

Why 21st Century Leaders Feel
'In Over Their Heads' and How
Psychological Flexibility Might
Help

Rachel Collis



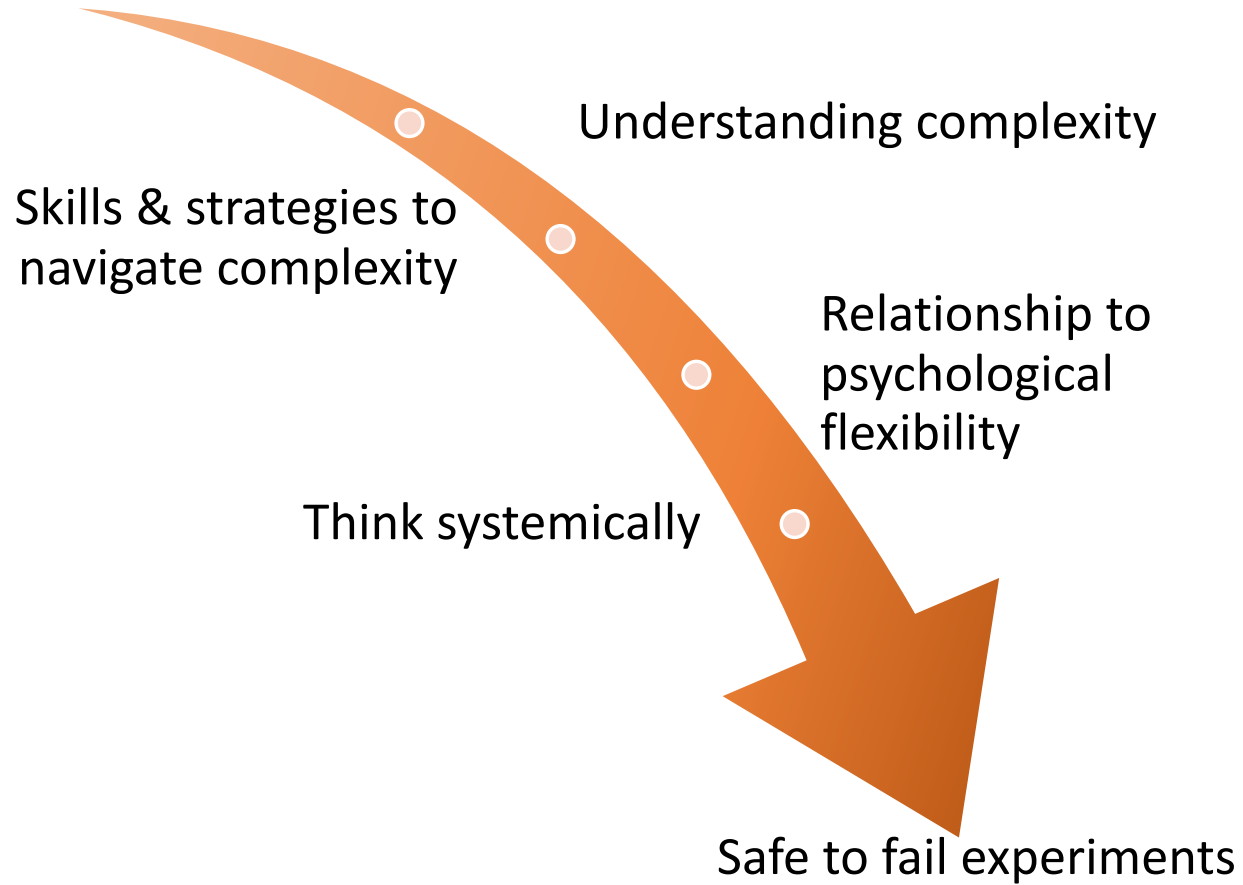
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Learning Outcomes

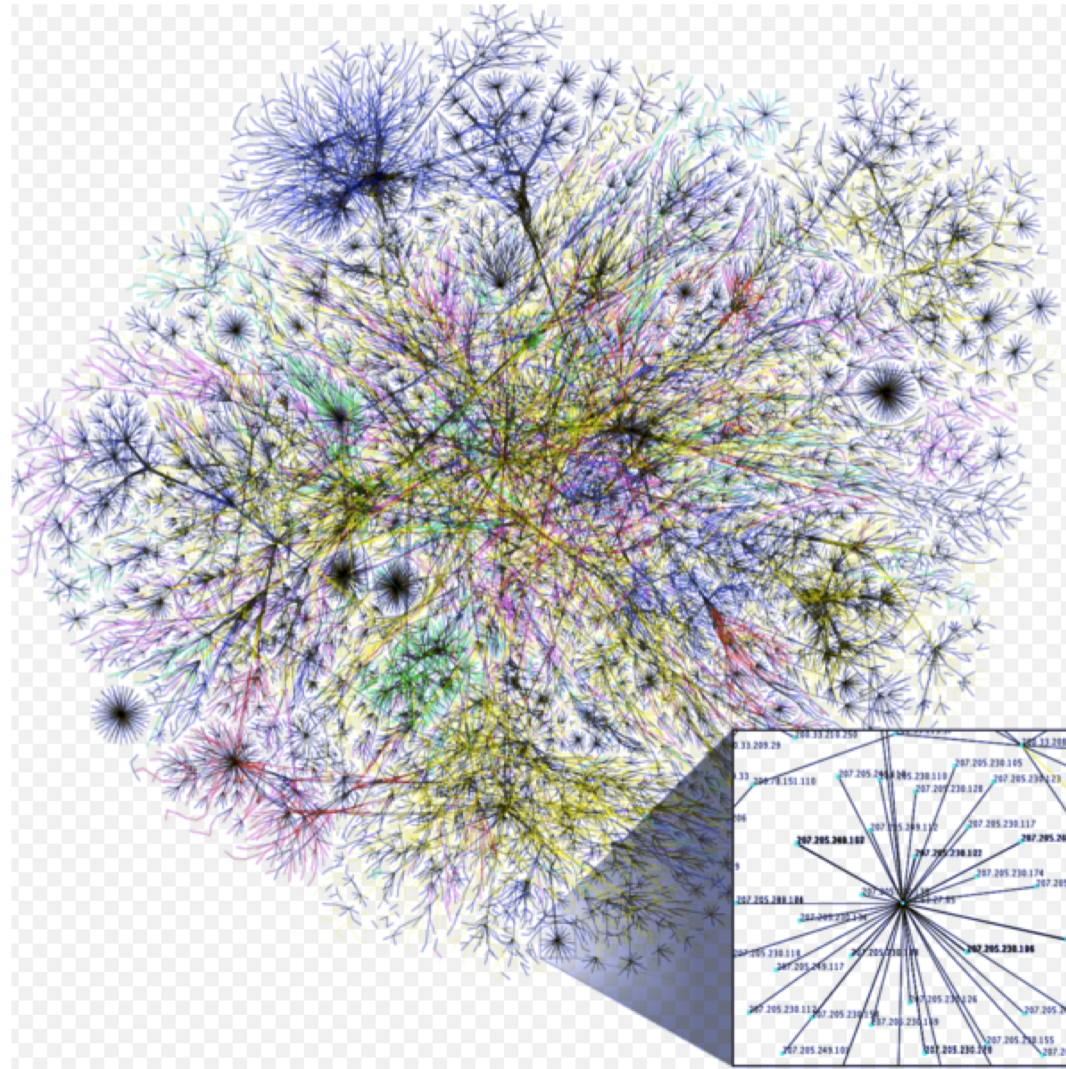
- Analyse the skills needed for leading in complexity
- Describe the way in which psychological flexibility may be a key skill in these contexts
- Practice leadership coaching interventions designed to build psychological flexibility in leaders who are feeling in over their heads

