

Advances in Project Management Series¹

VUCA and the power of Emergence Teams

Tom Cockburn and Peter A.C. Smith

In their recent report, Deloitte (2014) asserted that the global business landscape has fundamentally changed and that business-as-usual and the previous ideas of what is *Normal* are a thing of the past. They imply that everyone is now working in the world of VUCA - an acronym for the volatility, uncertainty, complexity and ambiguity of general business conditions and market situations; witness “Brexit” and the Trump phenomenon as current illustrations of VUCA. Nevertheless, according to McKinsey & Company (2014) this new emergent VUCA environment is “rich in possibilities for those who are prepared”, as well as pitfalls for the unprepared.

VUCA contexts mean more than complication of systemic or detailed workings. Complexity is imbued with the forces and outcomes of emergence across all business dimensions and levels, from strategic to operational. *Emergence*, according to Wikipedia (2015) is the process whereby a large system, entity, pattern, or regularity with singular properties evolves through interactions among smaller, simpler entities (that themselves do not exhibit such properties). The core features of emergence are: (1) Surprise or radical novelty (features not previously observed in systems); (2) integration and coherence or correlation (integrated wholes that maintain themselves over some period of time); (3) A holistic global or macro level (exhibiting some property of ‘wholeness’); (4) it is the product of a dynamical process (it evolves); and (5) it is ‘ostensive’ (it can be perceived).

In order to achieve a meaningful theoretical-practical balance for thriving in and benefitting from a VUCA world, we first focused on operationalizing Snowden’s (2007) Cynefin Framework for teams operating under emergence situations. The Cynefin framework is cited in the literature (Snowden, 2007) as a tool for *a leader* to use in their decision-making. Given that the Cynefin framework is a “sense-making framework that is socially constructed from peoples’ experience of their past and also their anticipated futures” and “the Cynefin framework is a sense-making one and is normally created as an emergent property of social interaction. One of the reasons for this is the need to root any sense-making model in peoples’ own understanding of their past and possible futures.”(Snowden, 2010). However, in our opinion its use solely by leaders seriously short-changes the framework’s power, and we recommend its use in team settings where conclusions drawn regarding environments and responses are emergent, enriched and reach project consensus based on team consensus or team input to the leader.

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Cynefin is a Welsh word, which may be translated into English as 'place', although the term was chosen by Snowden (2014) to describe his understanding of the evolutionary nature of complex systems, and their inherent uncertainty - the name Cynefin is his reminder that all human interactions are emergent and determined by experiences, both through the direct influence of personal experience, and through collective experience; for example through storytelling.

The four Cynefin environments and associated recommended responses are:

1. Known environment: Sense--categorize--respond
2. Knowable environment: Sense--analyze--respond
3. Unknowable environment, complex: probe--sense--respond
4. Unknowable environment, chaotic: act--sense--respond

Many organizations categorize the environments they face without any detailed examination as *known environments*, assuming without further study, that the environments in question have been previously categorized. These organizations then respond by applying *best practices*; that is with solutions that have worked in the past. However in our VUCA business world, where complex conditions exist in virtually all business situations, *Normal* typically no longer applies and employing *best practices* without careful consideration does not take account of VUCA's surprise factors and often produces catastrophic results. In this regard, it is noteworthy that the average longevity of S&P 500 organizations declined from 67 years in the 1920s to just 15 years today (Gittleston, 2014).

Organizations typically try to apply simplified solutions to even the most urgent problems because they lack "situational (contextual) awareness". All too often they are trying to solve the wrong problem as they confuse symptoms and causes. It really should be no surprise to decision makers when previously successful problem-solving approaches fail in new situations -the simple reason is that most organizations try to solve problems facing backwards! They confidently assert that what worked in the past will work in the future – try driving your car down a busy street that way. You'll end up in the same situation as do such organizations – with a catastrophe! As Snowden and Boone (2007, p. 68) assert: different contexts call for different kinds of responses. Before addressing a situation, leaders need to recognize which context governs it and tailor afresh their actions.

