

## Management Agility

*Evolvagility* provides a set of tools and practices that support the emergence of an everywhere capacity for *Sense-and-Respond* leadership—a form of inner agility that creates a foundation for deep and sustainable organizational agility.

As individuals and collectives across the organization grow in their capacity for both inner and outer agility, they quite naturally gain an increased ability to address more of the kinds of tasks and responsibilities previously held by management and leadership: holding deadlines, interacting (and collaborating) with business stakeholders, resolving interpersonal issues and conflicts on their teams, planning their work, and so on. And, as individuals and teams continue to grow the complexity of their Action Logic—at both the individual and collective level—and become more skillful in the spheres of relationship and organizational systems, the range of tasks and responsibilities they are able to take on only grows.

This shift in role capability fostered through the growth of both outer and inner agility follows a key adaptive organizational principle: The people closest to the work are in the best position to make decisions, and coordinate and organize the activities related to that work. And as people take on more management responsibility related directly to their work, they become better able to assess, think through, and intelligently resolve larger institutional impediments that impact that work, but which ordinarily fall upon management to resolve. And just as the tasks and activities directly related to their work fall naturally within the purview of those closest to that work, so too do ways of assessing, understanding, and resolving the larger institutional impediments which impact that work.

As individuals increase their leadership capacity in this way, it makes sense for management and leadership to step back and loosen the reins in order to make room for individuals and teams throughout the organization to step in. As individuals and teams throughout the organization take on more of the tasks, responsibilities, and activities traditionally held by management and leadership, the job of management and leadership changes dramatically.

For many leaders and managers, this can be a daunting prospect. Among the many questions which they now face, their most pressing question is probably this: If so much of what I've been doing will be done by others—those closest to the work being done and the outcomes being generated—what is *my* job? What is the nature of *my* role?

The answers to these questions are to be found when we shift the context—the very meaning—of what it is to be an organizational leader or manager. The context of this newly constituted role has two, interrelated parts.

At the heart of it all is **growing inner agility in you**, which has been the primary focus of this book; it is the inner foundation on which everything else sits and is the source of inner capabilities needed for all that you do. It is here where each of us grows our capacity for *Sense-and-Respond* leadership, as I've been describing it in this book: as that which is an *everywhere* phenomenon, which one grows from *inside out*, and which arises in *relationships*—and as that which is defined as “showing the way,” not by *doing* or *telling*, but through the complexity and quality of one's *sensemaking*. In this regard, *Sense-and-Respond* leadership distinguishes a leadership that is, for the most part, *role agnostic*. One could be a Scrum Master and **be** a leader; one could be a QA engineer and **be** a leader; one could be a product manager and **be** a leader.

*Role* plays a part in the growth of Agile leadership within an organization when we come to the position of organizational leader—whether a development manager, a middle-level director, or a top-level executive leader.

What is different for the organization leader or manager has to do with their *role*, and the job associated with that role.

This brings us to the second part of the new context for the role of the organizational leader and managers, which is **growing inner agility across the organization**.

The philosophical grounding for this part of the new role of organizational leadership is that to the degree people—both as individuals and as collectives—throughout the organization grow the complexity of the ways in which they make sense of their world—their *Action Logics*—they will increase their ability to deal with, and solve, the complex organizational challenges that ordinarily fall into the lap of organizational management. Your role as an organizational leader therefore shifts from managing for the things people *do* (and need to do) in order to realize key organizational initiatives—to growing capability in people so that they find *themselves* managing *themselves* to do the things that need to be done in order to realize key organizational initiatives.

## Management by Indirection

This new management imperative calls for a shift in focus: from managing through directing, coordinating, and motivating people to do this or that—to creating conditions that empower and enable ways of thinking that make it possible for people to do their own directing, coordinating, and motivating. From the perspective of *Evolvability*, and the practices through which it promotes the growth of people’s *inner* agility capabilities, the job of organizational leadership is to bring about the emergence of environmental conditions and structures that enable the growth and mastery of those practices and the growth of those capabilities.

