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## **The Complexity Gap**

In December 2009, leaders from 192 governments came together in Copenhagen to negotiate and conclude a follow-up treaty to the Kyoto protocol. Over 45,000 accredited participants from all walks of life converged in one place to put pressure on government officials to take action against climate change. The preparation for **COP15** took two full years. But what came out of it was hugely disappointing. We are left with no plan and no commitment as to how to combat climate change. It wasn't for the lack of effort. It wasn't for the lack of prioritization. And it certainly was not for the lack of need. We failed because of a deeply **flawed decision-making process**.

This is only one example of many that illustrate how we fail **to take much needed collective action with regards to systemic challenges**. The nature of these challenges is such that none of us can afford to ignore them because they put the future of our people and the planet at risk.

Let me tell you what I think the **underlying problem** is. In many ways, we have seen **more change** over the past few decades than has occurred since the Middle Ages. The rate of change in our environment has been growing exponentially. **Many trends exploded around 1950 or later** - CO2 emissions, extinction of species, water use, the number of cars, the number of people on this planet, the rise in temperature, the growth of GDP and consumption.

The **interaction** of all these trends combined with by rapid technological innovation, increase the complexity found in our environment at the same overwhelming rate. Now contrast these **two developments** with our ability to respond to these kinds of challenges. I believe this ability has been expanding only incrementally over the past decades.

There is the **problem**. There is a widening gap between the rate of change experienced in our environment and the ability of human beings to respond. This analysis is based on the fact there is a limit to how much complexity a human can process. And we have reached that limit quite some time ago. We have created a world, where it is impossible for anyone to understand let alone control the man made operating system of this planet.

This is what I call the **complexity gap**.

Certainly we are making efforts to close it. But many of these efforts are based on our hope that technology will save us. **Technology** will certainly be of great support. But at the end solutions must be found with us - human beings.

**I believe** that the nature of systemic challenges is such, that it is now **impossible for one** person, one organization or one country to solve them alone.

I believe that it is time to acknowledge that we have to **come together** to assemble the complexity and to address them collectively.

I believe that we have to fundamentally change the way we are **making decisions** and find solutions.

It is time to **re-engineer how we interact with one another**.

**There is good news.**

We have processes that are able to deal much better with complexity than the ones we have used so far. Probably the best one is the design process. You surely know about design in the context of product, service or communication design. I am talking about **using the design process to guide social interaction and systemic solution-finding**.

There are few **characteristics** that make the design process especially well suited to deal with complex challenges. Let me highlight only few.

The design process allows for **collaboration**. It allows for individuals with diversity of thought and background to come together and rapidly resolve complex problems. The design process allows everyone to be a co-designer and co-creator. It allows for true dialogue and helps to naturally create alignment.

Answers to complex challenges cannot be pre-imposed. They have to emerge. The design process allows answers to reveal themselves over time. This is what I call **emergence** and it happens when groups work iteratively towards solutions.

The design process is **anticipatory**. This means that the process tries to anticipate what might come at us in the future. It helps us to foresee unintended consequences and weak signals or trends that may not be readily apparent.

When people come together in a collaborative design process, ideas and actions fall naturally into place. This ensures that individual actions are well **coordinated and integrated** guided by a common intent.

Design thinking is always **comprehensive**. While designers may work on a part of a problem, they constantly think in whole systems. The design process ensures that

at all times groups are asking “How does this part that we are working on affect the whole system? And how does the whole system impact our work?”

Comprehensiveness enables us to be **deliberate**. This means that we take decisions only after considering the larger context within which we operate.

**I believe that these characteristics of the design process are essential to address the complexity gap.**

Complex issues **need stakeholders from throughout the system to collaborate**. If you apply the design process well, you see that inclusion will not lead to confusion and wavering but rather to effective collective decision making.

I could show you many **different models that illustrate** the workings of the design process. But we don't have time for them now. Instead I would like to introduce you to someone else who plays a crucial role in addressing the complexity gap.

The best processes in the world are useless as long as there isn't someone steering it.

They need a **process designer and facilitator**.

I would say that the *raison d'être* for a process facilitator is to **make it easy** for others to do what they set out to do. The process facilitator shapes the way individuals interact. The process facilitator has to make sure that the group work culminates in well-considered and iterated decisions and actions.

The work of a process facilitator is to help organizations, corporations, cities, entire countries and, in my dreams, the planet **to transition from one state of being to another**. For a process facilitator to be successful, he or she must know how to **create a neutral space**, an environment for groups to collaborate.

The process facilitator is **impartial** with no commitment towards a specific outcome.

For me a process facilitator is an **enabler** of positive change.

In fact, the process facilitator is at his or her best when going **un-noticed** – exercising the role with an almost **invisible hand**.

**Collaboration among different stakeholders is really difficult** – at times impossible. But I know that good process design and a good process facilitator can make the impossible possible.

