THE FORGOTTEN NEW PHILOSOPHY OF WORK, MANAGEMENT & LEADERSHIP
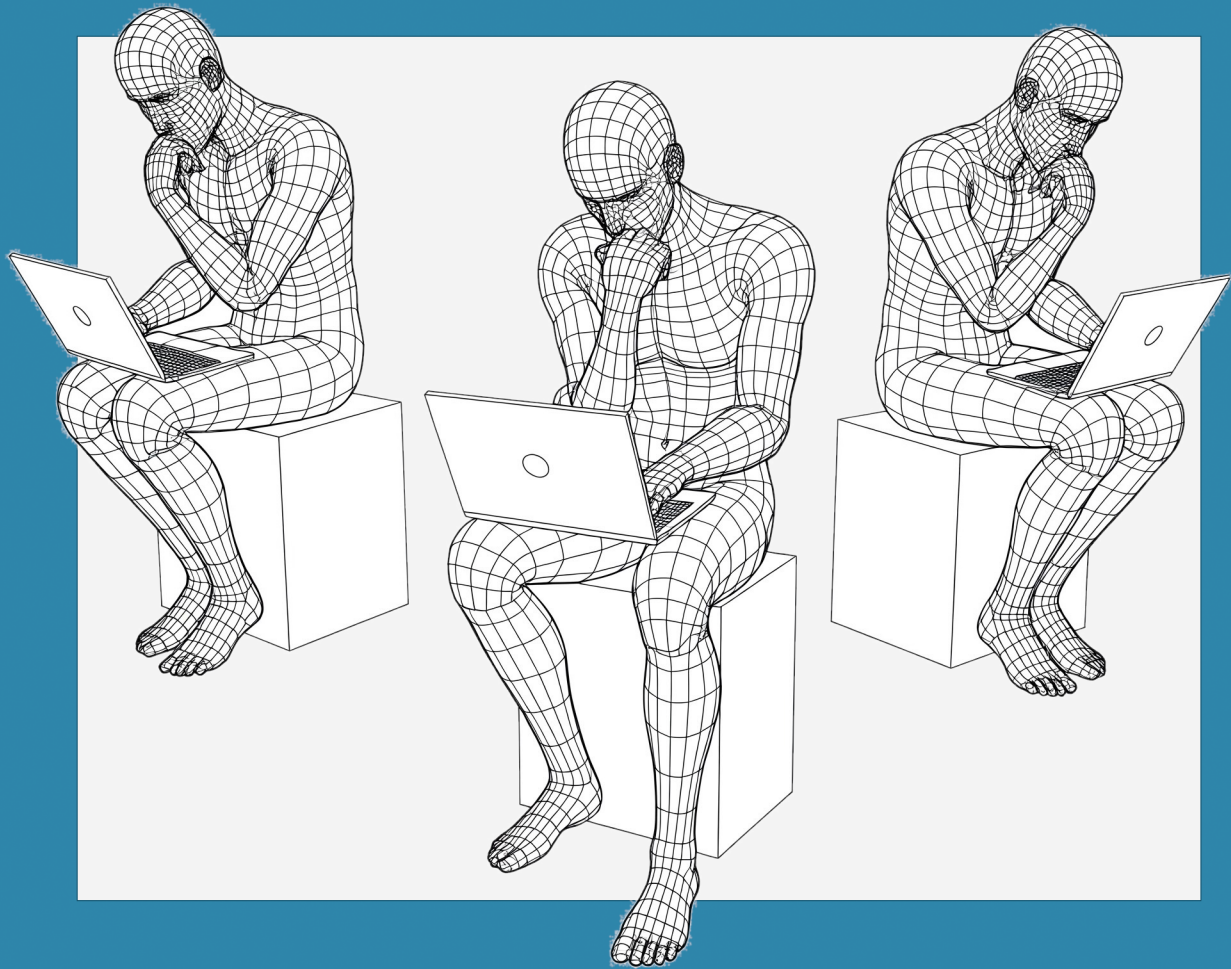
LUCA MINUDEL

The forgotten new philosophy of work, management & leadership

Luca Minudel

This book is available at

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Contents

Foreword by Marco Fainello

Marco Fainello, Mechanical Engineer
Winner with Ferrari of 8 Formula 1 Constructors' World Championships and 6 Drivers' World Championships and 4 Endurance WEC world titles as Head of Performance Development. Chief Technical Officer at Danisi Engineering and Executive Director at Addfor S.p.A. Professor of Race Track Engineering: Management, Preparation and Strategy, at the Modena and Reggio Emilia University – MUNER.

I have spent a large part of my professional career solving complex problems, learning a great deal during my experience in the world of racing and the extended period spent with the Ferrari Formula 1 Team, during which I got to know Luca.

I have often noticed the ineffectiveness of classic planning and management methods in dealing with situations that are not easily schematised and have many unknowns, to the point of having tried to invent alternative methods to those I saw being applied.

The most common limit I have observed is the tendency to reduce everything to schemas derived from past experience, even at the cost of distorting reality to fit our vision and theories. I recall reading years ago about someone who was surprised at hammering a corner of the Great Pyramid of Cheops because, by a few centimetres, the measurements did not satisfy his esoteric theory; well, this is what we do every day, creating many of the problems we then have to face.

Applying known schemes is undoubtedly a very useful mechanism, elaborated over millennia of biological and social evolution, allowing us to make hundreds of decisions every day without the need to pause and analyse each one individually. However, when problems are complex and force us to confront profound and multiple changes, trying to bend reality to our experience can be a significant limitation. In attempting to analyse situations, we are blocked by the fear of not having control, we superficially focus on symptoms instead of going to the root of the problems, and consequently, in teamwork, we aim to force consensus to create a false sense of security instead of facing an open and real confrontation.

