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COMPLEXITY | LEADERSHIP | TRUTH

Complexity Diagnostic

Surface the **Complex Dynamics** Contributing to Entrenched Systemic Issues

OVERVIEW

The Complexity Diagnostic is designed to help organisations and other systems (e.g., communities, networks) make sense of entrenched issues that persist despite repeated efforts to address them. Combining quantitative and qualitative inquiry, systems analysis, and collaborative sensemaking, the diagnostic explores the interconnected factors and dynamics that may be locking these issues in place. Moving beyond isolated symptoms and individual causes, the diagnostic brings together diverse perspectives from across the system to develop a richer understanding of what is happening and why. Through this process, participants identify potential points of intervention to nudge the system towards more desirable outcomes. The Complexity Diagnostic is currently in development, and a pilot version is now available.

WHAT MAKES IT DIFFERENT

- **Systemic, not symptomatic:** Looks beyond surface-level symptoms to uncover deeper patterns, structures, and interconnected dynamics sustaining entrenched systemic issues.
- **Diverse perspectives, including inconvenient truths:** Brings together perspectives from across the system, surfacing areas of agreement, disagreement, and potentially overlooked or uncomfortable realities.
- **Multiple forms of evidence:** Integrates quantitative and qualitative insights to develop a richer, more nuanced understanding of systemic issues.
- **Adaptive and emergent:** Responds to emerging insights and changing conditions rather than following a predetermined methodology.
- **From insight to intervention:** Moves beyond understanding the system to exploring potential interventions that may shift entrenched dynamics.

The Problem

Many systems struggle with entrenched issues that persist despite good intentions and tried-and-tested solutions. These issues typically involve complex dynamics that are poorly understood or overlooked.

Common patterns include:

- Focusing on superficial symptoms rather than deeper systemic patterns and structures.
- Overlooking the multiple, interconnected factors contributing to the issue.
- Failing to account for diverse perspectives, experiences, and interests across stakeholder groups.
- Developing fragmented understandings of the issue across different parts of the system.
- Overlooking how existing aspects of the system may be reinforcing the very outcomes leaders are trying to change.

Without a thorough understanding of these issues, systems risk investing significant time, resources, and effort in interventions that fail to address the complex dynamics at play.

The Complexity Diagnostic is facilitated by Aiden M. A. Thornton, PhD, a leading expert in complexity leadership

aidenmathornton.com/#about.

To discuss running a Complexity Diagnostic, please get in touch at aidenmathornton.com/#contact

Illustrative Elements of Our Approach

When working with complex systems, no two contexts or issues are exactly alike. Rather than following a predetermined methodology, we adapt our approach to the unique characteristics and emerging needs of each system.

The following building blocks illustrate elements that may form part of a Complexity Diagnostic. They are neither fixed nor necessarily sequential, and many involve engagement with diverse stakeholders across the system.

- Frame the issue(s) and identify key questions guiding the inquiry.
- Use our online platform to:
 - Identify and prioritise systemic factors that may be sustaining the current situation.
 - Explore potential causal relationships and interactions between these factors.
 - Capture qualitative insights to deepen and broaden the inquiry.
- Analyse quantitative and qualitative evidence to identify emerging patterns and dynamics.
- Construct visual representations of the system, such as systems maps.
- Identify and interpret convergent and divergent perspectives across the system.
- Test, challenge, and iteratively refine emerging findings and interpretations.
- Explore potential points to intervene in systemic behaviour.
- Collaboratively generate, prioritise, and prototype interventions to nudge the system towards more desirable outcomes.

Illustrative Example of Diagnostic Design

Typically adapted to the unique needs of each context

Duration: Typically 8–12 weeks

Audience: Middle and senior leaders, executives, high-potential leaders, and boards

Format: Tailored to the context and may include stakeholder engagement, online inquiry, quantitative and qualitative analysis, systems mapping, collaborative sensemaking workshops, and intervention prototyping

Price: Tailored to the scope and complexity of the engagement, with consideration for not-for-profit, public sector, and private sector contexts

Ideal Use Cases

Particularly suited to entrenched systemic issues that have resisted conventional approaches.

Examples include:

- Strategy execution
- Operating models and organisational design
- Organisational transformation
- Leadership and capability development
- Culture change
- Cross-functional collaboration
- Complex stakeholder environments
- Community, social, and political challenges