Shaping Organizational Transformation Processes with Creative Agility

Impulse text
Dealing with Ambiguity and Contradictions

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Ambiguity tolerance is one of the future skills that is becoming increasingly important in the 21st century. What is ambiguity and why is ambiguity competence important today? What are key techniques and what does ambiguity have to do with creative agility? Many people perceive today's world as fast, dynamic, confusing, complex. Hardly anyone understands what is happening. Nevertheless, the only way left for us is to get along in this world despite the flood of information. How does that work?

How do I use this impulse text?
This impulse text with interesting facts about ambiguity and contradictions is designed for self-study and as a personal research diary. The following five symbols mark an interruption in the text and invite you to pause, reflect, or take action:

Take time to think.

Write down initial associations.

Share respectfully.

Listen attentively.

Read carefully.

In addition, each page has a margin column and an area at the bottom. Both are color-coded. In the columns, write down key words, notes, questions, and ideas. At the bottom, you will find space for your summary and essentials in your own words.

Let's go! Have fun!

What does ambiguity have to do with creative agility?

Creative agility is a key competence for remaining decision-ready and action-oriented in unpredictable situations. Organizations and businesses continuously develop new products and services to remain competitive and successful. This requires creativity, agility, and ambiguity. Prof. Dr. Ulf-Daniel Ehlers, educational researcher and professor of educational management and lifelong learning, mindful leader, and art-of-communication expert, considers ambiguity tolerance, along with sensemaking, communication, decision-making, reflection, design thinking, innovation, future and designing as well as digital competencies, to be essential skills in times of organizational transformation (Ehlers 2020a/b). Ambiguity competence is the ability to recognize and understand multicity, complexity, diversity, and uncertainty. It also involves the ability to handle ambiguity in a productive and situationally adaptable manner, even in conflicting roles (ibid). Creative agility is a multi-perspective setting that with suitable strategies, practices, and techniques from the fields of art, communication and organizational development can be used especially in ambiguous and uncertain situations.

Why is ambiguity tolerance important for an organization and society?

In organizations with flat structures and particularly in a democracy, one must tolerate different interests and often negotiate compromises laboriously and over a long period. Approaching each other in conversation and not imposing one's own will on others requires a space for ambiguity, where opinions can mature and change. When individuals have the capacity to tolerate ambiguity, they are more likely to trust others and cooperate (FeldmanHall 2018). It is important to find one's own standpoint while remaining open to new perspectives, reflecting on them, evaluating on them, and potentially incorporating them into one's own actions. Ultimately, societies thrive in an ambiguity-friendly atmosphere, becoming diverse and vibrant. The result is ambiguous creations, which provide contradictory material for discussion. Constantly taking a new point of view and talking about it keeps people alive and young.

Think about the following questions:

- Do I meet ambiguity with reluctance or goodwill? Why?
- Could a reluctance potentially stem from a lack of clarity or genuine feeling of being overwhelmed?
- Do I perceive diversity (in my work processes) as a threat, an obstacle, or as an enrichment?
- What patterns and mechanisms can I identify to protect myself or my collaboration processes from an excess of simplification?

What mechanisms and patterns exist in organizations to respond to diversity, contradictions, and change?

Organizations are constantly changing, but most often not in the way intended by those involved. That is challenging. Purposeful rational thinking no longer works and falls short. It conveys the illusion of predictability and reduction of anxiety and carelessness, because top management takes care of everything. The hope that future

scenarios and visions will be clearer and less irrational than the current situation within one's own organization is often a misplaced hope. Leaders and employees mistakenly believe they are safe. It is a misconception.

