

Feature articles

Contextual intelligence: overcoming hindrances to performing well in times of change

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Intelligence is the adaptation to the environment (Sternberg and Detterman, 1986). Therefore, intelligence rests on an individual's capacity to diagnose their context and not necessarily on IQ, test performance, or intellectual ability. This means that failure to diagnose the environment accurately can lead to the kind of mistakes that have a detrimental effect on an individual and an organization.

The complexity of context

To diagnose context requires a keen awareness of one's surroundings. The ability to do this has been called contextual intelligence (Kutz, 2008). True to its Latin origin, context (Latin "*contexere*", meaning "to weave together") is the weaving together of different variables that form a unique and complex web-like relationship. Each web of relationships is its own unique context that can be easily influenced by the addition or subtraction of other variables. This shifting of variables keeps context in a constant state of flux. These contextual variables include things like, political climate, personal values, economic environment, precedent, social and organizational culture, future goals, and stakeholder values.

Adding to the complexity is that individuals may be interacting with more than one "context" at a time. Staying abreast of constantly shifting contexts requires a unique skill set, which is forcing an accelerated evolution of how leadership and management are practiced. This in turn influences how performance is measured and rewarded. Top performers must be able to recognize and diagnose when the context shifts or a new context emerges and quickly adapt. Failure to adapt, even to the smallest shift, increases the risk of becoming obsolete or irrelevant.

Leadership is evolving into an applied construct that has meaning only to the extent that context is understood and defined. Leadership is becoming so nuanced and idiosyncratic it is impossible or at best difficult to lead outside of a defined context. Therefore, a new set of skills is necessary that will enable its users to perform well in a variety of contexts. Intuition is quickly becoming a commodity that can have long-term transferable value. However, developing a reliable sense of intuition takes time. In other words, intuition is of little value without experience.

Experience is a necessary precursor to the effective use of intuition (Benner, 2001). In times of contextual shift, intuition becomes a very valuable asset. Practicing contextually intelligent behavior is a way to accelerate experience and eases the burden of change, perhaps even allowing an individual to perform well during a shift in context.

Overcoming the hindrances to diagnosing the context

Accurately diagnosing the context is a significant advantage for those who can do it effectively. However, there are four factors that can hinder an accurate diagnosis of the context:

1. the pace of change;
2. the complexity of the variables that are interwoven into the context;
3. learned behavior; and
4. inappropriate orientation to time.

The pace of change can be so fast that it is nearly impossible to keep up. By the time change has been implemented it can be time to change again. When the rules of the game are altered or stakeholder expectations shift keeping up can be dizzying. One solution is to practice the skill of “improvisational wisdom.” This requires the intentional extracting of “life-lessons” from every encounter. In other words, learn as many lessons as possible from as many different situations as possible; and then apply those lessons everywhere possible. It is important not to fall prey to the temptation to restrict the use of an acquired skill or insight to a single context. Wisdom gained in one context, then later applied to a seemingly unrelated context is improvisational wisdom and may accelerate the acquisition of experience and facilitate intuitive thinking.

The second hindrance is the complexity of the variables that influence the environment. As global awareness, sustainability, and the need for profitability increase there is an ever-increasing number of external and internal variables that have an impact on people and organizations. This creates an exponentially high number of combinations that inform and create new contexts. One solution is to realize that as complexity increases the necessity of needing all the pieces in place before a decision can be made decreases. A simple illustration of this is a puzzle. A simple puzzle, say four pieces, requires all four pieces be in place to see the picture accurately, missing just one piece can seriously detract from the picture. On the other hand, a 1,000-piece puzzle, missing one or even two or three pieces hardly detracts from the picture at all. Therefore, as complexity increases the need to have all the pieces in place before a decision can be made may not always be necessary.

The third hindrance is learned behavior. Past success often creates incredible obstacles to adapting or responding to changing contexts. People are often strongly biased by their existing knowledge and rarely can interpret what they see without that bias. When the environment is stable, precedent is useful. However, in times of change, precedent is less useful and insight must be acquired from other sources. One solution is to adopt a new commitment to learn what informs the behaviors and attitudes of self, others, society, and the organization. This requires the continual reframing of experiences. Reframing experiences is motivationally embedded in improvisational wisdom; the difference is, to reframe an experience one needs to be aware that former knowledge may point in the wrong direction. Therefore, a solution might come from outside an existing frame of reference.

The last hindrance is a disproportionate time orientation. Most people when faced with a crisis, a shift in context, or an important decision will lean heavily toward one of three time

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orientations – i.e. past, present, or future. In other words, people disproportionately pull and apply information from one of these time orientations, rarely are all three time orientations consulted simultaneously or proportionately. This can be unproductive, especially if the wrong time-orientation is accessed. One solution is to think in three dimensions (3D). Thinking in 3D requires a proportionate awareness of how the past, present, and future are influencing the current context. Implicit to thinking in 3D is knowing when and if it is appropriate to emphasize one time-orientation over another.

Contextual intelligence behaviors

Once the solutions to these hindrances are put in place the individual can use them to develop and integrate contextually intelligent behaviors. These behaviors are foundational to contextual intelligence. Contextually intelligent individuals weave these behaviors together. This is a heavily nuanced ability in the sense that each of the following behaviors needs to be practiced in conjunction with the others. In isolation, the individual behaviors may contribute toward leadership in general, but when the behaviors are practiced in conjunction with each other it leads to contextual intelligence. The behaviors are (Kutz, 2008):

- *future-minded* – having a forward-looking mentality and sense of direction and concern for where to be in the future;
- *influencer* – uses interpersonal skills and different types of power to non-coercively affect the actions and decisions of others;
- *ensures an awareness of mission* – communicates how the individual performance of others affects how and if the mission is being accomplished;
- *communitarian* – expresses concern about social trends, issues, and assists in social and community activities;
- *cultural sensitivity* – works to provide opportunities for diverse members to interact in non-discriminatory manner;
- *multicultural leadership* – can influence the behaviors and attitudes of ethnically diverse people or groups;
- *diagnoses context* – knows how to appropriately interpret and react to shifts or changes in one’s surroundings;
- *change agent* – raises difficult and challenging questions that others may perceive as a threat to the status quo;
- *intentional leadership* – is aware and proactive concerning their own strengths and weaknesses and has delineated goals for achieving personal best and influencing others;
- *critical thinker* – makes connections, integrates, and makes practical application of different actions, opinions, outcomes, and information; and
- *consensus builder* – convinces other people to see the common good or a different point of view for the sake of the organizational mission or values.

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Integrating these behaviors is fundamental to the proper demonstration of contextual intelligence (Kutz, 2008). When individuals or groups demonstrate these behaviors and overcome the hindrances to diagnosing context, handling change well and leading across contexts may result. Developing contextual intelligence can help generate top performers who have fewer boundaries and are able to transfer and maintain their influence across different and even multiple contexts.

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