

Navigating Uncertainty - A Collective Wisdom Response

Research Report - June 2017



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Most leaders of organisations today are very familiar with the phrase:

"Single answers don't work for long".

As Achi and Berger state in their 2015 paper, *Delighting in the Possible*, "All too often, we operate with an excessively simple model in enormously messy circumstances. We fail to perceive how different pieces of reality interact and how to foster better outcomes."¹

The dynamic connectivity between every day and not so common factors in an organisation's operating environment have turned seemingly simple challenges into complex nightmares. Untangling these challenges has led to the emergence of a new way of thinking about these messes; messes that have proved impenetrable to traditional problem solving techniques.

To penetrate these issues, a new paradigm of thinking must be used, one that is based on a unified view that integrates all the dimensions of a situation. At the very core of this new way of thinking - of how we can understand and navigate complexity - is a fundamental change of the guiding mental model: from seeing the world as a machine to understanding it as a network.

The new mental model of organisational challenges is a 'systems view' because it involves thinking in terms of relationships, patterns, and context. This way of thinking is called 'systemic thinking' in this paper. Systemic thinking is crucial to understanding systems of any kind, including those associated with managing organisations experiencing complex situations or severe disruptions.

Systemic thinking makes us aware of the fact that the problems of our time are all interconnected and interdependent. They are systemic problems that require corresponding systemic responses. Achi and Berger's comment after describing the birth and development of Emirates Airline, "When people think in new ways, very small shifts can have unexpected and significant consequences."²

This research project utilises a few techniques, based on the principles created by systemic thinkers, to explore a current, major disruption in the operating environment of organisations, which are influenced by political changes in America. The research demonstrates how systemic thinking can create strategies to enhance how organisations navigate through the uncertainties they encounter.

¹See <http://www.mckinsey.com/business-functions/strategy-and-corporate-finance/our-insights/delighting-in-the-possible>

²ibid

Research Focus

Organisations, in the Californian business world, have been subjected to significant uncertainty following the election of Donald Trump as the 45th President of the United States. Confusion over the priorities, intentions and directions of the new administration in Washington has raised questions about workforce security, market stability, supply chain continuity, financial and other regulations and client loyalty. These are just a few of the many variables that are now couched in uncertainty.

The questions many organisations are asking is how can we best navigate this uncertainty to sustain our long-term security and viability. There is no shortage of answers as everyone has an opinion from their perspective about what should be done. Most of these answers are based on a mechanistic view of the world – fix a part that's broken and things will run ok again.

However, the systemic thinking approach to navigating uncertainty contends that each part is interconnected to the whole through a myriad of relationships. Therefore, if one part is dysfunctional, a whole range of those relationships associated with that part will also become dysfunctional. Consequentially, the single part fix is unlikely to restore all the damaged relationships. In practice, it appears the problem keeps resurfacing in slightly different manifestations.

The systemic approach seeks to identify the patterns of disruption across the whole organisation with a view to tackling the uncertainty on many fronts simultaneously. The issue of uncertainty created by a political event, where the extent and shape of the disruption is largely unknown, provided an appropriate situation to test the value of the systemic approach to meet the urgent needs of business organisations and not-for-profit agencies.

The research team posed the question “How does your business adapt to uncertainty?”, and collected the responses of many people to maximise the number of different perspectives of the uncertainty and then assessed the relationships, patterns and context of the challenges that these multi-perspectives revealed.

Summary of Findings

From the many ideas contributed by participants who have diverse backgrounds, training and responsibilities, a number of action strategies emerged. The strategies were focussed on four areas of business activity which were seen by participants to require careful and continuous attention when the organisation was navigating uncertainty. Predictably these four areas are: Employees, Clients, Partners and Structure.

The dominant outcome that needed to be achieved in the first three areas was mutual trust. Most respondents stated or implied that the first casualty of new uncertainty around the business environment was trust within and between the stakeholders in the organisations'

future. The lack of trust quickly deteriorates most organisational functions and could be likened to a business cancer.

This difficult balance is reflected in a recent article in the Independent written by Simon Glynn, *"How can brands navigate politics in 2017? Expressions of support or anger are symbolic of the new relationship between brands, personal identity, values and expression"*. Reaffirming your values is not only reassuring for employees in a time of uncertainty, but also a necessary first step in setting a direction that your employees can rally behind – purpose or values should really be your business's reason for being. Continuing on that trajectory then requires action to fulfill your promise.³

Study participants advocated that plans to navigate uncertainty should clearly communicate the organisation's values and be very transparent about its commitment to these values. It emerged that a robust communication strategy is critical to preserve and restore trust within the organisation and with its external stakeholders.

Employees

In the case of employees stress management is critical. There was consistent evidence, especially in times of political disruption, suggesting several factors were important to reducing their level of stress and improving efficiencies in their ongoing performance: personal security; sustainability of their communities; opportunities to develop their skills; and flexibility in the roles they could play within the business.

Clients

Regarding clients, sustaining loyalty was put to the fore as a strategy to navigate uncertainty. It included establishing a strong listening culture to keep abreast of circumstances that could weaken clients loyalty. Again, the study participants advocated the use of communications to demonstrate the organisation's commitment to its values and to be transparent about how it was navigating the current uncertainty. This is what was referred to as a 'no surprises' strategy. Demonstrating loyalty to clients was extremely valuable to maintaining a sustainable business operation.

Partners

Partners were recognised as one of the most volatile variables when navigating uncertainty. In most cases of political disruption, they also had to navigate the same uncertainty but from a different stance. Mutual support was the best way to maintain the quality of the interdependent relationship. Yet, in stable times when trust is taken for granted, partnerships are not necessarily anchored in shared values, which makes such relationships difficult to sustain in times of heightened uncertainty. Partners sharing the same core values are found to be more valuable to navigate uncertainty.