Increasing complexity, dynamism and speed can overwhelm us. Some people perceive this as a human imposition and urge simplicity, clarity, recipes, and a clear direction. It would be easy to give in, but would that lead us forward? What if, instead, we resist the urge, did not simplify, did not give clear answers? What if we simply accept a situation, a state and the influencing factors in all their complexity, dependency and imponderability without simply wanting them to be gone? Reality will catch up with us anyway. Therefore, it is important not to negate, look away, dismiss, or switch to autopilot with a „business as usual" mindset. Embracing diversity is the richer option. We must not intellectually underchallenge ourselves or settle below our possibilities and competences. Therefore, it is advisable:

1. to endure the situation with all its contradictions and personal conflicts, accepting the inner restlessness and torn feelings,
2. to respond appropriately by deciding and acting according to the situation, and
3. to leverage ambiguity and inconsistency constructively.

How do ambiguity and contradictions manifest themselves in organizations?
On one hand, in behavior.

Two examples:
- The manager sends an employee to a multi-module training program. The employee frequently misses the sessions because working hours have been assigned during the training hours.
- The manager signals freedom of expression and repeatedly interrupts and cuts off discussion partners.

In both cases, the leaders ignore or negate their own contradictions, which manifest in inconsistent messages, leaving employees confused and frustrated.

On the other hand, there are crisis-ridden conditions or complex, ambiguous situations where a quick and simple solution would not be effective. Such circumstances are characterized by strong ambiguity.

Example: Home office regulation during Covid-19. How can a manager effectively monitor when the employees are working?

Special attention is required when a leader communicates with ambiguity and vagueness, intentionally and strategically. Such behavior leads to significant insecurity, frustration, and powerlessness among employees.

All these terms – multicity, vagueness, contradiction – describe **ambiguity**. The word comes from the Latin ambiguitas = double meaning. Ambig means ambivalent, being contradictory, and having inherent inconsistency.

Let us continue with some definitions:

Distinguishing ambivalence
Ambivalence: lat. ambi – from two sides / valens – strong, powerful. Ambivalent is more affective-emotional (Pertaining to feelings, emotions, and mood).
Ambiguity: rather cognitive-rational. (Perceived information is further processed.)

Distinguishing risk
We know the probability of an event occurring. There are parameters for assessing the situation. Example: You can get stuck in a traffic jam on the highway.
Ambiguity: We have no knowledge of the chances or risks. Example: Crossing a jungle or wilderness – We have no idea if there are any paths or roads, or if there are pitfalls.

According to studies, there is no direct causal relationship between these terms: Being risk-tolerant does not necessarily mean being good at handling ambiguity. Having a high ability to cope with undefined situations does not automatically make someone inclined to take risks.

Difference between uncertainty tolerance and ambiguity tolerance
Uncertainty tolerance refers to situations that are uncertain. Uncertainty arises when there is insufficient or incorrect information about the future development in a particular situation, and the participants do not know how to handle the situation correctly. Individuals with low uncertainty tolerance may perceive such conditions as a threat and therefore try to avoid them, in contrast to individuals with high uncertainty tolerance. Unpredictable conditions positively influence their thinking and behavior as a challenge and can therefore be stimulating and performance-enhancing.

Ambiguity tolerance is more specific than uncertainty tolerance, which is broader in scope. Ambiguous situations usually involve known alternatives that contradict each other, whose information is incompatible with each other and where logical contradictions collide. Firstly, it is about the ability to recognize conflicting information and, secondly, to endure the resulting contradictory demands for action.

It is not easy to maintain a state of contradiction, because human beings are naturally limited in their ambiguity tolerance and instead strive to establish a state of clarity. Enduring ambiguity in the long run is challenging but possible and achievable.

What does ambiguity tolerance mean specifically?
Tolerance of ambiguity refers to the degree of human ability to tolerate multicity, to endure contradictions, and ideally respond to them positively, navigate in uncertain and unstructured situations or to cope with different expectations, roles, views and opinions.

Else Frenkel-Brunswik introduced the term „ambiguity tolerance" in 1949 while observing children in daycare centers. The discovery had a backstory. The Austrian-American psychoanalyst and psychologist was of Jewish origin. Her family fled to Vienna in 1914 and to the United States in 1938, escaping the National Socialists and their categorization as an unambiguous Jew. Her time in Europe greatly influenced her. Together with Theodor Adorno, she researched and published on authoritarian personalities, enemies of democracy. The term **Ambiguity Tolerance or Intolerance** soon became associated with a stable personality trait that changes only minimally throughout a person's life. It is an emotional-cognitive, measurable dimension.