The problem?

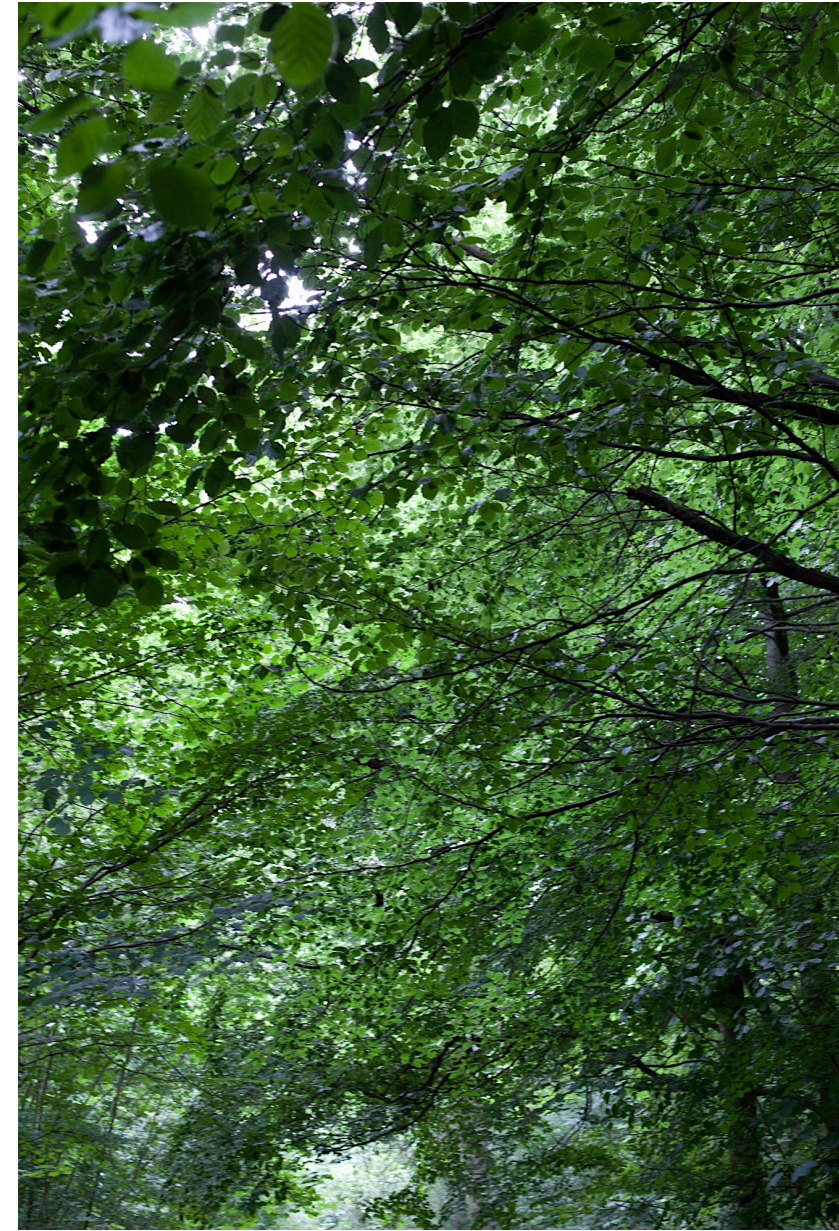


Why do leaders feel in over their heads?

