Richard Claydon & Stefan Norrvall
Calling for the rise of a new type of organizational hero capable of slaying the zombies and monsters of meaningless work, impotent planning & lost leadership.

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Place: Level 20, 135 King Street, Sydney
Monsters and Heroes Mini-E-Book: An Overview

The motivation for this book is very simple.

We believe that the ways of thinking that underpinned industrial era organizations are no longer relevant in our post-industrial society. They are, however, dominant and pervasive. They are extremely difficult to move past. So they remain. Living fossils that prevent contemporary organizational life being purposeful and engaging.

Popular management thought is patently failing to deal with this problem. It has become obsessed with disruption and entrepreneurship. Abdicated all responsibility towards those working in established organizations. Who are left to cope on their own.

Although the conditions of organizational life that many experience are ignored by those who should take them seriously, they do permeate our wider social lives. For many, organizational living is characterized by anxiety, fear, meaninglessness, confusion and unpredictable, never-ending change.

We believe these conditions are best captured by contemporary TV shows such as The Walking Dead, Game of Thrones, House of Cards and Breaking Bad. We also believe that the heroes of those shows better illustrate the actions of contemporary organizations than the heroic leaders that the popular press throws at us.

To address this, this E-Book examines the following:

1: The death of the promise of the strong culture movement, still the most dominant form of organization for the vast majority of employees.

2: The shift in popular television shows from the decadent lives of the rich and powerful to the dystopian lives of the struggling to survive.

3: The character of traditionally romantic, godlike heroic leaders versus the character of the trickster, ironically aware hero of dystopian times

4: The nature of the heroic journey in organizations undergoing complex change.

5: A step-based analysis of the journey that enables:

- Reflection
- Collaboration
- Mapping the Organization
- Plotting the Change
- Agility

We are not trying to provide a methodology of doing things. Just get you to think differently about organizations and organizational change.

Throughout the text, we provide thinking points and takeaways that might help you in the reflective process. No hard and fast rules. Just ways to put you on your toes. And keep you there. You, not we, have to be the hero that slays your organizational monsters.

Richard Claydon & Stefan Norrvall
The Themes of our Social World: Zombies, Dragons, Machiavels & Druggies


Why are long-dead Eighties TV shows relevant?

Because, at the same time these shows were being made, management thought was experiencing a frenzy of newfound enthusiasm. The birth of the strong culture movement. A massive outpouring of promises made in the name of the high-tech way of life. A new era, new work organizations, a new man and woman. Huge profits, futuristic innovation, humane working environments, and happy, productive workers.

We were shown images of utopia. Given promises of an organizational society without discontents. Shown a “you can have it all” world that fulfills dreams. And releases us from limited opportunity. All captured by TV through big hair, large shoulder pads, glittery dresses and Stetson hats.

"So what", you might ask. I know we are all used to the seriousness of management and organization being transmitted with numbers. Via statistics. Charts. Tables. Cognitive science. Organizational psychology. And other such serious scientific disciplines. What have Dallas and Dynasty got to do with all of this?

We forget that organizations are collections of humans interacting with each other. And that human action and interaction have been captured by other disciplines during the centuries. Art, literature, drama, music. And TV shows. That reveal underlying, subconscious themes that concern us all.

Long arc TV shows are the dominant art form of our age. They capture socio-cultural themes in the most revealing way. So, if Dallas and Dynasty captured the optimism and emerging decadence of strong cultural organizations, what do we have now? Have the promises of the Eighties come true?

Or have we seen the coming of a different age. That was illustrated and predicted in the critical analysis of the strong culture movement. This research was dark. It contained apocalyptic visions. Warnings of tyranny, domination and oppression. Is that what we now experience? Let’s have a look at the themes informing the most successful shows today. And see where we might be.

**Thinking Point:** According to Gideon Kunda, in the 1980s “massive outpouring of promises were made in the name of the high-tech way of life—of a new era, new work organizations, a new man and woman; of huge profits, futuristic innovation, humane working environments, and happy, productive workers”. Has this come to pass? If not, why not?

