

WALKING IN FOGG

HOW ACCEPTING 'UNORDER' CAN UNLOCK PROJECT LEADERSHIP



*The objectives are rewritten. The goalposts shift. The context changes. It's all too easy for projects to be thrown off course by 'events'. But, as **Carole Osterweil** explains in this fascinating real-life story, skilled project leaders can find clarity even in the most volatile situations*

The remit of Project 2020 was to restructure a partnership organisation delivering health and social care across the NHS and central, regional and local government. For the senior team charged with delivery, it was turning into a nightmare. The environment was changing so fast that every time they got a clear sense of the way forward, there would be a new policy announcement and the goalposts would shift.

Reputations depended on it. Failure was not an option. They were desperate for clear parameters, but the steering group was unable to oblige. Things were moving too fast and, no matter how much they wished otherwise, there was little the team could do.

The Project 2020 team members were talented, experienced and highly motivated individuals charged with delivering ambitious objectives amid relentless and demanding conditions. They had heard of VUCA environments (those with volatility, uncertainty, complexity and ambiguity).

They knew that VUCA environments do not conform to expectations.

But this knowledge was not enough. They still got stuck and frustrated, and often they could not put a finger on what was going wrong or why. It was as if a thick fog had descended, yet they must keep walking – despite being unable to see a way forward.

Project 2020 is based on real episodes from a project that I worked on (I can't name it for confidentiality reasons). The frameworks offered here are taken from my work in the private and public sectors with senior project leaders, and project managers making the transition to project leader.

PERMISSION TO ACKNOWLEDGE REALITY

Back to the Project 2020 story. The team first glimpsed light at the end of the tunnel when, during a team meeting, a consultant offered a label courtesy of complexity theorists Cynthia Kurtz and Dave Snowden to describe their environment. It was 'unordered'. ▶▶

◀◀ In unordered environments, so much is changing on so many fronts that it seems impossible to keep up, let alone influence the way forward.

The way to thrive is to recognise that the lack of order is not a matter of poor investigation, inadequate resources or lack of understanding. It is simply a characteristic of a complex system at work. What's more, the lack of order is not necessarily a bad thing or a problem that could be solved if someone else would only set their mind to it.

For the 2020 team, this one word, 'unordered', was worth its weight in gold. It validated what, at some level, they had individually come to understand – the lack of order was here to stay, for the foreseeable future at least.

In one way, nothing had changed – they still had to deliver. In another, everything had shifted.

They had permission to acknowledge reality and revise their baseline assumptions. Their usual approach, which aimed to create certainty across the board, would never pay off, and there was no point in pretending it would. The notion of an unordered environment opened the way for a very different approach that ultimately led to a successful outcome. It worked on several levels.

On an intellectual level, it provided a new frame of reference – that of complex systems – to help the 2020 team make sense of the situation they found themselves in. They saw that the sense of chaos reflected the state of the system; it was not caused by their inability to lead or control.

On an emotional level, it created psychological safety – it enabled team members to speak for the first time about how stressful and difficult things were. They could now admit that things felt chaotic without fear of being the only person who thought the project was going off the rails. And they could speak this truth without fear of being embarrassed, punished or rejected for speaking up.

PSYCHOLOGICAL SAFETY

The combination of a new frame of reference and psychological safety was the starting point for creating an environment where the Project 2020 team, like others I work with, could begin to:

- relax and stop trying to force their project to fit in its entirety with standard tools and methods;
- separate the aspects of the project that were unordered from those that were ordered;
- use standard methods where there was order;
- use dialogue and sense-making elsewhere; and
- be confident that order would emerge.

With the publishing of research like Google's Project Aristotle, leading businesses are gradually

NEUROSCIENCE
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1 The human brain is wired for survival.

2 The human brain responds to a social threat in the same way as it responds to a physical threat – it tries to avoid it.

3 In judging whether a situation is threatening, the brain trusts its own experience above all else.

4 This response to social threats generates avoidance emotions, such as fear, anxiety, anger and shame. Avoidance emotions lead to avoidance behaviours, such as defensiveness, denial, attack and withdrawal – which all get in the way of delivery.

5 In contrast, when we feel psychologically safe, the brain generates emotions such as excitement, trust, joy and love. These emotions are a prerequisite for successful project delivery, because they enable us to collaborate, be creative and be highly productive.

coming to understand the importance of psychological safety. At its simplest, this is permission to make mistakes in pursuit of better performance.

However, most organisations are still a long way from appreciating that a lack of psychological safety has a huge impact on productivity.

If this sounds like an outlandish claim, take a moment to consider just some of the facts we are learning from the emerging field of neuroscience (see left). Understanding how the human brain works enables us to see projects as social systems. David Rock of the NeuroLeadership Institute has written extensively about the five key sources of social threat – status, certainty, autonomy, relatedness and fairness (SCARF). A perceived reduction in any one of these activates avoidance behaviours.

Think about the projects you are working on for a moment. How many times have you seen people becoming defensive or getting aggressive? In the 21st-century workplace, social threats abound. Dealing with the resulting avoidance behaviours consumes large amounts of energy, adds to complexity and distracts from achieving project goals.

WHAT'S YOUR ORIENTATION?

