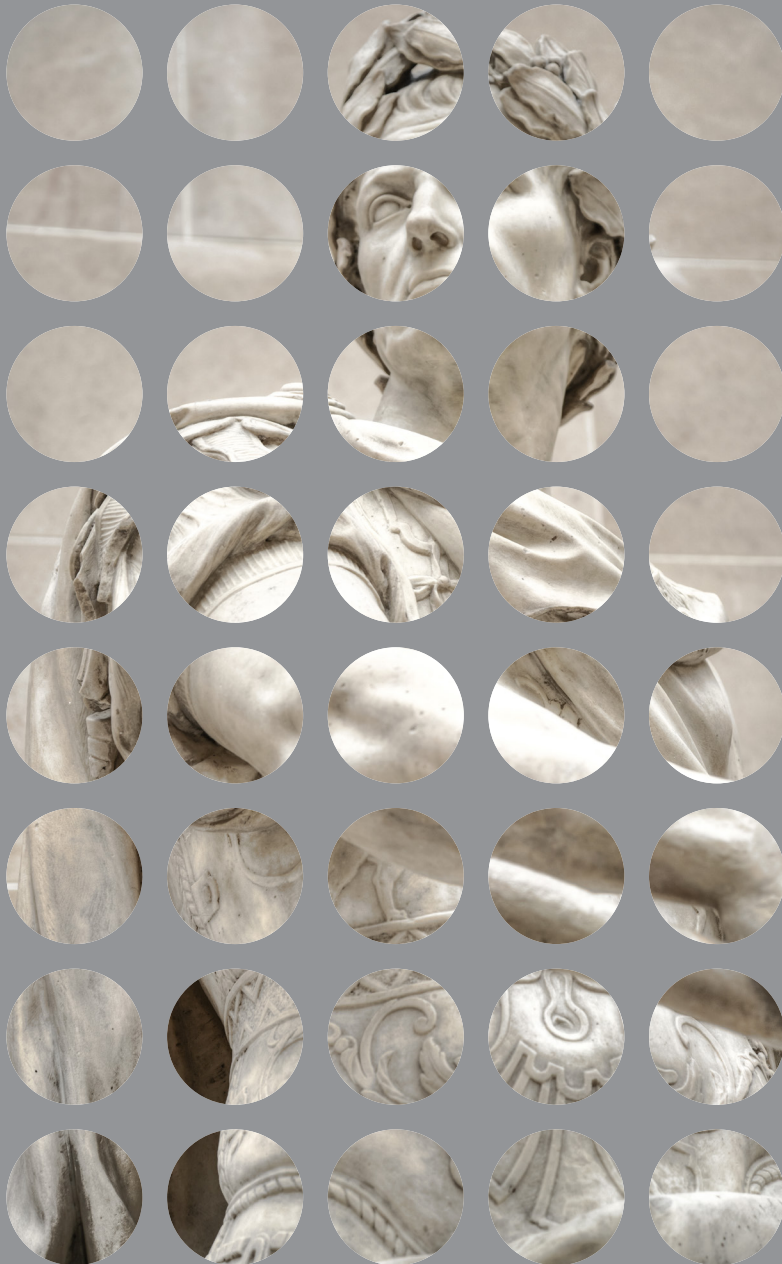# LEADING IN COMPLEX TIMES

WHAT CAN LEADERS LEARN FROM ANDERS TEGNELL'S LEADERSHIP STYLE DURING THE PANDEMIC?

Klara Palmberg Broryd

Already before COVID-19, most societies were rapidly changing. Today the social landscape is full of uncertainty for all organizations and leaders. No one can foresee the future. Not even what is ahead in the next six months is foreseeable. This deep uncertainty calls for a change in attitude for many leaders who are used to planning and used to having answers.

The Swedish strategy for the pandemic stands out in international comparisons and many have been provoked by the communication of the Swedish State epidemiologist Anders Tegnell and his team. He is truly clear on what Sweden's mission is which is to lessen the spread of infection so the healthcare system can cope with this public health crisis. But Sweden's public health goal is quite vague regarding what actions are needed to achieve this. Tegnell calls on everyone to act but he is unspecific in his instructions about exactly what to do and when. Even when directly asked if it is a problem that the recommendations are interpreted so differently, he answered:

Are you looking for everyone to do the same? Yes, then it is a communication problem. Are you looking for an effect in society on smaller social contacts, i.e. less spread of infection? Then I don't think it has to be such a big problem. […] Only the goal is clear. Exactly how to get there, it can be a little unclear.

Interview with Anders Tegnell in Aktuellt, SVT (Swedish State Television) March 24, 2020

The approach expressed by Anders Tegnell is in line with research [1, 2] and management experience that suggests that in complex situations leaders should focus on:

1. Clear goals – what is the direction where the organization needs to head and what is it aiming to achieve? How to communicate the objectives as clearly as possible?