The nature of this new kind of leadership and management calls for several mindset shifts:

- **From** posing and pushing (and in some cases *enforcing*) specific processes and practices needed to realize key initiatives—to creating the conditions necessary for individuals and teams, throughout the organization, *themselves* to grow the processes and practices best suited to the work needed to realize those initiatives.
- **From** trying to get others to exhibit certain kinds of behaviors and to execute particular kinds of actions—to creating the conditions necessary for those others to cultivate those behaviors and that capacity for action *in themselves*—by deliberately growing themselves, and those around them, *developmentally*; that is, from the *inside out*.
- **From** establishing institutional structures, procedures, rules, and systems that support the day-to-day operations of an organization—to creating conditions necessary for individuals and teams, throughout the organization, to develop the wherewithal *in themselves* to grow those structures, procedures, rules, and systems in ways that *organically* support those operations.

Organizational and management theorist Robert Chia calls such a management approach *management by indirection*.<sup>1</sup> The term “indirection” refers to a form of management in which the manager “manages” by effectively taking him or herself out of the middle of things, and steps back in order to be better able to pay attention to the greater unfolding of things. From this place of remove from the hurly-burly of organizational goings-on, management happens, not through *direct* control, but through the *indirect* introduction of small adjustments, catalyzing ideas, vocabularies, or through the design of organizational structures—all of which

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<sup>1</sup> See Robert Chia, “In praise of strategic indirection: An essay on the efficacy of oblique ways of responding,” *M@n@gement* 16, no. 5 (2013).

have the effect of altering some aspect of the organizational environment in which people are working. As such, the manager manages by *catalyzing* rather than through *directing*.

I want to be very clear that I am not advocating a complete abandonment of management by direction. Moving toward a deliberately developmental organization takes time. Things evolve and emerge as the organization grows the leadership capacity of all of its members. In a VUCA world there is much we need to retain in terms of the skills, competencies, roles, and structures that are offered by a management by direction—and we need the stability and predictability that such a stance affords. So rather than throwing out the baby with the bathwater (in this case, throwing out the stabilizing and structuring qualities that management by direction brings), we want to include that which management by direction *can* bring, even as we move toward an increasing embrace of all that management by *indirection* can bring.

## Shifting from Management by Direction to Management by Indirection

### Management by Direction

Two pictures can help us compare management by direction, and management by indirection.

The first picture depicts the management flow as it occurs more traditionally—that is, as a form of management by *direction*.



Figure 25: Management by Direction

This management approach seeks to *direct*, in some way, the *behaviors* and *actions* of others to get them to produce some particular result or outcome in service of this or that institutional aim. Such an approach can take a variety of forms: accountability structures, performance management systems, training and development programs, development goals, and professional mentoring to name a few.

Let's take one specific example: the practice of setting professional development goals in which a direct report sets personal performance goals for the next year. Such goals are typically related to specific behavioral improvements (though we may not call them “improvements”), or to more effective actions they could take, which both you, as their manager, and the other person envision *for that person*. Those goals, and the specific behavioral and action-taking improvements they entail, are among the criteria that management and HR use during a person's annual performance review to assess overall progress.

Another example: Many organizational training programs aim to help people improve on a behavior or develop a new skill (or set of skills). Consider, for instance, a workshop on interpersonal communication. A person's manager might suggest such a workshop; or perhaps that person herself sees ways in which she could improve her communication skills. Typically, in such a workshop, one learns practices or skills that are intended to improve specific skills in communicating and relating with others. Such skills might range from that of active listening—which is the saying back to another person what you just heard them say—to the practice of body language mirroring—a neuro-linguistic programming trick to establish a more direct emotional connection with another person when they are upset.

Interventions like these are entirely valid—and in fact *necessary*—ways to invoke change and improvement in others. However, they are limited in the depth to which they can stimulate a deep, organic, and sustainably growing *Sense-and-Respond* leadership capability for two main reasons. First, the source of the impetus for an individual’s personal growth points, in subtle ways, to *you*, the manager. When push comes to shove, the direct report will do this or that thing in order to please the manager in some way (with or without conscious awareness), or to fulfill some important emotional expectation in that relationship—or simply to follow what feels like a subtle institutional expectation or directive. The arrangement has the effect of playing to the power dynamic in which one person holds a subservient position in relation to another. In such a relationship dynamic—reminiscent of the parent-child relationship—individuals relinquish, in subtle ways, their own power, including their power to think outside the box, to offer solutions which may go against the grain of cultural habit, and to effect change, whether in themselves, in others, or in the organization. That quality of individual *power* is a key asset within any organization living in a VUCA world—it is the very atomic energy on which an organization depends if it is to become a sustainably *Sense-and-Respond* organization; its loss or diminishment destroys your chances of moving toward deep and sustainable agility.

