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The Illusion of Control: The Need for a New Paradigm

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Why are we talking about the illusion of control? Is it because it seems as if, suddenly, we are like leaves in the wind? Or is it that our understanding of control is being sorely tested in what many call "VUCA" (volatile, uncertain, complex, and ambiguous) times (Magee 1988)? When things are complex, interconnected systems can behave in unpredictable ways. Second-order effects abound, as does randomness that undermines the very notion of control. This can be hard for many to accept. Apart from reaching for the Prozac, what can leaders and organizations do when faced by uncontrollable times? And was it ever thus anyway?

The illusion of control can be considered in many ways. One common theme concerns how leaders exercise control. This is based on some commonly held assumptions:

1. Leaders can control when faced by a VUCA context.
2. Control can be exercised by the few over the many to get better results.
3. Control is something that is a hierarchical enforcement rather than a system-wide enablement.

Modern times present many examples of how these assumptions are being challenged:

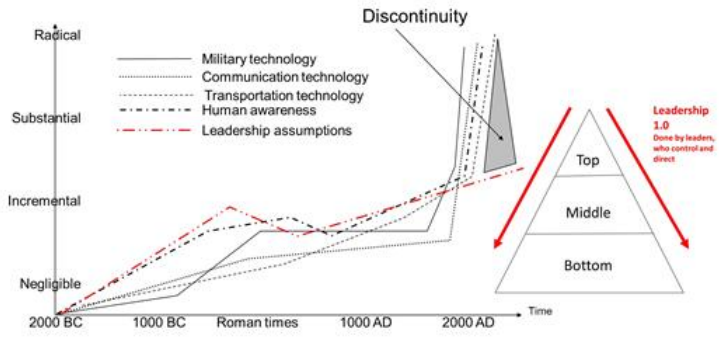
1. In China the policy of "zero COVID," with strictly controlling policies, at first worked well. The delta variant was controlled, and for a couple of years, China was relatively free while the rest of the world went through lockdowns and much pain. Indeed, China kept the world economy on a more or less even keel. However, when the omicron variant emerged, it slowly dawned, with an R_0 infection rate many times higher than earlier variants, that the old policies of control no longer worked. This led to a dramatic U-turn. The classic mistake had been, when faced with a new context, not changing or preparing a new strategy when the old one no longer worked. The trap of success. Others in the past had fallen into this trap, with Kodak and Nokia mobile phones being examples. The other mistake was to treat the complex as if it were complicated. When complexity arrived, it was only a matter of time before the strategy of control needed to be changed (Obolensky 2022).
2. In the UK armored forces, when the strategy during the Cold War for the defense of western Europe moved from positional to mobile defense, the traditional tactical controls proved to be too slow. New battlefield tactics emerged whereby decisions taken by commanders were pushed down to the lowest possible levels, allowing a much faster self-organizing response. Control moved from the few to the many (Obolensky 2017). Military commanders realized that traditional uses of control were not needed in a fast-moving and complex environment. To some extent, this thinking enabled the hotchpotch of Ukrainian forces to stop the attempts by Russia to seize Kyiv in the early stages of the war, gaining advantage over forces that followed the traditional military "top-down" approach of control. Such an approach is called "Mission Command" where "Empowerment to react and decide is decentralised" (Sage-Passant 2022).
3. A myriad new approaches regarding control are emerging in organizational thinking, from Frederic Laloux's reinvention of organizations (Laloux 2014) to Brian Robertson's holacracy (Robertson 2016), from Samantha Slades's horizontal approach (Slade 2018) to Jeff

Cumps's Sociocracy 3.0 **(Cumps 2019)**. A common theme of all of them is how control can be moved from the few to the many, with self-organization acting as a complex dynamic. Such books contain many case studies that show how the notion of traditional control is being changed.

Does this mean that we need to sweep out the old and usher in the new? Should we seek to abolish hierarchy, as some would contend, and move control to the masses? That would be a simplistic mistake of "either/or" thinking rather than "both/and." To understand why, we need to look at the context.

