



Crooked timber thinking before agile

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My Basildon reality: a game of cat and mouse

If you've never been to Basildon, Essex, in the south of England—a word of warning. In the 1980s a journalist (from a sophisticated London-based and rather snooty viewpoint) described it as a well-designed open prison. A tad harsh I think as someone who lived there for nearly eight years. Basildon is a new town, designed as part of Britain's post-war recovery to house displaced Londoners.

I worked for Basildon Council from 1985 to 1987 as the Members' Policy and Research Officer. It sounds a bit dull. It wasn't. Basildon Council was rate-capped. That meant we were on the Thatcher Government's hit list of over-spending councils that spent way above what the Government thought they should. By the way, we did.

For the two years I was there, we played a game of financial, and political, cat and mouse with the Government. We built sports centres, a theatre and kept community services for the elderly going. We had a clear vision: *Basildon, the Caring Council* was our by-line.



Formal management planning didn't fit reality

At the same time, I decided I wanted to have a crack at management. What was it? What did managers do? So, I signed up for an Open University management course and away I went. The problem was the massive gulf between the theory I was learning and the reality I was experiencing.

At the time, I thought I must be doing it all wrong. The course was all about control, planning and monitoring—predictability. I remember struggling with project plans based on making a cup of tea I would never use in reality.

My world changed weekly and even daily

My Basildon Council world changed every week, every day sometimes. A strategy group met every week. We'd take stock, adapt, agree new approaches and start off again. I thought then the Council was unusual; proper organisations were different.

It's nice to know all these years later, it's the other way around. We were in the real world, and a very exciting one at that; I'm not sure where the management text books were. We were doing agile; we just didn't know it.

Life's messy: get over it

At university in the 1970s I studied the Enlightenment: the age of reason. And I suppose, without thinking (and perhaps much enlightenment) bought the version of the world that said logic and straight-line thinking was the way to plan and participate in the world.

But it never felt right. My Basildon experience told me the opposite. I developed this phrase—*Life's messy: get over it*—to help leaders, particularly new ones, grasp their new role and not be daunted by it. And if life's messy, organisations certainly are, and leading them most definitely is.

The crooked timber of humanity is still crooked

Kant (1784) was more eloquent. "*Out of the crooked timber of humanity, no straight line was ever made.*" And Susan Scott (2002) makes a similar point: "*Life is curly. Don't try to straighten it out*" (p13).

In practice this means expect the unexpected and be ready to change course when you need to. You may plan for a particular result, but other events happen you didn't predict or couldn't have predicted. Often, the results are far different from those you planned for originally.



We make things up after the event

There's one more dimension to add to our crooked timber. Often we take action and something happens. Then we rationalise the result afterwards. We convince ourselves what happened was part of a logical sequence of events we'd planned for. Sometimes the logic isn't there but we manufacture it to fit in with the neat and logical way we hope the world really operates. Kahneman (2011) calls it the overconfidence effect.

So it's important you think about how the world works. And if you're with me—life's messy—then you need to get messy with it. You need an agile and adaptable mindset.

A shout out to quantum physics

In the late 1960s and early 1970s I attended the Arthur Terry Bilateral School, West Midlands, UK. The school tried, and failed, to educate, or even interest me, in physics.

So, when a colleague suggested I should read about quantum physics, to add some more flesh to the bones of my *Life's messy, get over it* mantra, I had a nervous reaction against the idea. But I did, and it was worth it. So, bear with me if this is your first venture into this subject and forget anything about experiments in physics labs.

The core idea of quantum physics is this: by observing the universe, we shape and change it. It responds to our observation. So the environment you're working in is far from static. It's not just a bunch of atoms and molecules that come together and create the permanent living and non-living things we see around us. Astrophysicist and writer, John Gribben, sums it up nicely: *"It is impossible to predict with absolute certainty the outcome of any atomic experiment, or indeed any event in the Universe, and that our world is governed by probabilities. And it tells us that it is impossible to know simultaneously both the exact position of an object and its exact momentum (where it is going.)"* (p251).



We create reality, rather than just observing it

So, how we think about, and observe, a situation or an object has an effect on it. Traditionally we've thought that reality exists and we observe it, interact with it and try to make sense of it. Quantum physics says otherwise. We're all creators of reality, rather than mere observers of it.