**Takeaway:** The heroes of Dallas and Dynasty were larger than life oil barons and media tycoons. Big lives, big dreams and big promises. The heroes of today’s TV are ordinary people forced to make good. The local sheriff looking after his family. The misshapen and cynical dwarf. The bastard son and widowed daughter. Our society no longer believes in the traditional hero. So don’t try to be one!
Monsters

Hordes of undead zombies. Shuffling around in a mindless herd. Only motivated into action by random noise, light, movement. And food. Staying one step ahead of them, constantly vigilant, constantly on edge, close-knitted tribal groups.

Theme 1 - Fear of a Meaningless Existence: The fear driving the character’s decisions in The Walking Dead is not death. But becoming one of the undead. Inhumanly animated. With no purpose. No meaning. Killing anything that is alive and vibrant. Turning it into just one more member of the unthinking masses.

The characters fear that so much that they will lovingly plunge a knife into an ex-colleagues brain. To spare them such a horrific fate. The driving motivation is to escape and prevent the nihilistic existence of the undead zombie. To create something alive. Different. Something worth living for. Despite all the hopelessness surrounding them.

Theme 2 - Reborn Tribalism: The characters develop a total and complete trust in each other. Knowing that they have each other’s backs. No matter what. To gain the trust of group, you must prove that you can make good decisions in completely chaotic circumstances. That you will risk your own safety to help your friends.

This trust has a dark companion. The total distrust of different groups. And their different ways of combating the dead. Ways that look, at first glance, to be more civil. More sophisticated. Better. But ultimately result in the same grisly end. Death and destruction. The loss of community. The end of hope. So, group gets pitted against group. And ultimately only the most adaptable survives.

Theme 3 - Be Alert and Agile: The group’s journey has no end. At every step and at every resting point, they must evaluate and reevaluate their surroundings. To be sure it is safe enough to rest. But knowing the safety is temporary. And illusory.

That to stay ahead of the pack they must keep moving. Be quick and agile. Work out innovative ways to stay alive. More creative ways to kill the threats. By being wary of new threats and quickly adapting, the group survives. Standing still and assuming safety ensures death.

Thinking Point: Is modern knowledge work (timed, managerially controlled, data driven) just the digitalized rebirth of the industrial age management style? Is it a new drudgery driving the fear of a meaningless existence?

Takeaway: Survival in a meaningless environment requires agility, speed and tight-knit collaboration. But there’s no utopian end-point. No achieved goal that signals the end. It’s just a reoccurring cycle. Make sure you have opportunities to break you and others out of this cycle for rebooting opportunities.
To the north, undead winter walkers ready to kill everything in their path. Merciless and pitless. To the south, a warrior queen with a slave army and might weapons of war. Internally, warring factions split the country apart. Rendering it impotent against these dual existential threats.

**Theme 1 - The End of Traditional Leadership:** We are used to our leaders and heroes being virtuous. Having a noble countenance. Ethical motivations. Power coming with responsibility. Here, political ambition lays this all to waste. The most virtuous character is murdered in Act One. His son betrayed by his supposed allies. The whole house massacred. The only remnants lost, hidden, crippled, immature or exiled. With virtue dead, the country is ruled by the ruthless. Willing to do anything to hold onto power.

From the depths of this corrupt futility, new and unexpected leaders and heroes arise. One is guilty of regicide. And incest. And adultery. Another is a misshapen, cynical dwarf who whores and drinks. Both do terrible things. Brought to the lowest of the low. And from the depths of their despair, they emerge changed. Ready to make a difference. To redeem themselves after they’ve finally seen the horrific reality of the world.

**Theme 2 - The Impotence of Planning:** Numerous clans attempt to gain control of the kingdom. Some show great strategic skill. And tactical excellence. Winning battle after battle. Finding ally after ally. Seemingly ready to win the kingdom. Just one step away. Then each gets betrayed. Unexpected events overcome them. Unseen shadows kill them. Supposed allies rebel. All the strategic and tactical decision-making undermined by complex and chaotic events over which they have no control. Or knowledge. Things they can’t have hoped to predict. Or influence. Laying waste to all their talented planning.