Why is control, in the traditional sense of something done by the few to the many, becoming more of an "illusion"? One reason could be that our age-old traditional assumptions of how organizations should work, and what leadership is about, have been outstripped by the radical changes we are living through **(Obolensky 2010)**.

Figure 1.

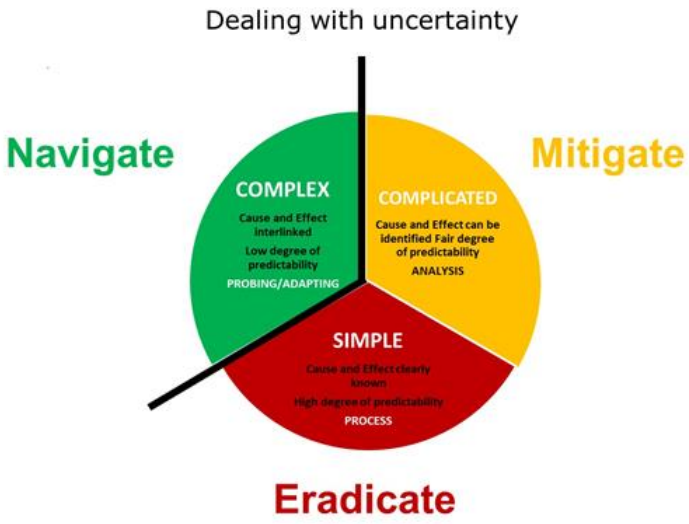


The discontinuity of Leadership 1.0 in modern times

In the past, control was exercised more comfortably by leaders as, in less complex and dynamic times, they generally knew solutions to their problems. This is the core assumption of Leadership 1.0. Leaders lead, and they exercise control because they know what the solutions are to the issues their organizations face. The assumption is that having risen up the ranks, they appreciate what they are asking subordinates to do. However, things are changing fast. So today, that is no longer the case. Research shows that leaders know only a small percentage of the solutions (less than 20 percent) **(Shannon 2012)**, and in general they know that they do not know. In the old days, they turned to God; today they turn to McKinsey. However, they cannot say they do not know as they are expected to know. Meanwhile, those below often know that leaders do not know, but they still expect them to know. So the circle is complete: leaders do not know, they know that they do not know, but they feel they cannot say that they do not know as they are expected to know by a whole load of people who know they do not know anyway! This is a common charade that feeds the illusion of control. This "charade" is creating challenges around the world, albeit in different ways depending on the power distance that may exist.

The issue is not just an issue of leadership. Followers also suffer from the same illusion. We crave for someone to be in charge, to be in control in today's messy, complex world. Robert Michels's Iron Law of Oligarchy **(Michels 1989)** plays a part, in that within a hierarchical system, followers will defer to leaders who take increasing control. It is a deep emotional need, exploited by some. The Brexit campaign to "take back control" is a good example. However, in today's complex world, the solutions are often dispersed across the organization. This means that control is no longer best vested centrally if speed and agility are needed. A mistake would be to take this as a sine qua non for all contexts. Not everything is complex. We need to see where central control makes sense and where it does not, and when it becomes an illusion and when it is not. Brenda Zimmerman was the first to contextualize complexity **(Zimmerman, Lindberg, and Plsek 2008)**, followed by Snowden's more famous Cynefin framework **(Snowden and Boone 2007)**. Zimmerman described three contexts: the simple, the complicated, and the complex. The example she gives of the simple is cooking a meal following a recipe; the complicated is sending someone to the moon; and the complex is raising a child. And within each, we can discern where centralized control best resides. The assumption here is that control is exercised to overcome uncertainty.

Figure 2.