Application of Cynefin response #2 may seem to offer a safer more general situational approach although "analysis" too has many pitfalls (Ackoff, 1977) and this environment would be better approached using systems theory (Ackoff, 1981); for example analysis would not resolve the following question: why do two seemingly identical cars have the steering wheel on the left in one case and on the right in the other? A systems approach could tell us that one is built for the UK market and the other for the North American market.

The experimental approach of ‘probe, sense and respond’ may be seen as overly demanding by many practitioners although it is one that has served countless organizations well for many decades e.g. in complex plant optimization using statistical design and analysis and also in organizational development where it is called “Action Learning” (McGill & Beaty, 1995). The key is to make sure that the “probe” will not produce disastrous results but rather results from which careful further probing may be planned after in-depth reflection and learning (sensing, adapting). Although slow, this approach has no serious drawbacks, even when Cynefin environments #1 or #2 are actually being faced. Action learning typically takes place among trusted colleagues in a group of about six people where the group (“Set”) members encourage and help the group-member(s) owning the problem to reflect on problem causes and possible courses of action before the Set member(s) with responsibility for the problem take(s) action. The action-learning approach practiced in organizations today has become highly structured and consultant/ set-adviser driven.

It is important to remember that events in complex contexts do not necessarily result in the proportionality of responses of the Newtonian-type, i.e. equal and opposite reactions. They can, in fact, be very disproportionate. Small events can trigger big changes and vice versa. These amplifications encompass the affective domain too. Groups must maintain a minimum of cohesion to avoid the centripetal forces of discontent overwhelming the centrifugal forces of group bonds (Arrow, 2000: 231). Centrifugal forces include the differential effect of events on individual members at different times. There are a number of vitally important conversations that often get missed, misheard or mis-communicated, resulting in project failure.

Emergence Team conversations

Many initiating and evaluation conversations between key parties about projects tend to focus on scheduling and risks of cost overruns but perceptions of what constitutes a ‘successful’ project may also vary between the business clients and the project team or may include unvoiced assumptions. Similarly the mutual perceptions of ‘ideal’ composition of the team itself may differ. These may then impact the manifest or tacit project management risks and what are the key choices to be made by each party at a variety of stages, such as who has the major say, what are the key features, advantages and benefits to each party and thus, when is the project actually successfully completed.

Emergence Teams are designed to address complex ‘3D’ strategic problems i.e. those which impact in depth as well as vertically and horizontally tackling major issues in VUCA contexts. In such complex business and leadership contexts developing shared narratives and conversations about meaning-making processes are both vital but also extremely fragile or fragmented in frequently far-from-equilibrium periods these teams inhabit.

There are a number of critical conversations that must take place, which we briefly summarize here.

- Team Sponsor and Team Leader conversations clarifying and communicating project purposes, aims, objectives and goals

- How to reach consensus inside fluid boundaries
- Participative Problem-solving processes—not just inward-looking or relying solely on their own data or resources; may include crowd sourcing
- Impacts of Fragmented work and dissolving hierarchies
- Team members' reward
- Timing, gradients of change, resourcing
- Structures and strategies
- Identification of team members
- Formal and informal team rules, values, expectations and responsibilities

The key to a collaborative work environment is that many individuals at *all levels* are responsible for achieving success. Collaborative interactions may operate under a set of predetermined norms or 'rules' or shift into a new paradigm and level and enact new rules and processes. As we have stated in other places (Smith and Cockburn 2013 and 2014). We would agree that every leader's key role is to influence or change local rules of interaction in order to promote knock on changes and encourage a qualitative change. We also recognise the interaction between hierarchy and hierarchic ties, suggesting this systemic feature in organizations can be a control mechanism for avoiding uncontrolled complexity overwhelming teams (Hazy et al, 2007,p30). In most teams, there are individual performers, each of whom has a contribution to the collective whole but some of whom can be more easily replaced than others.

