

Navigating complex challenges: creative competencies for contemporary leadership

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The authors propose how creative leadership can be developed and used to deal with complex challenges. Creative leadership means making shared sense out of complexity and chaos and the crafting of meaningful action. The authors' research has identified six creative leadership competencies, which are discussed in the article, namely: paying attention, personalising, imaging, serious play, collaborative inquiry and crafting.

Introduction

This article is about developing and using creative leadership in the face of complex challenges. A new and surprisingly useful definition has emerged from the authors' seven years of research with over 500 leaders. Creative leadership means making shared sense out of complexity and chaos and the crafting of meaningful action.

The authors have found the following definition of 'complex challenge' to be useful as a starting point their work with leaders:

Complex challenges are situations or contexts that defy existing approaches or solutions. They are central in importance and demand decisive action. Yet because the organisation, team, or individual does not know how to act, there is also a need to slow down and reflect.

This is how one can tell if a challenge is complex:

- You feel 'stuck', and the challenge is a source of real pain. Prior attempts at resolution have misfired.
- The challenge seems outside current or proposed approaches. Existing formulae do not fit. You may not even be sure exactly how to talk about the challenge.
- The challenge involves a clash of basic assumptions, world views or communities. People disagree about the nature of the challenge and what should be done.

In facing and resolving complex challenges, the authors have found that two sets of competencies are necessary. One is well known – rational skills such as planning, analysing and decision-making. Most leaders are aware that they have to develop these in themselves and in their organisations. Indeed, excellence in these skills is typically what people are hired and rewarded for. The second set is less well known in the organisational setting. These 'creative leadership competencies' are typically considered inappropriate and are therefore often neglected.

Everyone possesses at least the rudiments of the following interrelated but distinct creative leadership competencies: paying attention, personalising, imaging, serious play, collaborative inquiry and crafting. In what follows, these competencies are described, as well as the effects of their not being very well developed, and some thoughts on how they can be developed. It might be useful to think of a single overall sensemaking competency with several facets (Figure 1). For the sake of simplicity, they are presented as though they are enacted in a serial fashion. The authors believe that the first competency mentioned has to be mastered to provide breath, meaning and practice to creative leadership.

Competency 1: Paying attention

The real voyage of discovery consists not in seeking new landscapes, but in having new eyes.

Marcel Proust

The increasing pace of work today often demands that leaders scan information quickly and make rapid judgements. In order to do this, they typically take shortcuts, acting on what they expect to see. When the work is routine, quick perception by experienced people can be an asset.

For situations of high complexity, novelty, or chaos, however, another way of perceiving is crucial – namely 'paying attention', which is the disciplined art of taking time to observe in depth, breadth and detail, temporarily suspending the perceptual shortcut that 'I already know what I see'.

Paying attention is about making good sense of issues one is confronted with. One technique for doing this is to ask certain kinds of open-ended questions, which are termed 'powerful questions'. By bringing forth previously unnoticed details and new perspectives, such questions disrupt perceptual shortcuts and help one notice things, patterns, or movements that have been overlooked.

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Figure 1. Six competencies for navigating complex challenges.

An example is: ‘How might an apparently irreversible trend reverse?’ Steven Jobs and his cohorts at Apple Computers questioned the trend towards larger mainframe computers and noticed the first small elements that they would use to build the personal computer industry. A powerful question can be as simple as ‘What’s missing?’

Another technique for paying attention is to create temporary distance between oneself and the complex situation. Many leaders like to stay close to a problem and work hard until it is solved. Addressing complexity, however, requires periods of distancing and relaxation of effort – consciously putting the issue on the back burner, as it were. This makes it possible for the unconscious mind to mull things over and to perceive patterns, including the big picture.

In the authors’ experience, this competency is one of the harder ones to engage. The usual work mode adopted by most executives, when faced with an onrush of complex information, is to fall back on a repertoire of shortcuts and rules of thumb to guide their decision-making. In effect, they rely on a template or symbol system that they have developed for recognising and dealing with an issue, based on issues that look very similar. They become entrenched in modes of thinking and problem-solving methods that have been successful for them in the past – often unaware that a more discerning examination of the issue is possible and warranted.