Every day, in many fields of our activities, we are faced with increasing complexity of the situations we have to face, brought about by:

- the possibility of accessing an enormous amount of data and processing it in a rapid and complex way;
- the globalisation of markets and therefore of competition;
- the interaction between diverse cultures.

The reaction that we often notice in all sectors and levels is a growing rigidity of processes and the fragmentation of global objectives into micro-goals: in the illusion of simplifying and regaining control, we actually end up building ineffective methods in the attempt of evading responsibility for any problems or failures. This attitude leads to phase-gated, simplified, and rigid approaches, neglecting the potential for teamwork and sharing just when they are needed the most.

Instead, it would be more beneficial for us to focus on understanding our interaction with problems and people, recognizing complex situations, refining the sensitivity needed to understand if some seemingly obvious or harmless choices can result in unforeseen and negatively amplified consequences.

And once a complex problem is recognized, we must:

- be able to work and share as a team;
- delay decisions and recognize the right moment to make them;
- be willing to make choices even with effects that are not fully knowable in advance;
- manage the unexpected by choosing where we can afford to be wrong;
- prepare alternative plans;
- ensure that we have the necessary resources to face unexpected events and failures;
- accept mistakes.

The difference between a serious approach to complex problems and a reckless attitude that ignores consequences may sometimes seem subtle but is, in fact, substantial, and is based on well-defined principles rather than improvisation.

This guide addresses all of this: it provides concepts and examples to understand how to recognise situations that cannot be analysed and solved with linear processes and describes some effective alternative principles and tools to tackle them.

It does so in a simple yet not superficial manner, forcing us to question our way of seeing reality and interacting with it, enabling us to be aware of our limits and leverage our potential to handle the unexpected without being paralysed.

With complexity now permeating every aspect of our lives, whatever we do, Luca provides us with a key to open windows from which we can have a new perspective and open doors that lead to new paths to embark upon.