Arntz et al (2005) argue *"classical physics...was based on the premise that only by knowing the separate parts could you eventually understand the whole. The new physics is more organic and holistic; it is painting a picture of the universe as a unified whole, whose parts are interconnected and influence each other."*

"In quantum physics, the observer influences the object observed. There are no isolated observers of a mechanical universe, but everything participates in the universe" (p56).

We need to see the whole of our messy jigsaw and not just the individual pieces to grasp the whole picture, which by the way is moving continuously anyway.

And quantum physics is probabilistic: you never really know how things will turn out. So, instead of the fiction of prediction, iterate and use trial and error. Sounds like agile to me.

We live in a world of possibilities

Jaworski (1998) takes up these ideas and links them to leadership. Everything around us is moving continuously. We live in a world we see as fixed, and yet nothing's actually fixed at all. Senge (1990) says something similar: *"Once we understand this, we begin to see the future is not fixed, that we live in a world of possibilities"* (p10). And that world is all connected, interdependent and part of a system. We tend to concentrate on small, one-off events and projects. It takes a different mindset to see how the universe affects every small event and small events have an influence (however small) on the universe as a whole.

Think water, not rock, logic

Bear with me, while we explore one more take on this theme. Edward De Bono (1990) doesn't mention quantum physics. And if the last section left you a little baffled, hopefully De Bono will come to your rescue.

He describes rock logic as the basis of our thinking system. By this he means, logic, reason, and the

search for truth. We're back here to the thinking of the Enlightenment. Rock logic is hard-edged, permanent and unchanging. It uses argument to create absolutes. But De Bono argues this type of critical thinking is flawed. *"That critical thinking is so highly esteemed in our civilisation has had some unfortunate consequences. Critical thinking lacks the productive, generative, creative and design elements that are so needed to tackle problems and find our way forward"* (p6).

What's rock logic? If you have a rock, it's just that—a static collection of atoms and molecules. If you add one rock and one rock, you get two rocks.



Water flows and is fluid

On the other hand, water logic is far more fluid. If you pour more water into a glass of water, you don't get two layers of water. Instead it mixes together and creates one whole.

With water logic, we move away from straight-line thinking. *"A rock has a shape of its own. It is hard-edged, permanent and unchanging. We can see or feel its shape...Water is very different from rock, but just as real. It flows. The emphasis is on 'to' rather than 'is'. Water flows according to the gradient (context). It takes the form of the vessel in which it is placed (circumstances)"* (p8).

De Bono then builds on this idea and explains two different information systems: the traditional passive, rock-like system, and alternatively, an active, patterning, water-like system.

With rock logic, pieces sit passively waiting to be moved logically to produce a predetermined end result. It's how computers work and how many organisations try to make their world, and the people in it, work. With water logic, it's flowing and fluid. And it's linked with the quantum physics ideas I've mentioned already. Think of it like this. The world we inhabit, and the world we lead in, is moving all the time and we're influencing it all the time. It's—dare I say—messy.

The world's pretty unpredictable

So why did Leicester City win the English Premier League in 2016? Why is Donald Trump in the White House? Why didn't Hitler finish off the British army at Dunkirk? Why did my company fail to win a tender we thought we would, and then win another that was a complete surprise? Because the world's unpredictable and a complicated set of circumstances occurred to create these situations.

Things happen randomly

Johansson (2015) argues that success is random *"far more random than we have come to believe"* (p3). He goes further to suggest that success can often be attributed to *"a serendipitous encounter, and unexpected moment of insight, or an unplanned culmination of events"* (p4). He argues the world's an unpredictable place and if you buy this argument, then you can't predict what's going to happen. And there lies the paradox. In our lives and in business we logically plan our way to achieving goals. But at the same time we aren't surprised when surprising events happen all the time.

That doesn't mean everything is unpredictable all the time. It's not. We can be fairly certain Christmas Day will be on 25 December. But many things that happen are random and we can seize opportunities as they randomly pop up. And an agile mindset is vital to seize those opportunities.

Leicester City were rank outsiders

Certainly if you look deeper into the Leicester City story, it's worth understanding what was happening to create this unbelievable result. The Daily Telegraph reported on 2 May 2016: *"Nine months ago, the odds being offered on Leicester City winning football's Premier title were identical to the quoted odds on Elvis Presley being found alive this year: 5,000-1 against. Elvis is yet to turn up, but Leicester, who defined the term 'rank outsider', have achieved the impossible"* (Raynor and Oliver).



But why?

