A Case for Inner Multiplicity: How to Re-Skill Leaders in a Complex World

A Position Paper

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"Imagination is more important than information"

—Albert Einstein

Introduction

There is a remarkable measure of the disruptive and tumultuous world we now inhabit. The Accenture Global Disruption index is a composite measure that covers economic, social, geopolitical, climate, consumer and technological change. Measured by this index, the global disruption rate between 2011-2016 increased by 4%. Between 2017-2022 the increase was 200%. Companies now face a permanent state of change at a pace never seen before.[1] While the pandemic was certainly central to this increase, it seems equally certain that constant global disruption is part of the polycrises of our times.

The term VUCA (volatility, uncertainty, complexity and ambiguity) is frequently applied to describe today's business environment in strategic management and leadership contexts. VUCA is also being replaced by other acronyms and terminology, yet these are simply different attempts to say what is uncomfortable to leaders and workers alike: people are squeezed and stressed out. Constant change is now a way of life. Today, business leadership is arguably more difficult than ever because decision-making is now permanently within a global and uncertain context and uncertainty has never been a friend of economic markets.

Volatility in VUCA refers to unexpected twists and turns that demand immediate responses. *Uncertainty* refers to the realization that predicting the future becomes little more than making educated guesses, but surprises are inevitable. *Complexity* refers to the continued increase of subparts that make up today's business landscape where grasping the big picture becomes nearly impossible. *Ambiguity* refers to the understanding that few things are clear and transparent today. Leaders have to make decisions in environments where they rarely have complete information.

Considering a VUCA world, this position paper focuses particularly on complexity and shows how *complexity capability*, the human ability to handle complexity, is a leadership capacity that is not only imperative but also desirable for leaders to be future-fit. The authors postulate that complexity capability is a *right-brain function*, knowing that hemispheric specialization is a controversial theory. For our purposes the terms left- and right-brain are applied for their usefulness as shorthand for certain capabilities, not as a biologically based description of personality or brain function (see Fig. 1).

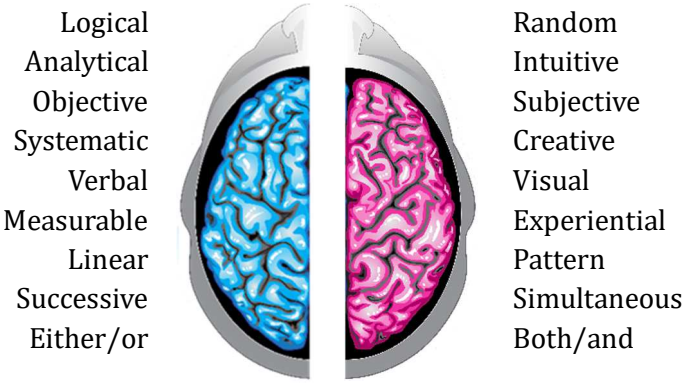

Fig. 1: Left- and right-brain leadership capabilities

Today, most organizations are left-brain driven. Accenture Strategy writes that 89% of C-Suite executives have formal training in left-brain directed degrees.[2] Evidence-based decision making relies on proven methods and linear thinking. Purported paths to traditional success are analytical, quantitative left-brain strategies.[3] Left-brain thinking has been normalized to the point that most leaders believe it to be natural to rely on old scripts of what is already known. Such traditional thinking is congruent with an economy where the median lifecycle of a business was 75 years. However, that median lifecycle is now only 6 years. Nadya Zhexembayeva warns that to stay relevant, companies need to reinvent themselves every 1-3 years.[4] Reinvention is not linear progression in the same direction.

With such rapid change, leaders who have been taught to always have the right answers and make the right decisions can find themselves feeling inadequate, overwhelmed and ill-equipped. Relying on their known left-brain capacities, leaders abandon their imaginative, right-brain capabilities, which are required in a complex, novel and quickly changing world. Under pressure and scrutiny leaders may find it particularly difficult to experiment with the unfamiliar and to access unconventional pathways. Yet this is precisely what is needed to lead today. Linear thinking is no longer enough in a global and interconnected world.