Application of the Cynefin framework raises a number of other practical questions underpinning team conversations: What is the best way to categorize the environment facing an organization? Once categorized, what is the best way to decide on a response or a series of responses? In regard to how a business organizes to apply the framework, the 'principle of requisite variety' (Ashby, 1981) becomes very important. This principle suggests that the internal diversity of any internal system must match the variety and complexity of its environment if it is to be successful in dealing with the challenges posed by the environment. Adhering to this principle indicates that to successfully categorize the environments facing an organization and to define an appropriate response or series of responses, the organization must access a pool of individuals with experience in facing the challenge(s) of the environment in question.

Team Requisite variety and Crowdsourcing

This principle of requisite variety suggests that the internal diversity of any internal organizational system must match the variety and complexity of its environment in order to be successful in dealing with the challenges posed by the environment. Adhering to this principle indicates that to successfully categorize the environments facing an organization and to define an appropriate response or series of responses, the organization must access a pool of individuals with experience in facing the challenge(s) of the environment in question. The organization may also choose to include in this pool

individuals having expert knowledge of disciplines relevant to challenges of the environment in question.

We recommend that to access and activate the pool of individuals, the organization develops one or more teams, similar to self-directed teams that meet together as long-term communities. A self-directed team is made up of employees who are fully responsible for turning out a well-defined segment of finished work or service. Since every member of the self-directed team is responsible for the finished segment, such teams are the opposite of assembly-line teams where each team member is responsible for only a narrow segment of the finished product or service (Orsburn et al., 1990).

In the context described above, such teams might also be characterized as 'matrix' teams, 'cross-functional' teams, or 'transdisciplinary' teams or even some hybrid combinations of these terms e.g. cross-functional matrix team. A matrix team is composed of people from different areas of an organization who are brought together to solve a common problem or achieve a goal through collaboration. Team members could also be drawn from outside the organization e.g. customers, suppliers, or consultants. A cross-functional team is a team of people with different functional expertise working toward a common goal; for example it might include people from planning, IT and human resource departments. A trans-disciplinary team is one in which members come together to jointly communicate, exchange ideas and work together whilst emphasizing freedom to cross the lines of their professional disciplines as they do so.

An exception to the above approach may well be necessary under chaotic conditions when response time is often of the utmost importance. In such cases a sole decision-maker may be necessary, for example the emergence team leader, although this decision-maker should try to obtain the recommendations of as many informed sources as feasible, given the time constraints.

As noted above, emergence teams have something in common with matrix teams, cross-functional teams, and self-directed teams. However, the makeup of emergence teams is quite unique and particularly challenging. Each emergence team member represents a centre of excellence, combining in-depth experience and knowledge of their own organizational domain (as in matrix teams) with deep knowledge of the problem with which the team is confronted. Each emergence team member must also abandon their chain of command allegiances (unlike matrix teams) and their organizational unit allegiances (unlike cross-functional teams) becoming part of a new 'organization', which is the emergence team.

The sense that emergence teams are self-directed teams may also be inappropriate since although they have responsibility for a well-defined segment of finished work or service they may hand over their conclusions regarding further work to other teams that then have responsibility for work completion. In other words not only are emergence teams unique but for team members they demand particularly unique kinds of individuals who are capable of assuming novel roles.

For this team approach to yield the necessary knowledge sharing and consensus the organization must also have developed and promoted an open organizational culture that supports strong social capital (Smith and Cockburn, 2013, p. 272 – 278). Social

capital consists of the stock of active connections among people - the networks of trust, mutual understanding, and shared values and behaviors that bind together members of teams and make knowledge sharing and cooperative action possible (Cohen and Prusak, 2001). This may incorporate crowdsourcing and sociodigital technologies to maximize coverage of stakeholders' interests inside and outside the organization in various ways.

In complex environments there may be times when Emergence teams may incorporate matrix structures or members, cross-functional and/or trans-disciplinary team members. The challenge then is exaggerated because of the organizational reporting lines involved and the overall diverse nature of the teams. These are all topics, which are discussed in this book.