Dealing with uncertainty in different contexts

So, to control events and overcome uncertainty:

1. *The simple*. This is where Six Sigma resides. Control is paramount. Right first time, every time. Uncertainty is eradicated. Pilots follow a checklist, manufacturing follows a centrally defined **process**. There is no illusion about centrally defined control among those who implement. That is vital.
2. *The complicated*. This is where techniques such as project management come into play. Things are planned to mitigate uncertainty, and then implemented. A single ideal path to a desired outcome can be calculated through expert **analysis**. A building site follows a plan. And control is exercised by following a defined path, again defined by the few.
3. *The complex*. This is where there is a low degree of predictability, and multiple paths could exist but none are obvious. This needs navigation, **probing** and calling on the wider wisdom of the crowd. Centralized control here can be an illusion.

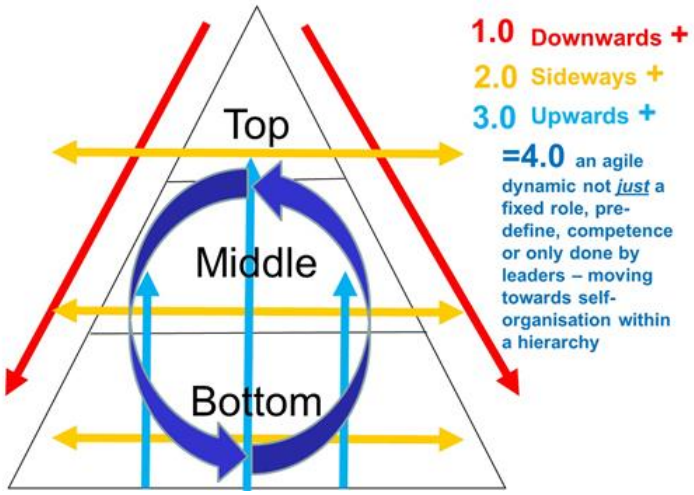
It is important to note that these three domains coexist. So following these three strategies is neither a panacea nor a guarantee of success. “Black Swans” **(Taleb 2010)**, random and completely unforeseen events, can play havoc in any domain. However, while control can be exercised in the simple, and to a degree in the complicated, it can be a damaging and dangerous illusion in the complex.

As we progress from the simple via the complicated to the complex, control by leaders can become more and more of an illusion. Indeed, leaders trying to control in a complex fast-changing domain not only follow an illusion but often get in the way. The reality is that the three contexts coexist in an organization, but leaders often apply the simple or the complicated approach due to past success. Knowing the context and when and how to control—and when and how to let go—is critical.

So, if control by leaders is an illusion within complexity, what strategy can be employed within the complex domain? Research show that self-organization gets better results, where control and decision-making are spread across an organization **(LRN 2016)**. The mistake is the belief that self-organization needs to replace hierarchy, when in fact both need to coexist. Hierarchy has real benefits **(Jaques 1990)**—it can help to release energy and creativity, rationalize productivity, improve morale, and lend career paths to those who wish to progress. This needs a new paradigm for organizational leadership: Leadership 4.0 **(Obolensky 2019b)**, a dynamic that combines:

- Leadership 1.0: managing/leading down, following/reporting up where control is exercised in the traditional way—good for the simple domain. The majority of leadership research and theories are based on this assumption.
- Leadership 2.0: leading and being led sideways across boundaries and functions, where control is a horizontal dynamic—needed for the complicated domain.
- Leadership 3.0: following downwards and leading upwards, where control is dispersed and followers in the hierarchy take control and lead. Control becomes enablement, key for the complex domain.

Figure 3.