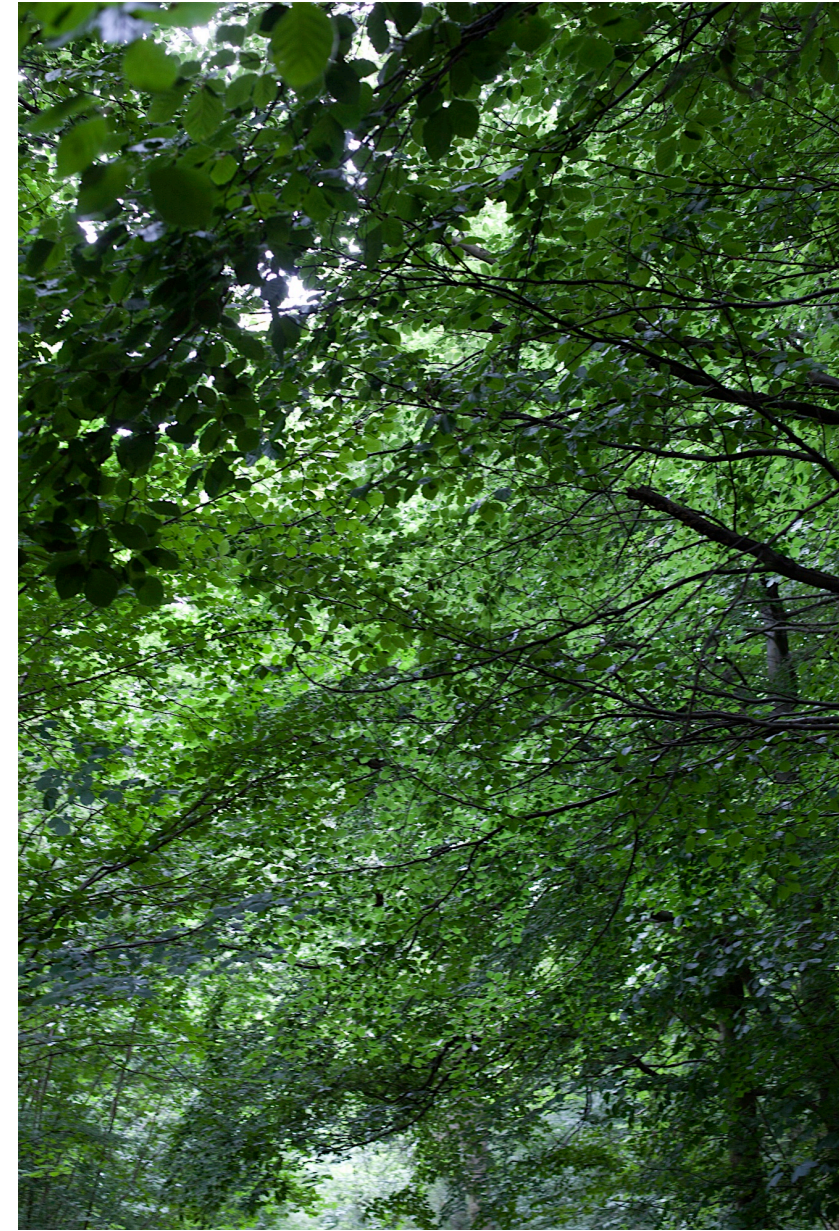




Hyper-connected
Interacting feedback loops
Interdependence



Cause and effect - non-linear
Can't control or predict the
outcome
Evolving
Emergent
More than the sum of it's parts





The problem?

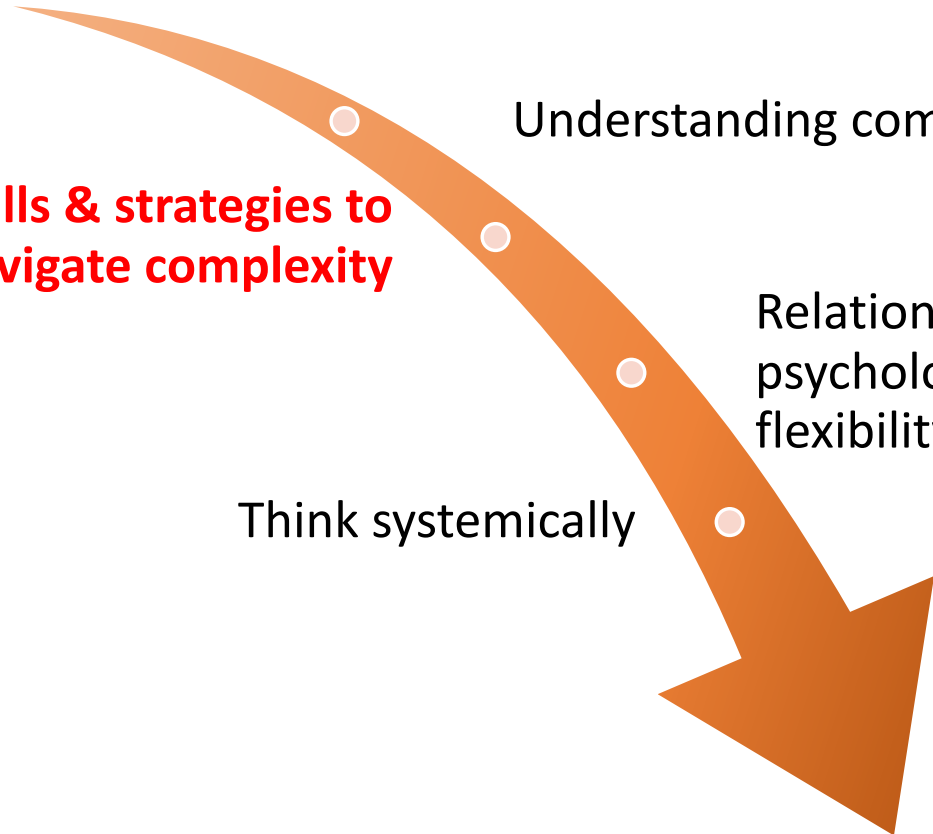
**Skills & strategies to
navigate complexity**