**Theme 3 - The Unpredictability of Power:** It is impossible to predict which characters will fall. The noblest get killed. The most ruthless get killed. Leaders get murdered. Innocent children get murdered. The most vicious characters have tender moments. Naive characters display unexpected ruthlessness. Even the littlest unpredictable action ripples into an unexpected future.

Then there are the dragons. The most powerful creatures in the realm. To control them, you must show no fear. No hesitation. Show you are worthy. Powerful, ruthless, predatory killing machines. You have no idea how they’ll act. Take to you. Or rip you to shreds. To get the power and success you crave, you must dare to enter the Dragons Den. Or the Shark Tank.

**Thinking Point:** What is leadership? Is it something that can be taught? Is it something inherent to the person? Or does it emerge as and when the situation requires it, often from the most unexpected sources?

**Takeaway:** If leadership is emergent and unexpected, how can you identify it in practice? As the world speeds up, the available time to see these emergent moments of leadership shrinks. Look for creative processes can you put in place to take advantage of these moments and give you a competitive edge.
The behind-the-scenes deal breaker turned political powerhouse. Ruthlessness as success. The cynical, sarcastic, manipulating Machiavellian as the central character. Explaining what he really thinks through the fourth wall.

**The Theme - The Rise of Machiavellian Leadership:** It is a simple tale of the lust for power. The ruthless stab in the back of anyone who stands in your way. Sometimes figuratively. Sometimes literally. The idea that there is something noble in leadership is stripped away. With power comes no responsibility.

The methods of ambitious leadership are revealed. Indirect communication. Promising one thing to the unsuspecting while planning something else. Making fools of anyone who has moral fibre. Making deals with power brokers, then doing their bidding. Giving up all you once stood for in the desperate desire for more power.


**Thinking Point:** Frank Underwood is the most traditional leader of all the characters in our currently popular shows. Moneyed, elegant, stylish, well mannered, charming, witty, and debonair. Yet he has no ethical morality. No sense of purpose other than to seize power. Driven by unrelenting ambition when nothing is ever enough. Why are we compelled to watch such a character?

**Takeaway:** Dr Travis Bradberry, of LinkedIn fame, talks of using emotional intelligence to be a more successful manager. Get in touch with your feelings so you can manage your reactions to events. Use clever tricks to appear smarter or more confident than you actually are. Fake it until you make it. But does a successful manager = an effective manager? Frank Underwood is undoubtedly successful. But effective? Would you want to be working for him? Be careful of advice aimed at getting you promoted and not about doing your job better.
A cancer-stricken chemistry teacher with no savings to leave his family. A quick an easy way to make money that becomes a living nightmare. Living dual lives. Losing your family. Everything that you held dear. A contemporary tragedy.

The Theme - The End of Personal Morality: Walter White starts as a good and kind family man. He has sacrificed his earning potential to teach chemistry at the local high school. The family are expecting a second child. A happy existence. But then cancer strikes. And Walter turns his talent for chemistry into a money making scheme so his family are provided for after his death.

The tales is a classic tragedy. Walter succeeds in everything he touches. His talent for synthesizing drugs is unsurpassed. And slowly his ability to be a gangster grows with it. There is no character that stands against him that survives the show. He makes a fortune. His family will be looked after.

Yet, he destroys himself. Every step he takes towards his goal takes a bit of his humanity with it. He loses his wife and son's trust. He gets his brother-in-law killed. He murders one partner. Lets his other partner's love interest die. This partner is kidnapped and forced into slave labour. The Walter he wanted to be gets taken away by the work he is doing. He loses himself. His humanity. Everything he holds dear. Through the incredible success in his working endeavours. The tragedy of one's talents undermining oneself.

Thinking Point: Walter White is destroyed by his descent into a moral-free existence. Which, paradoxically, is motivated by a deep morality about providing for the family. Are you morally conflicted? Are the contradictory imperatives stressful? How might they be for those undergoing the change initiative?

