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Complexity Is Necessary. Complicated Must Not Be Tolerated.

How Senior Leaders Embrace the Hard Problems and Cut the Clutter

Dean Miles · Founder and President, Bridgepoint Coaching & Strategy Group · November 2026

Executive Summary

> **"Complexity is necessary. Complicated must not be tolerated."**
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> DEAN MILES

Every senior leader I work with is handling two things at once and calling them by one name.

The first is complexity: markets, people, boards, regulators, and competitors all moving at the same time. Complexity is not a malfunction. It is the work itself, and it is where advantage lives.

The second is complication: the approval added after one bad quarter, the dashboard nobody acts on, the meeting that exists because it existed last year. Nobody hands it to you. You and your organization build it, usually under pressure and usually with good intentions.

The job is to embrace the first and eliminate the second. Under pressure that gets hard, because instinct reaches for more analysis, more control, and a better plan. On complex problems those tools do not shrink the complexity. They bury it.

I have advised senior leaders since 2007, from energy and aviation to healthcare, financial services, technology, manufacturing, sport, and family enterprise. Together their organizations account for more than $300 billion in combined revenue and assets under management. This paper shows how to tell complexity from complication, what confusing them costs, and what to do instead.

Two Words Leaders Use as One

Researchers drew this line long before it showed up in leadership books. In a 2002 paper for Canada's Commission on the Future of Health Care, Sholom Glouberman and Brenda Zimmerman separated three kinds of problems with three examples: following a recipe, sending a rocket to the moon, and raising a child (Glouberman & Zimmerman, 2002).

Sending a rocket is **complicated**. It has a huge number of parts and takes deep expertise across many fields. But it is knowable. Formulas matter, and in their words, "sending one rocket increases assurance that the next will be OK."

Raising a child is **complex**. Expertise helps, but it is neither necessary nor sufficient. Every child is different. "Raising one child provides experience but no assurance of success with the next." The outcome stays uncertain, and you still do it, and you can still do it well.

Dave Snowden and Mary Boone made a similar distinction for executives in their Cynefin framework (Snowden & Boone, 2007). In a complicated context, cause and effect are real but not obvious to everyone, so leaders sense, analyze, and respond. Expertise wins. In a complex context, the right answer cannot be worked out in advance. Patterns emerge only as you act, and cause and effect are clear mainly in hindsight. There, leaders probe first, then sense, then respond. By their account, much of today's business lives in the complex domain.

> **A NOTE ON WORDS**
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> In the research, "complicated" is a legitimate kind of problem. Rockets, refineries, and refinancings are complicated, and they deserve rigor.
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> When I say complicated must not be tolerated, I mean complicatedness: the clutter that leaders and organizations build on top of real work. Here is the connection. A great deal of that clutter is what you get when you take a complex problem and attack it as if it were merely complicated. Glouberman and Zimmerman traced exactly that pattern in health care reform, where repeated "complicated interventions" in a complex system left it destabilized (Glouberman & Zimmerman, 2002).
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> A client gave me the best picture of this I have ever heard. Think of the Manhattan sewer map. Shown raw, it is complex and complicated at the same time. Add a legend and a color code and it keeps every bit of its complexity and loses all of its complicatedness. Nothing underground changed. What changed is that a person can now read it.

	COMPLICATED PROBLEM	COMPLEX PROBLEM	COMPLICATEDNESS
What it is	Many parts, but knowable. The answer exists and expertise can find it.	People and forces acting on each other. The answer emerges as you go.	Needless layers we add: process, approvals, jargon, overbuilt plans.
Example	An ERP migration. A plant retooling. A debt refinancing.	A culture after a merger. A new market. A leadership team after a CEO exit.	Three sign-offs for a routine decision. A weekly report nobody reads.
Cause and effect	Clear to experts in advance.	Clear mainly in hindsight.	Hides cause and effect behind noise.
What works	Analysis, expertise, good process, a solid plan.	Small experiments, listening, sensing, adapting.	Subtraction.
Your stance	Solve it. Hire the experts.	Host it. Lead within it.	Do not tolerate it.