Application of competency

Consider the case of a manufacturing company with a long-standing quality problem in the manufacture of a chemical analyser. The symptoms seemed to indicate some difficulty with the chemical make-up of one of the components, but for several years it resisted the best efforts of the company. The device was complex, and there were many views about the true nature of the difficulty.

The classic response had been to invent new molecules to replace existing ones in the formula. This approach cost the company dearly in terms of millions of dollars in re-work, an unusable analyser and no sustainable solution.

A cross-functional team was formed. The team members were asked to approach the problem in a different way. The team went on three two-day retreats with the purpose of stepping back, asking new kinds of questions and engaging their visual sensibilities in order to think differently about the problem.

Team members slowed down and took the time to share stories about the situation, to create visual representations of it, to play with the images and to engage their imaginations. Through this process, they began to better understand the problem and to see it as a complex mixture of technical, human and social factors. Some consistent patterns emerged that had previously been overlooked.

Firstly and most importantly, they identified a pervasive pattern of fear in the workplace. Employees at all levels were afraid that if the problem were fundamentally solved, it would require major changes and the loss of jobs. The fear even pervaded the cross-functional team and, for a while, hampered its ability to consider new possibilities to solve the problem. Secondly, they saw that the problem had roots that cut across many boundaries in the organisation. Thirdly, they realised how the company’s propensity for inventing new molecules compounded the problem, both the technical and human aspects.

These insights helped the team focus on redesigning the entire production chain rather than only on the chemistry of the analyser. The solution was eventually successful because the team was able to openly and constructively engage employees about their fears, while at the same time planning an overhaul of operations to dramatically improve quality. The company was able to do this not by abandoning the engineering mind-set that pervaded the organisation but by adopting an engineering approach accentuated by the neglected competencies. This enabled the team to deal more effectively with the complexities of the human elements of the issue. As the leader of the team observed: ‘I’m an engineer. Engineers do experiments, observe the results and learn from them. I constructed an experiment in human resource management.’

At this company, leadership had historically been by competent technical experts directing groups by means of authority and reputation. The cross-functional team provided a different kind of leadership – integrating technical expertise with neglected competencies to build new and useful shared knowledge.

Competency 2: Personalising

‘Personalising’ means adeptly tapping into one’s unique life experiences and passions to provide insight and perspective on shared challenges. People are most creative when they are intrinsically motivated – that is, when they are inspired by inner drives and interests rather than by external pressures.

Personalising work is a way of recognising that each person has a wealth of talent and life experience that can be useful in handling complexities in the workplace.

Art Fry, the inventor of 3M's Post-It Notes, needed a way to place temporary notes in the music books his choir was using. He found his answer in a low-tack adhesive developed by his colleague, Spencer Silver, in 3M's Central Research Division. He was then able to connect this originally personal solution to the marketplace.

The Wright Brothers took their love of bicycles to the challenge of building a flying machine. A prominent lawyer known to the authors writes novels and finds that composing fictional characters helps her understand the nature of the people she serves in her family-oriented practice. A marketing vice-president told the authors that crafting strategy is like the poetry writing he has done since childhood – making connections, playing with ideas, conveying emotion and composing language. He finds that his grasp of strategy has become more powerful since his decision to link the two formerly separate realms of his life.

One woman explains it this way: “The rules say we should separate work from personal life. But I couldn't do it. I began to look for ways to bring my lifelong passion for dance and choreography to my work. Choreography tells me what it is like for 20 people to relate on stage – or in a conference room – and what it means to dance solo as well. I still see things best as paisley, circles and rhythms rather than as lines.”

Leaders can personalise in two ways. They can create a climate in which people can make creative connections between their personal passions and their work, and they can make connections of that nature for themselves. Indeed, modelling such connections encourages and facilitates similar behaviour in others.