Second, the nature of personal growth that these forms of intervention stimulate focuses almost entirely on *behavioral* growth, not on *developmental* growth. Such behavioral growth—along the horizontal axis of learning we discussed in Part II—while important, fails to generate longer term, more sustainable, more broadly enabling *capability*, unless developing that deeper capability is an explicitly and deliberately held aim. Such a deeper, enabling capability applies pointedly not just to this or that particular skill or competency; rather, it informs and enables an entire range of skills and competencies—it defines the deeper *operating system* capacity on which all of those applications will now run.

When we focus on behavioral growth and improvement, one might learn, for instance, the technique of active listening—along the horizontal axis of learning and behavioral change discussed earlier—and might even come to be able to practice that technique effectively in one’s conversations. But, unless such a skill comes along with a deeper capacity for authentic relationship with others, a deeper capacity to hold perspectives different from one’s own, and a deeper capacity for genuine curiosity, that practice will have a wooden, brittle quality, coming across as staged and vaguely inauthentic.

## Management by Indirection

The following picture depicts a management by indirection, one that is better suited to catalyzing the emergence of deep *Sense-and-Respond* leadership.

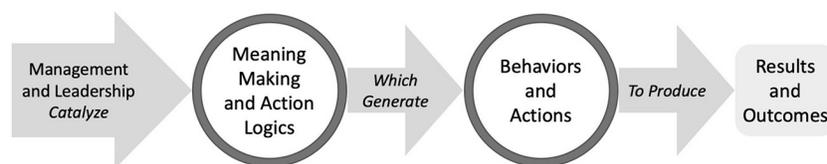


Figure 26: Management by Indirection

As shown in Figure 26, rather than trying to elicit some desired set of behaviors and actions through managing, management by **indirection** focuses on catalyzing the emergence of the inner meaning-making and Action Logics by which those behaviors and actions are informed and determined. Rather than instituting rules, policies, processes, and structures intended to change how people behave and act—as the more traditional, directive approach to management would do—a management by indirection instead endeavors to establish the conditions, expectations, ideas, and vocabularies necessary to support the growing of people’s inner meaning-making and Action Logic schemas. Similarly, rather than outsourcing the development of people to

behaviorally-oriented and competency-based training events, a management by indirection conceives of employee development as integral to people’s day-to-day work and is deliberate about establishing conditions by which that development happens. Rather than putting in place rules and policies to try to get people to change, a management by indirection would create the kind of broader, organizational **holding environment** that would empower and enable people to *change themselves*.

The body of tools and practices of *Evolvagility* defines locally activated *holding environments* (teams, working groups, partnerships, etc.) in which people engage, together, in order to uncover and enhance the quality and complexity of their inner meaning-making and to grow the kinds of skills—emerging directly from that enhanced meaning-making—needed to work effectively in a VUCA world.

*Evolvagility provides many of the elements for just such a broadly applied organizational **holding environment** and becomes a key ally to management by indirection by supplying tools and practices that people throughout the organization can use to develop the deep capacity to change themselves.*

The adoption of *Evolvagility*, with the goal of creating a deliberately developmental organization and ecosystem, creates and manifests a *holding environment* in several ways.

First, it establishes a **developmental vocabulary** that helps people clearly see and, perhaps more importantly, *name* the meaning-making that underlies and determines how they perceive and understand the world around them. Vocabularies are among the most important leverage points managers have in catalyzing the emergence of organizational transformation. Language acts as doorways to ways of thinking; words determine what we can see around us (Sensing), what kinds of actions we can imagine taking (Responding), and the manner in which we come to understand things around us (Making Sense). By introducing a research-based vocabulary that points directly to people’s inner meaning-making strategies—as does the Action Logic vocabulary described in Part III, and the *Thought-Openers* and *Deliberate Sensemaking* practices in Part IV—*Evolvagility* makes it possible for people to deeply examine the nature of their own thinking, and the impact that their thinking has on their actions in the world.

