

The Leadership Report 2016 - It's Chaotic! Bright and Associates

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Summary

This report provides insights into Leaders attitudes towards the three largest challenges facing contemporary leaders: change, chance and uncertainty. Leaders demonstrated a high awareness of their complex context, and demonstrated positive attitudes to leading in uncertainty. Overwhelmingly, contemporary leaders indicate that they are routinely managing uncertainty as part of their role. The Leaders surveyed expect uncertainty to be a large component of their futures that they recognise will be unpredictable.

The results are a wake up call for approaches to Leadership training that emphasise control and predictability. Modern leaders encounter significant uncertainty and need to be prepared to embrace the challenges posed by change, chance and uncertainty in the 21st Century. The Chaos Theory of Careers (Pryor and Bright, 2011) provides a coherent framework in which leadership development can be located to address these challenges.

Background

Leaders have to confront the complex, uncertain and changing realities of modern organisations. Traditionally greater emphasis has been placed on order, control and predictability, and less on adaptability, agility and change. The Chaos Theory of Careers (e.g. Pryor and Bright, 2003ab, 2011) provides a powerful framework to consider leadership in light of these contemporary realities. For more information, download the background paper Leadership-Chaotic!.

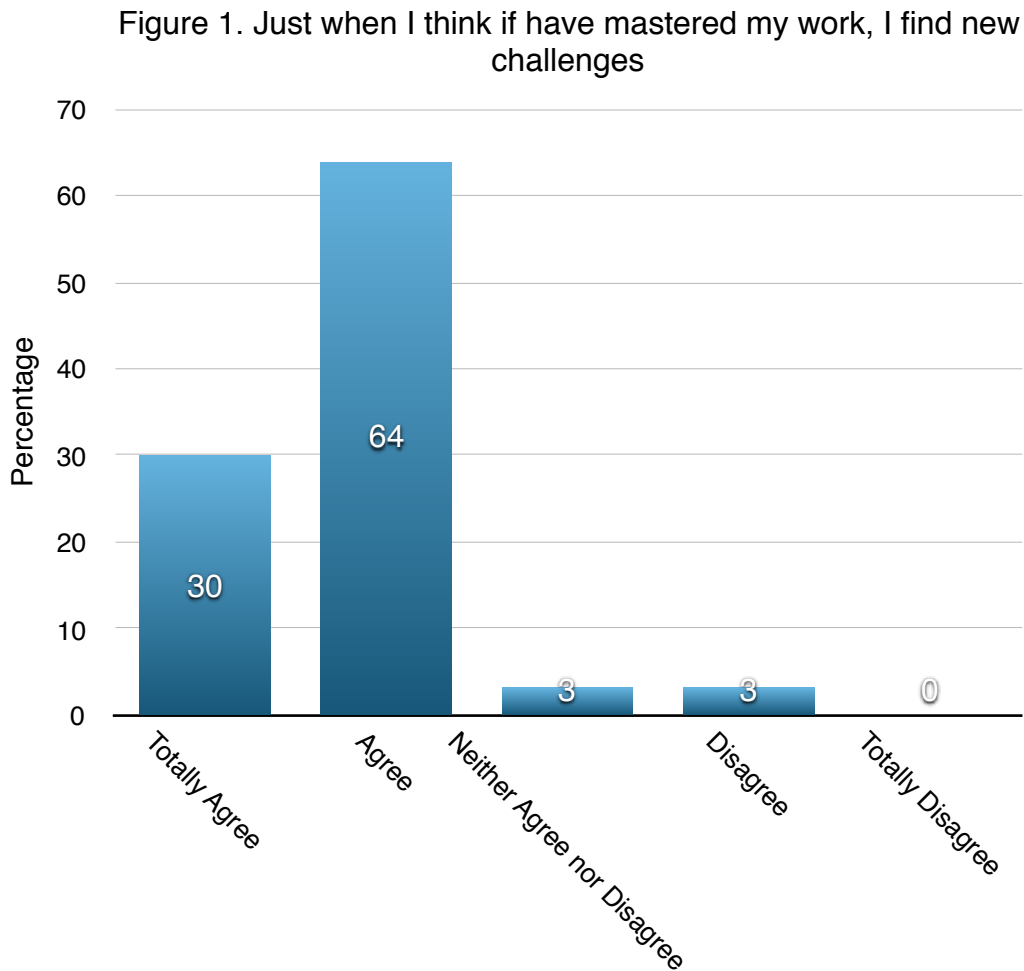
Methodology

339 Leaders enrolled in a Educational Leadership course were surveyed over 2015 and 2016 using two proprietary instruments: The Complexity Awareness Leadership Scale and the Change Perception Index.

