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Stepping back to discern systemic issues

Patrick Lagadec provides some thoughts to continue the work of reflection for criticism and testing in crisis management

In the last issue of the [Crisis Response Journal](#), Emily Hough, Matthieu Langlois and Patrick Lagadec wrote a framing essay to assist the leadership of societal systems when they are cast into mutating and unknown landscapes. Here, Patrick Lagadec provides some further thoughts.

In particular, the authors noted that: “The central mission of decision-makers is to restore perspectives, benchmarks and even some certainty in an ocean of unpredictability.”

The authors repeated their suggestion that the Rapid Reflection Forces (RRF) approach could provide essential support for leaders when navigating situations that are becoming increasingly defined by chaos, blind spots and unanswered questions, at speeds incommensurate with previously accepted and understood rhythms and changes that are as brutal as they are unthinkable.

Institutionalising the capacity to step back in order to undertake deep questioning and to discern systemic issues, becomes an absolute urgency if we want to be able to master the current challenges a little less badly.

The objective of the FRR proposal (which is rarely implemented because it is contrary to our engrained human nature) is to offer new frameworks for decision-making, with the aim of

leaving managers less exposed to confusion, loss of credit and powerlessness. The process helps managers and leaders to be less overwhelmed by processes that are adapted to handling single or isolated incidents when they need to deal with critical emergencies – immediate or potential – that involve a high level of uncertainty or even the unknown. Such leaders must be freed from the silos and strata that focus on specific difficulties and protection of their own positions. By implementing the RRF concept, they would be better equipped to be in tune with the reality of current risks and crises, which lie largely outside the domain of our reference tools and frameworks.

I have often highlighted the pathways that will make these Rapid Reflection Forces work. The purpose of these the thoughts outlined in this blog is to continue the work of reflection for criticism and testing.

A good starting point is found in the article by Gareth Byatt, published in the same issue of [Crisis Response Journal \(December 2020\)](#). Under the title “Kaleidoscopic learning,” Byatt invites us to be inspired by the kaleidoscope – which presents a succession of changing patterns and views with the slightest twist of the lens. The kaleidoscope is not only used as inspiration to help improve anticipation of a situation’s potential developments, but also to revisit the experience and imagine how modifying one or more parameters could have led to very different situational pictures.

The purpose is therefore not precisely how to navigate crisis management, but it is interesting to take up the central premise – the image of the kaleidoscope – to enrich our thinking in the field of assistance when managing the most complex situations in our chaotic and unknown universes. And here, of course, the Covid-19 issue is a crushing and immediate global challenge.

Kaleidoscopic Thinking: It is now a question of working on ‘tableaux’, or a series of different integrated scenarios, which succeed one another in a rapid manner; mutations that occur owing to tenuous factors and which brutally reconfigure all parameters and which influence factors, structures, visions and perceptions and pace of change. By taking such a perspective, the decision-maker can expect to be provided with far more than sporadic bursts of opinions, or situational snapshots from one particular moment in time. Instead, he or she can envision integrated scenarios that will provide the basis for reflection and upon which to initiate consultations. Decisions can then be made in a more relevant manner, in tune with current realities that are made up of constant mutations, of permanent deep and structural reconfigurations.

In practical terms, an FRR team could work on tasks such as:

- Preparing several global situational scenarios that integrate diverse disciplines and dimensions;
- Identifying factors, dynamics and major surprises that are not immediately visible because they lurk in blind spots or have been rejected as unlikely hypotheses;
- Reviewing scenarios with totally different kinetics – either greatly accelerated, or dramatically slowed down – but in a continuous manner;

- Examining scenarios from the perceptions of the actors in the immediate, medium and very long term;
- Preparing to share these scenarios with the most diverse audiences, including citizens, with constant corrections and improvements arising from such exchanges; and
- Presenting these scenarios to steering circles, and particularly to the decision-maker in charge.

The team working to build these scenarios must first and foremost focus on blind spots and aberrant signals. Here, the essential focus is played out in a landscape characterised by the invisible, the surprising, the counterintuitive and the deliberately ignored. These are the most decisive elements in our changing and unfamiliar environments.

These scenarios must be provided to the decision-maker at the same pace as the crisis. Crisis management cannot follow the usual file review procedures.

In the course of this work, real-time feedback on the methods, results and the reception of proposals is necessary to guarantee rapid learning loops. Here again, “rhythm is key.”