Competency 3: Imaging

We know more than we can tell.

Michael Polanyi

Competence in 'imaging' calls for literacy in the making and using of all kinds of images – pictures, stories, metaphors and visions – to make sense of data and communicate effectively. Images help us connect with ways of knowing and making sense that go beyond the intellectual and verbal. They reach into our imagination, intuition and emotions.

Imaging can be understood as a step in sense-making – the process of creating understanding that engages the aesthetic, besides the purely logical.

In work, people use formulae to break things down into parts, and recipes to put parts together. When this approach is applied too rigidly, there is no room for moments of insight.

Until recently, most organisations made sense of their work mainly from the top down – leaders and experts prescribing which practices were right and wrong, with control as the main imperative. The new organisational reality requires the involvement and participation of more people more often. The people closest to the work are emerging as an important leadership cadre, and imaging becomes a leadership competency practised collectively as well as individually.

Application of competency

An example of the deliberate use of the competency of imaging in creative leadership concerns dispatchers at XYZ Transport, who assign hauling jobs to a fleet of interstate trucks. The old method called for the dispatcher to refer to an optimised decision-tree that was based on variables such as driver seniority, client priority and cargo type.

The new method is that everyone in the company is trained to recognise three modes of operation that depend on the level of turbulence in operating conditions. XYZ calls these modes 'classical', 'jazz' and 'jamming'.

In the classical mode, which is predictable and highly structured, the dispatchers follow the traditional set of optimisation rules. The jazz mode recognises the increasing need for improvisation when conditions are busier. Jamming is called for when conditions become non-typical and far from equilibrium, such as during severe weather.

Structures for decision-making are still present but become 'undertones'. Improvisation based on experience and conditions is not only permitted, but also expected, and is taught to all employees. Jamming, as in music, is an ensemble performance, with the dispatcher directing the band, but sharing the lead. XYZ refers to this process as 'the strategic art of employing and deploying resources for the customer and the company'.

Effective dispatching in the jamming mode is highly regarded as a form of grassroots leadership at XYZ.

Competency 4: Serious play

Serious play is the skill of generating knowledge through exploration, experimentation, rule bending, limit testing, levity and sport. It is a way of learning about the complexities and subtleties of an issue or problem by testing the limits. It involves making or finding a relatively safe space so that the bending and testing can be done without catastrophe.

In this way, it is possible to see new patterns in apparent chaos and find a way through turbulent circumstances. Exhilaration and levity can be valuable aspects of serious play, even (or especially) when the issues are weighty.

Applications of competency

An example of serious play is the way people learn in the Apple Macintosh and (in recent years) Microsoft Windows computing environments. Such systems, by virtue of their design, encourage exploration more than the mastery of arcane procedures. The MS-DOS operating system, in contrast, requires close adherence to precise rules of operation, and learning is difficult because play is difficult (except for hackers) and mistakes costly. Using the Macintosh or Windows systems, most people can learn by serious play.

Some of the more successful teams the authors have worked with tend to approach stressful tasks with a measure of serious play. The dispatchers at XYZ Transport learn the jamming mode by playing with novel situations under the close (but not smothering) supervision of an experienced colleague.

Employees in coaching groups at Wilhelmsen Lines sometimes entertain 'What if?' scenarios around difficult issues, and play them out first in a meeting. Adventure learning (team-building using ropes, courses and outdoor challenges) is another way of simulating stressful situations so that a team can practice working at the edge – with a net, so to speak.

In simulations at the Center for Creative Leadership, the authors give leaders a chance to play with their personal styles. In their research, they have met managers that practise this competency by having their staff meetings begin with activities that bring lightness, lateral thinking and playfulness into the room, with the aim of having this carry over into the consideration of the serious business issues that follow.

Competency 5: Collaborative inquiry

Collaborative inquiry is the ability to sustain productive dialogue in addressing complex issues within and across community boundaries.