Frenkel-Brunswik observed the parent-child relationship and discovered that children do not always love their parents unconditionally. There are situations where children may feel less affection, become disappointed or angry with them. Throughout life, we learn to see both positive and negative characteristics of parents and partners. We experience feelings of love and hate towards the same person and learn to acknowledge, accept and reduce fears of loss. The same applies to objects, indicating the coexistence of contradictory emotions and impulses towards the same person or object (e.g. fur coat).

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- Talk to your best friend about tolerance for ambiguity and what experiences you have had in this regard.

How does ambiguity tolerance or intolerance manifest itself in everyday life?
It manifests itself, for example, when encountering strangers. This can have different effects on different people. Some see the foreign as a deviation from the familiar, a stranger as a competitor on the labor or housing market and accordingly stay away from them. Others are interested in different cultures and languages, approach strangers openly and engage in a conversation.

Note: The Polish philosopher Zygmunt Bauman considers the stranger in a more problematic category than the enemy. Enemy and friend can be clearly assigned. The stranger, however, is neither an enemy nor a friend.

Ambiguity intolerance is the rejection of the unknown. Diversity can be frightening, irritating, and perceived as a threat, resulting in ambiguity being feared, avoided, or rejected. Defensive gestures are the result.

Tolerance for ambiguity, on the other hand, is curiosity about the unknown. Thus, diversity can enrich intellectually and aesthetically, which can also be ambiguity-friendly. Depending on personal characteristics, the experience of the unfamiliar can be experienced as both tempting and threatening.

Ambiguity does not allow simple answers to complex situations. Offering simplistic solutions to complex circumstances fuels black-and-white thinking, ideologies or radical ideas, thereby promoting ambiguity intolerance. This can become a dangerous spiral, as the recent Covid-19 pandemic has taught us.

Ambiguity intolerance is human and partly opportunistic, but not abnormal. Those who operate within the categories of good and evil derive personal benefits by avoiding the tension generated by ambiguity. They do not have to endure it. As a result, they cannot fully enjoy life in all its richness and complexity. That is the price each individual pays.

What happens when ambiguity tolerance disappears?
• The willingness to engage in new thought processes decreases.
• Ambiguous, vague and unassignable aspects lose their significance.
• The inability to endure conflicting views and feelings increases.
• Impatience and aggressiveness intensify.
• Anything that appears ambiguous and whose boundaries are difficult to outline, and everything that cannot be quantified is devalued. In contrast, facts and figures are given high credibility. Ambiguity is denied in extreme cases. It is avoided by declaring it non-existent, or by not attributing importance to it. Indifference toward ambiguity arises (Bauer 2018).
• General mistrust towards authorities and experts grows.

Desire for simplicity in everyday life
Menus of some restaurants are written on one page only. Five appetizers, seven main courses, three desserts. That is it. The selection is small, the choice is usually made quickly. Not only for the guest but also for the kitchen it is easier. The same thing happens with food manufacturers: Häagen-Dazs successfully produces its ice cream „Five" using only five ingredients.

Product assortment reduction in supermarkets: Why 25 types of yoghurt? Less is more. Typically, people prefer to keep things and concepts as simple as possible. Too many options can be overwhelming. Hence the urge to simplify, to reduce. However, this is not always beneficial in every situation.

Consider:

• What parameters do you consider for making a good selection?

„Oh, that's too complex for me!" **Complexity** has become a buzzword. What does complexity mean exactly and how does it differ from **complication**?

Complicated means: difficult, strenuous, laborious (opposite: easy). Easy or difficult refers to the requirement and the degree of difficulty of the task.
Complex means: multi-layered, intricate, opaque, chaotic, confusing, rambling (opposite: simple).