Foreword by Sunil Mundra

Author of the bestseller Enterprise Agility: Being Agile in a Changing World
Change and Transformation Leader, CXO Advisor at Thoughtworks
Now Independent Consultant specialising in Transformation, Agility and Change

This book is a treatise on the subject of complexity. The book is highly relevant in today's times where complexity is increasing at an exponential rate within enterprises as well as in the external environment. This makes it imperative for both leaders and practitioners to appreciate the need to move away from applying linear approaches to dealing with complexity, and this book provides valuable insights on navigating complexity in the most effective ways.

Foreword by Marcin Floryan

Director of Product and Engineering, Spotify
Stockholm, December 2023

I feel fortunate that my grandfather introduced me to James Gleick's now-classic book "Chaos: Making a New Science" in the early 2000s. It opened my mind to the reality that the world around us is not, as we always pretended, ordered and linear. This realisation profoundly influenced my approach to software development and leadership, especially after connecting this new science with my own work through the 2002 publication "Agile Software Development with Scrum".

In the decades that followed, I learned to navigate the intricacies of software development and leadership, fully appreciating the challenges posed by complex adaptive systems. I have witnessed both the failure of projects and organisations that clung to familiar, mechanistic and reductionist thinking and the success of those who embraced a new way of thinking, one that recognizes ambiguity, uncertainty, and interconnectedness.

In 2016 at Spotify, together with Anders Ivarsson, we ran a series of workshops called "Complexity for leaders and managers" to equip our colleagues with the same understanding and tools that we grew accustomed to in our own work. By shifting their approach to recognize the complex adaptive systems at play, we saw remarkable transformations. Projects that once seemed mired in uncertainty found new incremental and iterative pathways to success. This wasn't just theory at work; it was practical, impactful change.

Now you can follow a similar path and learn how to "Succeed over difficult problems by embracing Complexity-Thinking" (Editor's note: now 'The forgotten new philosophy of work, management & leadership'). The book in front of you is more than a guide; it's an invitation to see the world differently. Complexity is not just an occasional obstacle; it's a constant presence in our modern problems. But recognizing this is only half the story. The real magic happens when we equip ourselves with the right skills and tools to navigate this complexity.

As you explore this micro guide, I encourage you to embrace the journey with optimism and curiosity. Whether you're in software development, product management, or simply looking to enhance your problem-solving skills, there is immense value in understanding and applying complexity thinking. This book is a stepping stone in a never-ending journey, one that I am still traversing with enthusiasm and an ever-deepening understanding.

Welcome to a world where complexity isn't just a challenge to overcome, but an opportunity to grow and excel.

Foreword by Paolo Aversa

Paolo Aversa, OSI
Professor of Strategy
King's College London

The evolution of technologies, the ever-accelerating pace of life, and the expectations of an increasingly connected, turbulent, and virtual world confront us with intricate, pervasive, and exponential problems that require a different approach from the traditional, typically ordered and linear one. The Agile methodology, born in the early 2000s, introduced principles and practices that have proven effective in solving complex problems. However, the widespread adoption of Agile has gradually diluted its effectiveness, perpetuating the old way of working.

This is where Complexity-thinking comes into play. Based on the Complexity Science, complexity thinking represents a new philosophy of approaching life and work that allows us to thrive in a chaotic and non-linear environment. This book offers us a valuable insight into understanding complex problems and the differences with non-complex problems. It is a practical aid in adopting a mentality that embraces unpredictability, emergence, and interconnectedness.

There are several reasons that make this book an interesting and worthwhile read. Firstly, the discussion of complexity thinking in this text provides a solid theoretical foundation that explains and interprets the complex problems we face on a daily basis. By learning to apply this perspective, it will be possible to broaden the understanding of complex situations and develop a set of tools to successfully tackle them.

Secondly, the book helps develop a mentality that promotes collaboration, adaptability, and recognition of the role of human factors in problem-solving. In an increasingly interconnected world, these skills are essential for working effectively and achieving meaningful results.

