**Forum**

# Adjacent Opportunities:
# Causal Clouds And Sudden Brainstorms

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You and I interact and something emerges out of that interaction that is greater than the sum of our two parts. We might call that a simple emergent interaction. And that perception might be accepted as true except for one slight little addendum: to get to this point of connection, we both have led lives that have been anything but simple.  Looking back, since we can only see this looking back, we bring to each moment in which we encounter another, our own personal causal chain of experience that informs, shapes and influences every next step we take. If you don't think that's a complex series of interactions, consider that it takes approximately 20,000 neuron interactions for a thought to emerge into consciousness and then think of all the thoughts that arise when you first meet that someone special. I guess love ain't so simple.

Like it or not, we operate within a vast array cloud of interactions with an equal array of nonlinear connections. Every thought we have, every organization we work with, every time we walk through a mall, this causal cloud forms and re-forms our engagements with each other, as well as our making choices to avoid each other… for example the homeless person you might have walked around this morning.  Now there are some people who might refer to this as a vast network of interactions, and I admit, I was once one of those. But it seems human interaction are not as neat as a network. As my friend and colleague Michael Lissack will tell you, what we are describing here is not so much a network, but an artwork. And true to that description, we could easily describe our encounters together as a creative and emergent process that reflects the world we see before us and the world we have experienced in the past.

If a linear network, with defined nodes and connections isn't what we've created, then perhaps we can co-opt the software visualization of a cloud to describe

these collective interactions:  a great nebulosity in which we find a vast number of shifting and interconnecting touch points of connection, and within which the conditions encountered influence every interaction and what emerges can produce a variety of outcomes and effects.

And so we go to work every day within this vast atmospheric space, in which we are constantly on the search to find more effective ways to improve how we can get our work done. And, more often than not, we end up with little bandwidth to sort through the complex patterns that coalesce from our interactions with coworkers, customers and suppliers, and we become even less effective in finding the crystallized emergent opportunities we might create together to operate more effectively. However, it is exactly this ability to share capacities that opens our bandwidth and is an essential aspect to our process of getting things done. The upshot is, if we're unable or unwilling to share, we can never expect to solve the complexity we encounter. Within this environment, collaboration becomes not just a tool, but the only means to surface new and novel solutions to the challenges that present themselves within any community.

But collaboration is not as simple a task as just being willing to share. We can't escape how we got to this moment.  As mentioned above, each of us brings an entire life's worth of causal experience to each interaction. So when we then find ourselves within this cloud of causal touch points with our collaborators, we can't assume their experience is ours, nor can we anticipate how this amalgam of experience will affect what might emerge.

As Hugo Letiche, Michael Lissack and I make note in our new book from Palgrave-Macmillan—*Coherence in the Midst of Complexity*—within the emergent process, something new emerges because it has been afforded by something else, as a chair affords sitting.  As we operate within the collaborative cloud of our causal interactions, the ability to afford our common and uncommon experience becomes of even greater importance. It does not take a great deal of reflection to remember a collaborative experience that failed because of someone's unwillingness to tolerate someone else within the group. So when we create dysfunctional organizations and teams in which tolerance and understanding of other is far from what is encouraged is it any wonder that the resulting storms rarely produce anything more than greater intolerance and few effective solutions?

Creating an atmosphere in which we can accommodate other is not a *nice-to-have* within the collaborative process, it is a must have. Because we can't help but create a great cloud of interaction in our collaborative encounters, we have to be aware of this if we want brainstorms, not destructive hurricanes.

So how do we effectively seed these brainstorms? It begins by establishing rapport, by sharing our stories and by understanding that we are interdependent complex adaptive systems that must find ways of working together or the larger

complex system of which we are a part will either spit us out, kill us, or die itself. Think of how our own human body responds to invading viruses? Nature has no problem with any of these kinds of responses. We do, and therefore we must learn to act accordingly.

So, how do we avoid calamities like this? When we shift our perception of each other, how we see each other, our understanding of the models we might have created about each other, we must also shift the rules that we have put in place for ourselves that govern how we relate. If we shift our understanding but don't shift the rules that govern our behavior, nothing changes and nothing new will emerge.

The causal experience we bring into our collaborative efforts is neither preordained nor immutable. We can change and adapt. But we must also become conscious of how it informs our interactions and those of whom we interact, and we must be willing to let go of preconceived rules that might limit our ability to shift our behaviors to serve the greater good of the collaborative effort. Now this is not some message from Star Trek's Borg, where resistance to the collective is futile, but if we are entering the collaborative process holding onto the rules of our previous operations when the model has clearly changed, it is not only destructive to the process of sharing our capacity to solve shared challenges, it effectively eliminates our ability to adapt and survive. Bob Dylan reminded us that *A Hard Rain is Gonna Fall,* but we can avoid these kinds of cloudbursts if we begin to recognize that just like our colleagues, we bring a lifetime of causal experience to every swirling touch point we encounter. And while these experiences inform that moment, it doesn't need to precipitate an out-pouring that floods our capabilities to operate more effectively, together.