High performing teams do not happen by chance. The managers selected to develop the plan cannot simply be co-opted from various departments where their skills are not currently in high demand. Team motivation cannot simply be simply assumed but must be enabled and facilitated in various ways.

It is critically important to establish a clear role for the team leader.

It is critical that the team's sponsor, and other members of senior management, understand that the emergence team may uncover unpalatable facts about the organization's operations in relation to the problem with which the team is tasked, and that such conclusions must not be rejected unless they are seriously flawed. All too often, senior management of an organization will not countenance any suggestion that mistakes have been made, and indeed will suppress any such research-based conclusions. Both authors of this book have carried out research reviews of unsuccessful business initiatives; these studies were based on in-depth interviews and stories from intimately involved personnel, and in both cases the resulting reports were not used in any organizational- learning fashion but in fact were confiscated and destroyed! It will be important for the emergence team to ensure that its Environment (see Cynefin Framework) research findings do not carry a "blaming" tone but rather set out the team's reasons for categorizing the problem Environment as a Known environment; a Knowable environment an Unknowable environment - complex; or an Unknowable environment - chaotic. However, unless the evidence for one particular environment is overwhelming, it is very likely that the team's categorization will not be fully supported by all team members or all senior executives.

Emergence teams are only formed to tackle serious organizational problems, and since launching an emergence team is a significant undertaking, it should not be commenced without the understanding and support of the most senior levels of the organization. The CEO or a senior member of the executive team should drive the formation of the emergence team as well as assume the role of the emergence team's sponsor. This individual must clearly understand not only the problem but also what results are expected of the emergence the team, its interaction with and impact on other stakeholders, and how successful resolution of the problem will be defined. This information establishes the core of the team's charter including the team leader's role, and forms the basis for Figure 1 below.

Figure 1: Emergence Team Sponsor-Team Leader-Team Members Questionnaire

The following questions relate to the work to be carried out by the Emergence Team and are being sent to you as Sponsor initially, and also to the Team Leader, and later to each member of the Team. Please fill out the questionnaire and retain your responses providing one copy to the Sponsor or Team Leader or Team Members as appropriate; these will be used as the basis for later dialogue between the sponsor and the Team Leader, and potentially with Team Members.

1. Why are we doing this?

- What imperatives influenced the decision to form this emergence team?
- Please describe concisely the problem(s) with which the team will be tasked
- How does the team's work relate to the organization's present and future strategies and objectives?

2. What will be achieved?

- What will be the specific outcomes/ results of the team's work?
- How will the team know when it is successful?
- In what manner will the team report its progress and results?

3. Definition of the team leader's role

- How will the team leader contribute to achieving question #2 above?
- What role is the team leader expected to play in advocating plans, tasks, and activities related to the outcomes to be achieved?
- How must the team leader participate in leading implementation of the plans, and in sustaining commitment and ensuring cohesiveness?
- How is the team leader expected to support team development?

4. Who else has a stake in the team's activities?

- Who are the other key internal and external stakeholders (including other teams)?
- What should be the team's relationship to these stakeholders?

5. How will the team's sponsor support the team?

- What is the sponsor's role?
- How will the sponsor and the team relate?

6. How will the team members be rewarded?

- What achievements should the team or its members be rewarded for?
- How should achievements be recognized:
 - At intervals throughout the project? Or
 - At the end of the project?
- Should rewards be granted to:
 - Individual team members?
 - The team as a whole?

7. What could hold the team back?

- Are there any critical constraints or barriers?
- Are there security concerns?
- How will all these constraints be addressed?

Emergence Team Decision making

In normal circumstances, reaching decisions in emergence teams is not a matter of the exercise of authority, represented by *power over* or *technical/functional relevance*, but rather involves reaching consensus among the team members and with the team leader in a process where traditional boundaries are non-existent or are blurred. However, in an emergence team, *final* decisions are still the responsibility of the team leader. This responsibility must not be taken lightly, and is normally based on a 'consensus' with the team members. Exceptions to this proviso are expected when the situation demands immediate emergency action, and the team leader, in formulating a decision, must rely on his/her/own experience or on the best (team?) information available at the time.