The Uninvited Guest

> **"The uninvited guest is complicatedness."**
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> DEAN MILES

Think of your organization as a house with guests. Complexity is the guest you have to host. You did not choose the market, the regulators, or the personalities around the table, but they are here, and leading well means making room for them.

Complicatedness is the one nobody invited. It does not knock. It walks in behind a reasonable request, sits down, and stays. Nobody ever sets out to build a slow, confusing organization. It accumulates one sensible addition at a time:

- **Structure.** Overlapping authority. Ownership nobody can name. Approvals that outlived the problem they were built to fix. Meetings that end without a decision.
- **Focus.** Too many priorities. Strategy with no sequence. Dashboards that report everything and drive nothing. Language that sounds strategic and hides who does what by when.
- **Trust.** When people do not trust each other, they add checks. When they avoid conflict, they add meetings. When they fear being wrong, they add analysis. Agreement in the room, then a different conversation in the hallway.

Pressure is the open door. Researchers at the University of Virginia ran eight experiments on how people try to improve things. People systematically looked for something to add and overlooked chances to take something away, and they were even less likely to find the subtractive fix when they were under higher cognitive load (Adams et al., 2021). The authors suggest that this default may be one reason people struggle with overloaded schedules and institutional red tape.

Read that again with your last quarter in mind. The moment you are most stretched is the moment your brain is least likely to suggest removing something. That is not weakness. It is how human attention works. It is also why complicatedness has to be noticed on purpose and shown the door on purpose. It will not leave by itself.

The Mismatch: Treating Complex Problems as Complicated Ones

Most senior leaders were promoted for solving complicated problems. You found the answer, built the plan, and drove it home. That skill is real, and it is still needed. The trouble starts when a complex problem shows up and gets the same treatment.

Under pressure, three reflexes take over:

- **More analysis.** Another study, another consultant, another month of data before anyone moves. In a complex situation, the data you need does not exist yet. It only appears once you act.
- **More control.** Tighter approvals, more reporting, decisions pulled up to the top. The people closest to the problem stop adapting because adapting now requires permission.
- **A better plan.** A detailed roadmap for something that cannot be mapped. Then energy goes into defending the plan instead of reading what is actually happening.

Each reflex feels responsible. Each one adds a layer. And because cause and effect in a complex system only show up later, the leader often cannot see the damage until it is expensive.

What the mismatch costs

- **Speed.** Decisions wait for certainty that is not coming.
- **Signal.** Layers filter out the weak signals that matter most in complex situations. Bad news arrives late, if at all.
- **Ownership.** When the plan is the boss, people stop thinking and start complying.
- **Energy.** Your best people spend their days feeding the machine instead of doing the work. They are also the ones recruiters call.
- **Direction.** The organization stays very busy and goes nowhere in particular.

> **Complicatedness does not make complexity smaller. It makes it harder to see.**

How to Tell the Difference

You will not always get a clean answer, and most big situations hold some of each. Snowden and Boone's advice for confusing situations is to break the situation into its parts and decide which kind of problem each part is (Snowden & Boone, 2007). A post-merger integration, for example, has a complicated core (systems, contracts, finance) wrapped in a complex shell (two cultures, two leadership teams, and a lot of people deciding whether to stay).

Ask these questions about the problem in front of you:

1. **Has this been solved before, somewhere, by someone?** If yes, it is probably complicated. Find the expertise.
2. **Would two equally smart experts give you the same answer?** If they would argue, and both have a point, lean complex.
3. **Do people's reactions change the problem?** If announcing the plan changes the situation the plan was built for, it is complex.
4. **Could you know the answer if you just had more data?** If more time and analysis would settle it, it is complicated. If the data only exists after you act, it is complex.
5. **Will success last time guarantee success next time?** Rocket or child?