Results

Continual Change

Leaders recognise the continually changing environment in which they must exert influence. Too often leadership is seen in static terms. For instance change management models typically assume there is a relatively stable “after” stage, however this assumption is highly questionable.



Planning is a central feature of Leadership training, but less often are the skills of opportunity awareness developed. Overwhelmingly leaders acknowledge the limitation of plans and need to change course, or the value of spotting better opportunities as they arise. Are we doing a good job of preparing leaders by training them in these skills?

Figure 2. Have you ever planned something, achieved it, and found out you needed to do something else?

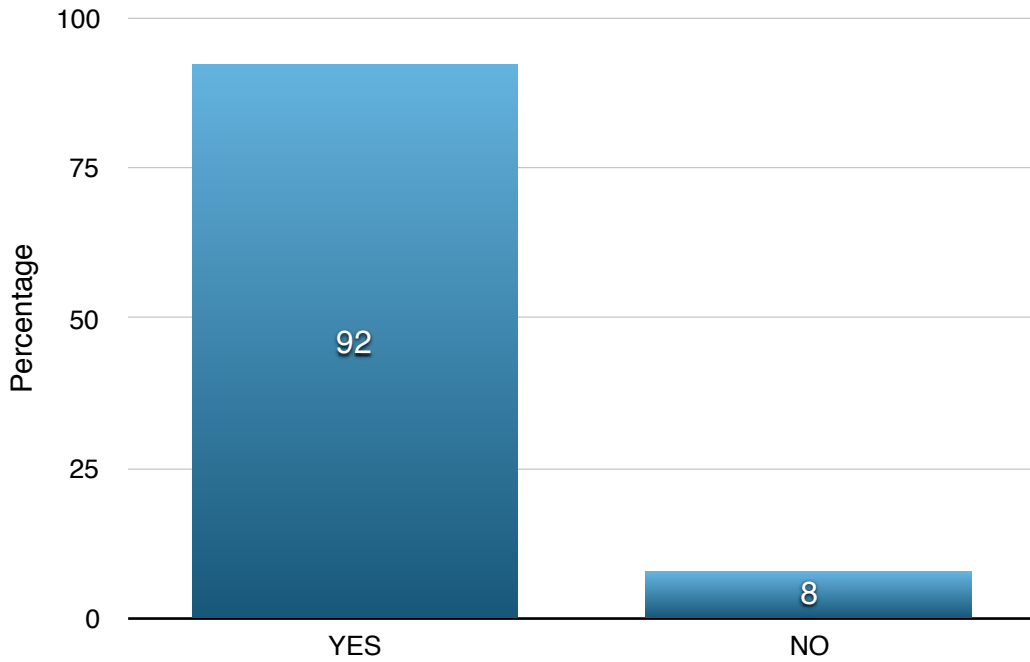
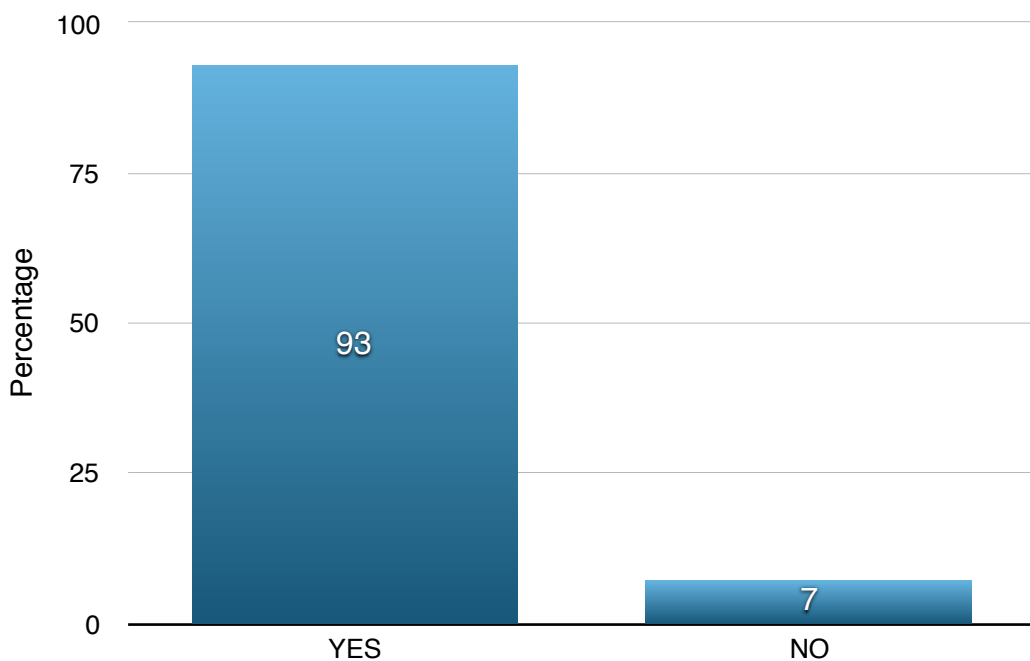


