

Lost in transition

WORD ESHER WROTE IN HIS

diary after the funeral of Edward VII in 1910: "There never was such a break-up. All the old buoys which have marked the channel of our lives seem to have been swept away." (Barbara Tuchman, *The Guns of August*).

The Fukushima nuclear power plant, Deepwater Horizon and Hurricane Katrina, the European crisis – are all examples of cognitive freeze, a collapse of initiative and an implosion of leadership. The recent *Costa Concordia* tragedy appears to mock our feelings that everything in our world is under control.

Conventional analysis would suggest that we need additional guideline governance, complementary best practices, more co-ordination and better communication. But actually, the stakes are more serious than that and go beyond current conventions. 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.

We can observe the emergence of numerous paradigm shifts.

Mega-shocks

From large-scale to off-scale: We have entered the era of global mega-shocks. The idea of 'Ground Zero', where those affected are rescued by those coming in from outside areas that have been left unscathed is becoming obsolete.

From complexity to the unreadable: The case of Hurricane Irene striking the east side of the American continent in 2011 is a global warning, telling us that it is impossible to predict in advance the multiple strikes and disruption dynamics of such mega-shocks, which can affect airports, stock exchanges, vital networks, military capacities, etc.

From tightly-coupled to total dependence: There is no longer a mere chain of interactions, but 'piles' of activities that become entangled and intertwined almost biologically. This means that shocks trigger submersion swells, which swallow up entireties, transmitting more than just incrementally from network to network, from one hub to another – and this transmission is replicated locally, nationally and globally.

From speed to instantaneity: In May 2010, Wall Street witnessed the 'disappearance' of



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Dreamstime

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

700 billion US dollars in just a few milliseconds. Electronic media coverage is now totally instantaneous, happening in real-time, globally and even beating timelines. During the secret operation against Bin Laden, news of the attack was already on Twitter as the core strategic group followed the assault in the West Wing war room. During the shootings in Liège (Belgium, December 13, 2011), one tweet said that the shooter was in police uniform and people began to flee from police officers. The police were unaware of that piece of 'news'.

From event to in-depth dislocation: The fundamental fabrics of our society, such as our environment, economy and culture, are very fragile and structurally in a state of pre-liquefaction. Events no longer develop in an absorbing milieu, but in a resonance chamber, amplified through weakened structures. A given impulse can develop into a cataclysmic dynamic, assuming very different forms or shapes. Such a milieu is prone to trigger rogue waves through the combination/recombination of any individual shock.

From uncertainty to ignorance: Instantaneity, the absorption of large parts of realities until they become isolated, an abundance of reverberations, the multiplication of rogue waves, the loss of our fundamental anchors and bedrocks... all of this sets us adrift outside our usual theatres of operation, be they intellectual or managerial. The challenge is no longer to grasp uncertainty at the margins while relying on the fact that we have a strong core of knowledge behind us. Instead, today's disasters confront us instantly with the unknown, catapulting us into territories where our principal hypotheses no longer work.

The concept of 'wicked problems', introduced by Rittel and Webber as early as 1973, is probably the most appropriate notion to rely upon when translating our response to these new realities. The cardinal idea is that the bulk of our conceptual and operational toolbox is designed to deal with 'tame' problems: those that can be precisely defined, whose causes can be specified and which can be resolved by gathering additional data, by breaking them down into smaller problems, and by applying specific techniques.

Wicked issues do not fit into any of these normal niches. In such cases, there is no consensus on the definition of the problem; indeed the very idea of a 'definition' is irrelevant. The search for solutions never stops, there is no ultimate test of a solution since any response generates unexpected consequences, and each implemented solution has consequences that cannot be undone. Every wicked problem can be considered to be a symptom of another problem.

These are indeed the core characteristics of mega-crises, qualitatively different from the event-focused crises, which have been mostly considered up until now.

Perhaps a remark by Mike Granatt – the founder of the Civil Contingencies Secretariat at the Cabinet Office in London – is illuminating in this regard. Since the turn of the century,

and checklists have previously made us feel so protected and in control? Can we bear a switch from an attitude of: 'Let's have the best toolboxes to avoid surprise' to one of: 'Let's train to be surprised'?

The third is specific to the very function of leadership: Are we ready to demand visionary leaders who are able to open new pathways into this great unexplored territory and 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 feel sufficiently secure to be able to listen, empower and inspire?

The challenge cannot be overestimated. Every month, I am asked to read academic papers quoting the same models, praising the same detailed frameworks – when

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and particularly since 9/11, the motto in the crisis world has been to: "Think outside the box." This already constituted a serious challenge for our habits of thinking, inherited from Descartes. The current reality, on all fronts, opens up a new landscape: as Mike said in 2011, "There is no box anymore."

Our first challenge is cognitive: can we change our visions, mindsets, and understand non-linearity in a chaotic world? This is far removed from Descartes and his neatly defined management models. A new chapter of the whole story of risks and crises has yet to be written. As pointed out by Peter Bernstein in his book *Against the Gods* in 1998: "The central theme of this whole story is that the quantitative achievements shaped the trajectory of progress over the past 450 years." But, he concludes at the end of the book: "Discontinuities, irregularities, and volatilities seem to be proliferating rather than diminishing". This calls for a paradigm shift – there is no ready-made off-the-shelf script. Discovery will be the name of the game, when we have been so used to applying, complying and controlling.

The second challenge is psychological – can we accept questions, when answers

we actually need bold exploration and discovery. But we know, as Thomas Kuhn has observed, 'normal science' is not the friend of exploration and invention. Every week, I hear the familiar strains of: "Do not scare our leaders; our people are not ready; come and revere the known responses."

The time has come to launch decisive dynamics. These include upgrading a collective understanding of the new territories involved in risks and crises. Leaders must be committed to playing their role in these new territories. Furthermore, we must adjust our organisations to include new capabilities, such as Rapid Reflection Forces (CRJ 3:2; 4:2) 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.

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