Most people's image of the Wright brothers is the memorable one where they are seen alone with their machine on the windy beach in North Carolina. A more revealing, but less well-known, image is that of the brothers living and working in Dayton, Ohio, among a community of inventors – teachers, artists and other citizens.

The members of this community helped one another create cash registers, washing machines, refrigerators and starters for petrol-fueled engines, as well as aeroplane wings with a proper design that allowed engine-powered flight.

The Wright brothers were nurtured by a community culture that revered self-discipline, education and teachers, believed that the status quo could and should be improved upon and generally had a 'can do' view of life. It was this community culture that facilitated the building of libraries, museums, performing arts organisations and spaces, public parks and the

community infrastructure. It is this legacy that deserves to be highlighted and nurtured.

Another example of collaborative inquiry is the practice in Wilhelmsen Lines, a global shipping organisation, where 'coaching groups' are formed to organise work that needs to be done. These groups meet periodically to give one another feedback, coach one another and ask questions about their shared work. This allows group members to make sense of their business at the level of service delivery to the customer and to feed this ever-evolving knowledge up through the organisation.

Competency 6: Crafting

Crafting is the skilful synthesis of issues, objects, events and actions into beautifully integrated, meaningful wholes. This competence is about the skilful, intentional application of the neglected competencies in order to make something new happen in the leadership arena. It entails blending and moving between modes of competencies appropriate to the challenge at hand and achieving a desirable result with the right amount of discipline and structure.

Application of competency

The Avery Research Center (ARC) is the research function of Avery Dennison, a \$3.2 billion *Fortune 500* company specialising in self-adhesive base materials, self-adhesive consumer and office products and specialised label systems. ARC used to conduct strategic project planning with a small group of senior managers. In response to the increasing pace and quality of innovation in the market, it began doing this planning with a 20-member team of managers, scientists and technologists. The purpose was to read the waters of market and technological change more deliberately and to make better decisions. The team was selected on the basis of diverse experience and perspectives and for leadership potential. It had open access to relevant information on internal operations, technology, patents, customers and competitors.

This improved the results of project selection – but it soon ran into a wall: there was simply too much information, too many unknown quantities and too many perspectives to take in. Computer-aided techniques of analysis were far-reaching but still proved inadequate. The team began to look for new ways to create order from the complexity it faced.

It explored and used the competencies described in this article to select projects in alignment with corporate strategy. For example, one technique involves making a 'spider diagram' for each proposed project. Each leg of this spider plots a rating of the project from 1 to 5 on a particular scale. The rating points on adjacent spider legs are connected with a straight line, and the resultant polygon is cut out. In one key segment of this process, the diagrams are turned over so that no numbers are visible – only shapes. (The top of each shape is marked so that the shapes can be compared.)

The team plays with arranging and sorting the shapes. Visual perception is strongly engaged. The members try to make sense of the patterns they notice. They ask themselves what is missing from an ideal pattern. They exercise their intuition instead of constantly focusing on the numbers. They conduct various exercises in which they collaborate in pushing the shapes into clusters along a variety of dimensions. The language shifts from one focused on numbers, logical analysis and ranking of criteria to one concerned with shape, form and appropriateness.

Of course, intuitions are not uncritically adopted, and numerical analysis is still highly regarded, but, in general, ARC perceives distinct benefits: "Intuition is legitimate now, where it wasn't before. Emotions are put on the table; different people will try to push the same spider diagram in opposing directions. Everyone on the team gets a chance to handle the diagrams and offer their perspective without always having to prove their point of view. Alternatives get surfaced, and we explore them."

The overall effort to improve strategic planning at ARC has resulted in increased value of completed projects, quicker time from inception to market of breakthrough projects and a measured improvement in the climate for creative work.

A developmental challenge

The authors believe that there are at least two reasons why these competencies have been neglected. Firstly, in less turbulent times, when the environment was relatively consistent and predictable, leaders typically sought to maintain an organisation in the same form over time, and these competencies may have seemed irrelevant. The competencies may even have seemed disruptive because, when used in concert, they often threaten to revise the given formulae and recipes. Some organisations have devalued people that try to use these competencies. Revision is seen as a threat to corporate vision.

