

A Review of “Organizational Survival in the New World: The Intelligent Complex Adaptive System”

Written by Alex and David Bennet, published by KMCI Press, 2004, ISBN 0750677120

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Introduction

For the last three or four years, I have looked for a good textbook to introduce theoretical and practical applications of complexity theory to graduate courses in business, public, and nonprofit administration. It should be basic enough to use with students who have never heard of complexity theory, minimize technical or ‘hard science’ terminology, and be reasonably priced. To date, the choices have been limited. Pioneering texts are still in print (see Kiel, 1994; Wheatley, 1999) and there are several more recently published alternatives (see Bar-Yam, 2005; Battram; 1999; Haynes, 2003; Johnson, 2002; Lewin & Regine, 2000; Marion, 1999; Zimmerman, *et al*, 2001). *Organizational Survival in the New World* may be the best of the lot.

Alex and David Bennet are co-founders of the Mountain Quest Institute, a learning center that sponsors research, consulting and workshops for individuals, groups and organizations “to help them achieve and sustain high performance in a rapidly changing, uncertain and incredibly complex world” (<http://www.mountainquestinn.com>). The layout of *Organizational Survival in the New World* is flexible and easy to read from beginning to end, or readers already familiar with complexity and knowledge management theories can jump around and go directly to chapters of particular interest.

Some strong points about the book are particularly noteworthy. The authors’ summarized discussion of the differences between outdated bureaucratic and new complexity-based “World-Class” organizations (p. 9) provides an excellent jumping-off point for students trying to make the leap from traditional theories of organizational management to new ways to think about the management of organizations as Intelligent Complex Adaptive Systems (ICAS). Chapter 19 entitled “Rethinking Thinking: Complexity” is a clear, uncomplicated summary of many of the key concepts associated with complexity theory. Three sections in the chapter, one called “Definition of Terms” (agent, nonlinearity, self-organization, etc.) and two others “Guiding Principles” and “Guidelines for Use,” may at first glance suggest a ‘Complexity for Dummies’ approach to the theory, but they are more than that. The chapter pulls together elements of complexity theory introduced in preceding chapters of the book and increases the reader’s ability to go on to read and understand the large quantity of other material on complexity theory now available in journals, other books, and on the internet.

The Bennets’ explanation of organizational intelligence is as straightforward as any I have seen in the literature on complexity theory. They define it as the capacity of an organization to gather information, generate knowledge, innovate and act effectively (p. 308). To behave intelligently, an ICAS must achieve continuous, interdependent collaboration and interplay among all levels of the system. It must balance the knowledge and actions of its people to achieve both the lowest-level tasks and highest-level vision of the organization, creating a distributed intelligence throughout the organization (pp. 38-39). Organizational learning requires individuals to work together. The results created by combining each individual’s own knowledge with the capability gained through their mutual interactions provide the individual learning and organizational learning that becomes the total learning of the organization (p. 150).

In recent years, I have incorporated complexity thinking in several graduate courses in business and public administration and in every course, students ask some variation of the same question. If complexity theory says the world is unpredictable and, as a manager, I can’t control the future of my own organization, why study complexity theory? The Bennets argue that uncertainty “...is the price for success in the age of complexity. If we cannot predict the future nor control knowledge worker productivity, then the only alternative is to embrace complexity into our organizations and get everyone involved using their best efforts to work together within the uncertainty, change and complexity that looms over, and throughout the organization” (p. 155). This is a great response to a very difficult question.

The Bennets use the term ‘intelligent complex adaptive system’ rather than ‘complex adaptive systems’ or ‘human complex adaptive system’ and I’m not sure why they do it. Certainly they can call a CAS whatever they want to call it, but I’m not sure bringing intelligence into a new name for a CAS adds much to things beyond contributing yet another term to the already almost mind boggling thicket of terminology now in use by people working with complexity theory.

The authors like to use models and figures, over thirty of them, to illustrate the points they make about intelligent complex adaptive systems, and some of them (e.g., on pages 31, 159 and 194) would have contributed greater clarity to the text in their absence. Maybe the only genuinely accurate way to model organizations and other living systems is to think of them as their

own abstractions. If that is the case, then we certainly can forgive the authors if their illustrations do not always work well.

So is *Organizing Survival in the New World* a contribution to the literature? As a clear, sometimes even eloquent summary of where we are in our thinking about the management of organizations as complex adaptive systems, this book is about as good as it gets. That said, the Bennets do not go where no one has gone before with complexity theory. That's okay though. Whether we are talking about students in a management course, hard driving practitioners, or armchair theorists, everyone working with complexity theory can profit from a good book about where we are in our current thinking about organizations as complex adaptive systems and this does exactly that and does it very well.

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