Lastly, complexity thinking can be applied in various fields, from software development to geopolitics, and even emergency management. This book presents concrete examples of how complexity thinking can be successfully employed in these challenges, opening up new possibilities and perspectives.

Therefore, for those ready to abandon old ways of operating and embrace a new vision that allows them to thrive in everyday complexity, this book will serve as a solid springboard into complexity-thinking.

Happy reading!

Acknowledgments

Introduction

We can predict the position of Mars in the sky 100 years from now with stunning accuracy. Yet sometimes we can't predict if - or when - a challenging project, software development initiative, or significant piece of work will be completed. Have you ever wondered why? And more importantly, what can we do about it?

Let's explore the possible answers, whether you're helping an organisation navigate a turbulent world, absorb change and innovate, or you're pushing the envelope in a high-tech, high-stakes, hyper-competitive environment.

The difficulty in making predictions about a challenging project may arise from a confluence of factors. Increasingly we find ourselves navigating uncharted waters - at work during a challenging project, as well as in our lives - confronted by new, unprecedented problems & opportunities.

In such a situation, we may lack essential knowledge, experience and information. Simultaneously we may not have enough time to process all the available information. Conflicting agendas of those involved and the ambiguities of the problems & opportunities we face, intensify the lack of consensus. An increasing number of dependencies and interdependencies and the global

interconnectedness we are part of, make us more susceptible to external influences, while ripple effects reduce our ability to exert control.

Even with help from the best experts and unlimited time for the analysis, we can only begin to understand the problems & opportunities we face after actively working on them - or retrospectively, after a working solution has been imagined, built, and proven to work. These problems & opportunities may also be constantly evolving, or never fully resolved, requiring constant attention and ongoing interventions.

In summary, challenging projects confront us with *Intractable Problems & Elusive Opportunities* that evade our best efforts to estimate, plan, and control. No matter how good we are and how hard we work.

This inherent messiness invalidates the assumption of order on which many organisations' "linear" thinking and work doctrine are founded. Marginal evolutions or extemporaneous exceptions to such doctrine are not enough either, given the growing frequency of these challenging projects. Relying on outdated linear approaches only results in greater unpredictability, lower productivity, and ultimately lower success rates.

Instead, organisations need to replace tradition and old habits with a **new philosophy of work**, **management & leadership**. One that is suitable for the exponentially accelerating change and innovation of this turbulent, digital, and hyperconnected world. The ongoing Artificial Intelligence revolution adds more urgency than ever. To find this new philosophy, we will turn to new science and rediscover forgotten ideas that have already proven their efficacy. We will dare to challenge the status quo and disrupt tradition.

<< **Tradition is a guide and not a jailer** >> - William Somerset Maugham

<< **To remain static is to fall behind** >> - Unknown

Intractable problems & Elusive opportunities: are something new?

In recent years, I've heard comments on the *complexity* of our times, mentions of the *butterfly effect*, or the *chaos theory*. All these terms have become part of the popular narrative in novels, movies, newspaper articles, and everyday speech.

But every era has had *Intractable Problems & Elusive Opportunities* that eluded the conventional approaches and solutions of its time. Even when counting on the best minds available and virtually infinite time and resources.

A reference I have encountered to these *Intractable Problems & Elusive Opportunities* comes from the legend of the **Gordian Knot**, impossible to untie. It dates back to 333 BC and regained popularity at the end of the eighteenth century.

Another reference I have come across is that of **Wicked Problems**, defined in the late 1960s as problems that are difficult or impossible to solve because they can only be understood in an incomplete, contradictory manner, and they are continuously changing.

It is since the late 1980s that the acronym **VUCA** has been around and used to describe the conditions that give rise to challenging and unpredictable problems & opportunities.

To arrive at **Complexity**, studied as an interdisciplinary science, and increasingly popular since the 2000s. Complexity science is revolutionising our understanding of the world around us, along with Complexity-thinking and Human Complexity, which I will introduce later.