Secondly, the influence of Frederick Taylor's widely touted notion of scientific management has made leaders suspicious of competencies that are not rational and analytical in nature. To many leaders, these neglected competencies seem more relevant to art than to science. The authors, however, see them as residing at the intersection of art and science. (Einstein's imaginary rides aboard photons, and falling elevators could be thought of as a form of imaging.) In their research, the authors often refer to them as 'aesthetic competencies' and believe they are becoming more relevant each day. A developmental challenge in becoming a creative leader is inventing effective ways of bringing the competencies into the work context.

How can aesthetic competencies be brought into work? It is not easy. The habit of discouraging them is still strong in many organisations today. Because they are interrelated – and thus should not be added one by one – there are no shortcuts. There are, however, some things that one can do to facilitate the process for oneself and others.

Ask yourself: 'What am I passionate about?' The best way to gain access to aesthetic competencies is through activities one cares about and loves to do. This is typically where such competencies play out strongly in people's lives. For some, this may be an activity we think of as art, such as painting, sculpting or musical composition. For others, it may be a hobby, avocation, or a seriously playful leisure activity.

Everyone has at least one such activity in his or her life and may have lost touch with it as other activities intruded. Some people recognise it in an aspect of their work that they are especially fond of. Once you have identified this activity, reclaim it if you have lost it; claim it for work. Find ways to make time for it for its own sake. Make it legitimate.

Then ask: 'How can I tap these aesthetic competencies and apply them at work?' Let others know that you are doing it and that it is something you do to revitalise yourself, enhance your creativity and improve your effectiveness and productivity at work. A word of caution, though this may sound paradoxical, is that you should protect it from the sharpest demands of the organisation. It is a matter of using but not abusing your aesthetic competencies in service of the organisation.

Look at the people you work with and ask: 'What activities are they passionate about?' Learn about those activities and respect them. Find ways to help people protect and nurture these aspects of themselves and connect them to the work at hand. Two cautions in this respect are that people tend to be sensitive or shy about their most cherished personal activities, requiring a climate of trust and respect for revealing them. Moreover, do not press too hard in asking people to bring their private talents to work.

Many corporate initiatives are efforts to squeeze more out of people. Creativity can be like sand, which rests easily on the open palm of your hand but trickles through your fingers when you try to clench it in your fist.

Artistry and creative leadership

As shown by the authors' terms for the neglected competencies (namely, 'aesthetic'), the authors make a strong connection between art and creative leadership. They are, of course, not the first to do this, but they do so in a somewhat different way.

The authors believe that the competencies that are understood as underlying art are also a foundation of leadership. It is not only that leadership is an art; it is that, on a deeper level, leadership and art (including crafts, hobbies and the like) are both processes that require these abilities. Thus, if we take an excursion from our work lives and explore how we appreciate, think about and create art (understood in its broadest sense), we will discover competencies that can be brought into work to address leadership challenges more productively.

Creative leadership is, at its heart, about building – building knowledge, building products and building institutions. Constructing something that has never been built before requires the two great engines of human creativity: analysis and artistry.

The first works by formulae; it depends on generating and coordinating parts. The second works by perception and composition; it strives intuitively for original wholes. It is the thorough integration of the rational-analytical and the aesthetic that enables people to lead creatively, so that they and their organisations can grow and adapt, explore and build.

Postscript: What do people who are competent at creative leadership do?

Creative leadership means making shared sense out of complexity and chaos and the crafting of meaningful action. The authors' research has identified six creative leadership competencies.