Global interconnectivity brings with it a significant rise in complexity, a term distinct from complicated. A complicated system, for instance a car, consists of many simple parts and systems that together make a car complicated. The world of business, similarly, has been complicated for a long time. The change from a complicated to complex business environment adds *emergence*, the sudden appearance of something new that has instant global implications.[5] Complexity, in this context, is a prerequisite for emergence because it is the intricate network of interactions among complicated sub-parts that gives rise to emergent phenomena. Recent emergent events include 9/11, COVID and the War in Ukraine, all events that had global business implications practically overnight.

In response, if leaders are to activate their complexity capability, they need re-activate their right-brain capacities. To do this, leaders need a language and tools that are up to the task of understanding, communicating, and creating in a complex world. This kind of leadership is sometimes referred to as "whole-brained," where right-brain approaches are of equal value to the overwhelming dominance of left-brain thinking. Yet, in 2019, only 8% of leaders queried by Accenture used a whole-brain approach to leadership.[6]

The most effective way to cultivate right-brain thinking and perspectives, is through the imagination and the classical way to do that is using the language of *Archetypes.*[7]

Archetypes are foundational, universally recognized symbols or patterns of behavior that are deeply ingrained in the human mind. They serve as fundamental building blocks to understand human motivations, ambitions, and responses. A leader fluent in the language of Archetypes becomes agile, insightful and begins to develop an *archetypal eye*, a right-brain capability that allows for the decoding of human and organizational complexities. Such leaders can see through layers of the obvious to the meaningful core that often invisibly "runs the show." Readily having access to

archetypal language empowers the leader to not only develop their own imagination and creativity, but also to lead in a complex world.

Background

Left-brain thinking is equivalent to what are often referred to as "masculine terms." Tom Peters, Margaret Wheatley, Carol Pearson, Riane Eisler among others remind us that men and masculine values still dominate corporations, their leadership and organizational consultants.[8] Alice Eagly observes that "leadership has historically been depicted primarily in masculine terms, and many theories of leadership have focused mainly on stereotypically masculine qualities."[9] James Hillman speaks about "the old heroics of business as battle, conquest, victory and reward."[10] Martial imagery and the continuing popularity of Sun Tzu's ancient military guide, *The Art of War* perpetuate the notion that to be in business means competition and survival of the fittest.[11]

Many men who were trained by the military returned home after WWII to take on leadership positions in business. Peter Drucker in his study of General Motors after WWII noted the common habit of managers to take charge and to control.[12] To this day, the majority of corporations are run by men.[13] Traditionally, men have not been comfortable or brought up to believe that it would strengthen them to develop their right-brain capacities which include compassion, sensitivity, imagination and creativity. Rather, men—and consequently leaders—were taught to think in a left-brain and linear manner. They were taught to be clear, make hard decisions and win at all cost. Over time, every leader, no matter their gender, was taught that leadership was left-brain because what started out as "masculine qualities" became equivalent with leadership qualities.

Leadership has also been synonymous with having answers. How do we overcome this problem? What do we do? Where do we go? Leaders who had the answers could lead their troops/teams out of difficult situations. Yet today and in a complex world, many leaders feel stuck and ill-equipped to provide clear and simple answers.[14] What is often neglected in business schools and on-the job-training is precicely what is required: complexity capability with its right-brain capacities.

An interview with a former F-16 fighter pilot evidences the need for right-brain capacities in complex situations. He said, "When I am flying over 1,000 miles an hour, paying attention to six directions (up, down, left, right, forwards, backwards) with deadly weapons at my fingertips, I cannot make left-brain, analog decisions. Such complexity requires my right-brain, my feminine side."[15] As this pilot understood, complexity requires right brain thinking.

Right-brain skills that include feeling, empathy and intuition are sometimes summarily dismissed by doing what the left brain does best, thinking logically: if the left brain is rational then the right brain must be irrational, a highly loaded word. What this F-16 pilot did was not irrational. Rather, this was a person using their full brain to perform a highly complex task. Similarly, any leader today must integrate multiple facets of their brain in order to arrive at wholistic decision making.