Then ask one more set, about the clutter around it:

- What did we add the last time this felt hard?
- Which step, report, or meeting would nobody miss if it disappeared on Monday?
- Who is waiting on an approval that adds no judgment?

I have asked leaders a version of this question for years: "Would you be willing to bet next month's paycheck that I could go to your direct reports, and they could give me those same three [priorities], in the same order, with the same level of confidence?" (Moran, 2018). Most would not take the bet. That gap is usually complicatedness at work.

What to Do Instead

The response has two halves, and you need both. Host the complexity. Show the complication the door.

Host the complexity

RUN SMALL, SAFE-TO-FAIL EXPERIMENTS

In complex situations, Snowden and Boone recommend experiments that can safely fail, so that useful patterns can emerge (Snowden & Boone, 2007). In practice: instead of one big bet on the reorganization, try the new structure in one region for one quarter. Instead of a company-wide

culture program, change how one leadership meeting runs and watch what happens. Decide in advance what would tell you to amplify it and what would tell you to stop. Keep each probe small enough that failure teaches you something without hurting anyone.

LISTEN AND SENSE BEFORE YOU RESPOND

Complex problems talk, quietly, through the people closest to them. Get out of the reporting chain. Talk to the front line, the new hire, the customer who left, the manager who keeps raising the same concern. Ask what they are seeing, not what they think you want to hear. Your job is to notice patterns early, while they are still cheap to act on.

BUILD THE CONDITIONS, NOT JUST THE PLAN

You cannot control a complex system. You can shape the conditions people work in, and the one that matters most is how early the truth reaches you. If bad news costs the messenger, it will arrive late, polished, or not at all. In complex work that is like flying with the instruments turned off. Make it cheap to be the first person to say "this is not working." Thank them in front of others. Then act on what they told you, where people can see it. Be clear about direction and a few firm boundaries, and give people room to adapt inside them.

REGULATE YOURSELF FIRST

Your own reaction to pressure is the first thing your team reads. When you feel the pull to demand another analysis, add a checkpoint, or take the decision back, pause and ask: am I reducing uncertainty, or just my discomfort with it? Self-regulation under pressure is a core focus of my doctoral work at Liberty University, where my dissertation studies self-regulation and premature scaling in startup failure. The short version for leaders: the move that calms you down is not always the move that helps the system.

Show the complication the door

- **Keep a stop list.** For every new initiative, name what stops. Say so publicly.
- **One name per decision.** List the ten decisions that matter most this quarter. Put a single owner next to each.
- **Audit your approvals.** For each sign-off, ask what judgment it adds. If the answer is "comfort," remove it.
- **Kill a meeting.** Every recurring meeting should end with a decision or a clear reason to exist. If not, cancel it for a month and see who notices.
- **Speak plainly.** If a priority cannot be explained in one sentence a new hire would understand, it is not finished.
- **Cue subtraction.** The research says people find subtractive options when prompted to look for them (Adams et al., 2021). So prompt it. Make "What can we remove?" a standing question in every leadership meeting.

Where I learned this

The rig floor taught me this long before any boardroom did. My coaching practice began in 2008 with rig supervisors and field leaders at a global drilling contractor. A rig is as complex as it gets: weather, geology, pressure, equipment, and a crew of people a long way from home, all acting on each other at once. On top of that complexity the industry had stacked years of complication: rules added after every incident, forms that nobody read, and a chain of command where the man closest to the hole was the last one anyone asked.

We did not add a program. We worked on the conditions. Supervisors learned to ask the crew what they were seeing before they told the crew what to do. Decisions about stopping a job moved down to the people who could see the job. The complexity did not go anywhere. The complicatedness did. Over three years, retention climbed from 85.6 percent to 93.8 percent.