1. Paying attention – the master competency – is the disciplined art of slowing looking down in order to discern the unfamiliar in the familiar, as well as the familiar in the unfamiliar. People that are competent at paying attention can do the following:
 - Focus one's own attention; shift focus
 - Focus the attention of others; shift the focus of others
 - Attend to emotions, needs and concerns of oneself and others
 - Pay attention in a variety of modes
 - Be a connoisseur and able critic of the special qualities of creative work
 - Perceive deeply before deciding
 - Persevere in paying attention, despite discomfort
 - Attend to the unfamiliar in the familiar, and the familiar in the unfamiliar
 - Shift perspective
 - Explore differences in perspective
 - Shift attention to the periphery, grey areas and negative spaces.
2. Personalising is adeptly tapping into one's unique life experiences and passions to provide insight and perspective on shared challenges. People that are competent at personalising can do the following:
 - Connect one's personal passions to the workplace
 - Help others connect their passions and their work
 - Depersonalise as necessary for greater objectivity
 - Develop an effective personal style or 'signature'
 - Bring personal experiences, avocations and interests to bear on a new situation
 - Understand and engage the personal investments of others
 - Practice self-development.
3. Imaging calls for literacy in making and using of all kinds of images – pictures, stories, metaphors, visions – to make sense of data and communicate effectively. People that are competent at imaging can do the following:
 - Use stories, metaphors and visual images to communicate
 - Make and tell insightful and compelling stories
 - Portray essence
 - Create and explore models and simulations
 - Create and explore metaphors
 - Create and interpret visual images (visual literacy)
 - Impart richness and depth to language
 - Use colour effectively
 - Visually represent data clearly and effectively
 - Avoid purely decorative embellishment.
4. Serious play is skill in generating knowledge through exploration, experimentation, rule bending, limit testing, levity and sport. People that are competent at serious play can do the following:
 - Experiment intelligently while holding setbacks lightly
 - Use humour and levity effectively
 - Find the thread of appropriate play in a serious situation
 - Engage the hearts and minds of others in a playful way
 - Explore with curiosity and a sense of fun
 - Show good sense in rule-bending and breaking
 - Know just how far to go when going too far
 - Read and respond to patterns in turbulence
 - Create safe-enough places for self and others to explore freely
 - Explore connections between seemingly unrelated domains
 - Know when not to play.
5. Collaborative inquiry is the ability to sustain productive dialogue in addressing complex issues within and across community boundaries. People that are competent at collaborative inquiry can do the following:
 - Engage in skilful conversation (also known as dialogue)
 - Ask powerful questions in an energising way
 - Explore differences in perspective
 - Express doubts in an inviting and/or loyal way
 - Be an able sceptic
 - Hold an issue open without rushing to an answer
 - Leave room for silence
 - Make meaning across community boundaries
 - Engage people from their own position
 - Build bridges among people
 - Balance advocacy and inquiry.
6. Crafting is the skilful synthesis of issues, objects, events and actions into beautifully integrated, meaningful wholes. People that are competent at crafting can do the following:
 - Put together parts into a suitable whole
 - Align form and function
 - Invest action with special meaning
 - Take things apart and put them back together
 - Know the proper places of both approximation and perfection
 - Work effectively with the advantages and limits of the materials at hand
 - Know when to work within tradition and when to break with tradition
 - Persevere on a daily basis with a long-term creative project
 - Respect and engage the craft of others.

Note

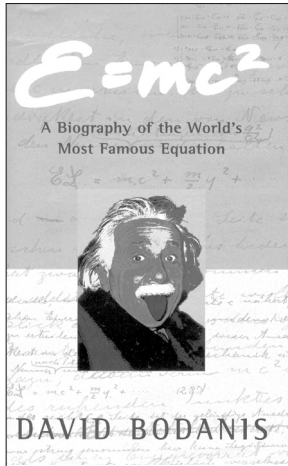
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Book Reviews



E = mc² – A Biography of the World's Most Famous Equation
by David Bodanis, 2001, Berkeley Books, New York

Everyone knows that the equation is really important, but do we know what it actually means? I shall leave it up to the reader to enjoy these explanations for themselves. More than this, the book does not explore the usual mathematical antics involved in developing the world's famous equation, nor the biography of Albert Einstein; it tells the tales of ordinary people that developed extraordinary ideas. Einstein himself is quoted as saying: "The most beautiful thing we can experience is the mysterious. It is the source of all true art and science." The plot unfolds, revealing science's bright discoverers and their battles for recognition in a world not interested in, and certainly not amenable to, the strange creations they lovingly proposed.