Newer leadership models embrace some right-brain capacities. Such models include Susan Szpakowski's *Mindful Leadership*, Erik Van Praag's *Spiritual Leadership*, Robert K. Greenleaf's *Servant Leadership*, Marshall Goldsmith's *Leading from Behind* and R. Hougaard and J. Carter's

Compassionate Leadership.[16] These ideas stand in great contrast to Thomas Carlyle's *Great Man* theory in 1840 which postulated that history can be understood by the impact of remarkable and heroic great men.[17] Bill George, addressing a VUCA world directly, suggests that "Now is a time for authentic business leaders to lead in ways not heretofore seen."[18]

Hougaard and Carter say that, "The greatest challenge for most leaders is doing things in a human way."[19] We would call this including right-brain capacities in leadership such as acknowledging multiple perspectives, and demonstrating a supportive presence. In order to survive in their role in a VUCA world, leaders need to access, recognize, and implement such capacities. But how is this accomplished? How do leaders mobilize their right-brain capabilities?

Neuroscience can help us understand how leaders can recoup their right-brain capabilities and make them part of their leadership and decision making. In the 1960s neuroscientist Paul McLean created an evolutionary model of the brain. The *triune brain* model is still in use today. The model suggests that our brain can be divided into three main parts, each corresponding to a different stage of evolution. In short, the Reptilian Brain deals with survival, including instincts for self-preservation, the Limbic System is responsible for emotions and social behaviors and the Neocortex is in charge of higher-order thinking such as planning, reasoning and carrying out advanced cognitive functions. Staci Haines says that this natural hierarchy mandates that for optimal performance three neurobiological requirements are met: safety, connection and dignity.[20] Similar to Maslow's hierarchy of needs, the Reptilian Brain and the Limbic System must be recognized before the Neocortex can function at its fullest.

The triune brain model allows us to explain why the COVID pandemic had such an impact on leadership and the workforce everywhere and has added to the ongoing polycrises. COVID attacked all three systems of our neurobiology. Fear for life and survival triggered the Reptilian Brain, no physical touch or close human contact policies triggered the Limbic System and finally the anguish of the first two combined with lengthy isolation got people to think about what they were doing with their lives.

We can look to Gallup's 2023 post-pandemic *State of the Global Workplace Report* which has the subtitle, *"The Voice of the World's Employees*" to glean a keener sense of what leaders need to do in today's world. Globally, 41% of workers would like more engagement or culture and 16% asked for more wellbeing. Only 28% suggested more pay and benefits. When asked what would make their workplace better, one worker said, "They should grant more autonomy in the work to stimulate everyone's creativity" and another said, "for everyone to get recognized for their contributions."[21] We can sum up the desire of two-thirds of workers on a global scale as *wanting to be seen and be part of something*. The very human need to connect outweighs economic concerns even during radical global inflation. People want more than being a cog in a system to maximize profits.

But how can leaders fully see their workers and let them know they recognize and value them on a deeper level than awards and raises? To see people for more than their measurable contributions and resumés is a right-brain capability. Not just systems, people too are complex. Leaders need a new language that is understood throughout their organization's culture.

Jon Clifton, the CEO of Gallup, summarized the 2023 findings as follows: "What can leaders do today to potentially save the world? Gallup has found one clear answer: Change the way your people are managed."

Problem Statement

Margaret Wheatley writes, “If the world is not linear, then our [linear] approaches cannot work.”[22] We no longer live in a linear world of growth where past success can be projected into the future. Experience no longer carries the value it once did. As one C-Suite member in a German consumer goods company said, “You have to listen much more to other people and have a feeling about where things are developing instead of extrapolating the future from previous experience.”[23]

The core (and linear) image that described success has long been an upwards pointing arrow on a graph (Fig. 2) and the rise to more power was equally linear, starting at the bottom and climbing to the top (Fig. 3).