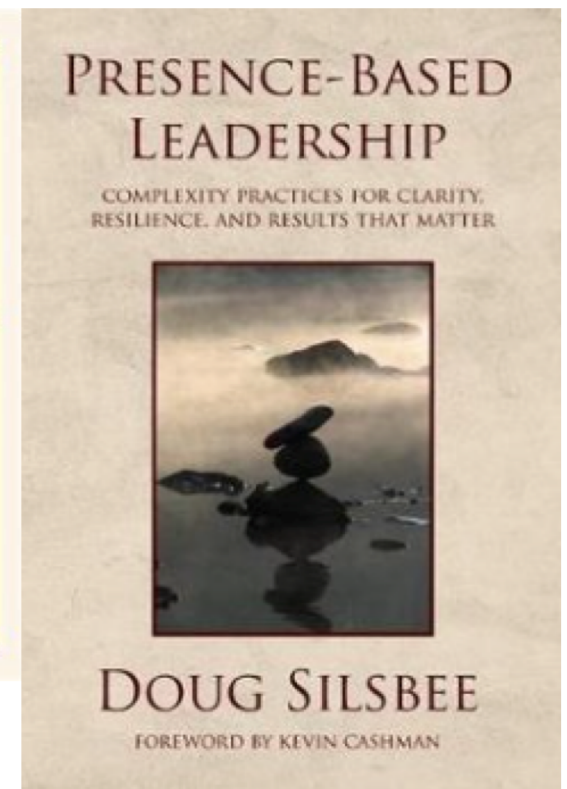
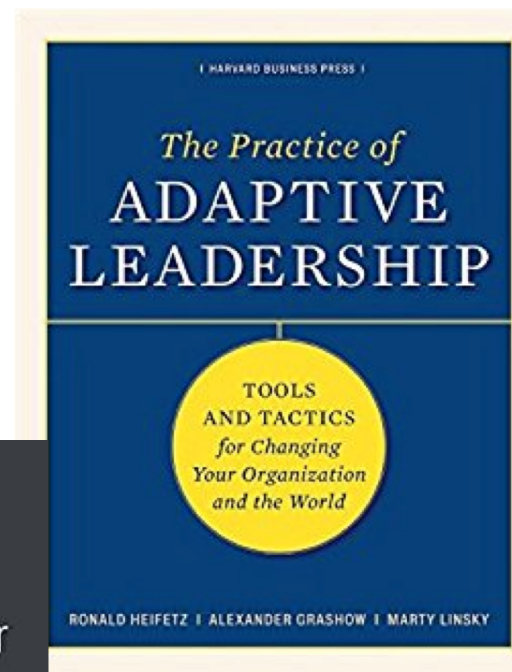
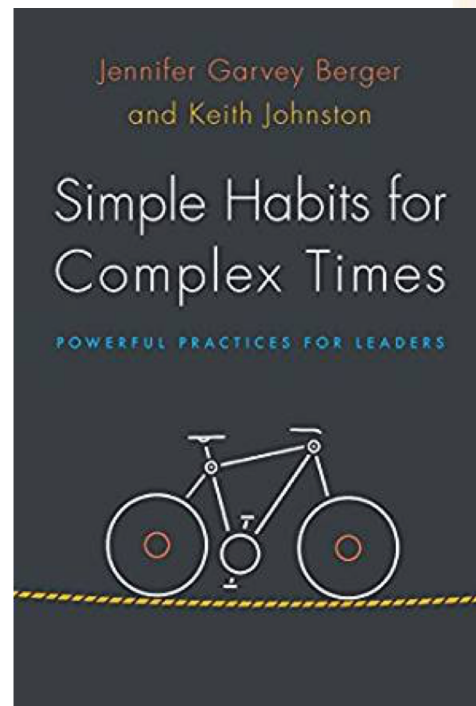
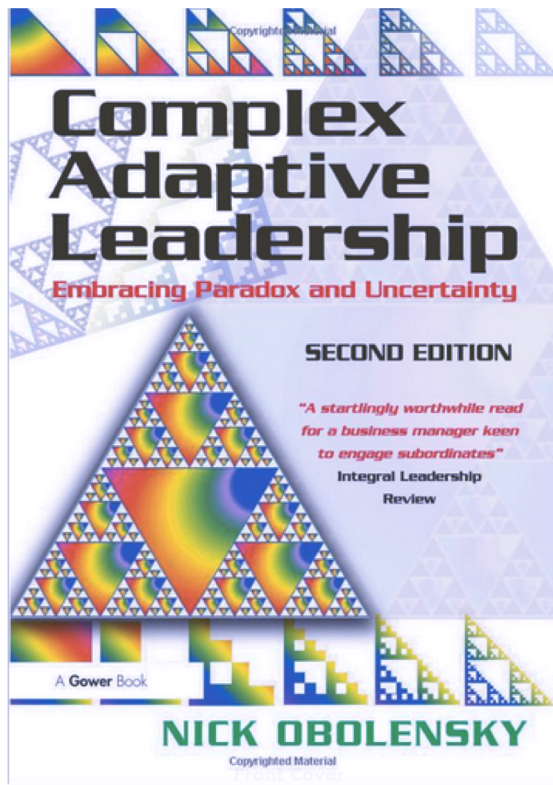
Understanding complexity

Relationship to
psychological
flexibility



Think systemically

Safe to fail experiments





Get clear on the type of challenge

	Complicated	Complex
Problem definition	<p>Clear</p> 	<p>Unclear</p> <p>Requires:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • learning • multiple perspectives • questioning assumptions 
Solution	<p>Can be identified using expertise & past experience</p> <p>Can be solved using current structures and procedures</p>	<p>Can only be addressed through an iterative and experimental process of discovery, learning and generating new capacity</p>

Strategies for responding to complicated problems

Complicated
Define problem, identify solution (using past experience & expertise)
Develop a plan and implement
Ensure roles and responsibilities are clear
Clarity and direction
Resolve the problem

In complexity these rules are unworkable

Good managers:

Define problem, identify solution (using past experience & expertise)

Develop a plan and implement

Ensure roles and responsibilities are clear

Clarity and direction

Resolve the problem

What complex challenges are you facing in your organisation?

Something where you are facing at least one of these:

- Can't control or predict what will happen
- Are uncertain about the effects of your actions
- Threat/fear of loss
- Many interlinked issues that cut across systems, silos and organisations
- Many different views of the problem, the solutions and the desired outcomes - conflict

Strategies for responding to a complex system

	Complex
Think systemically	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Map the system Ask different questions – foster new thinking Explore multiple perspectives – people, time, viewpoint Look for relationships, patterns, themes Look for places where things are tending towards what you want
Encourage new thinking	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Identify & raise issues others are avoiding or don't see Allow conflict to surface – explore different views Challenge norms Disorient roles Tolerate ambiguity and uncertainty
Face what is hard	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Disclose threats Be open about potential losses (and choose what to preserve)
Give support and clarity where possible	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Clear purpose and objectives Caring, courageous, unambiguous feedback Manage the level of discomfort – The productive zone of disequilibrium Compassion, curiosity Freedom to act (within boundaries and following a few simple rules)
Experiment & Learn	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Action learning Safe-to-Fail Experiments

Obolensky, 2014;
Heifetz; Grashow; Linsky, 2009.

The problem?