Takeaway: Strengths-based training is becoming increasingly trendy in the contemporary organizational space. Classic tragedies all follow a plot line in which the hero undermines himself by an over-reliance of his core strengths. This reliance results in a trained incapacity and cognitive bias that prevents him seeing what is really going on. Be careful of over-reliance on one way of doing things in complex conditions of change. Or risk a tragic outcome.
It's Time to Stop and Think

Each of these themes has relevance to our current state of organization, management and leadership. You might find resonance. Everywhere. Or somewhere. Or you might regard them as overly dramatic. That's fine. But they patently exist. And inform hugely popular shows.

Hopefully they have made you think about what organizations might be becoming. How leadership is changing. How traditional forms of management are failing. The shapes work is taking. And, despite our art revealing all this in graphic detail, how we aren’t really addressing it.

We are stuck in a system of management thought that originated almost four decades ago. Which has been shown not to work. To produce something other than intended. Which is creaking and straining to complete breaking point under the very technologies it helped produce. And we are struggling to work out what to do.

We live in a world full of advanced miracles. Gadgets and games of every type and description. Computers in our pockets. Connected to everything at all times. Ending the short, nasty and brutish existence of previous generations.

We should be engaged. Authentic. Resilient. Mindful. Fit and healthy. Billions are spent on achieving all of this. It should be the most utopian existence imaginable.

Yet we live in fear. And anxiety. Not trusting the establishment. Awash in cynicism and sarcasm. Stuck in meaningless jobs. Desperate to find a way out. Trying to survive despite it all. Fearful we are at the beginnings of a new dystopia.

A dystopia (from the Greek δυσ- and τόπος, alternatively, cacotopia, kakotopia, or simply anti-utopia) is a community or society that is undesirable or frightening.


Which future are we moving towards?
Heroes

Storytelling 1 | Tales of Organisational Monsters

We all have tales to tell of organizational monsters. The change program that promised to deliver loyal, hard-working and enthusiastic employees but produced anxious, cynical, sarcastic game-players. The microscopically planned project that was undermined by impossible to hit deadlines, spiraling costs and a total lack of motivation to continue. The once engaged team that was pulled part by manipulative people trying to take credit for their achievements.

Take opportunities to tell your tales of organizational dystopia. Feel free to embellish and exaggerate. After all, stories are not just what happened, but the myths that follow them.

Storytelling 1: The Monstrous Triad

Plot the stories you tell and hear on the triad. Do they involve meaningless work tasks? Drawn out planning sessions that delivered nothing but frustration and dead ends? Or the unwanted plotting of a third party who was using the project for personal gain?

Meaningless work

Impotent Planning

Self-interested Politics
Three Types of Organisational Hero

Hero Type 1: The Traditional Hero

The traditional hero is a god, king, prince or somebody with special powers. He can predict exactly what will happen and use his special skills to ensure a winning strategy. These special powers range from:

- Zeus' lightening bolts,
- Charlemagne's exemplary battlefield strategy,
- Mr Darcy's ability to save the Bennett family from poverty and embarrassment
- Superman's x-ray vision, speed and ability to fly.

The popular press sells us images of larger than life organizational heroes. Jobs, Zuckerberg, Branson, Musk, Trump! Uses their personality traits to explain their success. But it is mythical. Their specific superpowers might be completely useless in helping with your tasks. Might make things worse, not better. It's you in the messy dirt of your organizational change, not them. So it's up to you to be the hero.

Hero Type 2: The Dystopian Hero

In dystopian literature, long-term planning is undermined by unpredictable, complex and chaotic circumstances. There are too many different ways to interpret reality for kingly leadership to comprehend. There are too many unpredictable things that might happen to make long-term planning viable. And there are too many people whose actions, whether foolish or malevolent, can bring everything tumbling down.

In such conditions, the classic hero becomes a tragic figure. His very skillsets (the ability to plan, predict, lead from the top) undermine him.

A new type of hero emerges. Somebody at home in the complexity and confusion of this volatile, uncertain, complex and ambiguous world.

The dystopian hero can emerge from anywhere. He survives on seeing things infinitesimally more quickly than anybody else. And, through clever thinking and quick reactions, gain miniscule advantages that keeps him alive. One step ahead of danger. Able to continue his journey as others falter.

