



## **Complexity and compassion**

By Jennifer Garvey Berger

Not long ago, I spent a day with about 60 coaches and leadership professionals. We explored the ways our increasingly complex world makes demands on coaches as we support our clients to lead in new ways. I have been pushing out the boundaries on how to help people change both their internal and their external relationship to complexity. (Zafer Achi and I will be trying some totally new ideas at our track for the Mobius Next Practice Institute in Boston in October if you're interested.)

Perhaps one of the most interesting insights came from an exercise where we compared the complexity of the work of these coaches running their own businesses and the complexity of the world of their clients leading their organizations. As groups mapped first their clients' and then their own challenges, a pattern began to emerge around the

room. The issues facing their clients were complex: challenges about managing people and ideas, trying to see themselves in new ways, learning to listen more deeply or engage with more passion and presence. These issues hovered near the “Solution uncertain. Many moving parts. Must experiment to find the best approach” corner of the map they were making.

The issues the coaches themselves faced, however, they classified as more simple or obvious. Business development, stress management, time management—all these post-its hovered near that “Solution known: just implement” part of the maps. As we reflected on the pattern in most of the posters around the room, we mused about what might be causing this difference. Someone posited that clients simply had larger responsibilities than coaches, who often operated in small firms without staff. Someone else mused that perhaps coaches simply knew the best approach to solving some tricky issues because it is in our training. And then someone else stood up and offered another guess: Maybe it’s just easier to notice the complexity in someone else’s challenge while we simply don’t notice the complexity of our own lives.

When we looked at the issues themselves, it wasn’t clear that “learn to delegate” was much more complex than “making myself spend necessary time on dreaded business development.” In both cases, we are having to learn to change our behaviours, and it is likely that in both cases we are having to put something that matters to us at risk in order to do so. Such work will always be complex.

But the thing that interested us the most in that room is how easy it is to lose the sense that the work we need to do is difficult and complex. It’s so easy to say, as many of them did, “I know exactly what I need to do—I just need to get off my ass and do it!” And yet, there are so many difficult changes that fall into that category. To stop smoking, to lose weight, to delegate more, to spend more time reading and reflecting. It’s not as if any of these are total mysteries: we all know what it looks like to exercise, to not smoke after dinner, to explain how to do a piece of work, to say no to a meeting that comes during a scheduled reflection time. Just because we know how it is we want to be different doesn’t make it simple to change.

This conversation led us to reflect on two things: First of all, that there is the kind of complexity that deals with the Great Unknown—the uncharted future, the markets that interact with one another in unforeseen ways, the unprecedented rise of technology and globalization. Here we might think of the Big Systems—the ones that live outside us. Professions rise and fall, small changes in one market overcome another market. Complexity swirls and changes how leaders need to show up.

But there is also the complexity of our own conflicting forces and wishes, the collisions with the different parts of ourselves, the interaction between what we want and what society says we should want—here is the complexity of the little systems, the self-systems. Each of these systems is a complex adaptive system at a different scale. Each is unpredictable and complex. Systems change isn't obvious at any scale.

Our second core reflection was the compassion that lives inside complexity. As we moved pink post-its from the “obvious” category to the “complex” one, people's faces softened, and they were gentler with themselves and their inevitable failing. I wonder how often we think about our own challenges as obvious and simple and tell ourselves we're bad or weak for not mastering them.

On this rainy afternoon, we learned that to name something as complex was to offer a little more space to experiment and fail, to be gentle with error and open to learning. I have had participants point out to me the salvation in complexity, but I have not had participants point out to me the compassion in complexity. The gentle reframe to understanding these pieces as complex might help us be more compassionate with ourselves, more empathetic with others, and ultimately more successful at taking the steps we need to take to accomplish our goals.