³ See <http://www.independent.co.uk/news/business/comment/brand-politics-pepsi-marketing-advertising-apple-uber-jp-morgan-ikea-a7707331.html>

Structure

The fourth area of the findings focussed on the contemporary emphasis that organisations need to be agile. A top heavy structure with long lines of hierarchy creates significant distances between the experiences at the periphery of the organisation and those at the core. Reducing such distances significantly improves the capacity of the organisation to navigate uncertainty. The concept of agility canvassed from the study also emphasised the need to access and harness knowledge, whether experiential or expert, held by employees at all levels for improved decision making. This test of agility, localised decision making, is more likely to bring relevance to the decisions and distribute the sense of responsibility and accountability across all employees enhancing the navigation of uncertainty.

This study is a demonstration of such knowledge harvesting. It has shown that from sweeping in diverse perspectives and experiences about the disruption to an organisational operating environment, we can identify patterns of dysfunctional issues, and remedial options. We can then eventually improve the organisation's navigation of the uncertainty surrounding it.

Full details of the research methodology, results, and recommendations are presented in the later sections of this report.

Research Team

Two consulting groups who use the systemic thinking approach in their work collaborated to conduct this Research Project. Papillon Transformative Consulting is based in California and has three principal consultants who have been collectively involved with systemic thinking for over twenty years and have overseen its application to a variety of complex issues associated with sustainability and organisational resilience. They are all accredited WindTunneling designers and facilitators. The second group is the Australia based Systemic Development Associates who have been pioneering techniques in systemics to help organisations of all sizes and horizons around the world since 1992. The research project was supported by the Australian Catholic University's Executive Education Department.

Research Methodology

The research was conducted utilising aspects of systemic thinking that are drawn from three theories:

1. Complexity theory contends that the collective knowledge collated from diverse participants will provide a more robust understanding of a complex issue than a dataset generated by any single discipline or expert approach.
2. Experiential learning argues that as participants in life, everyone is a continuous learner and hence "everyone knows something but no one knows everything"⁴. It confirms the value of soliciting the wisdom of the crowd when exploring a complex issue.

⁴ Levy, P. (1997). *Collective Intelligence: Mankind's Emerging World in Cyberspace*. retrieved from <https://books.google.com/books?id=sjibAAAAMAAJ&focus=searchwithinvolume&q=no+one+knows+everything%2C+everyone+knows+something>

3. Systems theory postulates that everything is connected to everything else. Hence, identifying the patterns and relationships that emerge from the picture created by the collated collective wisdom will provide insights as how to improve the complex issue. By reinforcing desirable, naturally occurring patterns and relationships or disrupting those that are detrimental, the organisation can improve its ability to navigate the complex issues.

Participants, Tools and Processes

We invited a diverse group of professionals residing in California:

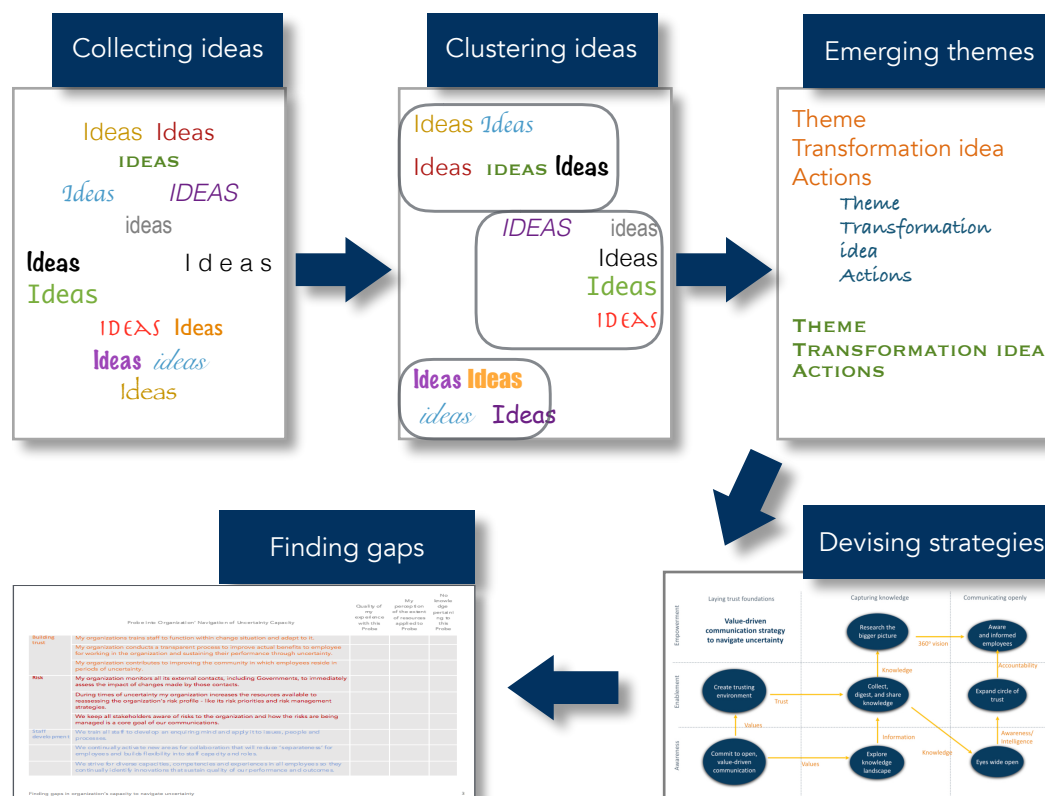
- Organisation: small, medium, large, private and public for profit, governmental as well as non-profit.
- Industry: healthcare, real estate, legal, social services, food industry, hospitality, marketing services, financial services, insurance, IT, etc.
- Work experience: entrepreneur, C-level position, managing director, operations manager, influencer, consultant, IT specialist, small business owner, sales, angel investor and VC, data analyst, academic, learning specialist, project manager, program manager, HR specialist, change manager, etc.
- Education: high-school, professional certifications, undergraduate, graduate and advanced degrees.
- Geography: city, suburb, and rural environment.