Fig. 2: Traditional image of Success

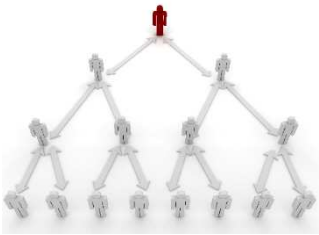

Fig. 3: Linear way to the top

In the new world, these images lose their central value around which leaders and workers can rally. Lateral thinking, moving in several directions at once, constantly reinventing and turning on a dime, this is the agility that is now required. In a whole-brain environment, creativity and relationships are as important as trained skills. Corporate anthropologist Jitske Kramer points out that organizational charts do not describe what actually happens in a company. Rather, social connections, gossip and power struggles define daily experiences.[24] Networking, social media and non-traditional paths to fulfillment mean that unless leaders offer new ways to success, leaders will find it even harder to hire and keep a workforce. Besides providing a pay-check, today’s workplace must offer social connections, counteract loneliness and make the work meaningful.

Some companies responded to a need for a more compassionate and mindful workplace as they experimented with mindfulness, meditation and even massage at your desk and poetry.[25] While such practices help reduce stress in a world beset by polycrises, this is not enough. We need a deeper change in how leadership responds to its workers. As shown, the recent pandemic has rattled leaders and workers to the core. Those who have time and choice to reflect on their circumstances are wondering what they are doing with their lives. According to Monsters.com, a job search service, 95 percent of people are looking for a new job in 2023.[26]

This has huge consequences for organizations. Hiring and training, only to have a large turnover is disruptive and costly for any size enterprise. Employers are not only conducting exit interviews to understand what they could do better, they are also conducting "stay interviews" to figure out what could entice a worker not to leave.[27] In meaningful conversations with workers, left-brain capacities don't suffice. Rebranding HR Managers as Chief People Officers does not solve the problem. In addition, when we only rely on left-brain and linear thinking we are cut off from a massive intelligence.

Neurobiology teaches that our intelligence is not only situated in the brain. Rather, human intelligence is spread throughout the body and importantly, the brain does not carry the majority of this intelligence information. 80% of information flows from body to brain and our right-brain capacities allow us to become cognitive of such intelligence.[28] The triune brain model alerts to the biological imperative that in order to access higher thinking skills we must first ensure safety and connection in our teams and that involves an awareness of our social sensibilities and physical senses.

These biological needs require that the right-brain language we are seeking must be *embodied* as well. Embodied means the use of gestures, body movements, and physical actions to complement and enhance verbal communication. Unless an organization learns to speak an embodied right-brain language we are as Wheatley says, "making lists and charts that do not capture the actual experience."

Such categorizing is also true for how most leaders and workers are assessed. Linear, left-brain assessment tools put people in boxes and type them. Typologies categorize people and separate them, "If I am this type then I am not that type and so you and me are different." Workers are found and hired for skills, for a particular part of who they are and they are asked to leave many parts of themselves—especially right-brain capacities—at the door when they go to work. Enhancing and supporting specific strengths and skills makes people specialists. It also separates them further from their colleagues. Importantly, specialization does not meet the neurobiological imperative for safety and connection and workers cannot be expected to perform at the optimal level without being holistically engaged. The language we are looking for must therefore address a person's whole triune brain needs and not only value them for a certain skill, specialty or part.

Proposed Solution

Once we understand the importance of developing right-brain capabilities to complement a leader's (often well-developed and rewarded) left-brain skills, how is this done? Is there an embodied language that speaks right-brain? And further, how would such a language be rolled out to leadership teams and eventually whole organizations? Even better, what if such a language was also universal, one that underlies the thousands of languages that are actually spoken today in a global world of business? We are looking for nothing less than a Rosetta Stone to decode right-brain business challenges, a language that transcends all borders and cultures.

For many thousand years, and certainly since Plato, right-brain thinking has been cultivated through the imagination. The classical pathway to activate the imagination is through the language of *Archetypes.* When leaders learn the language of Archetypes, they learn to activate their right-brain capabilities. When this language is extended throughout an organization, ready access to so-called extrarational, intuitive knowledge is engaged, precisely what is needed in a complex world. Learning the language of Archetypes therefore advances a person's complexity capability.

Because there are endless Archetypes, and because we can never see Archetypes or measure them, yet we immediately recognize them when prompted, Archetypes have never been at the center of theories about business and leadership. Archetypes are impossible to imagine unless we activate our right-brain capacities. Our left-brain capabilities cannot recognize and respond to the *archetypal multiplicity* of our inner lives except intellectually, the opposite of what is needed.