Complicated things can be simplified. Complex things must remain complex.
Simplify, reduce, omit, renounce, reorganize. This works well for complicated things, tasks and circumstances. Many scientific experiments work according to the exclusion procedure. Certain elements are omitted to understand and determine their influence and effect. However, certain things, topics and states should be allowed to remain complex in their diversity and ambiguity, because otherwise they cannot be grasped and understood in their fullness and vagueness. Simplification would eliminate important facets and influencing variables, thereby preventing a comprehensive understanding. Complexity can only be mastered from within. It is known from biology and cybernetics that organisms can only cope with external complexity if they also know and allow internal complexity. This principle can be applied to individuals, organizations, societies and states.

Example: The more detailed and incrementally a teacher prepares the subject matter, the more the students are tempted to make less effort and learn only superficially. In addition, the following applies: the more control, the less complexity. The more externally dictated, the more the ability for self-organization atrophies and undermines the assumption of responsibility. Conversely, the more that comes from within, the more spontaneously the forces in the system operate.

A first summary
- Diversity and complexity can only be shaped from within.
- Individuals evolve through more complexity, not less.
- Too much control leads to simplification.

What can we do to avoid despairing over ambiguity and complexity?
Vagueness, uncertainty and thus indecision and being overwhelmed can never be completely eliminated. They are part of our lives. We humans are also polar and thus ambiguous beings – torn between duality and oppositeness. Duality is also a way of dealing with ambiguity as it is inherent in our being. Hence, the desire for harmony, unity and oneness is understandable and relatable. Applying artistic principles are helpful here. ► see also impulse text Arts-Based Strategies and Artistic Interventions: oscillating between chaos and order, between distance and proximity, and between complexity and simplicity. It is good to keep moving and explore things and situations. Standing still is unhealthy.

Chaos is king, but order is necessary

Chaos is complex and must be allowed during the idea phase. It sharpens the sense of possibility, helps to remain open-ended, as well as having extended antennas for perception. **Deep diving and deep listening** are the order of the day. These terms come from my conversation with the South Tyrolean writer Maria C. Hilber. It describes a deep immersion and inner listening when it comes to probing and grasping a (new) topic.

Our brain seeks congruence, agreement. It does this by filtering. Filtering means simplifying – for a certain period, complexity is reduced. The question arises: How do I make use of the current moment? Filtering is a natural process in the brain that allows us to derive useful actions from chaos and take the next step. Therefore, it is advisable to create order intermittently and iteratively, especially during the implementation phase, to stay on track. This helps to concentrate and work efficiently and goal-oriented.

Oscillating between chaos and order, between opening and closing, makes complexity and ambiguity easier to understand and grasp. Remaining in one of the two states brings little increase in knowledge. It keeps people small. What is needed is the balance and movement of sliding from one state to another and back, moments of transparency, inner clarity and holistic understanding, the feeling of confidence and trust in acting under uncertainty. Essential is the next piece, the next step that I use. That is how I progress.

Counteracting: Focus on blind spots.

This applies equally to individuals and organizations.

Exchange ideas with a good friend:

- What do we not see or do we not want to see?
- Where do we see something, but still look away?
- What are we not addressing? Why not?
- Where do we need protected spaces where mistakes are only attempts with different experiences? Where do we need and what kind of new communication channels? ► see also impulse text Communication, Language, Storytelling

Do not start at all ends, turn selected adjusting screws. Niklas Luhmann warns: Not everything in an organization can be changed at the same time.

When dealing with other people in communication, it is important to accept other opinions and perspectives, to endure ambiguity without feeling uncomfortable or reacting aggressively.

Exchange with a leader in your organizational environment:

- Do you think a leader can lead with ambiguity tolerance? If so, what would this leadership style look like?