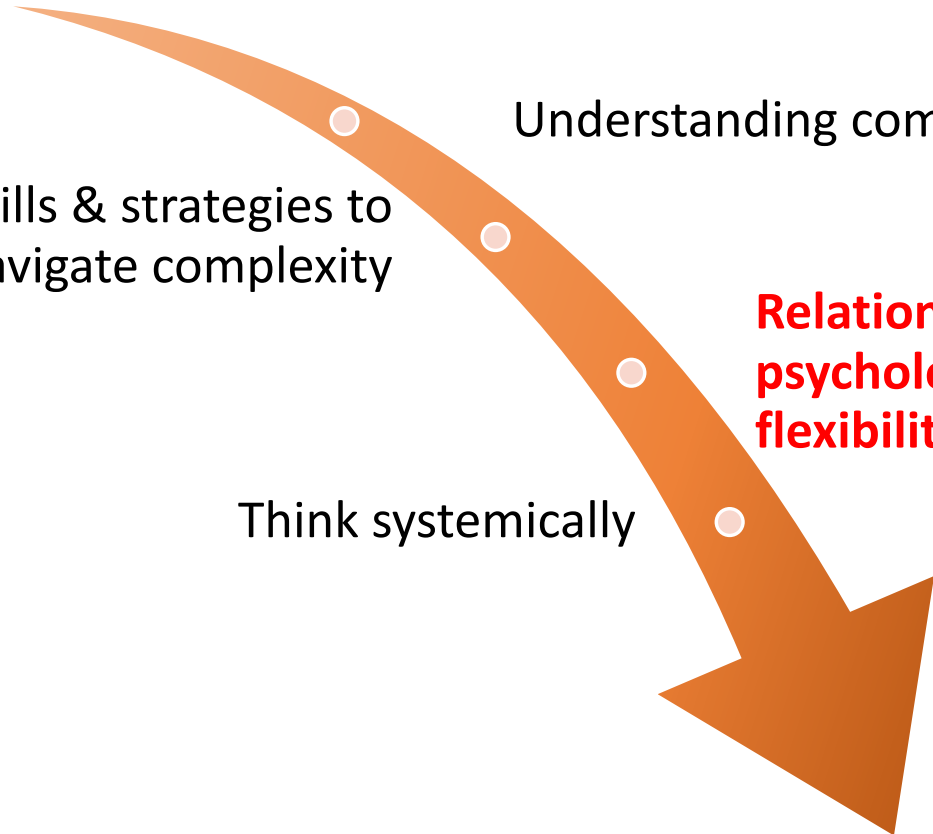
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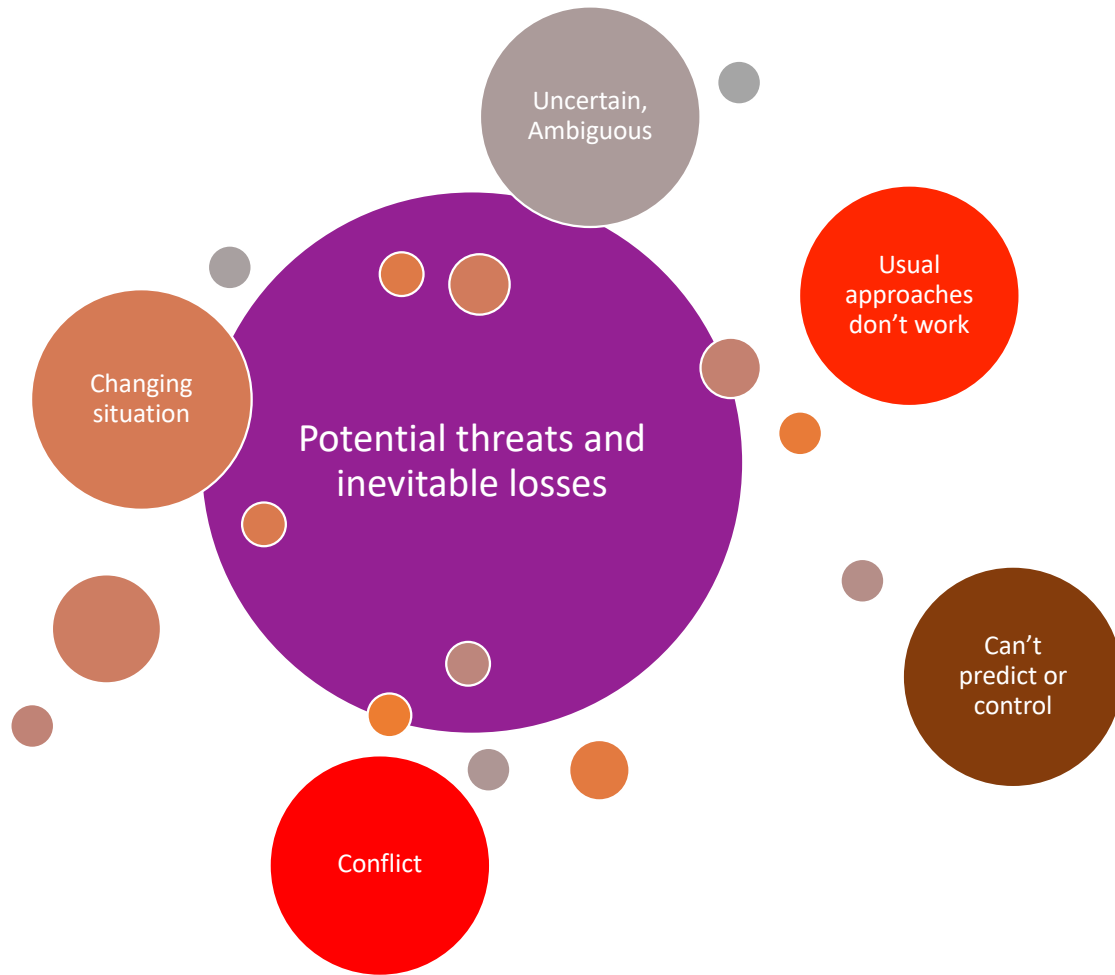