If *Intractable Problems & Elusive Opportunities* have always existed, why are we hearing so much about them only now?

> **What has changed from 333 BC to the present day is the spread of *Intractable Problems & Elusive Opportunities*: how many people have to deal with them, and how often.**

For example, in the 1980s, typically only those working on multilateral trade agreements, joint peacekeeping missions, or in intergovernmental organisations such as the World Bank or the United Nations frequently found themselves dealing with *Intractable Problems & Elusive Opportunities*. But just a decade later, in the 1990s, everyone who worked in software development and many tech organisations faced *Intractable Problems & Elusive Opportunities* almost daily.

Intractable Problems & Elusive Opportunities reach a tipping point

It was during the rapid and unprecedented Digital revolution of the 1990s that software development emerged as a significant economic activity, shifting from being an individual sport to a team sport.

This revolution drove the exponential growth of commercial applications on the Web, and later on Mobile, leading to the explosion of software development.

Those of us working in the field at the time, and many tech organisations, suddenly found themselves in an unprecedented situation, facing a constant stream of *Intractable Problems & Elusive Opportunities.* This led to an increased frequency of challenging projects, or software development initiatives, or significant pieces of work, for which it was impossible to predict accurately enough the effort required to complete the work or even to know in advance if the work was feasible. They eluded our best ability to predict and control. No matter how good we were or how hard we tried.

Intractable Problems & Elusive Opportunities now pervade every sector

With the rise of the Internet and the Web, came next the wave of hyperconnectivity, hyper-information, and hypercompetition. The punctuated equilibrium[1] with which companies were accustomed to, when dealing with innovation and change, gave way to constant change and disruption. Therefore, companies have been pushed from embracing continuity and stability, to embracing change.

This is because the protectionist barriers that safeguarded companies' margins gradually disappeared, and the speed of knowledge sharing quickly dissipates any knowledge advantage and competitive advantages. Therefore companies must start asking themselves how creative they can be, and how quickly they can create new knowledge and innovation.

Companies that are not fast enough, now risk succumbing to more creative, innovative, fast, and agile companies. To survive now every company must master the art of constant reinvention of itself, its products, and its business models.

Consider Formula One teams, for example. Within a few races from the start of the season, they manage to copy and adapt each other's winning ideas. As a result, in order to win the championship, F1 teams must continuously develop and innovate their car and their approach to the race without pause, throughout the entire season. In F1, change and innovation are no longer discrete and finite events and actions, but incessant activities. Nowadays the same applies to all companies.

The result is that the *Intractable Problems & Elusive Opportunities* initially experienced only by the tech sector in the 1990s, gradually permeated companies in all other sectors over the following two decades. Now they have become:

- **Pervasive**, they are encountered everywhere in the challenges faced at work.

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[1] https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Punctuated_equilibrium

- **Persistent**, they can be navigated, managed, but not completely eliminated.
- **Exponential**, they grow in number and frequency faster and faster, alongside the continuous acceleration of the rate of change and the pace of innovation

Conclusions

Intractable Problems & Elusive Opportunities have a long history. Their recent surge in all industrial sectors has amplified the need for greater awareness, understanding, and knowledge of how to navigate and exploit them. These abilities have become vital to successfully address challenging projects, or software development initiatives, or significant pieces of work where such problems *&* opportunities emerge.

Yet, the prevailing way of thinking of many organisations, and their work doctrine, remain at odds with these new vital capabilities. To move forward, organisations need to embrace the forgotten **new philosophy of work**, **management & leadership**.

Common causes of Intractable problems & Elusive opportunities

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Today's prevailing way of thinking and work doctrine

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Management gets invented

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Fordism and Taylorism become and remain dominant

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The emergence of a new philosophy of work, management & leadership

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Foundational ideas from the 1930s onwards

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An embodiment of the new philosophy emerged in the 1990s

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What the new philosophy is like

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Why forgotten?

