Our mindsets, lexicons and rules are no longer adapted to an environment that is mutating around us. Even our books and literature, dating back to the 1970s and 1980s, are outmoded...

Lost in transition

LORD EISHEN WROTE IN HIS diary after the hoarding of Edward VIII in 1910, “There never was such a break-up. All the old buoys which have accommodated our channel of our lives seem to have been swept away.” (Barbara Tuchman, The Guns of August).

From speed to instantaneity: In May 2010, the Deepwater Horizon oil spill occurred in the Gulf of Mexico. In the very same week, one tweet said that the shooter was in police uniform and police began to fire on public offices. The police were unaware of that piece of news.

From event to in-depth dislocation: We can observe the emergence of rogue waves through the combination of disruption dynamics of such mega-shocks, which can affect airports, stock exchanges, vital networks, military capacities, etc. While relying on the fact we have a strong understanding of the crisis world has been to: “Think outside the box.” But even as we do so, disasters confront us instantly with the unknown, capabilities, operational tools, which can affect airports, stock exchanges, vital networks, military capacities, etc.

From uncertainty to ignorance: Instantaneity, the absorption of large parts of reality until they become isolated, an abundance of reverberations, the multiplication of rogue waves, a loss of our fundamental anchors and bedrock, is a signature of this war.

The implosion of leadership: Every major crisis over the past 50 years has been characterized by leaders who are confident enough to be fully-prepared to march on the front-line, to be personally committed to shape new schemas, far beyond ready-made answers. Leaders who felt sufficiently secure to be able to lead, empower and inspire. The challenge cannot be underestimated. Every month, I am asked to read academic papers quoting the same models, prasing the same-detailed frameworks — when we actually need bold exploration and discovery. But we know, as Thomas Kuhn has observed, normal science is not the tool of exploration and invention. Every month, I hear the familiar strains of: “Do not scare our leaders, our people are not ready; come and train the people.”

The time has come to launch decisive dynamics. These include upgrading our capabilities, understanding the new territories involved in risks and crises. Leaders must be prepared to play their role in these new territories. Furthermore, we must adjust our organizations to include new capabilities, such as Rapid Response Forces (Crisis 2.0) to be available instantly to assist when the unknown has to be dealt with.

And, last but not least, we must prepare our citizens and people at work — at all levels — to be creative and to be part of the inventive process that this new reality demands.

Patrick Lagadec introduces the feature on leadership by examining how a new era of interconnected global mega-shocks requires a different leadership mindset...