**This is why I believe that the emerging profession of process facilitation is essential in closing the complexity gap.**

Now you might argue that these ideas of collaboration sound all good but don't reflect the reality. You can argue, based on your experience that the leaders of this world will not change the way they interact with one another or take decisions. You can show pictures of the UN General Assembly where one speech follows another and another and another while the audience is dozing off or reading the newspapers. You can wonder if such a process leads to any decision-making at all. You can argue that narrow individual interests, political short-sightedness, oversized roundtables, massive auditoriums and protocols cannot be done away with.

**Can you imagine all that changing? Can you imagine our leaders to interact and collaborate in a very different way?**

**I actually do think we can do away with all that!**

**And here is way.**

In January 2005, I was invited by the **World Economic Forum** to be part of a team to help them change the way participants interacted at their Annual Meeting in Davos.

We re-designed the way the world's foremost leaders and decision makers collaborated to find solutions to issues on the global agenda. The Forum innovated because it realized that the existing ways of conferencing were unfit to deal with the global issues on the agenda.

Those of us who were involved then, created The Value Web, which is a non-profit association of process designers and facilitators that aims to design and deliver collaborative engagements around the world. Over the past 5 years, we were given the opportunity to run a large scale experiment. We have co-designed and facilitated with the Forum more than 130 sessions. The meetings lasted between several hours and 3 days. These sessions gathered anything between 30 to 300 participants at a time with a total attendance of over 7000.

The themes covered almost any of the issues that the Forum has on its global agenda.

**This experiment gave us hope;** we have seen that leaders *can* work together; they *can* roll up their sleeves, hear each other and consider possibilities. We have seen that they *can* cut through custom and protocol to truly interact, to truly collaborate.

I would like to show you the **results** of the work with the World Economic Forum by putting the effort in a larger context. This is called a **shift paper**. It documents the changes in behavior of participants we have seen as a result of using the design process.

The following shift paper has been put together by The Value Web.

**familiar: quick fix**

**emerging: playing with ideas first**

This shift shows that you should not trust the quick fix. Make haste slowly. Playing with ideas is not a waste of time! Consider the system at large first - it pays off in the long run!

**familiar: sharing issues**

**emerging: fixing problems**

This shift shows a move from “having a chat”, dialogue with no end to introducing a challenge and ask everyone’s help to solve it!

**familiar: addresses the brain**

**emerging: addresses the brain, the heart, the body...**

This shift shows that we moved away from almost exclusively addressing our hearing sense to use multiple senses!

**familiar: one way communication**

**emerging: feedback loops**

This shift is about one person telling everybody else how to fix the world towards active participation, active listening, and seeking input from many different sources to challenge assumptions and co-design solutions.

**familiar: strong signals only**

**emerging: strong & weak signals**

Make room to discuss what’s written between the lines.

**familiar: specification culture**

**emerging: prototyping culture**

The specification culture is about delivering exactly what the initial brief told you to. No deviation allowed. However the prototyping culture is about focusing on the user or beneficiary. It is about an ongoing dialogue with the user; it is about iterating, adapting and evolving a solution based on the feedback that the users provide. And it is about accepting the fact that the result will be different to what everyone had thought it would at the beginning of the process.

**familiar: think from the present forward**

**emerging: think from the future back**

Step boldly into the future! Imagine it together! Bring the THERE to HERE and create the future we all want.

**familiar: mass produced**

**emerging: customized / “made for you”**

Think global, act local. One size fits all. Adapted to your individual needs.

**familiar: reinforce a leader**

**emerging: reinforce a leading community**

Away from reinforcing the leader to celebrate the power and possibilities of the community!

**familiar: individual brilliance**

**emerging: group genius**

If you want to sum up the shift paper in one sentence then you would say that is about moving from individual brilliance to group genius. The concept of group genius is the ability of a group working iteratively and collaboratively to seek, model and put into place solutions to complex challenges.

The ideas that I am sharing with you took a generation to mature. Many of the ideas are owed to the incredible work of Matt and Gail Taylor who started their work in the seventies. I wasn't even born then. But their process was designed to be organic, ongoing, and systemic. It was designed to deal with a world undergoing global transformation. As futurists, the Taylors were aware of coming catastrophic changes. They knew that we had to choose between breakdown and breakthrough. They designed for breakthrough.

The work that The Value Web has done with the World Economic Forum as well as with many others organizations is only one more step on that path of evolution. Now it is our generation's responsibility to use these ideas in an appropriate manner, improve on them and apply them on a scale that will truly shape a sustainable future.

I believe that if we want to close the complexity gap, there is a need to fundamentally change our decision-making processes and for more individuals to step up to the role of process designers and facilitators.

This is an invitation to join in as the process we use is inclusive. The more we work together instead of fractured competition, the more we can accelerate the making of a fitter world.

Whatever you do and wherever you go - I hope that you will join me in trying to create a future by design, not default!