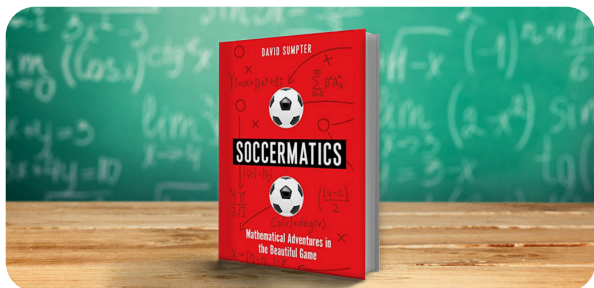
A great team spirit; the manager, Claudio Ranieri; regular Buddhist blessings, spreading good karma, from Thai monks, are just some of the reasons given for the team's success. (Leicester's late billionaire owner, Vichai Srivaddhanaprabha, was from Thailand.) My husband, an avid English football fan, also reckons six other glamour clubs that were usual championship contenders all had poor seasons for one reason or another. Also Leicester City was great at scoring goals from defence breakouts, and strikers Jamie Vardy and Riyad Mahrez were on fire all season.

I'd argue Leicester City's success came from an unpredictable and unique set of circumstances. The team defied rock logic, had numerous serendipitous encounters and created many unexpected moments of insight when they were winning. In short, they won because of an unplanned culmination of events.

By the way, in a savage twist of fate, Claudio Ranieri, was sacked by the club about nine months later as the team failed to repeat its success of the previous season. Who'd have predicted that?

Probability theory has a place in football

The Leicester City story is more interesting because it happened in a fairly predictable environment: football. I bought my husband a great book, *Soccermatics* by David Sumpter, a mathematics professor with a love of maths and football. It was a Christmas present for him and I randomly picked it up and started reading. If you're into both subjects, it's a great read. Sumpter reckons you can use probability theory to predict which teams will do well in a season. But he's also clear each game has a random quality. I started to worry about probability theory and how accurate predications can be. So, I took it up with Sumpter. Was the Leicester City win an outlier? He replied: "I think they got a bit of luck but they were an outlier" (2017). So there it is—relief. My faith in randomness is restored.



Football hasn't changed that much, but our world has

But the thing about football, and the thing that makes the Leicester City success story more remarkable, is that the game hasn't changed that much in over 100 years. Yes, rules may be tweaked occasionally, and FIFA's credibility may have risen and fallen, but the fundamentals of the game have stayed roughly the same.

Our world has changed dramatically. It changes all the times in ways we can't predict. What drives success in football (most of the time) doesn't drive our success in business, government, not-for-profits and life in general. Why? Because we're not playing a game with set rules. The rules change constantly.



All models are wrong, but some are useful

Patton (2011) outlines variations on an observation by George Box, Professor of Statistics, University of Wisconsin.

"All models are wrong, but some are useful."

Essentially all models are wrong, but some are useful.

Remember that all models are wrong; the practical question is how wrong do they have to be to not be useful?

All models are false but some models are useful.

Most models are wrong, but some are useful" (p123).

I think you've got the message. Software developers worked out years ago that rigid models weren't getting them the results they needed. Business as a whole is catching up. Rigid models don't give you agility and adaptability.

Let's add obliquity to the mix

Now let's look at obliquity. John Kay, (2011), a leading UK economist, uses it to describe how we often get to our goals indirectly. What we intend is not what always happens. Instead, we take an oblique route. He takes a particular pot shot at frameworks, particularly those used by economists like him. He describes his previous consultancy practice in which he sold economic decision-making models to clients, who then didn't use them.

"Of course, we told ourselves privately, our clients were being stupid—that was why they didn't use our models. But we didn't think we were stupid, and we didn't use them either... Like many economists we believed that if our models did not describe the world, the fault lay with the world, not the model" (p. xi/xii).

Kay concludes the world is right and the models are wrong, even though we like to retrospectively shoe horn them into what we've decided and explain things that've happened. He concludes: *"Perhaps we should recognise the ubiquity, and inevitability, of obliquity"* (p. xii). Sounds like a piece of crooked timber thinking and a reiteration of the life's messy mantra.



So, what's your mindset?

All of the above is how I came to agile. Not as a method, or a set of project rules, but as a way of understanding the world and operating successfully within it.

Our world is unpredictable, messy, crooked, static, fluid and oblique. You could try to create predictability; clean up the mess; straighten out the crooked timber; ignore quantum physics; stop the water flowing; and make the oblique explicit. Good luck. I believe the world will come back and bite you.

An agile and adaptive way of seeing the world and acting within it is a better bet.

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