And here, we have a contradiction that must somehow be integrated: the lightning speed of crises leaves little time for consultations but, without consultation and co-decision, there is a risk of building ever greater penalising universes of rejection.

It is also necessary to integrate the different temporalities and their contradictions. It is not only important to identify the emergencies to be addressed so as not to see the ship sink quickly, but also to identify the immediate and tempting short term victories that could pave the way for later defeats of an equally large scale, fraught with further inextricable crises. A good example of this would be only the richer countries managing to overcome the vaccine crisis.

Let's add a few more points to integrate.

We are not only dealing with a succession of possible scenarios, but rather with the simultaneous existence of a profusion of scenarios, some immediately centre of stage, others in the wings but ready to leap to the fore; others still dormant and virtually invisible, but with the potential to arise and claim the spotlight at any time.

One question to be investigated relates to those factors that can trigger breaks and rapid transition from one scenario to another. An example of this is the extremely rapid transition in some countries from a strong anti-vaccination movement to an urgent demand for more vaccines.

In practice, we often wonder how a team could ever have enough information to be able to establish such maps. The FRR experiment shows this clearly: completeness is not the objective at all, the essential acts lie in the spirit of the process – the search for decisive factors in grey areas. The identification of decisive signals is the goal, and the amount of information to be gathered is not the relevant question. It is important to have the capacity to carry out such work, which requires extremely rapid training of possible pools of people who are already prepared to work in a crisis situation and who are capable of functioning in such a context.

And, as is carried out in RRF training, the interface with managers must also be prepared so that on the one hand the production of intelligence is in step with the demands of the decision; and, on the other, managers are prepared to make the best use of this type of steering assistance.

All of this still remains to be built, and the pressure of current events strongly encourages us to initiate such an increase in skills as quickly as possible.

Of course, these few paragraphs remain a mere starting point. We will have to learn while running; such is our lot at this time. There would be no point in waiting until we have a perfect model before we put ourselves in a better driving position. A simple change of approach makes remarkable progress possible.

Of course, the main obstacle to be overcome will be the cultural refusal to open up to perspectives other than those which, currently, are constantly proving their inadequacies. But now is the time to attempt impossible conversions. As Christian Sommade, [Executive Director of the HCFDC](#) rightly says: “It is urgent to rethink crisis management in France.” And the message is probably the same for many other countries. Let us work with all the actors concerned with finding ways out.

Further reading and notes

- Emily Hough, [Patrick Lagadec](#), Matthieu Langlois: “Leadership in Terra Incognita: Vision and action”, *Crisis Response Journal*, 15: 4, December 2020, pages 14-17 (Matthieu Langlois is Anesthetist-Resuscitator at the CHU de la Pitié, Sorbonne-Université Paris and Member of the French Society of Catastrophe Medicine)
- Patrick Lagadec, [The Rapid Thinking Force - Assistance in crisis management](#), *Préventique-Sécurité*, n ° 112, July-August 2010, p. 31-35 and [Intervention as part of a mission to prepare educational documents in the form of video testimonials, entrusted to CRISOTECH by the SGDSN, on the theme of the anticipation function within the Interministerial Crisis Unit, January 16, 2019](#)
- Requirement stated by Todd LaPorte (UC Berkeley) during a colloquium in Baton Rouge (“Surviving Future Disasters,” Stephenson Disaster Management Institute, Louisiana State University, April 7, 2008), see the video Todd LaPorte: “Prepare for be surprised”, in [www.patricklagadec.net](#), section Educational films
- Gareth Byatt, Independent Risk Consultant and owner of Risk Insight Consulting. 8 Gareth Byatt: “Kaleidoscopic learning”, *Crisis Response Journal*, 15: 4, December 2020, pages 20-23. 9 This point is particularly underlined by Mike Granatt, founder and first person in charge of the Civil Contingencies Secretariat at the Cabinet Office,

in London. See the video, “Complexity Crises – Never Fight the Last War,” interview with Mike Granatt, in www.patricklagadec.net, section Educational films

- “Reconfinement, a scent of mistrust,” *Le Monde, Planète*, Wednesday January 27, 2021, page 8
- Emmanuel Hirsch: “Faced with the pandemic, the capacity to consent to the decisions of the State seems exhausted,” *Le Monde, Idées*, Wednesday January 27, 2021, page 33
- Christian Sommade: “Covid-20 - Attention Danger!”, *Post, Cercle K2*, January 27, 2021

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