



From Chaos To Continuity—Change, Cognition, And Coaching

by Esther Muller and Michael Williams, Ph.D.



What we know limits us more than what we don't know. We focus on the known; believing in its reliability; cherishing its predictability. We spend our lives constructing contexts of continuity; mental models designed to organize our lives focused on creating order from chaos. Creating order and continuity from what we know is a perpetual process of sense making; making sense of our relationships, endeavors, and behaviors. Our ability to make sense of the world is predicated on how we think. Thinking is defined by our perceptions and meaning made through attributions. Our attributions determine what is meaningful or meaningless to us. From meaning we determine value and relevance in our lives.

Chaos and Change

Is chaos meaningful? Does it add value to our personal or professional lives? To effectively address these questions, we must first determine how we think; specifically, our orientations toward thinking. For example, do you consider chaos random and unsystematic, devoid of structure, and impossible to influence? Or, is chaos understandable and uniquely organized, possessing structure, and stimulating us to think and act in new ways? In her 1998 seminal article *Shifting Paradigm: From Newton to Chaos*, change expert Dr. Toby Tetenbaum offers us an orientation toward thinking about chaos. She writes “chaos describes a complex, unpredictable, and orderly disorder in which patterns of behavior unfold in irregular but similar forms.” Everyday situations present us with forms of chaos. We are confronted by the dichotomies between order and disorder; irregularity and similarity. We are compelled to make sense, attribute meaning, and determine value offered in chaos. We reveal to ourselves, our preferences and needs to create order from chaos; to move from chaos to continuity.

Chaos and Cognition

Moving from chaos to continuity is a cognitive and behavioral experience. Deriving order from chaos depends on our ability to adopt new ways of thinking and translating gained insights into informed, continuous action. One cognitive approach used for moving from chaos to continuity is rationality. Rationality employs pragmatism, logic, and reality-based thinking as tools for addressing the perceived structurelessness and inconsistencies associated with chaos. Rationality enables us to engage, disassemble, and reconfigure chaos towards continuity. It provides the cognitive models, methods, and metrics necessary to harness the power and potential inherent in chaos preparing us to dispute and dispel irrational beliefs inconsistent with empirical reality.

Dr. Louis Primavera, Dean of the Graduate School of Psychology and School of Health Sciences at Touro College shares “Humans are active, thinking, and choosing organisms possessing some control over their thinking and behavior. Our ability to analyze and evaluate chaotic situations, apply insights, and create positive and constant behaviors aligned with our goals, tends to create conditions of continuity enabling us to lead relatively orderly and productive lives.”

Chaos and Coaching

Many business professionals perceive chaos as destabilizing even debilitating. When chaotic situations arise they default to modes of thinking and behavior they believe have helped them cope with chaos. Unfortunately, many of the coping mechanisms employed are grounded in the fear, helplessness, and rigidity associated with loss of control. As a result, the possibilities for personal and professional growth through engaging and experiencing chaos are lost. Sadly, these professionals create and perpetuate cycles of unrealized potential composed of fear, avoidance, and helplessness that then manifest in chronic under performance.

The 2nd century Greek Stoic Philosopher Epictetus wrote “Men are disturbed not by things but by the views which they take of them.” A rationale view of things promotes a logical and data driven approach to engaging chaos and change. Rationality endorses pragmatic, reality-based thought and behavior when confronted with discontinuous events and the irrational thinking and behaving of others. A rationale view of chaos considers enlisting it as an ally for growth and transformation; a powerful force fueling personal and professional achievement. Or, chaos could become a font of new knowledge enabling deep shifts in thinking and behavior resulting in our creating conditions favoring continuity, success, and sustainability.

Coaching can enable our understanding of the complexities and constructs associated with chaos. It can summon cognitive clarity and marshal personal commitment; seed future innovation and reinforce our resolve to grow and progress. Coaching promotes reflection; leading to insight and informed action. Prepare for chaos; get coached. ■

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