Figure 3 Have you ever set a clear goal or a precise objective and discovered a better one along the way/ to the original goal?



The Future

Leaders overwhelmingly expect their lives to change significantly in a relatively short period of time. 88% think their life will look very different in 5 years. Perhaps more surprisingly, only 28% say they have a very clear picture of what they are going to be doing in the future and how they will get there. Traditional approaches to leadership would argue that this is the result of a lack of goal setting and planning. Chaos and Complexity-based approaches such as the Chaos Theory of Careers would characterise this as a realistic appreciation of the complex and uncertain nature of the environment in which leaders operate.

Figure 4 My life will look very different in 5 years time

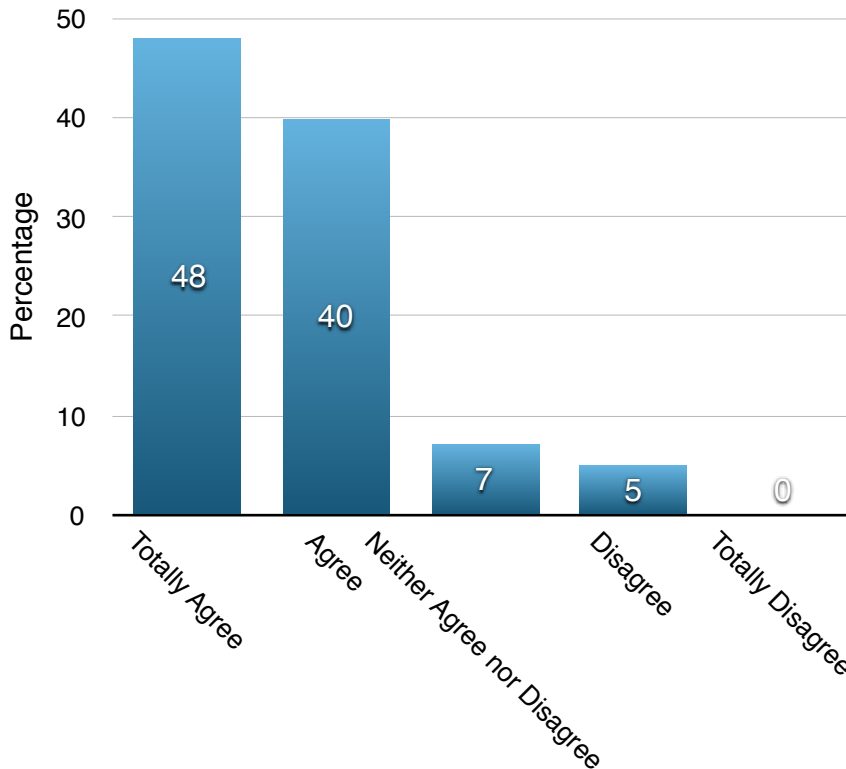
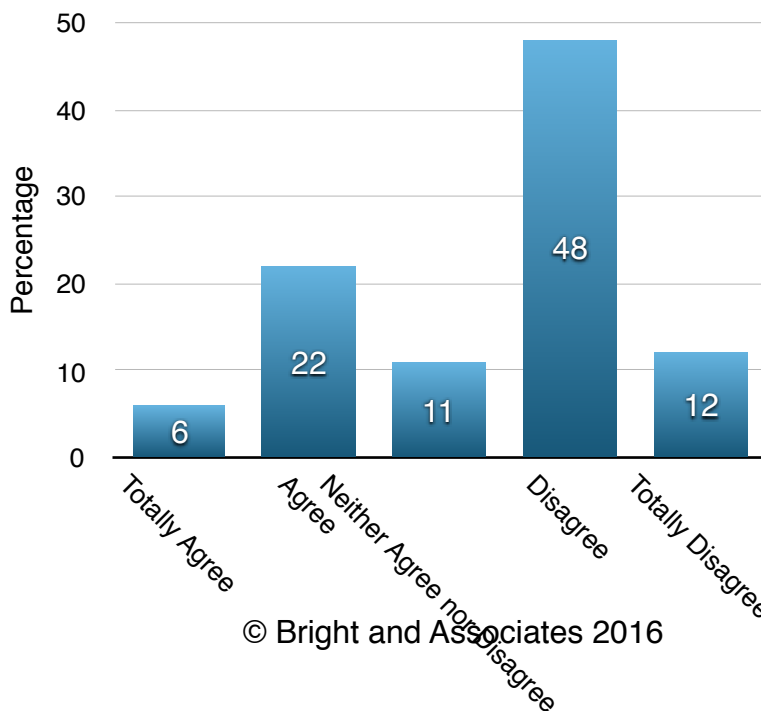
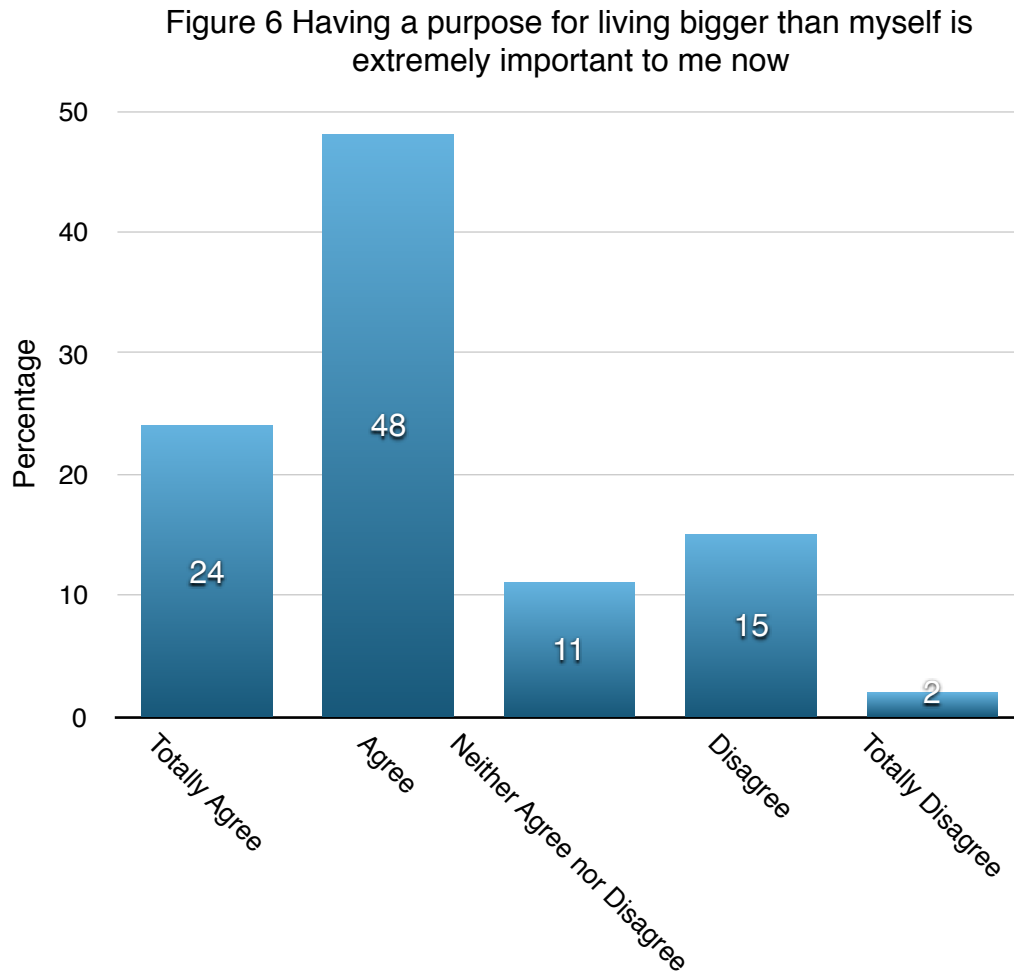