Various tools and processes that have been constructed using Systemic Principles were used throughout the research. An online SaaS tool called WindTunneling⁵ was used for knowledge capture. It is a principled software that provides anonymity of the participants, but ensures that everyone's contributions are visible to all participants, and available to be responded to. Thus, a dialogue about the collective knowledge of how business can navigate uncertainty in 2017 was gathered.

The dialogue resulted in a very rich picture describing the complexity of the situation being experienced, perspectives of how to move forward, and reflections on previous efforts to navigate uncertainty. All submissions were reviewed and clusters were formed from those expressing similar but not necessarily identical insights. A statement describing the 'essence' was created for each cluster. These statements were called emergent themes since they indicated where improvement could be achieved to make a difference to current performance. These themes were used in the second stage of the WindTunneling process through which participants in the project could rate each theme against the two criteria – "Likelihood this will improve an organisation's navigation of uncertainty" and "Likelihood this will improve a client's confidence in the organisation." Themes that were rated high on both criteria were considered by participants as being more significant to achieving the desired outcomes.

⁵ See www.WindTunneling.com

Further, each of the original contributions describing specific actions, which would improve the navigation of an organisation through uncertainty, was recorded separately. These contributions were called “transformation idea statements” (TIS). A nine cell matrix was created as a framework to make sense of the relationships between each of the TISs. The three rows of the matrix represent from the bottom to the top: preparation to act effectively, acting to change capacity of organisation, and aspirational outcomes. The three columns represent from the left to right: actions now, actions soon, and actions later. Each TIS was then placed in the cell that was adjudged by the research team to be most appropriate to its assistance in achieving the overall goal of an organisation navigating uncertainty today.



Subsequently a process of ‘backcasting’ was used to establish specific strategic patterns embedded in the matrix. Selecting a TIS in the top right hand cell, which were considered as a preferred ‘Later/Aspirational’ outcome, the TIS’s in the other cells across the matrix would need to directly assist the organisation in achieving this preferred outcome. This process enabled the research team to nominate several strategies (as illustrated in the Summary of Results below), that were embedded in the collective knowledge captured from participants, to assist organisations navigate uncertainty.

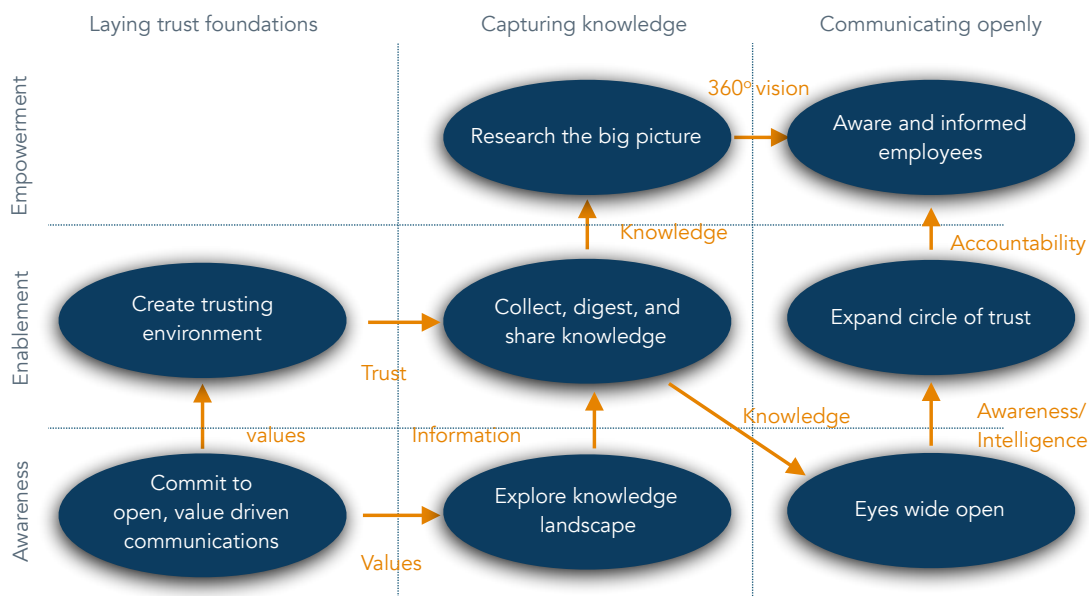
The collective wisdom capture segment of the research was completed by the end of February 2017.

Summary of Research Results

Results from the systemic methodology are available as soon as a project starts. After one week of collecting contributions from project participants about how they thought business organisations can navigate the current levels of uncertainty, the research team was already starting to identify emerging themes. The collection of ideas spanned 8 weeks. Many of the participant contributions had similar, underlying messages and were clustered together. From the clusters, 21 themes were identified as helping business organisations navigating uncertainty. Further, in the basic material that shaped these themes, it was possible to identify many ideas for action. These actions have been called Transformation Idea Statement (TIS). A TIS is an action that would support an organisation moving from its current state to a preferred state. From the multitude of TISs, a handful of strategic pathways were developed. Nine examples of these themes and their associated strategic pathways are set out below.

