



CAPE CHAMBER OF COMMERCE & INDUSTRY

COMPLEXITY AND THE NATURE OF REAL-WORLD PROBLEMS

Date Published: 13 MAR 2017

If people were asked to list their problems, they might include: job dissatisfaction, lack of money, home strife and blood pressure. If you placed the issues in a table, and asked them to mark those squares where the problem in the row was related to the problem in the column, you'd get a surprising result: very few squares would remain blank.

	Family	Career	Health
Money			
Family			
Career			
Health			

This principle of interconnectivity amongst issues has a name: organised complexity, and Mason and Mitroff (2003) propose that it applies at any scale, from corporations to countries: "Every real world policy problem is related to every other real world problem."

If people say that life is more complicated today, in spite of the fact that the world is smaller due to enhanced communication – they're right. In the old days, we were in villages, not part of the global village, so the complexity was relatively disorganised – all the variables (people in this case) were somewhat independent. That situation was fine for statistical sampling – we were all relatively independent-thinking pieces of discrete data. But no longer. The insurance industry, for example, is finding that their calculations on the probability of death and accident are becoming less reliable, as people become more connected.

Today, more and more of the problems we encounter are neither simple nor chaotic, but exhibit more of the characteristics of this organised complexity.



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Here are 4 characteristics of organised complexity problems, the knowledge of which could make for better strategy:

- 1. Everything is connected** – the problem as well as the solution. Don't only focus on isolated pieces of information – the relationship between things can often provide vital clues.
- 2. Organised complexity is messy** – your challenge is to find leverage points where intervention can make a difference.
- 3. There will always be uncertainty**. Your job is to decrease it to an acceptable level. There is usually an optimal amount of research, where further discussion does not advance the strategy. When you revisit the same issue twice, you're probably beginning to waste your time trying to engineer uncertainty out of the system – and that's not going to happen.
- 4. There will always be ambiguity**. There is no one right way of defining the problem. However, there are many ways of solving the right problem; there are no ways of solving the wrong problem.

Reference: Richard Mason and Ian Mitroff. Complexity: The nature of real world problems. In Bob de Wit and Ron Meyer, Ed. Strategy Synthesis, Thomson Publishing 2003, p26-36.

About the author

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