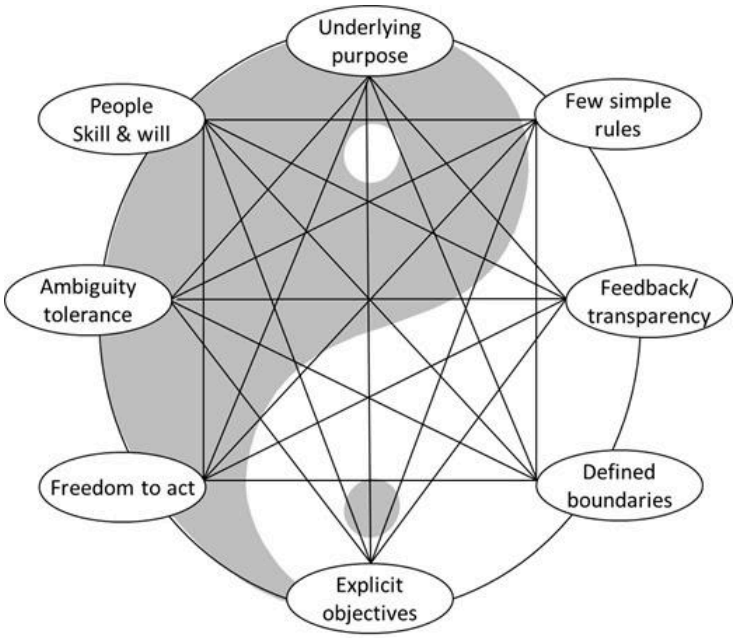
A new paradigm: dynamic Leadership 4.0

So, in this respect, the illusion of control is when a Leadership 1.0 approach is exercised in a complex dynamic. Self-organization and self-control get better results.

A simple exercise that demonstrates this can be seen at **https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=41QKeKQ2O3E**. In the video, a group of some thirty people are spread at random in a space. Each person has to choose two people as their secret reference point. Then, at the same time, everyone has to position themselves at equal distance from their two reference points. This is a complex challenge where an individual tries to position at equal distance from two people, who have chosen another two people who have chosen another two people, etc., thirty times! Many feel it will be a continuous movement, like birds flocking. In fact, the group accomplishes the task in less than a minute. And when asked "What would have happened if we had put one of you in charge?" everyone laughs, and the illusion of control hits home. The participants in the exercise know that if a leader "took charge" and tried to control the outcome, the exercise might never end!

Research into complexity science—and the lessons therein for human systems—has shown that underneath complexity, there are often a few simple rules at play. Further research has shown that eight simple principles exist that enable teams and organizations to self-organize and self-control. They can be summarized using the Tai Chi Tu yin-yang symbol **(Obolensky 2010)**:

Figure 4.



Principles for dynamic organizational agility

Since the publication of the research into these principles, leaders from across the world have assessed their teams and organizations. The findings are surprising. Overall, most teams and organizations have these principles more or less in place, with an average overall score of 68 out of 100, with the two highest scores being the principles of "Underlying purpose" (72) and "Freedom to act" (71).[1] With "Freedom to act" scoring well, one would have assumed that the illusion of control is not so much of an issue. However, the potential that these principles offer is not fully released. When these leaders are surveyed on how adaptive, responsive, effective, and enabling their leadership is, the results are not so good. The overall average score of enablement is 47 percent—in other words, much leadership in organizations is more disabling than enabling. Most of this is due to overcontrol: 87 percent do not let go enough, of whom 21 percent find it hard to let go at all, with some 29 percent micromanaging.[2] The common reason is that, as the context has become more complex, the spasm response is to try and stay on top of everything and exert more control, with resultant frustration and/or overwork. This is not helped by the increasing difficulty of generalist leaders to understand the work of specialists, and specialists to understand the wider context of generalists.

The question then remains, Can leaders within a typical Leadership 1.0 organization adopt a Leadership 4.0 approach, and does it get better results? Can "letting go" of control to enable self-organization work in reality? It depends on the context. Within the simple/complicated, control is needed (such as using project management techniques). However, when things become more complex, or when black swans fly in, then the resilience that Leadership 4.0 lends can pay dividends. In more recent times, the uncertainty that COVID-19 forced upon organizations across the world gave the opportunity to research these questions. Leaders who were practicing Leadership 4.0 (as described by the Complex Adaptive Leadership—CAL—approach) with their teams were asked to what extent such a practice helped to cope with the uncertainties that COVID-19 brought about.[3] Over one hundred managers from thirty-nine companies in twenty-six countries reported: 96 percent of those stated that this new approach to leadership helped, with over 60 percent reporting better team engagement; 74 percent reported they were doing better than other managers around them. The common issues reported by respondents about managers around them not doing so well included suffering higher anxiety due to uncertainty and not being able to exercise control, getting lost in the details, and constantly searching for certainty and control during lockdowns.