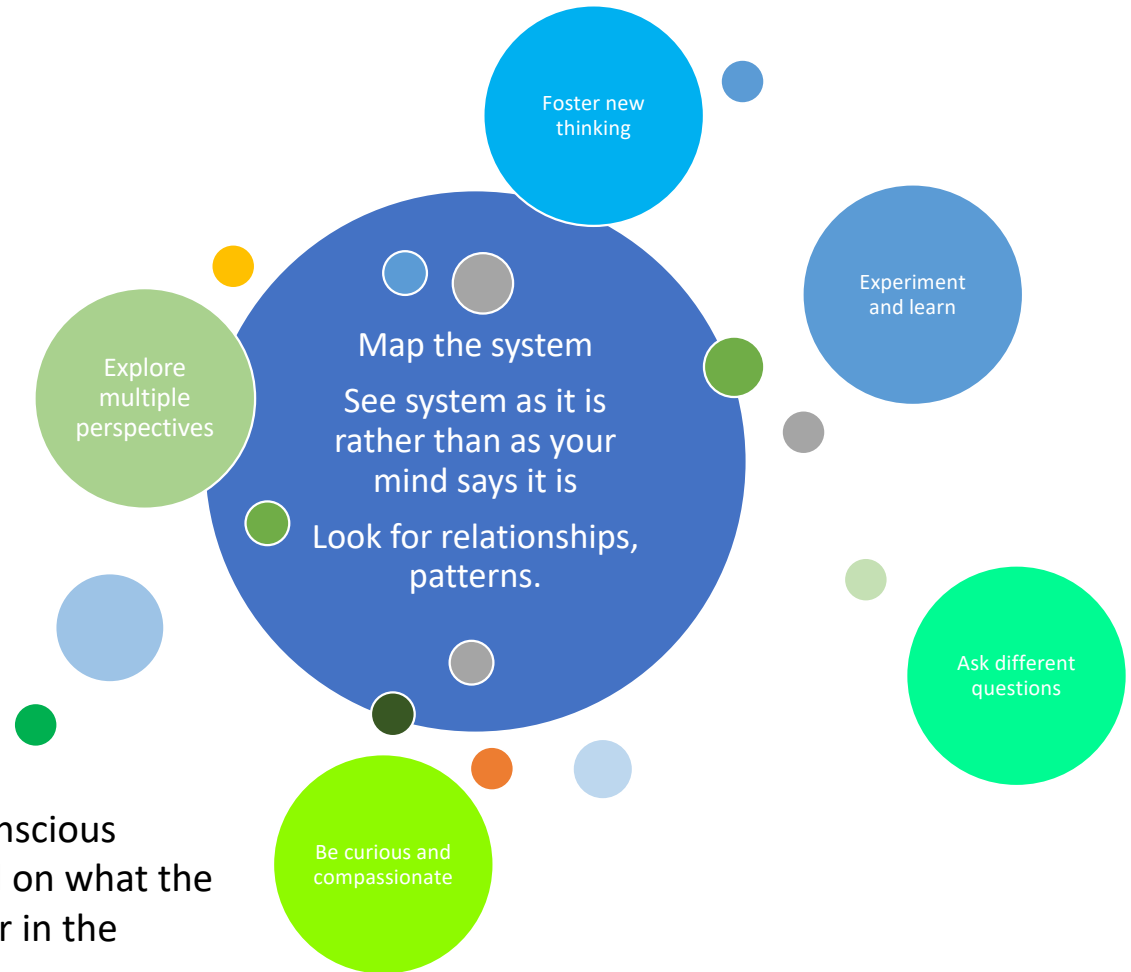
Contacting the present moment more fully as a conscious human being, as it is, not as it says it is, and, based on what the situation affords, changing or persisting in behavior in the service of chosen values.



Not present
Avoidant
Fused
Inflexible

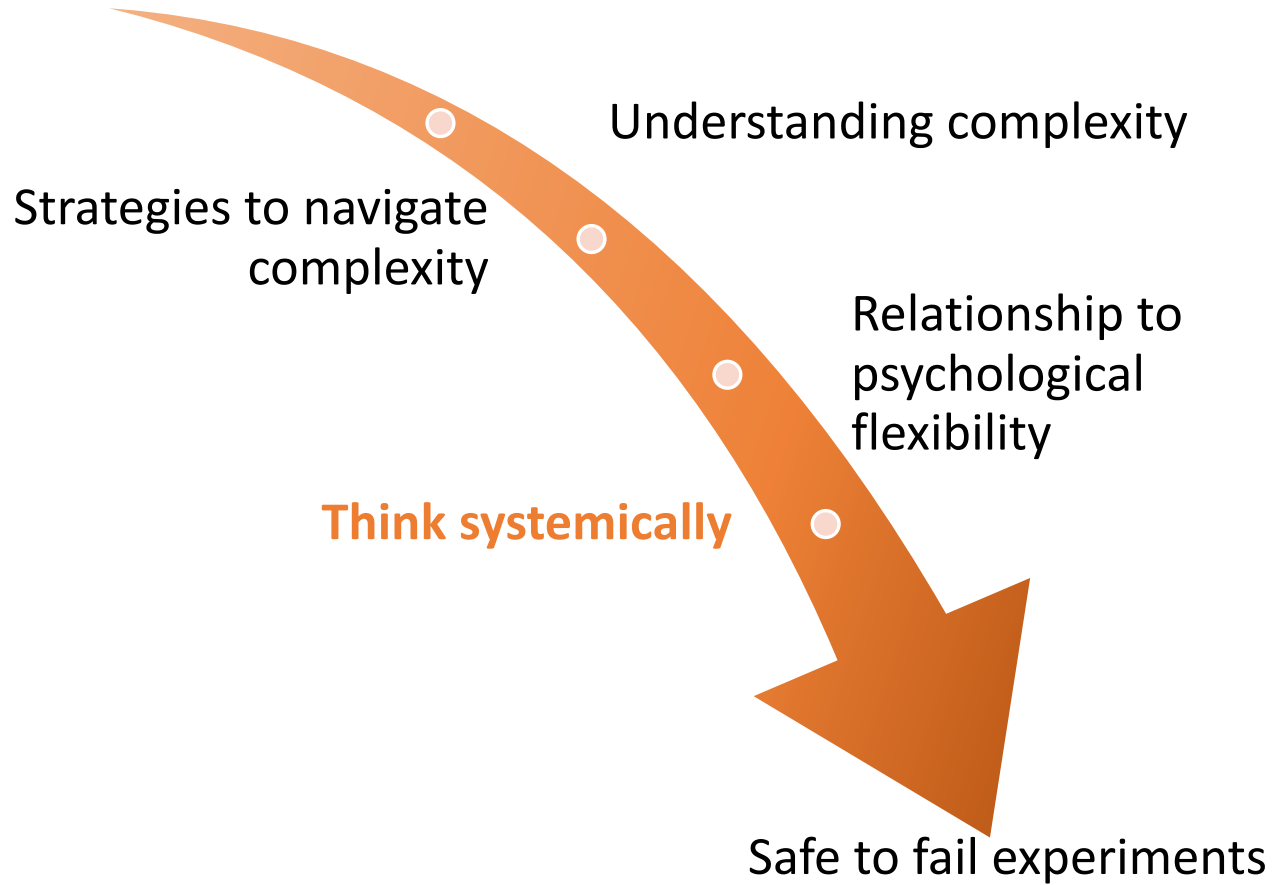
Present
Open
Flexible
Expressing values





Contacting the present moment more fully as a conscious human being, as it is, not as it says it is, and, based on what the situation affords, changing or persisting in behavior in the service of chosen values.

