar space, end up being quite unique. A lot of training, though it's evidence-based, is quite generic. But a generic solution seldom works without some and, more often numerous, adaptations to fit the particular context. Even solutions that worked at one time in an organisation need adjustment to fit a changed context later on. This is because contexts are complex.

### *Simplified outputs from complex inputs*

Managers, and knowledge workers more generally, need to be able to deal with complex inputs and then repackage outputs into a simpler form. But organisations take huge risks when matters are over-simplified with generic or silver-bullet solutions. These provide a false sense of economy because, while simplicity may sell, over-simplification is unlikely to solve! The consequences can be costly.