Decision-making under uncertainty and contradictions
Example: I am at a buffet in an all-inclusive club in the Caribbean. I am unfamiliar with most of the food. I have to decide what I want to taste, how much of each dish and how to combine it. But what I have chosen does not taste good, is not digestible and causes stomach pain and more. All of this is accompanied by stormy weather and the Covid-19 pandemic. This is where several factors of uncertainty gather. When a situation is completely novel and unclear, its impact is significant, and its meaning is difficult to grasp, and when the consequences of the actions taken are uncertain, the approach to decision-making should be adapted to situational ambiguity. In other words, logical decisions based on solid foundations are not difficult decisions. Real decisions are always uncertain. In everyday leadership, it is about making decisions precisely when it is not clear what the right decision is.

The following aspects are worth considering and implementing depending on the situation:
• Adding new members to decision-making groups.
• Promote diversity and thereby encourage different opinions in order to get the broadest possible picture of the situation.
• Take your time despite high pressure, listen to all opinions and avoid premature consensus.
• Find the question behind the question. What is the actual, causal issue behind the question? What do we really need to talk about? What are subsidiary issues and what do we have to decide in concrete terms?
• Adapt decisions once made with regard to new changes that cannot be controlled (if necessary in partial decisions and sub-steps).
• Standing by wrong decisions and correct them if possible.
• In new types of crises and ambiguous situations, experts are of limited help. For them, the situation is also new. Which recommendation feels right?

Reflect on:

• To what extent do I succeed in making decisions under uncertainty, for example based on inadequate information and knowledge?
• What about my openness and willingness to make course corrections?
• To what extent do I take responsibility for myself, my team, my organization in unpredictable situations?

What are the most important experiences and insights for individuals, teams and organizations when making decisions in crisis situations?
Everyone expects and seeks security. There is no blueprint, no recipe for the right action. You have to be willing to correct decisions made and let go of your own opinions. Groupthink can lead to similar points of view and thought patterns among all stakeholders. Dissenters can be silenced. Thus, there is a risk of echo chambers. How can we counteract our own blindness? Uncomfortable opinions, controversial perspectives and divergent ideas should be listened to and sincerely discussed.

In addition, people who think differently must not be devalued. Conflicts and disputes should be carried out with each other instead of being prevented, in order to come to new insights and solutions. A lack of transparency about decision-making processes and rejected alternatives means that those who think differently are decoupled from decisions. It is helpful to prioritize communication of decisions and decision-making processes in ambiguous and uncertain situations over the decision itself. Because divisions weaken the organization. The longer a crisis lasts, the more urgently critics and opponents should be heard.

Moving away from right or wrong
The standards of „right" and „wrong" promote black-and-white thinking and judging in categories. You feel like you have been transported back to school. With this, the fear of failure and grading comes back. In terms of tolerance for ambiguity, one might ask: Was the decision consistent? Was the communication effective? When something is coherent and effective, people get moving. How do we notice this? By looking at concrete situations, taking action, communicating clearly, mindfully observing whether the energy is flowing and the whole thing is moving in a meaningful direction.

Exchange with a good colleague:

- What is our error culture like?
- How can we collectively take responsibility for decisions made under uncertainty?
- What is our way of communicating with each other? What communication rules apply in our company? ► see also impulse text Communication, Language and Storytelling
- When and how do I become unpopular in the company?
- Where and to what extent are we tolerant and when and why not?
- What do we need to change about our corporate culture? What can be added? What can we leave out?
- How do we want to make decisions in the future?
- Where are ambiguities? How would we describe them? How do we deal with them?
- Where do we deny reality? What aspects do we ignore?
- What personality types do we need in our company? (Consideration of personality tests in addition to competency profiles, e.g. Myers-Briggs type indicator, Enneagram, HDBI profile). Important: We need different personalities because they represent the diversity of skills and competencies, ways of thinking and working (not only choleric types, not only alpha individuals, and so on).

