

The Megacrisis Unknown Territory
In Search of Conceptual and Strategic Breakthroughs
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“We are entering a revolutionary age.
And we are doing so with ideas, leaders, and institutions
that are better suited for a world now several centuries behind us”.
Joshua Cooper Ramo, *The Age of the Unthinkable*, p. 8.

“The most promising words ever written on the maps of human knowledge are
terra incognita – unknown territory.”
Daniel J. Boostin, *The Discoverers* (p. xv-xvi)

The world of crises appears to evolve very fast. Beyond mere specific events, we have to deal with fault-line convergences and global systemic dislocations. In short: from the 1976 Seveso accident to the 2008 global economic meltdown; from the sudden meningitis outbreak in that school to a worldwide unknown pandemic. We are entering the Mega-crisis era.

This is not “something more”, but “something else”. We had the intellectual framework and the operational answers; we are now left with a blank page, in a new territory, adrift with no compass, but with the demand to find some new orientation, and decisional and managerial capacities.

We are discovering that any disturbance can stir multi-dimension phenomena, each fault-line (economic, for instance) connecting to another (social), and another (violence), etc. The contamination is not only “rapid”: it appears “instantly systemic”. The best analogy is the super-cooled liquid, which appears “normal” and can, after just a slight blow, abruptly crystallize. That kind of environment defies our basic Cartesian logic, which sustains our visions, organizational design, and even crisis philosophy. The obsession must be, as ever in crisis, to avoid “fighting the last war”.

What are the main characteristics of “Mega-Crises”?

- *Global dislocation*. The focus is no longer the “event” (and its “domino effects”), but the potential liquefaction of our bedrocks, disintegration of links, destruction of most basic references – which open the way to “black hole” dynamics swallowing everything and every usual mode of response.
- *Multiple concomitant and interlinked scenes of crises*. Even if “all hazards” approaches are always recommended, our basic philosophy of disaster and crisis management is still event-focused and channeled. Multiple scenes and kinds of crises

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now confront us, at the same time, each of them feeding the others – like rogue waves that take their colossal energy from other nearby waves.

- *Systemic blackouts*. The problem is no longer the possible domino effect from one system to another but the global common freezing of all, since interdependencies are now total. A world without borders opens the way to crises without borders.
- *Instant crystallizing dynamics*. The time scale is just compressed to nothing. Our systems, especially social systems, are in “super-cooled” phase, exposed to abrupt possible crystallization.
- *From accidental failure to embedded function*. We were prepared to think of the world as stable, with some “accidents” from time to time; to see crises as difficult moments to navigate before coming back to normalcy – and even as opportunities to exploit to be stronger after the crisis. Here comes a world whose very “engine” is Mega-Crisis itself – the principle of evolution. The challenge is no longer to make sure the sea remains calm, but to be prepared to sail basically stormy, wild, uncharted oceans.

A definition to capture this new state of the world could sound like:

Mega-Crisis: “The embedded engine of a chaotic world that evolves and mutates through global dynamics whose texture is made up of complex, unstable webs of constant, global, major dislocations.”

Such a vista calls for reinvented landmarks and practices. We have to go much beyond Cartesian logic and be able to think a new way, and grasp chaotic dynamics. More: we have to be prepared to *be surprised* (LaPorte, 2007), and not prepared to have plans to avoid surprise. We are going to need leaders, able to *shape futures*, and not only managers trained to apply the “best known practices”. We have to be ready to *empower people* (Honoré, 2009), and not only to “reassure” everybody that “everything is under control” before the crisis, and then to impose a decaying “Command and Control” philosophy. We must be prepared to search for “*strange*” signals, and not only “weak” signals. We have to train students to this new world that demands new answers, and not just teach them the “crisis manuals” published in the 90s. Being prepared to Terra Incognita is the vital request.

I would like to focus on one already operational and tested approach: the *Rapid Reflection Force*. Leaders must have at hand people who are familiar with engaging chaos and who are given to thinking openly in unreadable situations. The concept and practice of the *Rapid Reflection Force* – *RRF* – has been forged to foster and protect the ability to open questions and forge new initiatives. It has been implemented for example in EDF (Electricité de France, the premier French public utility in the energy sector, and the leading worldwide nuclear operator). Along with the more conventional crisis teams – operations, communication, logistics, and top management – such *RRF* teams engage in four broad lines of questioning:

- *What is the essence of the problem?* The intelligence front involves a constant battle to frame, anticipate, detect and clarify the nature of the crisis, surprises, chain reactions, escalation dynamics, and the general mutations that can be triggered. By definition, it is not possible to grasp all the essential issues at stake in a crisis that is new, unclear and chaotic.
- *What are the major pitfalls?* When the pressure of events becomes extreme, when bearings are lost, the normal tendency is to become mired in highly counterproductive ruts. It is crucial, immediately, to think about the major stumbling blocks to avoid. And the first is a wrong framing of the issue – which can mutate at any time.

- *What is the map of actors; what networks are needed?* The new issues will have to be handled with new players. New maps will be needed both for diagnosis and for action, and they will have to be adjusted or remodeled throughout the ordeal.
- *What constructive initiatives can the RFF suggest?* The most important thing is not to pore over statistical lists or to compile all the information possible, but rather to try to discern one or a few critical initiatives that could introduce “a new ballgame”, help us escape our crisis-induced mental ruts, and launch “virtuous circles”.

Experience shows that these Rapid Reflection Forces are crucial for Executive Committees, from blowing the whistle (“there is a crisis, wake up”), to re-checking the organizational response, and above all to outline some creative initiatives to transform the global dynamics (Béroux, Lagadec, Guilhou, 2007, 2008). After two years of implementation, the quintessential power of the Rapid Reflection Force innovation is coming to the fore. Fundamentally, the RRF is not just another organizational tool providing additional answers. The RRF manifests the necessity of an open-minded, questioning, creative stance, beyond the usual mere application of previous models and mindsets.

Beyond specific responses, what we vitally need is the capacity to launch initiatives to develop new ways of thinking and acting – something we have labeled the “Magellan Initiative” to link an open number of people who try, at an international level, to understand and tackle the issues related to emerging mega-crises (Lagadec, 2007; Granatt, Young, Lagadec, 2009).

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