> **Embrace the complexity. Eliminate the complication. Do not confuse the two.**

How Coaching Helps

Complicatedness is hard to see from the inside. You built some of it, and every piece looks reasonable up close. I work in three phases, and each one has a specific job when the problem is clutter:

- **Discovery: sort it.** We put what is on your plate into three columns: complex and needing to be led, complicated and needing expertise, and clutter. The third column is almost always longer than the leader expects.
- **Design: subtraction made visible.** A published stop list. Two or three safe-to-fail experiments for the complex work, each with a signal to amplify or end it. One owner for every decision that matters.
- **Development: practice the pause.** When pressure spikes and the urge to add a layer shows up, you learn to notice it, wait, and ask what could come out instead. We rehearse it before the big moments and review it after.

The full method is laid out in my first paper, *Advising Leaders at the Point of Pressure*, available at deanmiles.com/whitepapers.

Sidebar: A Composite Case

This case is a composite. It is assembled from patterns I have seen many times, and every identifying detail has been altered. It does not portray any actual client, company, or person.

The team that buried its own signal

Two years after a compliance scare, a business unit's leadership team was still running on the safeguards it added that year. Any customer concession needed a second sign-off. A weekly risk report went to every executive. A Monday pre-meeting prepared the team for its Tuesday leadership meeting. Each step had made sense when it was added. Together they meant routine decisions waited a week or more, and frontline managers had stopped raising small problems because the paperwork took longer than the fix. Meanwhile the real complexity, a shifting customer base and a new competitor, got the least airtime of anything on the agenda.

Discovery took every approval, report, and recurring meeting and asked one question of each: what judgment does this add? Design followed the answers. The team kept the approvals tied to real risk and dropped the rest. The pre-meeting ended. The weekly report became three questions answered in the leadership meeting itself. A stop list went out to the whole unit. One safe-to-fail experiment let frontline managers approve concessions under a set limit for a quarter, with an agreed signal for pulling it back.

Development was the hard part. Within weeks one of those concessions went wrong, and the reflex in the room was to bring the second sign-off back. The leader held the line, fixed the problem directly, and kept the experiment running. Decisions sped up. Frontline issues started reaching the team while they were still small. And the leadership meeting finally spent its time on customers and the competitor.

Reflection Questions

Use these alone first. Then try them with your leadership team and compare answers. Where your answers differ, you have found your agenda.

1. What is the most complex problem on my plate right now, and am I treating it like a rocket or like a child?
2. Where am I waiting for certainty that is not coming?
3. Which layer did I add the last time I felt pressure, and is it still earning its place?
4. Which approval, report, or meeting would nobody miss if it disappeared on Monday?
5. What small, safe-to-fail experiment could I run in the next 30 days?
6. Who closest to the problem have I not heard from lately?
7. What happened the last time someone told me early that something was not working?

8. Would I take the paycheck bet on my top three priorities?
9. When pressure rises, do I reach for control, or for information?
10. Where has complicatedness walked in uninvited, and who on my team has noticed it before I did?

If you could not name at least three things to remove, start there.

About the Author

Dean Miles is Founder and President of Bridgepoint Coaching & Strategy Group. He has advised senior leaders since 2007, at organizations with more than $300 billion in combined revenue and assets under management, and first made this case in a keynote on complexity and complicatedness for the Colorado Society of Association Executives in 2021. Thinkers360 ranks him #1 in the world in Business Continuity and a Top 10 Thought Leader in Coaching. He holds an M.A. in Executive Leadership and is a PhD candidate in Organization and Management at Liberty University.

Bring Me the Problem More Analysis Has Not Solved

Every organization carries some clutter it no longer sees. If yours is slowing down the decisions that matter, send me a note about the problem in front of you. In our first conversation we will separate what needs to be led from what needs to go, and you will leave with at least one thing to take out.

WEBSITE: deanmiles.com **EMAIL:** dean@bridgepointcsg.com

Bridgepoint Coaching & Strategy Group. Direction. Not just motion.

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