

# Meeting the Cognitive Demands of Leading in Times of Uncertainty

**Al Lauzon**

*University of Guelph, Canada*

## INTRODUCTION

The historians Lukacs (2002) and Hobsbawm (1994) have argued that the 1980s constitutes the beginning of a radical transformation of the developed world. During the 1980s we begin to see the decline of the Keynesian welfare state in earnest and neoliberalism begins its ascent with its restructuring of the economy through trade liberalization, dominance of the market over the state, and the development of a global economy. These changes correspond temporally with the increasing sense of urgency as it relates to environmental degradation and the need for a collective response as documented in the World Commission on Environment and Development report titled *Our Common Future* (1987). With the rise of neoliberalism, economic globalization and increased liberalization of trade the United Nations (1992) was incredibly optimistic, arguing that neoliberalism and economic globalization would raise all boats with the rising tide of a new economic order founded upon increased freedom for people. Yet that is not the world that evolved and we now have a world characterized by increasing inequality both between and within countries coupled with recognition of global climate change and its potential physical, social, financial and political impacts, along with continued environmental destruction. Lauzon (2015) has noted that these changes are rooted in confronting what are known as “wicked problems”. The illusion of a predictable and controllable world has been undermined as we must now admit we live in a time of continuous and often disruptive and transformative change where there is a need for leaders to facilitate the development of resilience, be it in organizations or communities in order to foster our adaptive capacity. The question then arises how do we lead and manage in a chaotic environment characterized by continuous and disruptive change in a “shrinking” world while striving to develop resilience? Lauzon (2013) has argued that this constitutes a shift from the modern worldview to a more participatory worldview. This worldview, I believe, requires a new form of leadership rooted in a different order of consciousness; leaders need to be exploring the cognitive frontiers of an emerging form of consciousness as they grapple with the challenges and opportunities that face us collectively as presented through wicked problems.

This chapter proposes to ask the question “What are the cognitive demands of contemporary leadership?” The chapter begins by exploring the various changes we have experienced and continue to experience, and the implications they have for leadership. These changes will be explored in the context of wicked problems and followed by a section of the implications of wicked problems for leadership. The argument will then be made that in examining the various challenges and opportunities we are being presented with a demand for a structure of consciousness beyond that of modernity’s rational-logic. This will be followed by the articulation of an evolutionary framework and its dynamics that focuses not on biological evolution, but on the evolution of consciousness. This evolutionary framework has been captured in the thinking of numerous intellectual leaders, including the German social theorist Jurgen Habermas, the philosopher Ken Wilber and the futurist Jeremy Rifkin. A specific focus will be on the

emergence of a new structure of consciousness—vision-logic— as the necessary structure of consciousness for leaders contending with wicked problems and uncertain times. I will close by looking at the implications for leaders.



## Contemporary Challenges as Wicked Problems

As noted above, we are living through transformative times, but like all moments of transformation, they are both exhilarating and challenging, we are excited but fearful for the unknown of transformation can be unnerving. In this section I will explore what the challenges of modernity are and their relationship to contemporary transformation, followed by an explication of wicked problems.

Lauzon (1998) has suggested humankind face two fundamental challenges: the challenges of a deteriorating environment and the challenges of diversity. I would now argue that these challenges have been exacerbated by the challenges of global climate change and increasing global inequity. These issues are further challenged by fundamental shifts in the economy and movements from an industrial based economy to what many have called a knowledge economy or information economy, but I prefer to refer to it as a creative/innovation economy for to be economically successful means to be constantly engaged in change and transformation, to be innovative, and to be innovative is a state of both being and becoming. Furthermore, I would argue that the creative/innovation economy is an economy that is characterized by wicked problems that can be understood in the context of complexity. Furthermore, while we often parse the economy from the social and from the environment, it is an artificial parsing for one cannot truly separate the three; they are intimately and intricately related to one another and changes in one ultimately effect changes in the other. To begin, however, let me briefly provide an overview of modernity and its approach to problems.

Modernity was grounded in a belief that science gave us the power to master whatever challenges might come our way; it was in a sense a panacea to meet and resolve all challenges and woes we encounter. Lauzon (1995, p. 60) captures this spirit, quoting Francis Bacon: “I come in very truth leading you to Nature with all her children to bind her to your service and make her your slave.” Here we see in its earliest formation the idea that science provides a means of controlling nature (not to mention its inherent patriarchic beliefs as evidenced by the language used by Bacon). Science was premised on reductionism whereby one could break down any problem or challenge into its constituent parts, deal with individual pieces and once all individual pieces had been adequately addressed the problem would be resolved. This was accomplished through technical-rationality and logic which continued and reaches its apex in post WWII as expressed through the idea of progress and continuous economic growth. As Rostow (1990) noted in his theory of development, mass consumerist society characterized by the West represented from his perspective, the pinnacle of development. However, in the 1960s some people, particularly young people, became disillusioned with the modern worldview rooted in notions of material progress through science and began to challenge the hegemony of science and the idea of expertise. Much of this is premised on the failure of the promise of science to resolve all our problems, and the failure of reductionism to account for unintended consequences. An example of unintended consequences is illustrated with Rachel Carson’s publication of *Silent Spring* (1962). While DDT was very successful in doing what it was designed to do—eliminate pests—it failed to consider potential unintended outcomes and consequently in its application it was detrimental to the health of wildlife, human health and ultimately was undermining the health of ecosystems. Part of the challenge was not recognizing the complexity and interconnectedness of life and the planet. Head and Alford (2008) argue that the dominant mechanistic paradigm in which reductionism was rooted was inadequate to meet the

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