Archetypal multiplicity refers to the ancient idea that we have within us a set of core ways to interact with the world.[29] This is a set of innate patterns that are universally recognized and exist in everyone. For instance, wherever you travel there will be storytellers. They have various names and translate around the world into countless words. In English these including narrator, bard, chronicler, wordsmith, yarn-spinner and talebearer. In an enterprise the storyteller tells the story of the organization and this task is usually assigned to the marketing department.

There is no need to explain the core idea of a storyteller. Each culture—and in it, each person—will have their own understanding of what a storyteller does and how they act, but there is *universal agreement on the archetypal nature of storytelling*. In every person in every culture the archetypal Storyteller resides in the imagination. Therefore, every human already has an *inner* Storyteller, the potential to express this part of themselves and to recognize it in others. The fact that we recognize the Storyteller, whoever we are and wherever we are, makes the Storyteller an *archetypal figure*. Archetypal multiplicity states that we have several inner figures, each one ready to step forward given situational circumstances. When a leader defends her brand, she steps into her Warrior and when she sets out on an adventure she steps into her Explorer. This implies inner multiplicity.

In practicality, we imagine ourselves as having multiple inner parts or voices. For instance, we might say, "a part of me want's this but another part of me thinks this would be better." We sometimes feel torn inside and this is not possible if a singular "I" is making our decisions. Because archetypal thinking recognizes this inner multiplicity, it is a form of *parts work*. Well known models include Internal Family Systems (IFS), Voice Dialogue, Systemic Constellations Work and Archetypal Psychology. These methods all vary from the far more typical models in developmental or behavioral psychology that postulate a singular "I" (Fig. 4).

Over the last decades, parts work and training has grown exponentially due to its effectiveness in addressing complex issues and because it is empowering. Most of all parts work has been tested and studied and the results are lasting, sustainable and transformational.[30] However, as practiced today, parts work is used in therapeutic settings and for trauma work. Meanwhile, we are looking for a model that is designed for business, is non-clinical, yet harnesses the power of parts work.

The parts work model set forth in this position paper is called *Archetypes at Work™* and it uses 10 Archetypes, delivering a complete set to describe any behavior, thing or business complexity, akin to how twelve notes on a keyboard can play any song (Fig. 5).

Fig. 4: The singular "I" model

Fig. 5: A full set of Archetypes

To make these parts visible and cognitive, Archetypes at Work™ has a unique assessment tool that maps a person's archetypal patterns. The Archetypal Preferences™ Report (APR) notably uses the word *preferences* thereby highlighting that people prefer certain archetypes in certain situations. For instance, at a gathering, if we want others to listen to our stories, we might step into our Storyteller. Or, if our company is downsizing and we don't want to rock the boat, we may keep our Renegade in check.

Trained APR debriefers can help a person understand their particular archetypal pattern. A conversation about a person's APR shows which Archetypes are currently preferred and used over others. Because we always have all 10 Archetypes available to us, we can choose to develop our access to some—or tone down others. As a trained APR debrief coach recently said, "One of the key benefits of learning to think archetypally is that we can rewire ourselves proactively. This has huge implications for how we change in the moment, generating efficiency, self-regulation, co-regulation and hence a more responsive agile style of leadership."[31] Here is a practical example:

> Sally, the CEO of a midsize company, considers herself direct, to the point and driven. She has always been rewarded for reaching her goals and for winning. She is surprised by a 360-feedback report from her leadership team that states that her leadership style comes across as dominant, aggressive and bullying. She wants to work on this. Her archetypal coach shows her how she has relied on her Warrior to lead the way most of her career and how this is not sufficient anymore. The coaching process involves letting other parts of herself step forward when appropriate and she learns how to cultivate her Dreamer and Nurturer. She also learns how to give her Warrior space to express in appropriate ways, without running over others. At her next round of feedback her development is recognized and appreciated. Sally has more options to respond to the complexity of her career.