2. Assessment – monitor the development of a situation based on facts and data and give feedback to the organization or the system that you as a leader are responsible for

3. Refine – reflect over the direction and the speed of the response, is this fast enough, is there a need to take more measures to achieve the stated objectives?

By not focusing on exactly how individuals should approach a particular situation, you as a leader invite multiple initiatives that strive towards a broad-based response to a challenging situation. This is in contrast with "strong" leaders who pretend that they have the answers, focus on details and actions and who will try to maintain a façade of strength until it cracks.

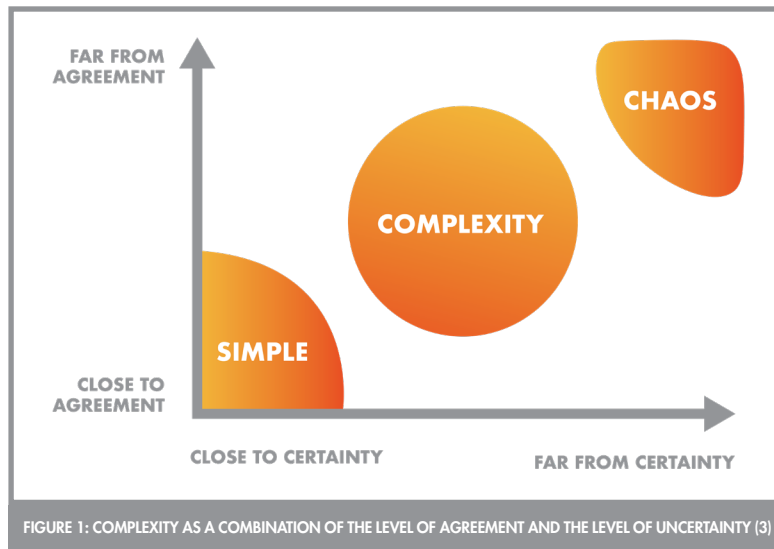## The Swedish strategy deviates from many other countries

Compared to most other countries in the world, the Swedish government's response to COVID-19 has been liberal and relies on individuals to act responsibility and to decide whether to stay at home or not. There is a ban on gatherings, but restaurants are still open with table service only. Students over 16 years old study from home, but kindergartens and elementary schools are open. This involves a lot of trust and is the direct opposite of other countries where governments have enacted laws prohibiting their citizens from engaging in their customary social interactions.

A few words on complexity

The term complexity is widely used in discussions, often as an explanation or an excuse implying that the complexity of an issue makes it difficult to solve problems or drive projects forward. For leaders, it is useful to concretely relate to complexity and to ask what does complexity mean and what does complexity consist of.

The British researcher Ralph Stacey [3] argues that in every decision situation there are degrees of certainty and degrees of agreement. If the degree of certainty and the degree of agreement both are high, decisions are quite easy to make. Traditional management approaches

can then be applied and as a leader, you can make use of experts, employ established processes and routines, and use the principles of command and control. But as the degrees of certainty and agreement decrease, so too does the effect of rigorous planning and traditional command and control management. With a low degree of certainty and agreement, traditional management responses, no matter how many reports, plans, details, and routines an organization has in place, will risk failure because the future will evolve in an unknown manner.

FIGURE 1: COMPLEXITY AS A COMBINATION OF THE LEVEL OF AGREEMENT AND THE LEVEL OF UNCERTAINTY (3)

Many situations that leaders face today contain a varying degree of both certainty and agreement and previous methods and tools do not apply; this type of situation can be represented as the "zone of complexity", shown in the middle of Figure 1.

In situations with no agreement and total uncertainty, there is chaos. Even if some argue that chaos drives invention, it is hard to lead and learn in chaos and in the end, there is often destruction. As a leader, it is your task to keep your organization from total chaos, to strive for the "zone of complexity" with some certainty (e.g. by communicating the desired goals) and to reach some agreement (e.g. presenting data and

facts assessing the development that has occurred) while still embracing the complexity of the situation.

To navigate in the "zone of complexity", with a varying degree of certainty and agreement, leaders need to develop a toolbox. The situation with COVID-19 is a perfect example and situation to apply new approaches. Research on what differentiates leaders who successfully manage in complexity [1, 2] and my own leadership experience as the Deputy City Director in the fast-growing municipality of Nacka, suggests that leaders facing complexity should focus on: 1) communicating the desired goals, 2) assess the development of the situation based on facts and data and 3) continuously refine strategies and objectives.

1. Clear goals: Successful leadership in complexity focuses on the direction towards a goal, not the actions

When a situation is uncertain and there is a low level of agreement among experts, politicians, entrepreneurs and among countries on what to do and what will come next, as is the case today, there is little use for a leader to focus on details and control. Complexity research shows [1] that leaders who are successful in managing complexity focus, like Anders Tegnell and his team, on the purpose and goal of the organization. With a high degree of uncertainty, identifying and clearly defining a goal is more important than ever. Leaders should be distinct on what objective an organization or society wants to achieve.