Second, *Evolvagility* provides a body of **practices** that, when practiced, has the effect of **psycho-activating inner growth and development**. As was explained in Part III (“Deliberately Facilitating Inner Development: Foundational Principles”), “psycho-activating” refers to changing something in one’s mind through the introduction of something from *outside* the mind. For instance, when you teach people new skills and practices—such as the professional coaching skills of focused listening and asking powerful questions—you *psycho-activate* their inner growth, and this activates a new way of thinking or being.

A third quality that *Evolvagility* brings to bear is that its practices foreground the **social context** of inner development. Inner development is an individual phenomenon, and yet in the workplace setting, it necessarily happens in relationship with others. Specific practices such as *deliberately developmental conversations*—a form of peer coaching that helps an individual see how the way in which they make meaning of a situation may be helping or hampering their ability to deal with a specific challenge they are having—and *shared sensemaking conversations*—a specific conversational format that helps people be deliberate about the deeper meaning-making that shapes how they collectively view, and respond to, particular workplace situations—are inherently and necessarily *social practices*.

Meanwhile, as individuals grow their inner capacity for more complex meaning-making—and specifically as they do so within the social and organizational environments in which *Evolvagility* practices are cultivated—a new capacity for **skillful relating and communication** emerges. Though such skillfulness certainly is one that

individuals come to hold, that skillfulness also becomes a capability trait of those very relationship systems themselves. That is, as individuals develop themselves within the environment of a deliberately developmental relationship system, the relationship systems themselves evolve and develop.

As a *human technology* designed to facilitate the inner growth of both individuals and the relationship systems in which they are engaged, the distinctions and practices of *Evolvagility* make it possible to grow a deep and abiding sensemaking capability on the basis of which a new level of behavioral competence arises. This deep capability—and the new competencies it gives rise to—forms the very DNA necessary for establishing a sustainable organizational agility. Such a deep and sustaining capability is an organization’s most precious internal capital—from such a capability grows everything that defines what an organization *is* and what it can *do*.

In this regard, *Evolvagility* itself is a key tool—in that it contributes to the shaping of the larger organizational *holding environment* that supports and enables people’s developmental growth—for a management by indirection.

## A New Organizational Bargain: The Yin and Yang of The Self-Managing Organization

As a way of developmentally growing people, the tools and practices of *Evolvagility* create the foundation for a *self-managing organization*. In a self-managing organization much of what traditionally constitutes “management” is carried out by people throughout the organization,<sup>2</sup> and the people whose role is that of manager or executive leader need to shift their focus. Their focus now needs to be on creating the conditions necessary for others to grow their own inner capacity. In the context of *Evolvagility* and the distinctions and practices it provides for growing the developmental capacity of an organization’s people, organizational management has the critical role of *catalyzing and sustaining* the conditions necessary to support that growth at an organizational level.

The notion of self-management points to the context for *Sense-and-Respond* leadership. At the heart of *Sense-and-Respond* leadership is the idea that people manage themselves, not just in terms of what they **do**, but by managing how they **make meaning** in the face of the complex and challenging organizational situations that define their day-to-day work life.

*It is precisely in this way that Evolvagility becomes a key lever to management by indirection.*

What do I mean by lever? In the third century BC, in reference to designing war machines for the Greeks, Archimedes said, “Give me a lever long enough and a place to stand, and I can move the world.” In his book *The Fifth Discipline*,<sup>3</sup> Peter Senge envisioned managers using such levers; that is, managers can take small actions within their organizations that have an outsized effect.

*Evolvagility* provides a human technology by which individuals and collectives can manage themselves by managing how they make meaning. To the degree that they are successful in doing so—and to the degree they

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<sup>2</sup> For more thoughts on the notion of the self-managing organization, see Ronald Purser and Steven Cabana, *The Self-Managing Organization: How Leading Companies Are Transforming the Work of Teams for Real Impact* (The Free Press, 1998).

