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## LILA Feb 2016 animation script: **Complexity and the Paradoxical Organization**

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Large organizations inevitably have top-down structures and centralized functions for bringing order to their work, but what about the kinds of bottom-up forces at play in stock markets and beehives? Organizations too, are dynamic networks of interacting agents that **self-organize** and are greater than the sum of their parts. [*Rules of interaction, positive and negative feedback loops, generative disorder*] In other words, they are **complex adaptive systems**.

All organizations start out adapting to their environment or they don't survive and grow. Paradoxically, the structure and stability that allows us to withstand challenges over time is precisely what causes us to lose the flexibility needed for larger challenges. This often shows up as tension between the administrative system that brings order, and the entrepreneurial system that supports innovation. Life is full of these paradoxes we take to be problems, but that resist resolution [*tug of war*]. But what if we stopped trying to resolve paradoxical tensions and learned to embrace the complexity they signal?

While paradoxes often show up in our language as alternatives we must choose between, focusing on one while neglecting the other will eventually be counterproductive. Once we recognize the problems this has created, we often think the other option is the solution. The trouble is, we need both. Each has benefits that come with an equally powerful fear of their loss, creating an energy flow that forms an interdependent **polarity**.

Take for example a long-established company losing revenue due to a disruptive technology. They might respond by trying to be more innovative, but the downsides of innovation only amplify the discomfort of the market pressures they are experiencing. This triggers an attempt to create more order by tightening controls. Despite devoting resources to becoming more exploratory, the organization ends up even more rigid and bureaucratic! Without an awareness that a polarity is present, organizations can stagnate or get trapped shifting back & forth from one false choice and the other.

While it's often suggested that we can escape this pattern with a shift from "OR" thinking to "and" thinking, this might not be enough. Somehow, we need to cultivate adaptive spaces that help us navigate the tension. **Polarity mapping** invites us to shift from "or" to "or AND and". Once we recognize that we're dealing with a polarity [**see**] we can **map** it, identifying the values we don't want to lose. This is a non-intuitive step that can feel as if we're moving in the wrong direction: towards what we already have too much of and away from a solution. The **map** lets us know where we are [**assess**] and helps us see a way forward by identifying actions and warning signs that allow us to collectively **learn** new ways of **leveraging** the polarity.

Polarity mapping is one adaptive practice that can help leaders manage complexity, but cultivating adaptive space requires leadership that goes well beyond formal leaders.

**Enabling leadership** must permeate the organization, transcending and including administrative and entrepreneurial leadership. Within a toolbox of adaptive practices, we have examples of how we can put the adaptive principles underlying complexity into action, tapping into the dynamics shaping what is struggling to emerge in our organizations.

**go small:** when we encourage **small**, local experiments,

**iterate:** we can learn from and **iterate** on our prototypes, allowing the strongest options to bubble up over time.

**connect:** By enriching **interconnectivity**, we grow social capital and enable information flow, allowing us to notice and

**build:** **build** on existing ideas, strategies, relationships, sponsors.

**embrace conflict:** By embracing conflict, we can harness the energy of **resistance & criticism** to refine & strengthen emerging ideas.

Rather than reacting to complexity with order, recognizing its paradoxical nature allows us to meet complexity with complexity, transforming the tension ignited by pressures from a source of conflict to an energizing bridge towards our greater purpose.