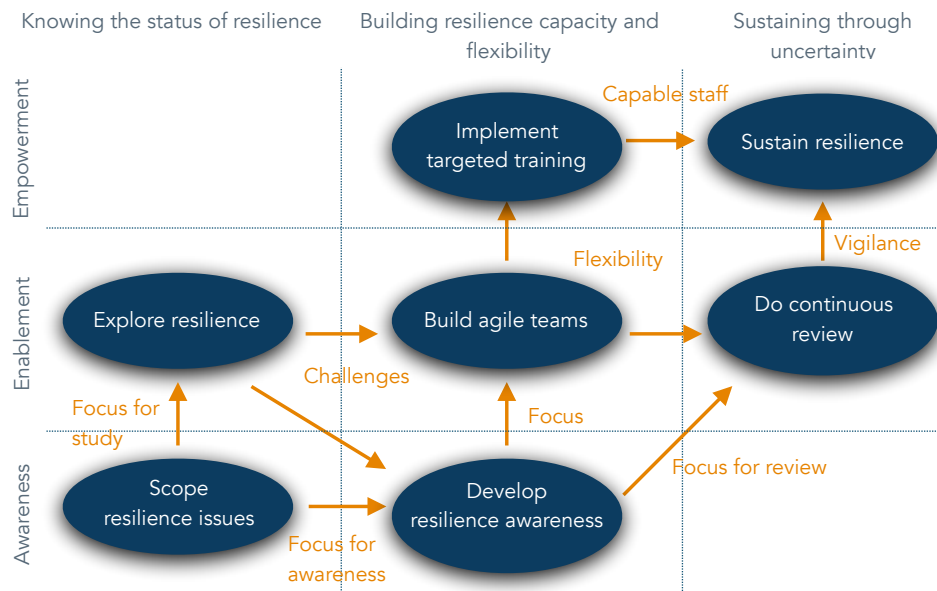
Driven by Values - Communicating

During periods of uncertainty, an organisation will examine its key values and then enhance both its internal and external communications to clarify and explain how it applies key values that may be under threat (e.g. diversity, inclusiveness, and respect for the betterment of its stakeholders) as they manage the impact of the uncertainty on their lives.



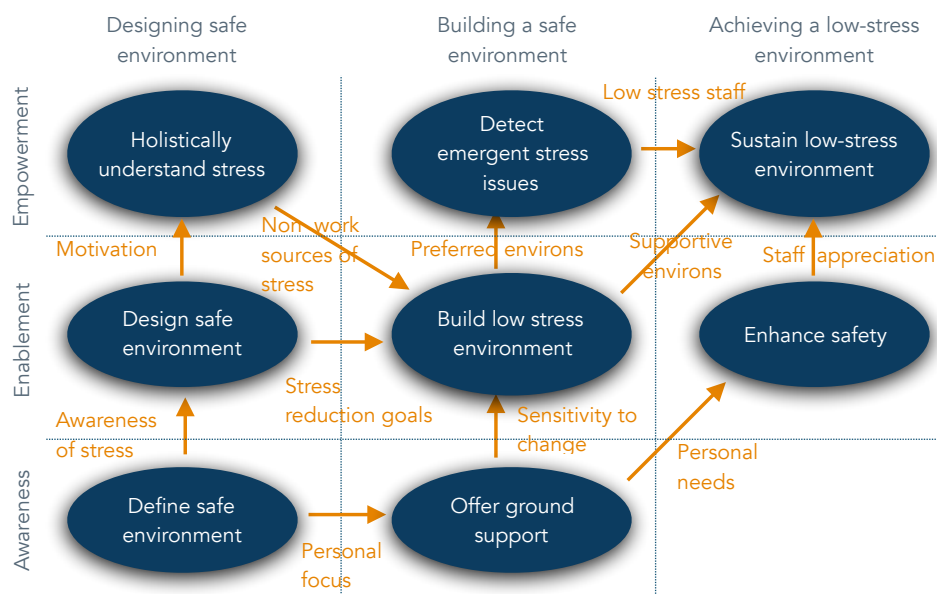
Improving Resilience

It is important to initially understand the assumptions that the organisation has around the issues of resilience. Once the assumptions are clarified, the scope and consequences of the issues can be explored systemically. Building collaboration, capacity, and flexibility of the teams to continuously review the issues will enhance the speed and adequacy of response.



