Editor's Introduction

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Complexity theory purports to enable us better to understand the dynamics of systems operating in far from equilibrium conditions. Originally conceived by the Belgian Nobel Laureate Ilya Prigogine, the field has generated a plethora of ideas and concepts which could offer much to support and improve managerial performance in today's fast moving world. Indeed, the study of complex systems, and particularly application of the ideas to non-linear feedback systems such as human social organisations, has already achieved prominence in many academic and practitioner journals.

Whilst much of the debate has focused on the development of concepts and theory, rather less attention has been given firstly to critiquing the potential of the complexity field, particularly by integrating it into existing theoretical approaches to management problem-solving, and secondly to opening the debate detailing precisely how complexity thinking might impact and support managers at work.

Smith and Humphries address both of these issues. Firstly, they begin by exploring the main notions of complexity thinking using straightforward terminology. Secondly, they take an overtly critical view of complexity science questioning its fundamentals and its relationships to existing approaches posing the question as to whether rhetoric is backed up by reality at the level of operational strategy and the application of ideas. They ask precisely what does complexity theory explain that has not already been addressed in other ways which are already in use by managers? Finally, they conclude that if we are to profit from a set of ideas developed in the natural sciences, then complexity theory, and more importantly, complexity thinking in organisations, must not be allowed to degenerate into yet another simplistic recipe. It needs to be understood as a philosophical approach, useful in addressing the change and innovation agenda which is so central to improving management performance in organisations and businesses of all kinds.

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