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Tradition and old habits

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Human nature's aversions

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How to embrace the forgotten new philosophy

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Opportunities from Adversity and Crisis

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Embracing and supporting Human nature inclinations

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New attitudes, behaviours, and new principles

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New Attitudes & Behaviours for Leaders

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1) Accepting Complexity

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2) Maintaining a positive attitude toward Complexity

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3) Informing Complexity-fit actions

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4) Enabling Complexity-fit actions

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New Principles for Leaders

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2) Fostering a deep and fluid Collaboration

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3) Relentlessly pursuing Mastery

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More on the human element

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Examples from organisations that embraced the new philosophy

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More networked, less hierarchical

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More self-coordination, less command & control

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More broadly distributed authority, less centralised authority

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More autonomous X-functional structures, less functional/matrix structures

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More teamwork, less solo work

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More fluid roles & responsibilities, and collaboration, less fixed roles & responsibilities and scripted collaboration

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More adaptive individuals & free initiative, less rigid processes & bureaucracy

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More Transparent, less Secretive

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More Continuous organisation reinvention, less Ad-hoc innovation initiatives

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Examples of concrete practice

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Identify intractable problems and elusive opportunities

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Choose the initiative funding strategy based on the level of complexity

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Make and keep promises in the face of uncertainty and change

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Work with self-organising autonomous teams

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Embrace the new philosophy, gradually and socially

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Follow authors and practitioners worth following

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One last piece of advice on avoiding trivialisations

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Insights from distinguished practitioners

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Carol Mase, social anthropologist and author

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Tiani Jones, Socio-technologist and Keynote speaker

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Valerie McLean, creator of the McLean Loop

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John Coleman, creator of Kanplexity

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Chris Matts, creator of Real Options e co-author of Commitment

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Sonja Blignaut, creator of Waysfinder and prolific author and speaker

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Daniel Mezick, author of Inviting Leadership, The OpenSpace Agility Handbook, etc.

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Sunil Mundra, Author of Enterprise Agility

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Appendix 1: What is Complexity (Science)

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Appendix 2: Other related concepts

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Appendix 3: Common misunderstandings about complexity

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Different aspects of Systems-thinking are relevant for different types of problems

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Systems-thinking together with Complexity-thinking

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How we fool ourselves back into the illusion of certainty, control, predictability

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Appendix 4: How to gradually approach practice and understanding

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Appendix 5: Learning and dealing with Human Complexity in a social way

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Appendix 6: Book versions history

Below you find the notes relative to the current version and the previous versions. Check your Leanpub account for the latest available version of this book, freely available to you. For comments, suggestions, and errata, contact the author from the book page.

Ver. 2.0 (current version), 27 May 2025 This is the new edition of this book, which comes with a new title and a new cover. The language is now more accessible and less technical. The focus is more practical.

Most chapters from the first edition and their content have been reorganised and renamed. While some of the more technical chapters, and some other chapters from the first edition have been moved into the Appendices at the end of the book. All this is shown in this table below. All the other chapters from the first edition not listed in the table below remained untouched in the second edition.

From the 1st edition's chapter	To the 2nd edition's chapter
Where all these complex problems originate from	Intractable problems & Elusive opportunities: are something new?
How widespread and acknowledged are complex problems today	Intractable problems & Elusive opportunities: are something new?
	Today's prevailing way of thinking and work doctrine
	The emergence of a new philosophy of work, management and leadership
Today's approach remains unfit for complex problems	The emergence of a new philosophy of work, management and leadership
	Why forgotten?
How to find out which problems are really complex	Examples of concrete practice
What is Complexity (Science)	Appendix 1