<sup>3</sup> Senge, *The Fifth Discipline*.

are able to bring the fruits of a more complex, adaptive, and nuanced meaning-making into skillful practice and action within the organization—they provide key **leverage** for organizational management and leadership.

*In precisely this way, Evolvagility acts as a management lever that helps to bring about a new bargain between management and those whom they manage.*

In light of this *new bargain*, the job of individuals throughout the organization, besides carrying out the tasks related directly to their specific roles, is to grow the complexity of their meaning-making and Action Logics—to be self-managing by managing the quality and complexity of their own meaning-making.

Meanwhile, the job of organizational management as it relates to the growing of *inner* agility across an organization—besides of course growing the quality and complexity of their own meaning-making, just like everyone else—is to bring about more broadly institutional conditions in which the capacity for people to so grow their inner complexity is empowered and enabled.

These two parts—the *everywhere* activity of growing inner complexity and agility that happens across the organization, and the establishing of institutional conditions that empower and enable that activity—form the *Yin and Yang* of a deep and sustainable organizational agility:



*Figure 27: Yin and Yang of organizational agility*

The principles and practices of *Evolvagility* create a *holding environment* for the individuals and relationship systems who engage in those practices and learn to embody those principles. In this regard, *Evolvagility* provides one part of the infrastructure needed to support the emergence of a deep inner agility. Management provides the other part by establishing the conditions, vocabularies, agreements, and catalyzing practices that contribute—in their own way—to the growth of inner agility. The two together form a necessary symbiosis out of which the possibility for an inner agility emerges, gains force, and eventually becomes the basis for a new organizational culture.

Locally grown and  
executed *Evolvagility*  
tools, vocabularies,  
and practices



Managerial conditions,  
vocabularies,  
agreements, and  
practices

*Figure 28: Grow and Catalyze Inner Agility*

# Management Through the Design of Environments

By providing a human technology that supports people throughout the organization in holding their part of this new organizational bargain, *Evolvagility* makes it possible for organizational managers and leaders to assume their part of that bargain by moving from a position of coordinating, telling, and directing to a position of *designing environments* that bring about conditions favorable to the emergence of *Sense-and-Respond* leadership capabilities *everywhere*.

Let's take a moment to unpack this notion of *designing environments*. First, we want to recognize that organizational management is concerned, at least in part, with how to effect change in people's behaviors. How does this change happen?

Research in the psychology of behavioral change<sup>4</sup> identifies two different kinds of behaviors: those that are infrequent and episodic—for instance, donating blood—and those that are habitual and repetitive—for instance, the daily ritual of simply walking into the office at work. Changes in behaviors that are new and as yet untried—such as giving blood or planning a yearly work event—can be effected through the adoption of specific intentions and goals. For instance, giving blood is a behavior that can be encouraged through social campaigns—as often happens, for instance, within companies—and gentle peer pressure. It is a relatively one-off kind of behavior that is not likely to fall into a kind of mindless habit. Somewhat similarly, the design and facilitation of a yearly work event is one that can be informed and guided by specific intentions and goals. However, changes in behaviors that are old and habitual—the kinds of behaviors that can be most deeply entrenched within an organizational setting—are less strongly affected by the espoused intentions or goals. For these more habitual and repetitive behaviors, it is the *environment* in which those behaviors are happening that provides the catalyzing forces for change.

This principle is well understood in the world of design. The design of everyday things<sup>5</sup>—from doors to stovetops to automobile interiors to software—orients particular patterns of habitual and repetitive behavior. The most effective way to effect change in such behaviors is through a change in the design of the immediate environments in which those behaviors happen. To get people to buckle up in their automobiles, for instance, public information campaigns or even cajoling by friends rarely works. What works is to build something directly into the driving (or riding) environment itself; specifically, to have the car produce a repeating—and, after a while, increasingly irritating—noise which reminds the person to buckle up. Similarly, in order to reduce potentially catastrophic fire hazards, many apartment management companies install gas stovetops in their apartments that deliberately limit the maximum intensity of the flame in order to prevent people from overheating cooking utensils, which can lead potentially to very damaging fires.