Figure 5 Looking into the future I have a very clear picture of what I am going to be doing and how I am going to get there



A Bigger Picture

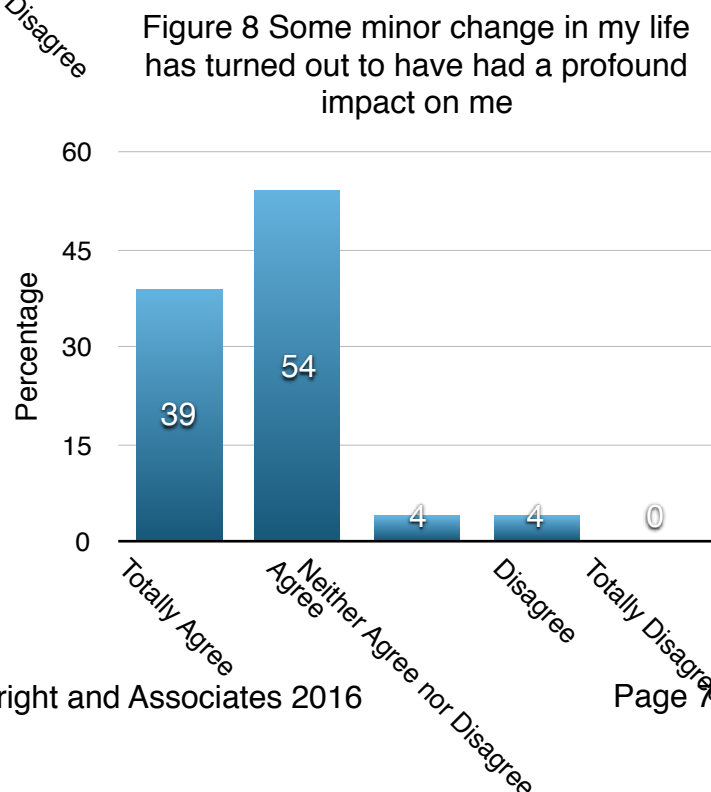
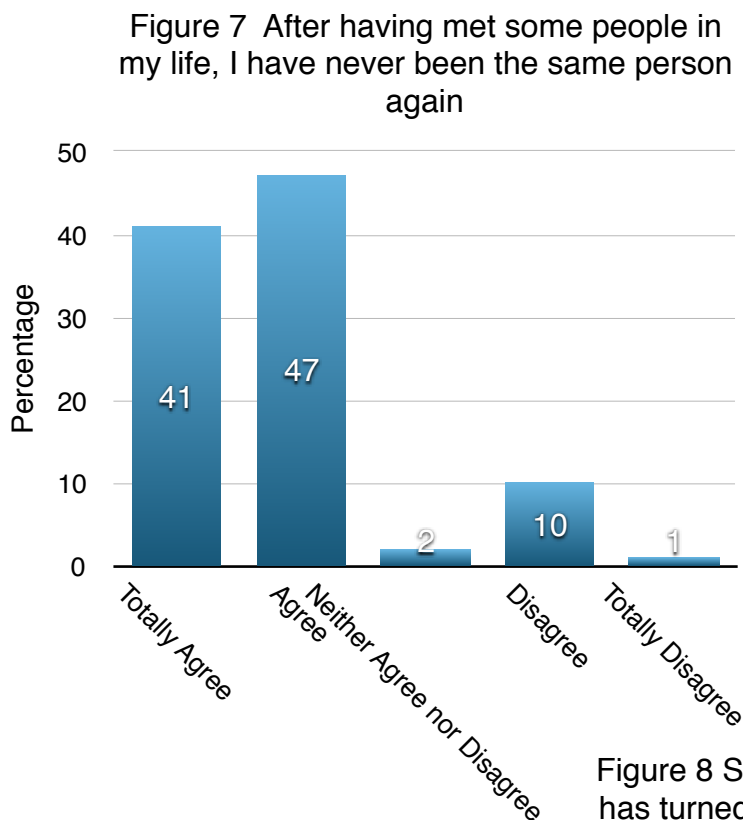
Chaos and complexity-based leadership encourages thinking about actions in terms of a bigger picture beyond immediate objectives. 72% of leaders indicated that this was important to them, with only 17% disagreeing.



Non-Linearity

A central feature of chaos and complexity-based leadership is the idea of non-linearity. It is the recognition that actions do not always have an opposite and equal reaction, rather small actions can lead to disproportionately large reactions, and vice versa, that large interventions can lead to minimal or no change in the systems you want to lead and manage. The presence of non linearity in complex systems is one of the reasons why we talk about influencing rather than controlling systems and why predictions based on linear assumptions, such as past behaviour predicts future behaviour can often be poor indicators. It calls on leaders to demonstrate flexibility, adaptability and strategy in their responses to complexity and uncertainty.

Figures 7 and 8 show the results of responses to two questions, that indicate the profound impact just meeting other people can have on the course of a life, and how seemingly minor changes can have profound impacts.



Unplanned (Chance) Events

84% of Leaders reported that an unplanned event has had a big impact on their organisation. This result alone is sufficient reason to provide leaders with better training in terms of the nature of unplanned events, and the most appropriate courses of action in the aftermath of such events. Or indeed how to leverage or encourage such events as a method of promoting change. Chaos and complexity-based approaches to leadership do not characterise unplanned events as unwelcome interlopers that can be eliminated through ever more careful planning processes, rather instead, they are seen as the inevitable consequence of complexity and that learning how to leverage such events and how to influence rather than control the system is the more appropriate and effective method of leadership.

Figure 9 Have you ever experienced an unplanned event that had a big impact on your organisation?