Other research looked at to what extent this new paradigm helped improve productivity, engagement, and innovation in these VUCA times. Over 120 managers from a variety of organizations, both public and private, were surveyed **(Complex Adaptive Leadership Ltd 2021)**: 90 percent agreed that personal productivity was improved, 82 percent reported improved team engagement and productivity, and 88 percent reported a better culture for innovation. In a video that looks at the context for such an approach, a lead program business manager, Adrian Butcher, summarized **(Obolensky 2019a)**: *"It's about understanding what you can control and what you can't control…the reality is you need to STOP doing things."* The importance of stopping the urge to control and letting people get on with things was observed by Peter Drucker **(Drucker 1996)** half a century ago regarding knowledge workers, and more recently reflected by Steve Jobs: *"It doesn't make sense to hire smart people and then tell them what to do. We hire smart people so they can tell us what to do"* **(Jobs 2011)**.

The illusion of control has emerged over time due to the increasing complexity and interconnectedness of today's world. We have changed the context faster than our assumptions of how organizations, control, and leadership work. To escape the illusion of control, the necessity is to understand whether the context is simple, complicated, or complex. And if it is complex, the challenge is to enable self-control and self-organization within a few simple principles. A study of the science of complexity, and the lessons it can bring, can help ensure that the risks generated by the illusion of control are lessened.

Competing Interests

The author has no competing interests to declare.

Author Biography

Nick Obolensky's speciality is improving agility and enablement in VUCA environments with a unique form of organizational strategy, change, leadership, and talent development.. He has a depth of experience of being a practitioner, consultant, academic, and author.

As a **practitioner**: a decorated officer in the British Army achieving the rank of major in his late twenties, and a qualified mountain expedition leader, leading climbing expeditions around the world; FTSE 100 director of Somerfield supermarket chain, with line responsibility for 12,000 staff, and leading a major turnaround change program involving 45,000 employees; and CEO and chairman of green energy technology start-ups. He currently leads consulting/organizational leadership development companies in UK and in China.

As a **consultant**: He was an executive consultant of Ernst & Young's Strategy Consulting Group, where he both managed strategic projects around the world and led the research associate practice; entrepreneurial founder and CEO of Complex Adaptive Leadership (Research) Ltd and Agile Plus Leadership International Ltd.

His **academic** experience includes: associate professor of leadership at Nyenrode in the Netherlands (Professor of the Year for part-time MBA 2002 and full-time MBA 2003), fellow at London Business School; visiting professor of leadership at INSEAD, IMD, and EHL (Switzerland). He is currently faculty member at CEDEP (INSEAD Fontainebleau).

As an **author**, his various publications include: *Complex Adaptive Leadership – Embracing Paradox and Uncertainty* (bestseller by Gower 2010, 2nd ed. 2014, Chinese edition "未来领导力" published 2017); *More for Less – How to Lead an Agile, Self-Organising Organisation* (Taylor Francis 2018); *Chaos, Leadership and Polyarchy* (Centre for Leadership Studies, University of Exeter, 2008); *Practical Business Re-engineering – Tools and Techniques for Achieving Effective Change*, translated into several languages (Kogan Page 1993).

More details about him can be found at **https://uk.linkedin.com/in/nickobolensky**.

Footnotes

1. 2019/2021, n 1,056, 120 companies, twenty-five countries.
2. 2008–2022, n 4,289, forty-three countries, twenty-two industries.
3. Complex Adaptive Leadership, "COVID-19 CAL Alumni Research results," in https://www.complexadaptiveleadership.com/wp-content/uploads/2023/02/Covid-19-CAL-Alumni-research-resultsSummary.pdf?x31293.

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