In the times of social distancing, leaders face additional communication challenges when they are limited mostly to use of digital channels. Thus, when communicating as a leader you should focus on the desired goal for your organization in this situation, so that everyone in the organization and its partners have a clear understanding of what the organization's mission is. In every call and every discussion, start with communicating the desired goal and the organization's mission. Constant repetition of the organization's goals and mission may be required to make them part of a shared mindset.

In complex times, many want leaders to have definitive answers.

The challenge is to keep coming back to the desired goal and the particular mission; but one needs to be humble and acknowledge that even though you are a leader, you do not have all the answers to how the organization is going to reach its goal. Have confidence in the objective and be open and invite others to contribute to how you will achieve it.

2. Assessment based on facts and data

Instead of getting lost in action plans and operational issues, as a leader, make sure you have ways of assessing the development of your organization. Striving for the stated mission of the organization, how do you know if you are moving in the right direction? By continuously assessing your indicators and providing feedback into your organization often – you can be a confident leader without having to produce set answers to a situation that is evolving.

In complex times, it is not always easy to know exactly what data to assess but you need to start somewhere and make sure that your assessments are evidence based. When individuals are worried, it is easy to fall into arguments based on emotions, and it is important to listen empathically, but base your decisions on fact.

As a leader, data and facts are the best tool when tackling the other factor of complexity: the level of agreement. Now more than ever, the world and probably your organization, is full of individuals who believe they have the answers. The problem is often that all of them have different answers. Instead of debating who is wrong and who is right, reconnect with the objective, look at data and facts and be open to different ways of tackling the situation. Then you can be a resolute leader without being the judge in every instance of competing opinions.

This is what the Swedish government and the Swedish State epidemiologist Anders Tegnell and his team have done every day during the crisis. In their daily press conference, they rearticulated the overall goal of decreasing the spread of infection so that Sweden's healthcare system could cope with the spread of COVID-19, and then they would show facts and data on the number of those infected, of those in intensive

care units and of deaths due to COVID-19. Moreover, individuals were encouraged to take the actions the health experts believed would help to continue to decrease the spread of infection.

There has been a significant pressure on Anders Tegnell to respond to questions on specific situations and the media has been calling for more directives and more details in the recommendations from the Swedish Public Health Agency. In interview after interview, week after week, the communication and leadership of Anders Tegnell has repeated the goal of limiting the spread of infection and on presenting data and facts on the status in Sweden.

3. Refine: The Sisyphus task to continuously reflect and refine

When there is a clear objective identified by the organization and indicators applied to assess whether the organization's strategy is moving us the right direction – is it time to pause? No, not at all, especially not in times of complexity.

As a leader, you need to spend time reflecting, listening empathically and to refine your strategy continuously. You need to take time to assess approaches, to evaluate where the organization is heading and to consider how things are evolving. If the organization is not moving fast enough in the right direction, you need to be transparent about it so that employees and partners can become more involved and contribute in correcting the course taken.

In the case of the pandemic and how different countries responded differently to COVID-19 a comparative analysis and evaluation of results from the various measures taken will not be available for many years. In Sweden, the goal of the government and the Swedish State epidemiologist Anders Tegnell and his team is to lessen the spread of infection so the healthcare system would be able to cope and meet the need for intensive care, if required. But their communication is also filled with uncertainty and openness, and they do not have all the answers. One example where the Swedish government has refined their response is when the data showed that a highly disproportionate number of older

people was infected. Consequently, a ban on visitors at elderly care homes was introduced. The data showed that the recommendations and trust in the individuals who would follow those recommendations was lacking in the case of the elderly care homes and the government's response was refined.

Complexity – a possibility for innovation?

Even if complexity can be uncomfortable and many individuals struggle with coping with the present crisis situation – these times can also open up for innovation and shifts in mindsets.

When a well-defined structure is in place and the objective of the organization is clear and where there are indicators to assess whether you're moving in the right direction – then a leader should make it possible for individuals to take initiative. Leaders should trust their employees and partners to innovate – within that structure.

If there is an assessment system in place, a leader can allow for individuals to take on a high level of responsibility and initiative. Because by assessing and allowing feedback, the organization can have a fact-based discussion on what initiatives should be scaled up and what initiatives should be put to rest. In the best-case, individuals will understand the objective to strive for and will take on initiatives far from anything a leader might expect. And through assessment and feedback, you can highlight these innovations to inspire others to innovate.

Be confident in uncertainty

The pandemic is a huge challenge for all countries, organizations, and leaders, and at this moment no one has definite answers about the timeline of the virus or about the pandemic's consequences. With clearly stated objectives, a distinctly described mission and a systematic protocol for assessing situations with data and facts, a leader can confidently share information and engage others to innovate and act responsibly.

THE AUTHOR

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