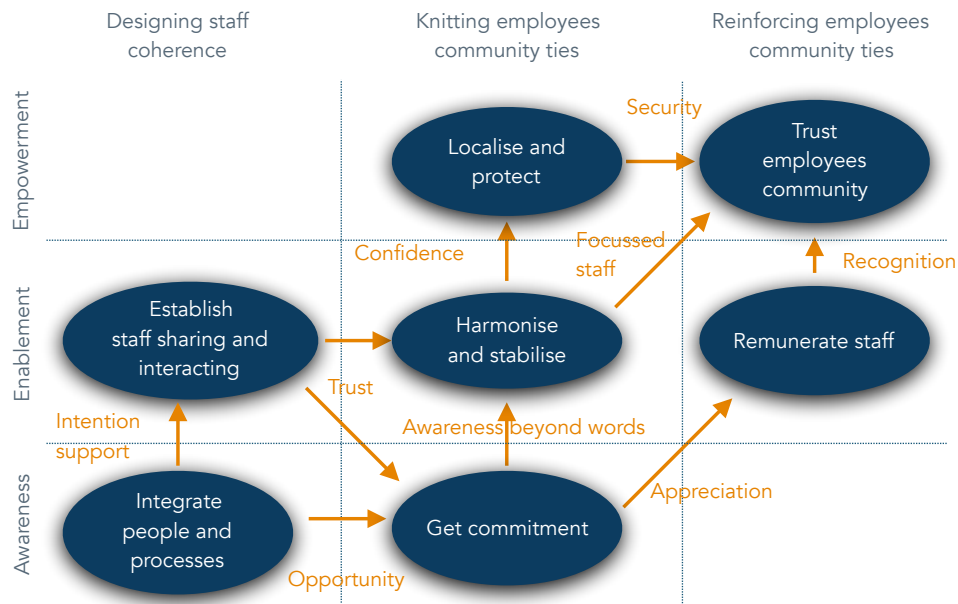
Developing a Resilient Workforce

Uncertainty can rapidly intensify employees' stress, requiring an organisation to immediately increase its investment in programs that demonstrate strong alignment between organisational and employee interests. Such programs could include stress reduction techniques, sustain a "management is listening" culture, and review employee benefits and perks.



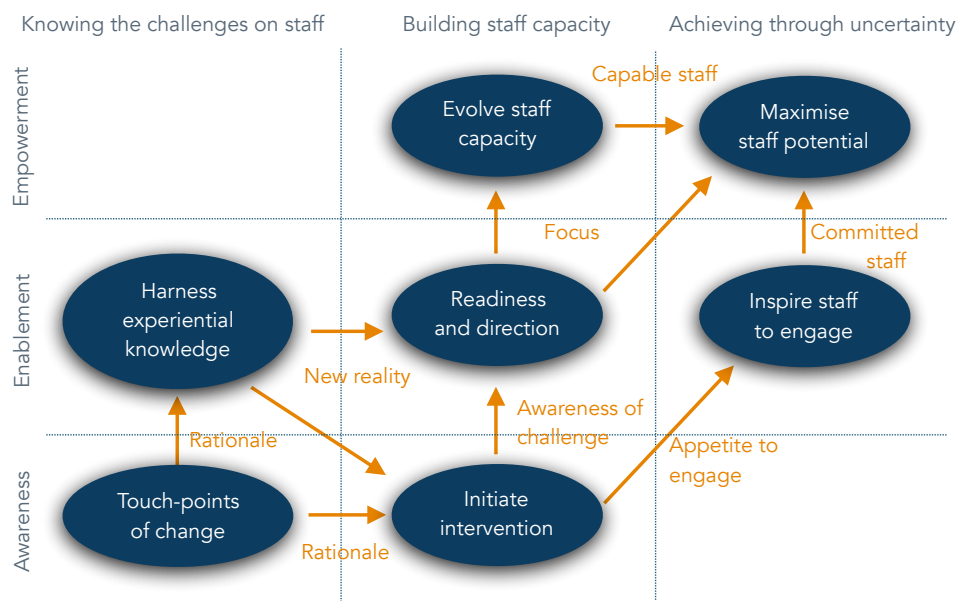
Building Trust with Employee-Centric Strategy

One of the first casualties of change is trust, as it usually highlights areas in relationships that are unexplored or unresolved. The organisation wants to set up programs such as protection of private information, support of employees wider communities, and better targeted workplace perks and benefits.



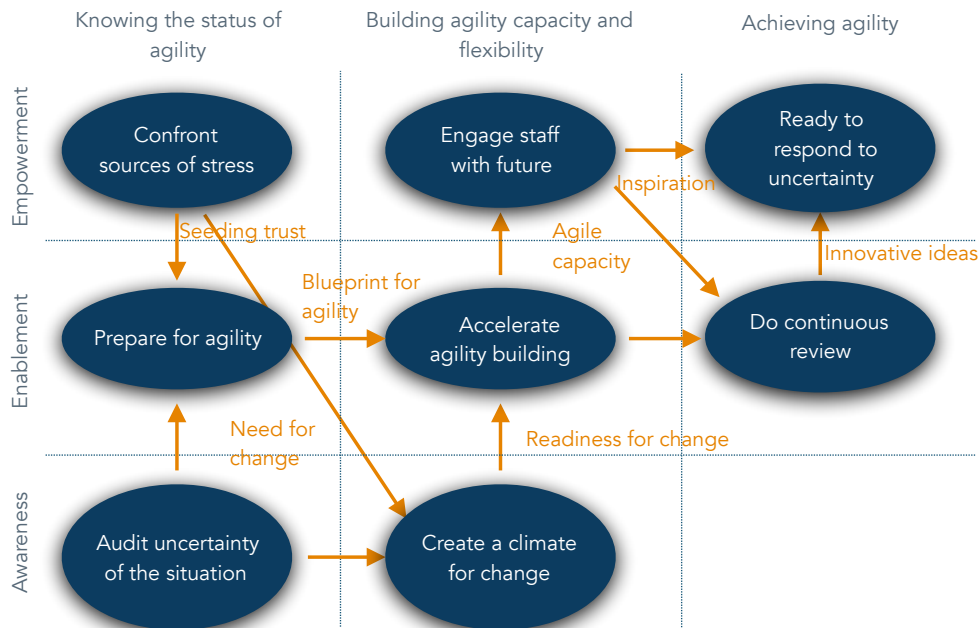
Improving Staff Skills and Flexibility

The labor market follows the same rollercoaster as the economy, making it difficult to find, attract and retain talent. The current workforce is resistant to change because of the fear of being replaced. Such attitudes require internal training and development programs that equip staff to participate in any adjustments the organisation needs to initiate to keep up with change, and expand their knowledge and skill sets.