From the 1st edition's chapter	To the 2nd edition's chapter
How to gradually approach practice and understanding	Appendix 4
How to embrace Complexity-thinking	New Attitudes & Behaviours for Leaders
	Examples from organisations that embraced the new philosophy
Which branch of Complexity Sciences to follow	More on the human element
Common misunderstandings about complexity	Appendix 3
Connections between concepts related to complexity	Appendix 2
Learning and dealing with Human Complexity in a social way	Appendix 5
What to do next?	Examples of concrete practice
What to do next? Ideas for Leaders	Examples from organisations that embraced the new philosophy
	New Principles for Leaders
What to do next? Ideas for those funding and planning the work	Examples of concrete practice
What to do next? For the teams and their leaders	Examples of concrete practice

The introduction has been rewritten. These chapters are brand new, and may contain some bits from the first edition: 'Common causes of Intractable problems & Elusive opportunities', 'What the new philosophy is like', and 'How to embrace the forgotten new philosophy'.

Some of the content of the first edition has been reorganised and expanded in these new chapters, to provide clearer guidelines and practical examples: 'New Attitudes & Behaviours for Leaders', 'New Principles for Leader', 'Examples from organisations that embraced the new philosophy', and 'Examples of concrete practice'.

Finally, a few bits of content from the first edition has been removed, as they have been made redundant or irrelevant by the addition of the second edition.

Ver. 1.5, 7 November 2024 First revision of the complete edition. It contains minor changes to improve the clarity of titles and their content. Furthermore in the chapter 'How widespread and

acknowledged are complex problems today' and subchapter 'Complex problems pervade all sectors' more examples have been added. In the chapter 'How to find out which problems are really complex' a list of three conditions that can give rise to a complex dynamic has been added. In the chapter 'How to embrace Complexity-thinking' and subchapter 'Some elements of Complexity-thinking' some of the elements have been expandend and others added; in the subchapter 'Examples' some of the examples have been expanded. In the chapters 'How to find out which problems are really complex' and 'Which branch of Complexity Sciences to follow' a few more cases of people spontaneously tackling complexity with success have been added. In the chapter 'Common misunderstandings about complexity' the subchapter now titled 'How we fool ourselves back into the illusion of certainty and control' has been fully rewritten. Finally in the chapter 'What to do next?' the list of sources to follow has been reorganised and rewritten with some additions.

Ver. 1.0, 10 February 2024 First complete edition of this book.

Ver. 0.1, 11 January 2024 First preview of the completed book before the publication. This book was originally written in Italian, incrementally, starting from the 23rd of August 2023. Various additions and gradual refinements have followed, guided by the feedback of readers cited in the acknowledgements, by subsequent revisions by the author, and from conversations, interviews, presentations, and ideas that emerged during the iterative review process. The first incremental publication on Leanpub of the chapters in Italian occurred on September 24, 2023. The English translation of this book started on the 3rd of November 2023 and the bulk of it was finished on the 13th of November followed by minor refinements until the 4th of December.

About the Author

Luca Minudel He has been working in professional software and digital products development for over 20 years, mostly with Agile, Lean, and Complexity.

He has a formal education in Computer Science and a background in software development.

He contributed to the adoption of Lean and Agile practices in the Scuderia Ferrari F1 racing team.

For ThoughtWorks, he has delivered training, coaching, assessments and organisational transformation to leading organizations in Europe and the United States.

He is an advisor, mentor, and consultant in modern Engineering and Product Management, Agility and Lean, and a Complexity-thinking practitioner. An organisational gardener, organisation's culture curator, collaboration catalyst, and delivery facilitator. Among his clients are companies such as Lloyds Banking Group, Japan Tobacco International, BP energy company, The AA, HSBC, LexisNexis, and many others.

Luca is the founder and CEO of SmHarter.com, a London-based company that helps organizations transform the way they work into their competitive advantage.

Blog: https://www.smharter.com/blog/
Linked-In: https://www.linkedin.com/in/lucaminudel/
Mastodon: https://mstdn.social/@lukadotnet/
Bluesky: https://bsky.app/profile/lucaminudel.bsky.social/
Twitter: https://twitter.com/lukadotnet