

Complexity Intelligence: Evolving Capacities for Complex Times

by

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We are living in complex times and are part of complex systems that our past experiences and training may not have prepared us to understand. Psychologist, Robert Kegan (1994, 2000) suggests, we may well be “cognitively and emotionally mismatched” to respond to the mental demands of modern life. As we move more fully into a global society, it seems that all our systems are in chaos: our local economies, our health system, the environment, our community life, and often, at times, our own personal lives. We are living in a rapidly changing society. Toffler (1970) observed nearly 35 years ago, these times are not just like a second Industrial Revolution, but are more like a second great divide in human history – parallel to the movement from barbarism to civilization!

This “great divide in human history”, this monumental shift in life conditions has placed increasing stress on local and global leadership. It is clear that habitual linear thinking is not helping leaders deal with pressing issues such as stimulating the local economy, protecting the aquifer, providing housing choices for our elderly populations or responding to global violence, famine or inequities. Even well-intentioned approaches to governance that include public participation in decision making often fail to grapple with the complexity of issues and end up creating polarized debate and divisiveness. People keep looking for simple approaches to things that are complex.

In using the word *complex*, we are referring to the interconnected and unpredictable nature of issues in a world technologically and thus socially connected across time and space in a way much different than we experienced even 20 years ago. Clearly, there is a wide gap between the societal challenges facing us in the 21st century and our collective capacities to effectively respond to them. This gap is severely threatening our survival as a species.

As part of the evolutionary process, humans routinely find themselves faced with challenges that exceed their capacities. This is a natural part of growth and evolution and occurs in all realms of the human experience, whether that is physical, mental, emotional, spiritual or interpersonal. But, what happens when the challenges in our life threaten our very deep-seated perception of “how the world works”? In other words, what happens when there is a gap between our operating beliefs of how the world works and the contradictory evidence presented by what we observe in the world around us? What happens to societies when this manifests as large gaps between existing capacities and the capacities needed to respond to societal challenges? We suggest that *complexity intelligence* emerges as we make the transition through these gaps.

We also suggest that it is possible to actively stimulate and support the emergence of *complexity intelligence* in our society, but we need a new form of social change agent - a *cultural coach*, to midwife its emergence.

Our intent in defining the term *complexity intelligence* is to offer a simple phrase or moniker for practitioners working in the area of social change. We acknowledge the many inspiring individuals and programs in the field of social change and feel that an accessible concept based on rigorous research and contemporary theory is needed to capture the essence of this work. Our concept of complexity intelligence draws on the interrelated fields of adult development, integral theory, transformational learning, complexity theory, dialogue, deliberation and action research. We suggest that social change agents should be familiar with this body of work in designing public processes to support the emergence of complexity intelligence. These theories do not need to be taught conceptually for complexity intelligence to be developed. In fact, in many cases they should not be taught, but rather should be embedded in experiential learning and application. Complexity intelligence is a natural human capacity that will emerge, given the appropriate balance of challenge and support.

We consider *complexity intelligence* to be both a capacity and a process. In general terms, it is the capacity to respond to the demands of current life challenges and it is also the process of developing this capacity. To capture its inherent dynamic evolutionary process, we should be using the verb *intelligencing*, but for ease of reference, we are considering both the capacity and the process to be described by the term *complexity intelligence* or, simply, CI.

As a capacity, CI is defined to be the integration of the reasoning ability, emotional capacity and social cognition required to function at the level of complexity demanded by current life challenges.

As a process of negotiating transitions, CI includes: (1) recognition that a gap exists between the life conditions currently facing us and our current operating beliefs and assumptions of how the world works (e.g. without a futures context many leaders are assuming they can do business as usual, not seeing that a shift in technology, transportation, health care, the economic base etc. will require completely different capacities for thinking and acting.) (2) perseverance to stay engaged in the gap with the resulting confusion, contradiction and frustration as we disembed from our familiar operating beliefs; and (3) exposure and openness to a new conceptual framework that helps validate the recognition of this gap.

Although this work of evolving our capacities to respond to complexity is a natural evolutionary process, given the complexity of our times, it is also extremely challenging work and, therefore, benefits from a designed approach within a supportive learning community to nurture it. Engagement is required at more than just the individual level for lasting social change to occur. We believe a new form of change agent is needed to midwife this transition – a change agent we are calling a *cultural coach*. This term acknowledges the support offered by a coach within the context of the culture to facilitate the natural evolution of complexity intelligence.

For further information please refer to the complete article at <http://integral-review.global-arina.org/>. We invite feedback on these concepts and welcome your responses at info@integrativelearninginstitute.com