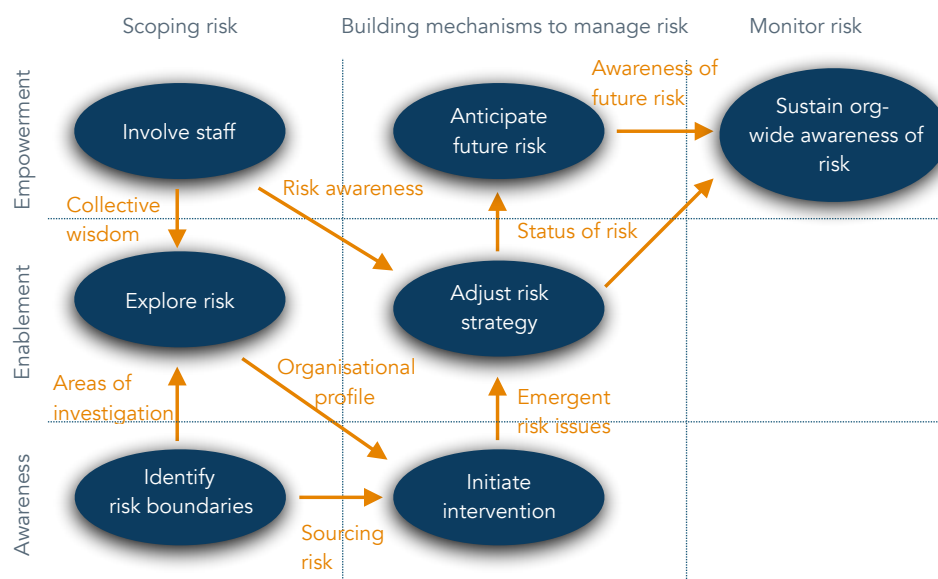
Being Agile and Speedily Adapting

Organisations with flexibility and agility to respond to changing circumstances will perform best. This strategy takes a holistic view of agility from understanding how uncertainty affects the organisation to identifying stress factors. Broadening the experiences of the staff across the organisation will be a crucial contributor in navigating uncertainty, which can be achieved with a curriculum that addresses plausible changes.



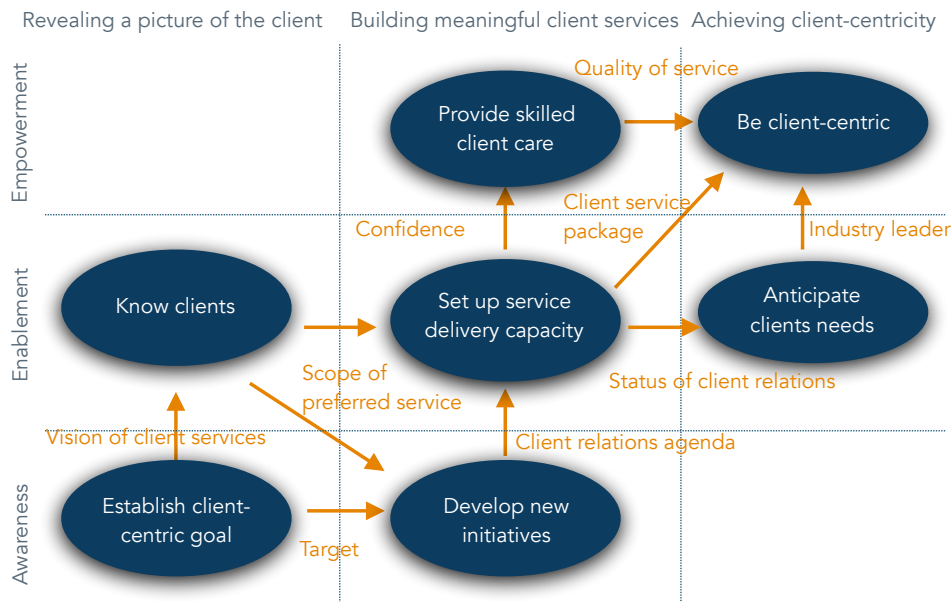
Raising Awareness of Risk

The risk profile of an organisation's continuance is always altered by change. Hence no matter its size, every organisation's resilience requires risk management strategies to be redesigned against restated assumptions of its continuance factors as they have been reshaped by the changes (such as organisation boundaries, industry cohesion, economic system sustainability, and resource security). The organisation can tap into the wealth of experiential knowledge from its staff to do so.



Being Client-Centric

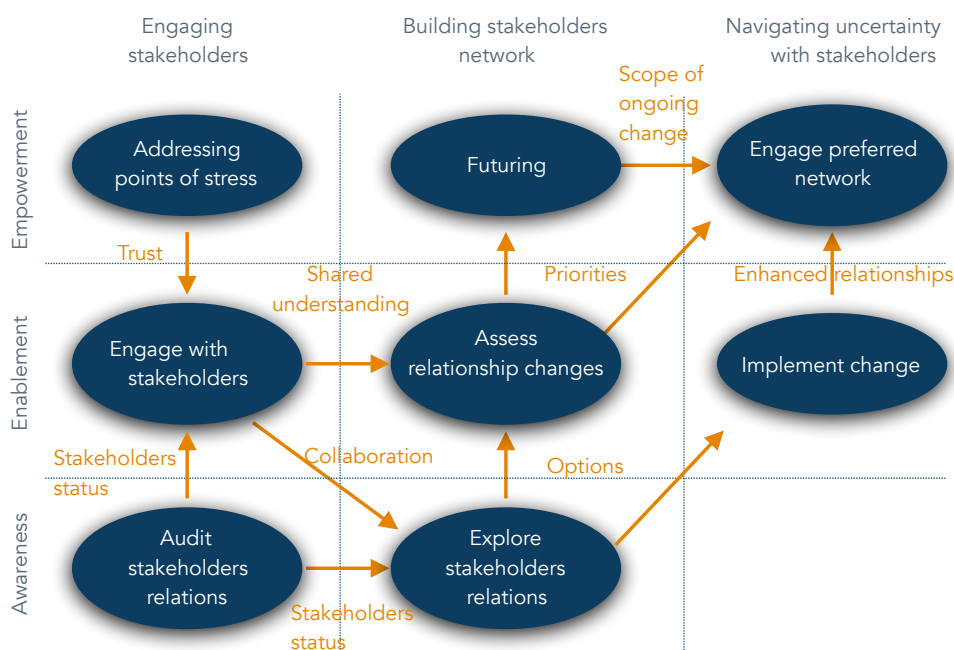
The client-business relationship should be more personal, value-centred as fears and threats to both parties sustainability increase. Small organisations can excel in providing a sense of known, community, and influence to the client that larger organisations struggle to emulate. Organisations should invest in finely tuned client care activities to expand their