Not a planner, but a fixer of plans gone astray. Not a lordly strategist, but an agile on-the-field tactician. Not larger than life and the centre of attention, but a backstage trickster arranging things unseen. Not ambitiously self-interested, but willing to sacrifice himself for the betterment of those he cares for. Such heroes might be:

- The tight-knit survival group found in The Walking Dead
- The "behind the scenes" unrecognised hero as in Tyrion from Game of Thrones
- The “for the greater good” hero in the shape of Walter White from Breaking Bad

Just as you did for the previous triad, tell stories about how you heroically achieved impossible changes. Did you run with a close-knit team? Did you have to do a lot of backstage manipulation? Or did you have to sacrifice things you held dear for the greater good of the project?
We currently experience volatile marketplaces. Uncertain employment. Complex organizational structures. And ambiguous organizational environments.

But we can’t be content living dystopian lives. Always struggling to stay one step ahead of impending disaster. We have to survive dystopian fear and deliver a better tomorrow. Which needs a new type of organizational hero.

One that can bond together disparate characters into an effective group, make things happen behind the scenes, and wear different masks when dealing with different people. One that can strives to gain experiential context of situations, listens to multiple points of view, respects otherness and difference, and acts as a catalyst.

**Hero Type 3: The Holistic-Ironic Hero**

*Thus far, we have tried to characterize the gap between the utopian image of organization and the more dystopian reality of organizational life. We have examined the fear, meaninglessness and unpredictability that, for many, comprise organizational existence. And looked at how change agents survive in this volatile, unpredictable, complex and ambiguous environment. But we want to help you do more than just survive. We want you to thrive. To make a difference. And for that, we must go one step further.*

In dystopian literature, traditional heroes are so convinced they understand the contours of the plot, they contribute to their own downfall. They realize far too late that they haven’t grasped its complexities at all. This has tragic consequences. The leader falls. All cultural achievements crumble to dust. We return to brutish existence.

Dystopian literature has a comic counterpart. Where the traditional hero succeeds despite himself. Helped by tricksters that do most of their good work offstage and behind the scenes. Who see the complexities of the plot, predict possible outcomes, and navigate the traditional hero in the right direction. They are *eirons* (or ironic heroes).

These comic counterpart of dystopian literature have three character types:

**1: The narrator or central character (traditional hero):** Over-confident in his intelligence and qualities, he cannot understand the complexity of his situation, while often being convinced he can. Well-known examples are Doctor John Watson,
The Heroic Quest

confounded by Sherlock Holmes’ extraordinary abilities, P.G. Wodehouse’s Bertie Wooster, totally reliant on Jeeves’ help, or Doctor Who’s wide-eyed companions.

Imagine these as the average organizational employee during change. Doing their best to work things out in a chaotic and confusing environment. But forever falling short of comprehending what exactly is going on.

2: Colourful supporting characters that block progress: The wide range of Sherlockian and Whovian villains, and Bertie’s formidable aunts and ridiculous friends.

Imagine these as people whom deliberately or accidentally hinder the change. They can exist anywhere in the organization, from the highest to lowest rungs.

3: The clever, tricky, (often) charming and complex ironic “hero”: Holmes and Jeeves are classic examples. These characters have three flavours:

- The trickster-eiron exercises wile and trickery to facilitate successful progress
- The wise-eiron, often an older figure, pulls the strings from behind the stage and emerges as the key manipulator towards the end of the drama.
- The sarcastic-eiron does not participate in the action, but makes cynical and sarcastic comments from the side, which reveal what is really going on.

We also have some of these character types in our TV shows. The heroic nerds in Doctor Who, The Big Bang Theory, Mr Robot, Scorpion or the reimagined Sherlocks.

NB: The idea of an ironic hero or leader thriving in complex organizational environments is not new. One of the top ten most read HBR articles is Seven Transformations of Leadership by David Rooke and William R. Torbert. This draws from research arguing that irony informs the highest level of leadership development.