How do we accept and resolve conflicts in human interaction?
Where many people come together, there is diversity of opinions, but also conflicts. Encouraging people to allow and endure conflict is a worthwhile approach (Sprenger 2020). It is important to ensure that the term conflict has a positive connotation. Conflicts do not leave us cold. Friction generates energy when we rub

shoulders. People are not indifferent or apathetic about it. The „I don't care" pattern does not get us anywhere.

Example Corona / Covid-19 in 2021/2022: Vaccination advocates and opponents defend their position, close themselves off and freeze. Both eventually lose interest in always reaching the same point and getting stuck there.

Ambiguity tolerance welcomes conflicts by not sticking to our positions, but by opening up to our counterparts. But how to do it?

Discuss the following questions with someone you trust:

- Choose a current conflict topic that concerns each other. What is the problem behind this topic? (personal – family – regional – global)
- If the problem was gone, what would happen?
- What is the core problem or topic behind it?
- Where do we come together again despite disagreements?
- Where and how do we find similarities, differences? How would we name and describe them?

Can we learn ambiguity tolerance?
Yes. Ambiguity tolerance is not an innate ability but must be learned. Influences and early relationship experiences with alternating positive and negative experiences are decisive. This gives rise to the tendency to love and hate people at the same time (Jaeggi 1993). It is important to learn to endure the ambivalences of affection and rejection and to find the different sides of a person enriching. Ambiguity tolerance is a stable and therefore difficult to change personality trait. Above all, the learning process requires willpower and patience.

Why the acquisition of ambiguity tolerance is a worthwhile goal
Avoiding tension and suppressing contradictions hinders personal growth and costs energy. A defensive attitude robs strength and energy. The realization that opposites are not only threatening, but also conducive to one's own development, promotes openness to live ambiguity-tolerantly. The ability to deal with ambiguity and to engage with it according to the situation is what distinguishes a „creagile" person. (creagile is a neologism of creative and agile.)

How we can learn and train ambiguity
- Create a learning environment that reflects the fast-paced, complex and flexible business world.
- Have the courage to question consensual and supposed realities.
- Teaching experiential learning in projects.
- Understanding pejorative language and communication patterns and adapting them constructively in ambiguous situations.
- Making ambiguity visible and tangible as a characteristic of the organization by using diversity to orient oneself in a dynamic environment, to make decisions

and to take concrete steps.

- Dealing with areas that depend on ambiguity tolerance: with music, visual and performing arts, literature. By definition, the arts are ambiguous, but move in several dimensions that are characterized by ambiguities. ► see also impulse text Arts-Based Strategies and Artistic Interventions
- Art can help to endure unsolvable contradictions and uncertainties, in others and in oneself. In this way, we can develop a differentiated culture of emotion (Bauer 2018).

What are the key techniques to deal with ambiguity, contradictions, complexity and to increase tolerance for ambiguity in organizations?
- Recognizing circumstances and habits such as entrenched and outdated structures, routines and conventions and courageously questioning realities.
- Reduce or dissolve diversity and ambiguity (be mindful!).
- Transforming contradictions and paradoxes in a meaningful way, using them productively and integrating them in a meaningful way.
- Change the rules of the game. Transform complexity.

Living ambiguity "creagile"
To be open-minded, forming tolerance for ambiguity means, on the one hand, to behave successfully in many different areas of life in which phenomena of diversity and diversity stress one's own orientation – i.e. being open, decisive and active. On the other hand, it means empathizing with others. This forms the ability to perceive and accept deviant perspectives and to adopt them empathetically. Creagile ambiguity also implies the ability to control one's own emotions: to perceive one's own feelings and to consciously control them in order not to reactively fall into rejection and demarcation in situations of inevitable alienation and uncertainty. This is a central prerequisite for promoting an open approach to phenomena of alienation. And finally, try out openness to interpretation: Arts, artistic thinking and acting provide a space of opportunity to playfully test how to deal with ambiguities, paradoxes, and contradictions and thus to have experiences that can be transferred into the private and organizational context. (Schnurr 2021: 46)

The future starts now!

The future is „creagile"!
The future is you!
The future is us!

Now!

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