market share and increase client confidence and patronage. Customer facing employees, operations and services, and clients are encouraged to share their experience to design such activities.

Engaging the Organisation's Stakeholders

Uncertainty can be stressful to the relationship of the organisation with its stakeholders. Stress is a primary reason for relationship deteriorating. It is important to draw a map of the stakeholders and their relationship to the organisation's purpose. Engaging them to help the organisation weather highs and lows, and build a sustainable future is then possible, and augments the resilience of the organisation.



Organisation leaders will proactively reach out to all stakeholders and co-create with them shared messages about the change and the intended navigation pathways.

Authors' Reflections

Upon reflection, further themes emerged from the group of researchers adding meaning to the research. When integrated, these themes may be just as impactful for an organisation to navigate uncertainty as the research findings themselves.

Raison d'être is a Navigating Compass

In times of uncertainty, the raison d'être of the organisation, its values and mission, act as a compass. They become the reference against which every decision, assessment, or response can be made.

Trust is the First Casualty of Uncertainty

Uncertainty reveals weaknesses in relationships, within and beyond the organisation resulting in deteriorating trust. The first step to navigate uncertainty is to assess, articulate and communicate the core values upon which the organisation is founded, to start restore, or preserve trust in relationships.

Speed of Adaptation is Key

Speed of adaptation to changing circumstances, which many consultants label as Agile, can be a game changer for threatened organisations. Especially significant is the flexibility and speed of capturing, assessing and deciding how to take action with new knowledge by the organisation in all its forms and levels. This capacity can be a key measure of organisations that not only survive, but thrive, during uncertainty.

Agility is achieved through distributed leadership, and accountability for the organisation's success is carried by each employee. It assumes open discussions, a culture of listening, and knowledge sharing across the entire organisation. To move in unison requires strong individual connections, trust in each individual and the whole, and a common set of values, and guidelines that orient choices.

Money Isn't the Only Measure of Success

Participant contributions did not include such strategies as implementing cost cutting measures (i.e. reducing variable expenses, reducing benefits, reducing staff levels, etc) as a way to gain financial agility. The lack of emphasis on money represented a shift from using financial metrics as a defining measure of success, making way for the recognition that employees, customers, network and community contributions are defining measures for a successful business.

Knowledge is Capital

Knowledge capital is the most precious resource during uncertainty, knowledge which is up-to-date intelligence about the ever changing situation, and its varying impact on the organisation. Investment in building knowledge capture and sense making skills amongst

staff quickly repays itself with interest. During uncertainty it is the quality of available knowledge that will designate marketplace advantage and enhanced navigation outcomes. Thinkers with holistic views are needed more than ever to connect the dots. Being one step ahead - from the competition, abreast of regulations, anticipating economic volatility - is no longer a successful strategy to sustain an organisation's success. Gathering a broader view with many possibilities is essential.

Uncertainty is the Cradle of Innovation

Organisations that have a culture of seeing uncertainty as the opportunity to forge a new and better future are orientated towards identifying areas for new initiatives and are hence motivated to innovate. Small and medium sized organisations are significantly advantaged over larger slower moving groups.

Competent People are the Core of the Resilience.

Sir Richard Branson's statement about if you take care of your employees, they will take care of your customers⁶ echoes how staff is at the core of the business. To sustain engagement of employees on a given project, they need to fully understand the whole picture, goals, and stakes, and why it is important to them, and the enterprise. It is helpful to gather objections and address them, and be ready to adjust as necessary. When employees are involved in the design of solutions, and because they have followed the thinking, they are engaged as part of the decision making process, and therefore they can accept the outcomes rather than oppose them. The priority of a company should be its staff.

⁶ See <https://www.inc.com/oscar-raymundo/richard-branson-companies-should-put-employees-first.html>

Applications of the Research Findings

Business organisations are experiencing uncertainty from unknown influences in the organisation's trading environments and the ambiguous or conflicting statements flowing from experts and politicians. The findings of this research offer many avenues for them to review and improve their capacity to navigate this significant uncertainty. Avenues for increasing engagement, with this collation of a crowd's wisdom, includes using the results to:

- audit the current status of an organisation to navigate along these pathways,
- develop leadership capacities in senior and middle level staff to implement any one or more of the strategies required for successful navigation,
- use the methodology and findings to conduct **customised** research on the organisation to ascertain its unique requirements to navigate the uncertainty it is encountering.

The diagram below figuratively represents the opportunity to audit a business organisation's current status for navigating uncertainty. Each of the probes listed on the compass will enable an organisation to penetrate into the critical factors that shape its navigating capacity and to assess whether there is sufficient threat or whether actions need to be taken to enhance a factor. The holistic nature of this collection of probes enables the organisation to avoid getting locked into any single answer to a very complex issue but rather have a wide scope of presenting challenges.