The people in the book are dedicated, no, passionate about their work. The foremost is Albert himself, whose father, Hermann, wrote a long and desperate letter to propose an assistant's position at the University of Leipzig for his unhappy son. Albert's grades were simply too low. In fact, his high school teacher noted: "Your presence in the class destroys the respect of the students." Albert himself, in the famous paper in the *Annalen der Physik*, pointed out: "The idea is amusing and enticing, but whether the Lord is laughing at it and has played a trick on me – that I cannot know." In 1905, $E = mc^2$ was born. (E is the vast domain of energies, c is the speed of light and m is the material stuff of the universe.)

There is Michael Faraday, the apprentice bookbinder from a poor London family that was desperate to change his life and worked hard to achieve this. With his limited formal education, he was not bound by the sciences of the day in his thinking about the linkages between electricity and magnetism. His discovery proved to be the discovery of the century: Faraday invented the basis of the electric engine. The story goes that later, after all the announcements, when asked by the Prime Minister what good the invention could be, he responded: "Why, Prime Minister, someday you could tax it."

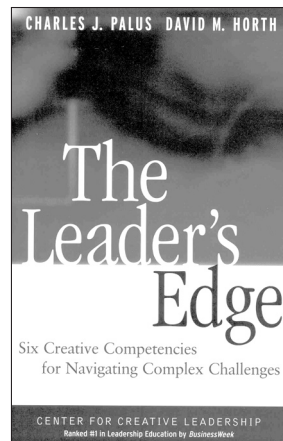
Then there is Mademoiselle Emilie du Chatelet, of whom her poor, suffering father wrote: "My youngest flaunts her mind and

frightens away the suitors ... We do not know what to do with her." Emilie was reading Descartes' analytic geometry rather than using her looks to find a husband. She enjoyed challenging the great masters of fencing at their own trade. In fact, she married Pierre-Louis Maupertuis, their courtship having been conducted mainly through their joint studies of calculus. Then she met Voltaire and formed a lasting match. Visitors from Versailles saw her as a beautiful young woman who preferred to work at her desk with calculations, translations and advanced scientific equipment stacked in the hall. Her research focused on 'What is energy?' Whereas Voltaire agreed with the accepted Newtonian views, Emilie studied the work of Leibniz, famous for views that competed with those of Newton. Emilie died in childbirth.

I do not want to spoil the book for those that are serious about the sciences, but find the people – and admire their brilliance and dedication, and their ability to search for the truth against all odds and without the perfections we have available in the 21st century to understand and develop.

And do likewise.

René Pellissier
Executive Director: De Montfort Southern Africa



The Leader's Edge, Six Creative Competencies for Navigating Complex Challenges
by Charles J. Palus & David M. Horth, 2002, Jossey-Bass, San Francisco

Amidst the rapidly increasing knowledge base on the creativity and innovation genre of literature, the authors bring a fresh approach to managing complexity and offer simple yet promising methods and advice for managers. While others regurgitate and repackage the basics of creative thinking, multidisciplinary problem solving, culture and the like, these two authors bring a paradigm reinvention package to leaders and managers under constant pressure to innovate and produce more with less.

The publisher and authors present the aims of the book as:

- To assist managers to handle complexity beyond conventional management skills
- To identify the insight, skills, techniques and wisdom that separate true leaders from merely effective managers

- To reveal how any leader can access and use these sensibilities and skills to make sense of rapid change and complexity and thus provide an invaluable 'leader's edge'
- To help managers to recognise the competencies they already have, develop them further and integrate these with traditional skills in the process of making sense and creating shared understandings in order to better navigate and resolve complex challenges in an organisational or community context.