David Rooke and William R. Torbert’s Leadership Development Framework

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<tr>
<th>LEVEL OF DEVELOPMENT</th>
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<tr>
<td>Level 8: Ironic 0.5% of US adults</td>
<td>Focused on being non-controlling &amp; witnessing the flow of experience. Deeply visionary, holistic, whole perspective; takes multiple points of view effortlessly. Respects the essence in others, no matter how different.</td>
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<td>Level 7: Alchemical 1% of US adults</td>
<td>Focused on interplay of awareness; thought, action &amp; efforts; seeks personal/social transformation; embraces appreciation; attuned to complexity of inventing, making, systemic interactions &amp; dynamic processes.</td>
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<td>Level 6: Transforming 4% of US adults</td>
<td>Focused on process, principles &amp; self-fulfillment. Generates organizational &amp; personal transformation. Consists of systems &amp; systemic crisis points where feedback is for growth.</td>
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<td>Level 5: Redefining 10% of US adults</td>
<td>Focused on context, systemic connections, and own role in them. Collaborative; questions assumptions and group norms; tolerant of differences; seeks independent, creative work. Open to &amp; asks for feedback.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Level 4: Achiever 10% of US adults</td>
<td>Focused on delivering results, effectiveness, goals, leads for success within the system. Interested in causes, reasons, consequences; future and learning-oriented; prefers accepting feedback.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Level 3: Expert 38% of US adults</td>
<td>Focused on expertise &amp; procedure. Prefers efficiency over effectiveness. Rules by reason &amp; logic; sees from a technical, specialized perspective. Seeks the “right way” before asking for feedback.</td>
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<td>Level 2: Diplomat 12% of US adults</td>
<td>Focused on socially expected behavior; approval. Loyal to group, conforms; avoids interpersonal conflict. Sees things as right vs. wrong, us vs. them. Status conscious; speeds in generalities. Feedback heard as personal disapproval.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Level 1: Opportunist 5% of US adults</td>
<td>Focused on own immediate needs; opportunities, self-protection. Strong fight/flight response; short-term horizon. Focus on concrete things &amp; personal advantage; sees rules as loss of freedom. Rejects feedback.</td>
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The remainder of this e-book imagines what the heroic quest of the holistic-ironic hero might look like in today’s complex organizational environments.
The Heroic Journey

A five-step model enabling the new organisational hero to stay one-step ahead of complex problems and chaotic disasters.

STEP 01
The Irony Bath
Step away from the hot and bothered moment. Access multiple types of thinking. Witness and reflect.

STEP 02
Find your Cynics
Find the people that can help. Those who can and do think differently. The cynics and the ironists.

STEP 03
Mythology Audit
Map out the systems, symbols and stories that reinforce positive and negative behaviour.

STEP 04
Pathfinding
Widen the limits of discretion. Find the many paths you could follow to reach your goal.

STEP 05
Agile Bicycle
Start the journey but be ready and willing to cycle back through the steps.

Richard Claydon & Stefan Norrvall
The Heroic Journey

Step One: The Irony Bath

The first stage of the journey is to enter the reflective space beyond organisational absurdities and politics. Moving into the cool waters of ironic reflection help you forget the hot and bothered enthusiasms and frustrations of everyday organizational life. These waters also help you reach the ironic level of development, enabling visionary, holistic, unitive, synthetic and catalytic possibilities.

The ironic space is inherently plural, activating and enabling multiple perspectives and ways of seeing and interpreting the world. In the organizational environment, it comprises at least the six types of thinking below:

1: Analytical Thinking
The ability to separate the business into its constituent parts in order to study the parts and their relations. Produces a functionalist understanding of the organisation. Reduces performance to numbers. People to personality traits and competencies. And projects to step-based processes.

2: Creative Thinking
The ability to see the world in a novel way. Occurs in unpredictable shifts and flows. Elegantly combines images, words and patterns to discover new possibilities. Opens up new ways of being and doing. Which are evaluated as creative or not by experts, peers and the public.

3: Critical Thinking
The ability to follow reason and evidence wherever they may lead. A systematic way of solving problems. Possessing curiosity, fairness and a confidence in reasoning. Helps determine between genuinely innovative and snake-oily solutions.

4: Design Thinking
The ability to empathetically understand what humans need. To take on board context and culture before delivering ways to do things. Actively engages people in the process. And then learns and improves by and through making things. Working out their strengths and weaknesses. Redesigning. And so on.