*Many of the fundamental principles of the design of everyday things are about orienting habitual, repetitive behaviors. Designing organizational environments to*

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<sup>4</sup> Hear Alix Spiegel, "What Vietnam Taught Us About Breaking Bad Habits," *Morning Edition*, NPR, January 2, 2012, audio, <https://www.npr.org/sections/health-shots/2012/01/02/144431794/what-vietnam-taught-us-about-breaking-bad-habits>. See also Mindy Ji and Wendy Hood, "Purchase and Consumption Habits: Not Necessarily What You Intend," *Journal of Consumer Psychology* 17, no. 4 (2007).

<sup>5</sup> For more on the principle of design I am referring to here, see Donald Norman, *The Design of Everyday Things: Revised and Expanded* (Basic Books, 2013).

*orient changes in habitual, repetitive organizational behaviors relies on similar principles.*

These habitual, repetitive, and largely unconscious behaviors constitute the bulk of behavioral activity in organizations. As psychologist and researcher Wendy Wood notes, “About 45% of what people do every day is in the same environment and is repeated.”<sup>6</sup> Those repeated actions and behaviors tend to be impervious to external motivation, planning, or goal setting. Moreover, their repetitious nature is strongly reinforced by the environment in which those actions and behaviors arise. The every-day environments in which we live and work become key stimulators of our habitual behaviors, acting as agents that unconsciously direct that behavior. If we wish to effect change in those habitual actions and behaviors, we need to create changes in the environment itself.<sup>7</sup>

Managing through the *design of environments* is about creating conditions within the organizational environment that stimulate, enable, and encourage a shift in those actions and behaviors that are habitual and entrenched. Suppose, for example, that as an executive or manager you want to see people be more self-directing, to take greater authority, to be bolder in their actions and decisions. A traditional approach would guide you to try to encourage and motivate them to do so. However, as we have seen, this approach is more helpful for behaviors that are episodic, new, or infrequent. Shifting people to behave in more self-directed ways requires a shift in behaviors that are habitual, patterned, and entrenched. Changing something in the environment in which those people are habitually acting and deciding will have greater impact.

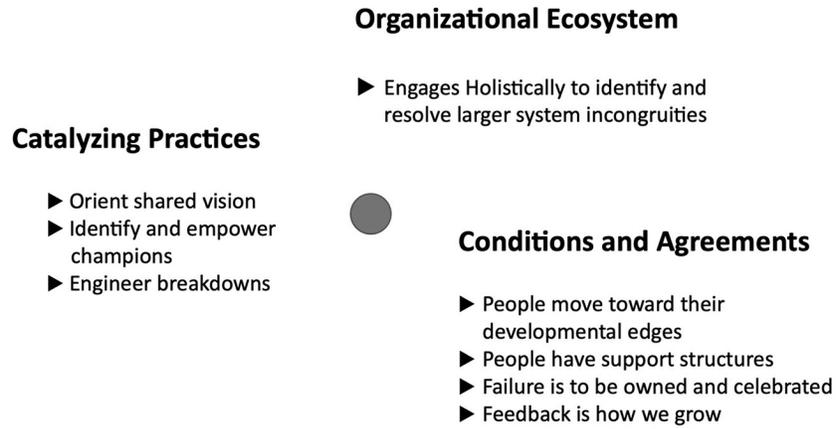
In the remainder of Part V, we will investigate what it means for organizational leadership and management to *design environments* that bring about conditions favorable to the emergence of *Sense-and-Respond* leadership capability. We will explore leadership and management in terms of the nature of the **conditions and agreements** necessary for that emergence, the **catalyzing practices** by which that emergence is catalyzed, and the role of leadership and management as it relates to **the larger system**.

The following graphic outlines each of these practice fields and the specific elements within each.

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<sup>6</sup> Wendy Hood, “What Vietnam Taught Us About Breaking Bad Habits,” interviewed by Alix Spiegel.

<sup>7</sup> A point which Dave Snowden has made rather elegantly in a number of his articles on knowledge management. See David Snowden, “Just-in-Time Knowledge Management: Part 1,” *Knowledge Management Review* 5, no. 5 (November/December 2002).



*Figure 29: The Elements of Organizational Environment Design*