The authors present a convincing case in support of these objectives. They present seven years of their research on hundreds of leaders and teams across industries and disciplines from which their proposed six competencies were derived:

1. Paying attention: using multiple modes of perception to understand a complex situation.
2. Personalising: tapping into your and others' unique life experiences and passions to gain insight and create energy to tackle group challenges.
3. Imaging: making sense of complex information, constructing ideas, and communicating effectively by using all kinds of images, such as pictures, stories and metaphors.
4. Serious play: generating knowledge through free exploration, improvisation, experimentation, levity and play.
5. Co-inquiry (or collaborative inquiry): dialoguing within and across community boundaries of language, culture, function and professional discipline.
6. Crafting: synthesising issues, objects, events and actions into integrated, meaningful wholes.

Each chapter ends with a 'Cautions' section in which the authors provide practical advice on the use and limitations of their approach. Their case studies illustrate clearly how others have derived value from applying these competencies.

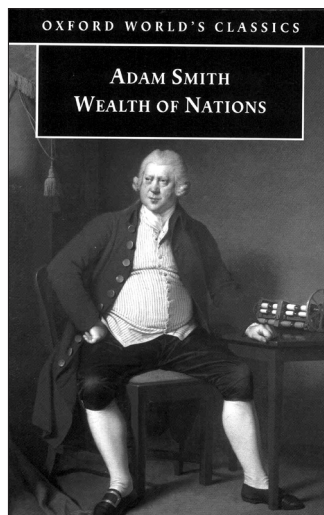
In line with the thinking of lateral or creative thinking practitioners, the authors illustrate the power of escaping the logic or comfort zone and use imaging as a springboard to develop new perspectives to problem situations or to conceive solutions.

Finally, a well intended suggestion to the authors: the term 'complex' in the title is only described on page two and, rather than a crisp, succinct definition, a number of descriptors are used to give meaning to the concept. Readers from a mathematical, scientific or research background may be attracted by the title, only to find that this is not a publication dealing with advanced levels of mathematical optimisation of multifaceted modelling/simulation problems. This could be contextualised earlier in the book.

In conclusion, this is a 'must read' for managers and leaders that have been looking for a better, simpler and non-franchised ticket to managing complexity – no wonder the Center for Creative Leadership (where both the authors work) was rated number one in leadership development by Business Week in 2002.

Awie Vlok

Director: CSIR Innovation, Leadership and Learning Academy



An Inquiry into the Nature and Causes of the Wealth of Nations

by Adam Smith, 1776, republished in 1998, Oxford University Press

Most people these days would probably say that advances in productivity have been due to the introduction of machinery and other technology, deriving from advances in science. Adam Smith's theory is different. The author believes that division of labour is not originally the effect of any human wisdom, but the slow and gradual consequence of a certain tendency in human nature to truck, barter and exchange one thing for another. Unlike animals, human beings have the ability to reason and use more persuasive means to get what they need. It is through this ability that the man good at making bows and arrows exchanges them for cattle with his companions – hence the certainty of being able to exchange the surplus of the produce of his own labour, which is beyond his own consumption, for parts of the produce of other men's consumption, and to perfect whatever talent he possesses for that particular business. The authors further suggest that the balance between a rich or poor nation is regulated by two circumstances: firstly the skill, dexterity and judgement with which its labour is applied, and secondly, the proportion of people who are employed and those who are not.

As one reads the book, one gains knowledge of how economies developed in terms of money and business. In the civilised nations of the 17th century, people exchanged one need for another if they required what someone else had. The chronological writing style gives the reader an overview of how nations moved from the barter trade era to the need for some kind of uniform and balanced means of trade.

The book is written in five parts; in the first part, the author talks about how best a nation can improve its labour and distribute its produce among its people. The second part addresses the amount of capital stock produced by employed labourers, how this stock is accumulated and how it is used. In the third part, the author discusses the circumstances in which Europe, after the fall of the Roman Empire, adopted a policy of developing industrial towns, leaving agriculture in the country. The topic of the fourth part is industrialisation and its impact on the advancement of a nation, depending on how it was perceived.