Build a Roadmap with Strategic Initiatives and Supporting Projects

Identifying strategic interventions that are required to navigate uncertainty are being regularly nominated by organisations', however, how to implement these interventions is often confusing as managers struggle with what to do first, what is critical and what can we do in-house and what requires outside assistance. The output from this program presents each strategic initiative as a Roadmap or staircase in which the organisation can start with the available opportunities and develop the capacity to achieve the most aspirational goals.

Identify Gaps (The Gap Finder)

Building a holistic navigation capacity is essential for organisations working in uncertain environments (supply, production, dissemination or regulation). Most managers have a limited view of their organisation, one that has been shaped by past experiences. A new framework is needed to enable managers to broaden their perspectives and understanding of where the unexpected may challenge the organisation's vitality, sustainability and resilience. By using the output from the collective wisdom of the organisation's stakeholders and wider industry experiences, this program creates the framework managers need to find gaps in capacity to navigate uncertainty. To identify these gaps, we developed a questionnaire out of the strategies drawn from our research. Here below is a sample which would be filled out by a representative sample of the organisation:

Assess each activity in the tables according to two criteria using a scale from 1, poor or non existent, to 10, excellent.

1. Quality of your experience (timeliness, accuracy, relevance, transparency) for each of these actions

2. Perceived level of resources dedicated to each of these actions

	Probe into Organization' Navigation of Uncertainty Capacity	Quality of my experience with this Probe	My perception of the extent of resources applied to this Probe	No knowledge pertaining to this Probe
Value-driven communications	We are alert to communication barriers caused by any changes that are occurring in the organization or its environment to our communication channels that work up and down and across the organization.			
Building trust	My organization contributes to improving the community in which employees reside in periods of uncertainty.			
Staff development	We train all staff to develop an enquiring mind and apply it to issues, people and processes.			

Once gaps have been identified, a range of other activities can use the information to improve the situation with respect to performance, resilience, sustainability and 'bottom line' outcomes. Each of the management and leadership areas extrapolated below are examples of the immediate improvements that can be initiated in an organisation using the project findings:

A. Cultural Change

In managing the complexity that accompanies uncertainty and ambiguity in an organisation's evolution, the culture that may have been appropriate during a startup stage or during a more predictable environment becomes a handicap to the organisation's resilience. Identifying the gaps in ability to navigate uncertainty enhances the organisation's awareness of aspects of its culture that may be causing or supporting the continuance of the gaps. For example, the organisation's utilisation of all its knowledge resources, or its maintenance of a coherent and collaborative working environment. The output from this program identifies where resources can be directed to enhance the working culture and align it with external challenges.

B. Coordination of Enablement

Managers are continually searching for the most effective composition of 'resources, processes and people' (RPP) to ensure productivity is creative, efficient and profitable. Once the gaps in ability to navigate uncertainty are identified utilising the knowledge of all staff across the organisation to contribute to designing, the best RPP composition is therefore a significant way to close gaps and add value. The output from this program provides the insights as to where RPP composition changes are needed.

C. Guides to Budgeting

Too often budget planning starts from what is happening this year and potential changes are then assessed against 'what is' rather than 'what could be'. That is, only incremental improvements are contemplated, even when uncertainty threatens the organisation's continuing performance and its longer term resilience calls for a more radical approach. The identification of the gaps provides forward looking information the budget planning team needs before it starts allocating resources. The forward looking information shows where the organisation must improve to navigate uncertainty in the future compared to how the organisation navigated in the past.

D. Staff Training Programming

Identifying the gaps in the organisation's capacity to navigate uncertainty highlights the absence or inadequacies in the current skills and competencies of its staff. Such information helps shape training programs meeting immediate and emerging objectives. Further, considering its unique gaps profile, the organisation can better target the development programs required by different groups of staff.

Build a Customised 'Navigating Uncertainty' Strategy

In some circumstances, organisations need a more specific focus on their operations than what the strategies from our broad profile of organisations provide. The organisation's unique and specific needs are identified by 'standing on the shoulders' of the general research findings. A second collection of knowledge from stakeholders with experience of that organisation is instigated based on themes identified with the gaps finder tool, from which customised strategies for navigating uncertainty are devised.

Establish Management Priorities for Nominated Criteria

A second way to deepen the research findings within the specific boundaries of an organisation is to use the WindTunneling software to assess the impacts of the findings according to criteria specific to the organisation. The criteria reflect the organisation's concerns about performance and resilience. Stakeholders are invited to rate findings according to such criteria, from which initiatives are identified that are key to the ability of the organisation to navigate uncertainty.

Conclusion

This study has been completed during the weeks leading up to the inauguration of President Trump in America and his first weeks in office. There was at the time a heightened sense of uncertainty amongst business, government and community enterprises, which acted as a focussing force for those who participated in the Study. There is little doubt that for many, it requires a crisis in certainty before exploration of the organisation's resilience is pursued.

We believe the results of this study capture the mature and focussed attention of people concerned about navigating unexpected uncertainty. The results may not contribute significantly new perceptions of what needs to be done to navigate uncertainty but offer a more complete picture of what it takes to weather uncertain times, and they do remind us and reinforce the maxim that all organisations need to be better prepared for the uncertainty that is more and more a characteristic of organisations in 2017.

The analytical tools for organisations to assess their resilience, not from the balance sheet, but from the performance, morale and capability of their staff, generated by the study can make a difference. The tools will enable leaders of organisations to capture the unique insights of their employees, customers and network's stakeholders. It is this ability to regularly capture the organisation's collective wisdom and respond to it that will distinguish the competent navigators through uncertainty from the others.

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