The problem?



Case study

Exploring the system, start with

- History
- Context



Avoidant
Fused
Inflexible
Playing not to lose

Present
Open
Flexible
Expressing values

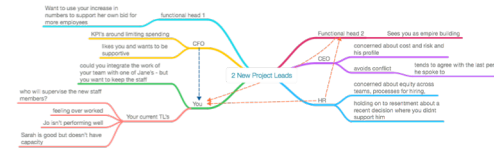
Exploring the system



Consider multiple perspectives:

- Whose perspective should be considered?
- How does each person see this?
- What values, loyalties, experiences inform their view?
- What commitments do they have to others?
- What questions do you need to ask in order to understand the system better?

Exploring the system



- Consider thoughts and feelings
 - Experiential avoidance is to be expected in uncertain and ambiguous situations where some loss is inevitable
 - Where and how is it showing up?
 - What is the impact of the EA?
- Ask
 - How are you feeling about this?
 - Help them discriminate



Ask about loss and risk

In a complex system change and loss are inevitable.

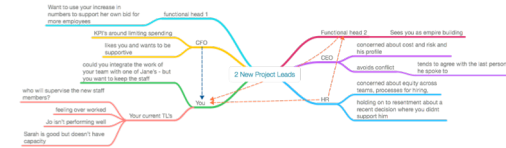
Ask:

- What is at risk here?
 - to you personally
 - to others?
 - to the organisation?
- If you/the system changes....., what is at stake? What might be lost? (jobs, \$, community, identity...)
- What must be given up to survive and thrive going forward...even though we care about it?
- What must be preserved, or we will lose precious values, core competencies, or lose who we are?

Heifetz; Grashow; Linsky (2009)

Connecting to Values & Purpose

- What is important to you here?
- How do you want to show up?
- What would that look like?



Taking perspective on the system

- If we stand back and look at the map
 - What do you notice?
 - What patterns and themes?
 - What relationships
- What is keeping this issue stuck?

Questions to Explore the System

- What are people not talking about?
- Which people are you not listening too and learning from well enough?
- What conversations might be helpful?
- What keeps you from doing *X*?

Skills Practice

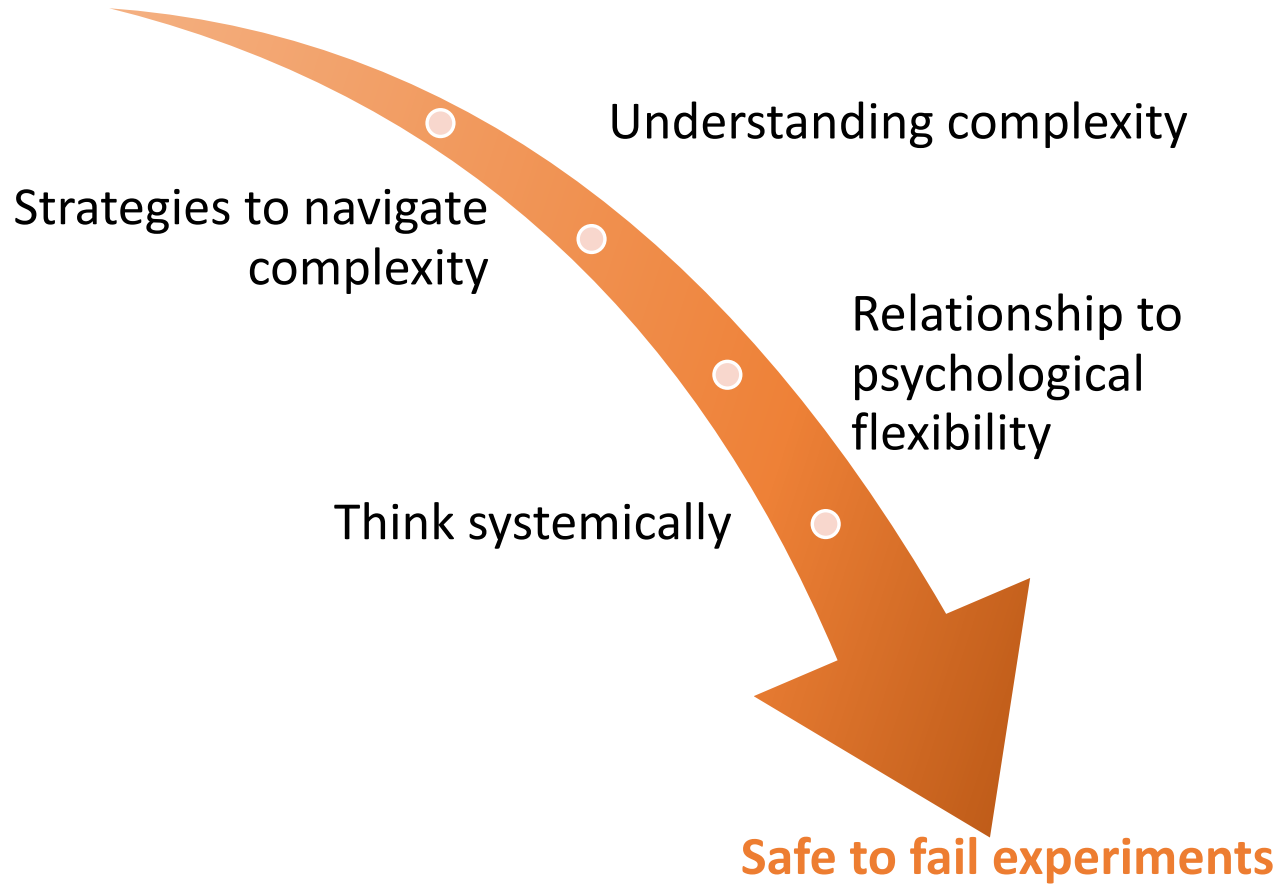
In Pairs

Coachee - complex challenge you are currently facing

Coach

- Map out the system – on a piece of paper.
- Ask questions about
 - Context
 - Relationships
 - Perspectives – people, place, time, viewpoint
 - Thoughts and feelings – potential loss and threat
 - Connection to values and purpose
- Notice anemone open and close
 - Slow down
 - Mindfulness, curiosity, compassion

The problem?