The coach in Sally's case has developed an *archetypal eye*, the ability to notice which Archetypes are underlying certain situations and things. Assessing, consulting and coaching with the Archetypes at

Work™ method are all based on the ability to use the archetypal eye and then apply remedies by activating inactive Archetypes and further developing others that are prominent. The same archetypal eye can be applied to teams, corporate culture or any complexity in an organizational setting. We can think this right-brain ability as the skill to translate "what is experienced here?" into "what archetypes are at work here?" Following is another example:

> ACME Company has an R&D department. Leadership in ACME Company during an annual review of department spending, recognizes that millions of dollars have been spent on the 28 member R&D department over many years. Yet, ACME has not produced any new products in a long time and the question is, what is going on in the R&D department? Why are they not developing new products? An Archetypes at Work™ professional is hired to assess the archetypal situation given these parameters. After assessing each member of the R&D team, it is found that collectively, *nobody in the team has the Renegade Archetype in their top three favorites* (the APR ranks how comfortable we are with each of our 10 Archetypes). The Renegade, as the Inventor Archetype, is not preferred by anyone in the team.

If we ask *why* the Renegade is not preferred by anyone, there could be cultural issues ("don't step out of line;" "thinking outside the box means I am not a team player") or competitive issues (our competitors always beat us with their newest inventions) or psychological issues (too many introverts that cannot express their ideas). Importantly, *the "why" here does not matter*.

At first glance it would make sense to ask why millions of dollars are being wasted on an R&D department. Yet, asking why to then fix the problem is a linear solution and looks at the R&D department as a piece of machinery that is broken. Instead, an archetypal approach says that there can be many reasons why a person, or even a whole team, is holding back one of their Archetypes at their workplace. The archetypal model goes directly to the remedy: *activate the neglected Renegade in the team by activating the Renegade in each team member.* Consequent work with professional facilitation activates the Renegade. This happens first in individuals and then in the team and the department aligns with its required mission.

The idea of inviting and then activating an archetype that is dormant but available is a radically different approach to believing that the team is lacking something. The Archetypes at Work™ model assumes that everyone is equipped with a full set of Archetypes. At any given time, we can develop any of our Archetypes—one at a time—as Sally did above.

We can understand the development of a particular Archetype through a theatre metaphor. In any play there are lead actors and more offstage actors. Similarly, we put forward certain archetypes, they run our show while we leave other parts offstage. In a business setting, if the parts that a person is leaving offstage—for instance their creative Renegade—is what they need, this has a price that both the organization and the person pay.

When we change a corporate culture by adopting a language of inner multiplicity, we begin to think in a whole new way different about an enterprise, team, or person. Old ways of thinking claim that

people are defined by fixed traits. Yet with neuroscience we are learning that "changing one's states changes one's traits."[32]

Finally, Archetypes at Work™ is an embodied language. When trained facilitators work with a team or individuals, the learning is taught through established theatre techniques adopted for the business world and include gestures, movement and deep embodiment. This approach enables people to recognize how they can evoke state change and gives them increased agency in the living narratives of their personal lives and at work. As Jerry Sternin said, "It's easier to act your way into a new way of thinking than think your way into a new way of acting."

Executive Summary

We live in a VUCA world that has gone from complicated to complex. To be future fit, leaders must develop their complexity capability which is a right-brain capacity. Leaders and their organizations need a right-brain, embodied language to respond and develop themselves and their people. Such development is necessary to meet the modern world. Archetypes at Work™ is a model that develops people, teams and organizations by working with what is underplayed and also overplayed in any situation. The model is being applied to personal development and leadership and team development in several countries and languages.

Archetypal leadership development begins with greater self-awareness. The Archetypal Preferences™ Report (APR) maps a Leader's current archetypal patterns with clear and actionable suggestions for development. When Leaders recognize that some archetypal habits no longer serve them, resistance to development diminishes and curiosity takes over.

In interactive workshops presented by Archetypes at Work™ facilitators, leadership teams explore and find what needs to be activated in the group to respond to a given complexity problem. Personal stories evolve and team stories are born when one Archetype at a time is developed.

For more information, go to archetypesatwork.com. To begin your training as an archetypal coach and/or facilitator, visit archetypesatwork.com/guild.

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