5: Systems Thinking
The ability to see the "big picture" rather than isolated parts. To understand reoccurring systemic problem, often made worse by previous attempts to fix them. Takes environmental variables into consideration. And deals with non-obvious problems.

6: Synthetic Thinking
The ability to turn a combination of ideas into a complex whole. Requires wide cross-disciplinary knowledge. Joins together concepts from a range of different disciplines (e.g. management, philosophy, sociology, art) to produce coherent pathways forward.

Thinking Point: Leadership tends to be predicted through personality traits. Is a capacity for multiple ways of thinking a better indicator?

Takeaway: It is unlikely you will be skilled at all types of thought, at least initially. Look to others to fill in the intellectual gaps.
Step Two: Find your Cynics

So how do you fight off the walking dead without losing your head during the process and without compromising your morals? How do you re-energise an organisation and bring its people back from the land of the walking dead? How do you find the wise-eirons and sarcastic-eirons to help you, the trickster-eiron, succeed?

Well, that's the million-dollar question.

If you watch The Walking Dead, you know that any attempt to successfully fight zombies by attacking individual zombies is doomed to fail. The people on your side that fall in the fight will join the other side. One more zombie to kill. You are fighting a losing battle. Ignore the individuals. Find the source of the problem and deal with it.

*The realisation of what the source is for many organisations is illustrated well in this Walt Kelly's Pogo cartoon.*

Many leaders will only see one way out. To copy what others do or what worked in the past (which, of course, rarely makes you a leader in any field). Others find themselves where two roads diverge. Do they do what everyone else does or do something different? Few have the courage to take the road less travelled. Travelling on this path takes courage, stamina and openness to unlearn and learn. But it is the better path.

**Identify your cynics (wise-eirons) and ironists (sarcastic-eirons).** They will be essential to locate, not only because they sit on a world of knowledge about the many ways in which your organisation trips itself. But they also care enough about the organisation and its people to work with you on changing it. For some, it will be an opportunity to put into action things they have thought about for a long time. This is also an opportunity to map the informal networks of the organisation to get a feel for who is connected to whom and where the key influencers are.

Approaching traditional prickly, difficult or freethinking people to help facilitates your appreciating multiple points of view. It enables you to respect otherness and difference. It forces you to be synthetic (combining multiple viewpoints) and catalytic (bringing together those of differing qualities to create something new).

*Thinking Point:* When you start a consulting engagement people are often quick to tell you who will be difficult to work with and who will give you trouble. *Often the advice is to not bother with these people and work with the ones openly supportive of the initiative. Is that advice good?*

*Takeaway:* We’ve found that these are often the people who: Often sit on invaluable knowledge about what is really going on in the organisation and why. Are usually not difficult to work with, just frustrated with how things are. (NB: we have put recommendations forward for changes that fell on deaf ears when they came from staff. We speak with the staff about the irony of this and it being something we’d like to change moving forward.)
Step Three: Audit Mythologies, Systems and Symbols

Before beginning your journey, you need to understand what might prevent its completion. This requires an audit of organizational mythologies, systems and symbols.

Understand the current mythologies of your organisation. You need to know what the current beliefs are in the organisation, concerning behaviours seen as positive or negative on the values continua. Mythologies are not about individual views, but the shared beliefs that create social cohesion amongst groups in the organisation. Understanding the present reality for people in your organisation is essential as it is from here, and only from here transformation can begin.

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<th>Values Continua</th>
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<tr>
<td>Trustworthy ← Untrustworthy</td>
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<td>Loving ← Unloving</td>
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<td>Honest ← Dishonest</td>
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<td>Fair ← Unfair</td>
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<tr>
<td>Courageous ← Cowardly</td>
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<td>Dignifying ← Undignifying</td>
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Conduct a Systems & Symbols Audit. You need to lift the covers and look deeper into the fabric of the organisation to identify systems and symbols that reinforce positive and negative behaviours. The underlying assumption here is that systems drive behaviour, so this provides valuable insights regarding possible intervention points. A tool that might help this process is Dave Snowden’s SenseMaker.