Develop Safe-to-Fail Experiments

- Nudge the system in the broad, desired direction
- Change what the system is *inclined* to do, rather than moving towards a specific known outcome
- Try something and learn about the system
- Disrupt unworkable rule –governed behaviour

Steps to Develop Safe-to-Fail Experiments

1. Create a map of the system
2. What is the *broad* direction you want (Purpose/Objectives)?
3. Notice any places where system is tending towards that direction

Questions to identify positive trends

- Where are the bright spots – forces or pockets moving in the desired direction?
- What guesses do you have about what makes those bright spots more possible?
- How might you create similar conditions elsewhere or spread the bright spots?

Steps to Develop Safe-to-Fail Experiments

4. Set the boundaries (safety guardrails)

- What risks are unacceptable? (Be careful not to limit opportunity)

5 . Design the experiment

- Pragmatic
- Short
- Cheap
- Crisp and clear (everyone knows exactly what they are trying)

Steps to Develop Safe-to-Fail Experiments

6. How will you learn from it, whether it succeeds or fails?

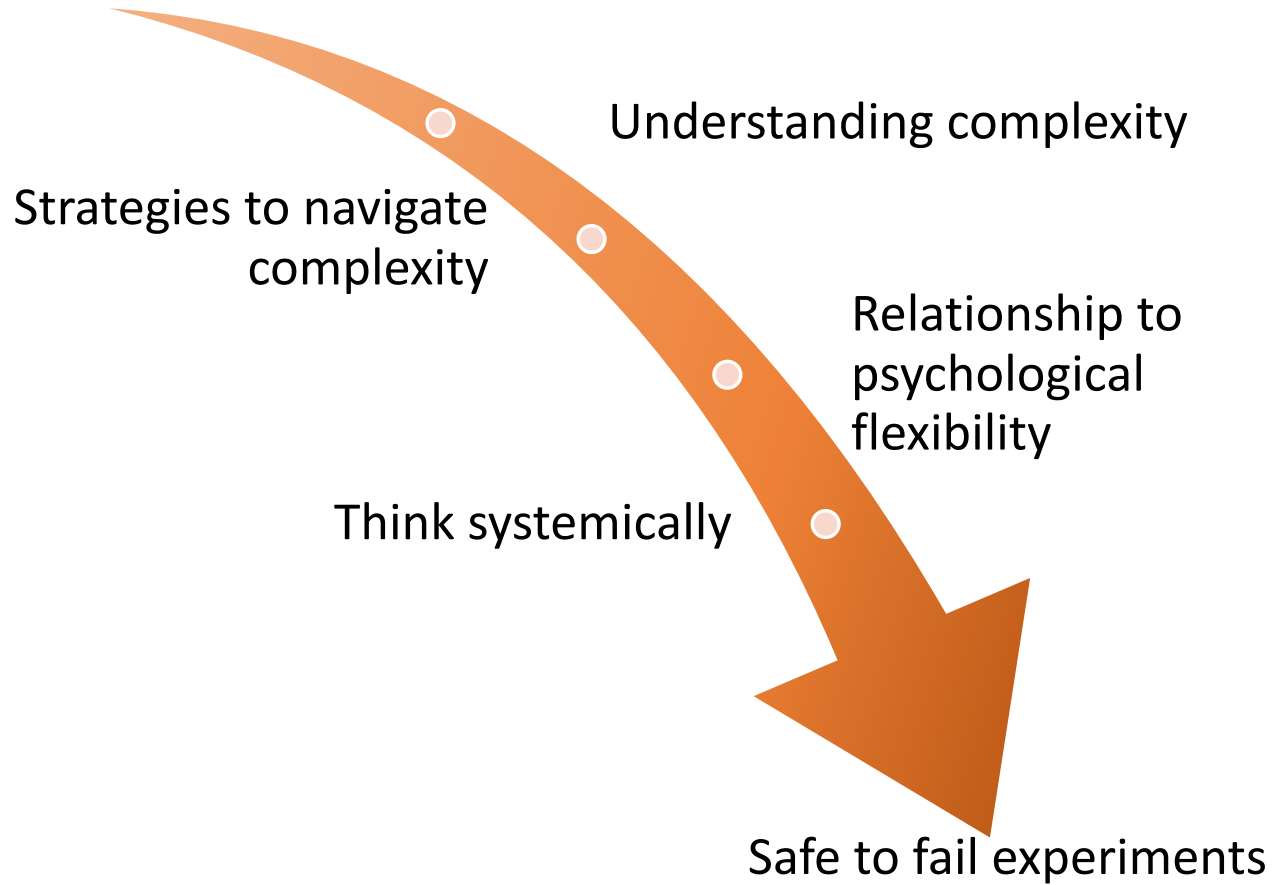
- What have you learnt about the system?
- What small signs of progress have you noticed?
- Be interested in unexpected outcomes

7. Can you make it contagious? So if it works, people will be inclined to use it more broadly or adapt it for their context.

Skills Practice

- Coaching pairs. Work with your coachee to design a safe-to-fail experiment for their complex issue
 - Pragmatic
 - Short
 - Cheap
 - Crisp and clear (everyone knows exactly what they are trying)

The problem?



Disclosure

Rachel Collis

I have not received and will not receive any commercial support related to this presentation or the work presented in this presentation.

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Further reading on complexity leadership

- Garvey Berger & Johnson (2015) *Simple Habits for Complex Times*
- Heifetz, R., Grashow, A, & Linsky, M. (2009). *The Practice of Adaptive Leadership: Tools and tactics for changing your organization and the world*. Harvard Business Press. Chapter 11, Orchestrate Conflict (pp. 149-164)
- Lalouz, F. (2014) *Reinventing Organizations* Nelson Parker
- Obolensky N., (2014) *Complex Adaptive Leadership, Embracing Paradox and Uncertainty* Gower publishing
- Silsbee, D. (2018) *Presence-Based Leadership. Complexity practices for clarity, resilience and results that matter*
- Uhl-Bien, Mary; Marion, Russ; and McKelvey, Bill, "*Complexity Leadership Theory: Shifting leadership from the industrial age to the knowledge era*" (2007). Leadership Institute Faculty Publications. 18.
<http://digitalcommons.unl.edu/leadershipfacpub/18>

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