The notion of an unordered environment radically challenged the way Project 2020 team members thought about one of the SCARF domains – certainty.

You may not realise it, but we have choices about how to treat uncertainty. In his article 'Defining Complexity for Practitioners', Mark Phillips points out that we can choose to have an orientation towards either certainty or uncertainty (see below).

Like many of the people I work with, the Project 2020 team was working in an environment that demanded an orientation towards certainty. Everything from business and project planning ▶▶

For the 2020 team, this one word, 'unordered', was worth its weight in gold. It validated what, at some level, they had individually come to understand – the lack of order was here to stay, for the foreseeable future at least



A fast-changing environment where goalposts are constantly shifting

No clear parameters established by steering group

The sense of chaos reflects the unordered state of the system

Acknowledgement of unordered opens the door for team members to find a position of psychological safety

PROJECT 2020

If your orientation is towards certainty...

YOU FUNDAMENTALLY BELIEVE THAT:

- all drivers of uncertainty can be identified;
- we can estimate their potential impact on outcomes and put plans in place to deal with this; and
- there may be unknowns, but these too can be identified and managed away.

If your orientation is towards uncertainty...

YOU FUNDAMENTALLY BELIEVE THAT:

- the drivers of uncertainty cannot be identified ahead of time;
- it is not possible or desirable to plan how best to deal with an unforeseen event before it occurs; and
- doing so will constrain you in delivering ambitious results.

Understanding how the human brain works and why we behave as we do is a powerful staging post on the journey to becoming a project leader

◀◀ through to forecasting, budgeting and performance reviews was structured around a belief that all drivers of uncertainty can be identified.

Leadership texts may talk about what it takes to thrive in a VUCA environment. All too often this talk is divorced from the reality of organisational life.

The Project 2020 team was struggling to make its work fit a business model that required an orientation towards certainty. Team members did not realise they were doing this, and they did not realise there was an alternative approach. Why would they?

As a consultant, it is easy to hold up a mirror and make glib assertions about what is wrong and what needs to change. It is far more difficult to get traction and action – especially when dealing with fundamental beliefs about the way the world works.

BAMBOO SCAFFOLDING

One powerful technique is to recognise the emotional content while offering observations about the pattern of interaction and inviting a reframe.

For Project 2020, this meant being deliberately provocative and asking the team if they had ever seen a construction site in Hong Kong – where skyscrapers are built with bamboo scaffolding. Could it be that anxiety about not being able to control things meant they were taking risk management to extremes? Were they over-engineering the monitoring systems to create the equivalent of rigid steel scaffolding, when what they really needed was the flexibility provided by bamboo poles?

Once the team stepped back and saw the social dynamics driving their behaviour, they were able to see how anxiety was contributing to the situation. Equipped with this knowledge, it was a short step to appropriate action.

Understanding how the human brain works and why we behave as we do is a powerful staging post on the journey to becoming a project leader. It is possible to see projects as social systems and offer tools to create psychological safety. This helps to keep anxiety – ours and others' – in check, and creates the clarity to separate the ordered aspects of a project from the unordered.

Like the Project 2020 team, we can stop fanning the flames of complexity and put just enough structure in place to walk in fog. 🌀

● **CAROLE OSTERWEIL** IS DIRECTOR OF VISIBLE DYNAMICS AND AUTHOR OF *PROJECT DELIVERY, UNCERTAINTY AND NEUROSCIENCE*, A GUIDE FOR LEADERS WHO FIND THEMSELVES WALKING IN FOG



There's a lot of talk about the need for project managers to become project leaders, and the differences between the two are not always clear. This article has told the story of Project 2020 using extracts from *Project Delivery, Uncertainty and Neuroscience*, a guide I wrote to demystify the whole arena. Here's how I see the broader context...

"We're still creating short-order cooks. They can make anything on a limited menu... but modern projects require 'MasterChefs' – and, as a profession, we're not geared up to develop them."

These words, spoken five years ago by a leading light in the project management community, have stayed with me. At last things are beginning to change.

Take a look at APM's recent report *Project Leadership: Skills, behaviours, knowledge and values* by Sarah Coleman and Professor Mike Bourne. It notes that the profession needs more project leaders to deliver the complex projects of the future, and it explores the difference between project management and project leadership.

Project leadership is future-focused. It is about setting direction, dealing with people and working outside the project with stakeholders. Project management tends to be focused backwards on progress that has been made, and inwards on the project organisation. Project leaders operate with greater autonomy, in more unstable and more volatile environments, than many people realise. These environments

demand fast judgement calls in ambiguous situations.

The report may not use the *MasterChef* metaphor, but it recognises that many find it difficult to make the transition to project leader, not least because being a project leader requires you to let go of many of the activities that make you successful as a project manager. A key aspect of this is learning to step back to work strategically on the project, rather than staying with the detail and working in the project.

The good news is that the upcoming *APM Body of Knowledge 7th edition* is responding to the increased demand for project leaders. According to the authors, it will be emphasising that:

- contemporary management through projects deals with an increasingly volatile, uncertain, complex and ambiguous (VUCA) world; and
- emerging thinking understands projects as social systems. Academic-sounding phrases like these can be hard to get your head around. Yet, if you want to become a project leader, it's vital to understand what social systems are and how social complexity arises.