Questions to consider include:

• What are the underlying assumptions about people and work?
• What systems are needed to deliver on our purpose?
• Are the systems designed from a Theory X or Theory Y view?
• Are systems designed or just emerged over time without stated purpose and intent?
• Are the work relationships clearly understood (i.e. the value creation relationships)?
• What are the systems linkages and boundaries?
• What symbols do we have in the organization and how do people interpret those?

Thinking Point: The answers to these questions can be confronting to people with a traditional perspective on management. How might you reframe them to combat resistance from senior organizational players?

Takeaway: Common themes in a positive organization are: Purpose over profit; Cooperation and collaboration in self-organizing teams, networks and ecosystems over central control; Radical decentralization and radical transparency of information; Experimentation over planning; Horizontal conversations over top-down communications; and a Theory Y Mindset.
Step Three: Pathfinding & the Limits of Discretion

Once you have reflected and collected, you are ready to examine the possible route your journey will take. This journey must be multidimensional, vibrant and open to possibilities. The below metaphor on ECG lifelines helps to visualize this process.

The ECG Monitor of your Organisation

Most organisations look more like the image below. Through policies, rules, standardised work practices, ERPs, etc., the organisation has flat-lined, creating an army of the walking dead. The end state is a defined shape. This represents the crazy assumption that we always can identify the end and work towards it.

Thinking Point: Traditionally organised companies have standardised practices that limit possibilities. Which most limit your attempts to change things (ones already in place and/or ones implemented in the change)?

Takeaway: Complex problems aren’t solvable via traditional means. You must sense weak signals and amplify them; pay attention to what works and ask why; be informed by stories, myths and parables; constantly scan for meaning through the system; extricate the quiet and hidden future from the noise of the culture; recognize that solutions will come at you obliquely, out of the blue and in surprising ways; and thus cultivate processes that allow that to happen.
Step Five: The Agile Bicycle

You have detached from the hot and bothered world, reflected on possible approaches, collected a multi-perspective team, mapped out possible blockages, and accepted there will be a range of possible pathways to completion. It’s now about moving quickly.

Agile is a trendy term. But we aren’t talking about the formal process of agile. Agility here is the ability to quickly cycle through the steps to stay ahead of the zombies and monsters waiting to tear you down. So, when beginning to pedal, take care of the following:

Test and Experiment: In a complex environment there is no certainty. With no certainty a fixed plan and a defined path seems risky. You are never sure which pathway to completion will hold the least peril. Make small experiments to test your way forward. Be prepared to cycle back down the path if the experiment fails. And start down a new one.

Understand the social dimension: The technical elements are usually the easiest aspects. Sometimes even irrelevant. To make sure your head stays connected to your neck and to be moral, understand the social dimension is where it is won or lost. Good social process will carry you a long way. People can deal with many things if they feel they are on the left-hand side of the values continua. Behave as if your organisation has already transformed. Live the behaviour you feel represents the new.

Engage the whole organisation in an ongoing conversation about the future: All the answers for creating a positive future are already contained within the organisation. The challenge is to enable the creativity and ingenuity of your people and get their ideas into action. Successful change is co-created, not implemented by edict from the top. Take the time to develop a connection with people to understand their needs. Ideas and strategies to meet these needs will flow freely once the needs are clear. There is a range of helpful techniques for facilitating large groups sessions, e.g. the World Café or Open Space Technology, where good social process is at the centre of the design.

Acknowledge that some challenges will be complex and others complicated: In the context of organisations, these are not words to be used interchangeably, even though in everyday life this might be the case. Think carefully about how you might approach a complex challenge differently to a complicated challenge and what might prevent you from succeeding in either.

Thinking Point: Is having a leader necessary in a complex system? Or can anybody lead? Are people accountable to one manager? Or is everybody accountable to the organization and each other? When making a decision, should you only ask people with expertise in the matter? Or everyone that will be meaningfully affected?

Takeaway: In a complex environment, conventional top-down change management is insufficient and limiting. Everyone’s actions are capable of helping or hindering the journey. Everyone can perform the act of leadership to influence systems. Everyone can sense issues or opportunities and address them. Everyone can access collective wisdom in pursuit of a sound decision.