We define 'consensus' as a multi-participant decision-making process that involves dialog and reflection among all the team members, the team leader, and sometimes the team sponsor, until the particular 'final' decision has typically the support of all the participants, or of a predefined majority. It has been emphasized previously that the CEO or a senior member of the executive team should drive the formation of the emergence team as well as assume the role of the emergence team's sponsor. It was further pointed out that this individual must clearly understand the problem but also the consensus process, plus what results are expected of the emergence team; its interaction and impact on other stakeholders and how successful resolution of the problem will be defined. This information is fundamental to the team's charter, including the team leader's role, and will form the basis for Figure 2 below. All the parties must have an equal opportunity to air their views and an independent facilitator is sometimes used to ensure this equality.

"Consensus may be defined as an acceptable resolution; one that can be supported, even if it is not the "favorite" of each individual" (Boundless, 2014). In other words 'consensus' does not imply total 'agreement' and helps avoid the potential for extreme escalation of team commitment leading to 'groupthink' and related problems including project failure seen in research on other kinds of teams (Cockburn, 2010). A number of approaches and processes relating to consensus building are described in Consensus (2014) including a Consensus-Oriented Decision-Making model which offers the step-wise consensus process set out in figure 2 (below).

Figure 2: Consensus-Oriented Decision-Making Model 6-Steps (Boundless, 2014)

1. Framing the topic
2. Having An Open Discussion
3. Identifying The Underlying Concerns
4. Building A Collaborative Proposal
5. Choosing A Direction
6. Synthesizing A Final Proposal

(Source: http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Consensus_decision-making - cite note-35)

The level of agreement necessary to finalize a decision is known as a “Decision Rule”. Possible decision rules for consensus vary and include the following range (based on: Consensus (2014)):

- Unanimous agreement (agreement is based on this proposal being a person’s first choice)
- Unanimous consent (Consent given because this proposal is one that the person can live with)
- Unanimous agreement minus one vote or two votes
- Unanimous consent minus one vote or two votes
- Majority thresholds without regard for ‘agreement’ or ‘consent’ (90%, 80%, 75%, two-thirds, and 60% are common).
- Simple majority without regard for ‘agreement’ or ‘consent’ (51%)
- Team leader decides

Concluding remarks

In hierarchical organizations, any equal-voice process is unsettling for team participants in the early stages of emergence team formation. However, consensus is greatly facilitated when the foundational principles of action learning are adopted. Team performance management and team development are based on the cooperative development values that are held in common between team members. In other words, fundamentally it is based on how quickly the team matures and how well they bond together.

Critically, sharing a set of core values and principles always entails shared interests, whereas the sharing of interests does not always entail shared values and principles for work processes. On the other hand, sharing information does not necessarily entail shared interests, but once again parties who have a ‘worldview’ in common are more likely to share information (Takeishi and Numagami, 2010). For example, action learning emphasizes and helps ensure that the issue is clearly stated and understood by all; that individuals offering statements and opinions are helped by other participants to reflect on those opinions and the reasons why they hold such views. In Action Learning all the participants learn from and with each other through the sharing of their knowledge and stories as well as the questions such sharing raises.

As we noted above, even in normal organizational team settings where emergence teams are not involved, all too often the organizational benefits that the team sponsor envisaged are not delivered. Preventing or resolving these kinds of problems begins with clarification and understanding by the team leader of the team sponsor’s vision of team activity and expected results (initially presented in general at a meeting of potentially concerned individuals), and the shaping of these intentions given the practical experience of the team leader. This process must be honest about risks, frankly discuss unpalatable matters and surfacing the ‘undiscussables’ in order to produce authentic consensus between the team’s sponsor and the team leader regarding the team leader’s role and the team’s working context.

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