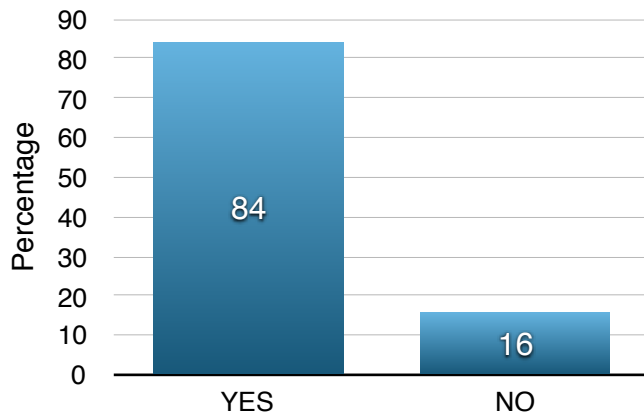
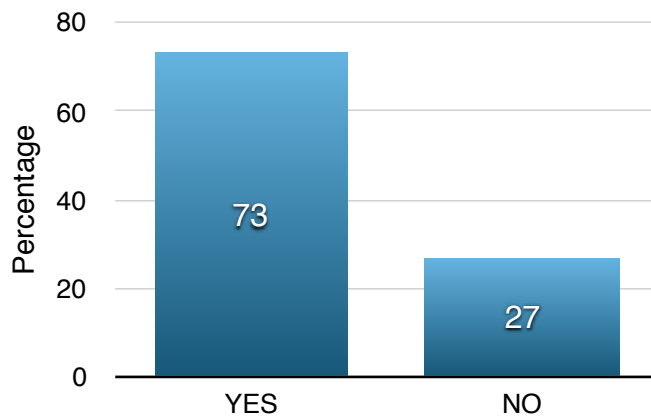
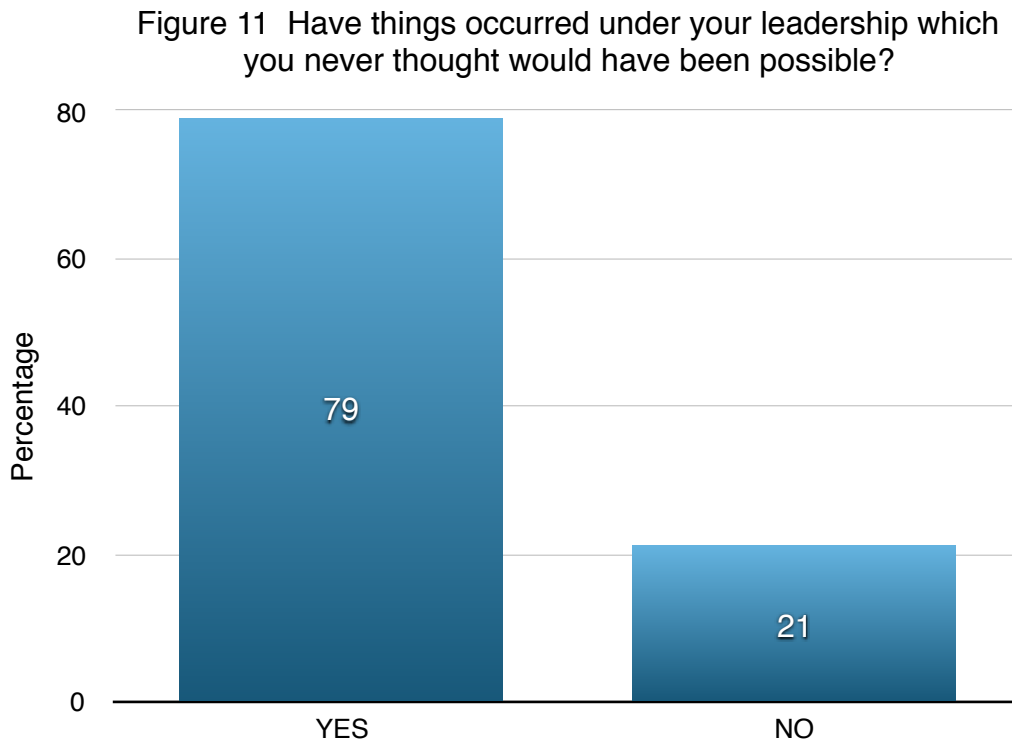


Figure 10 Has your organisation ever had the experience of being in either the right or wrong place at the right or wrong time?



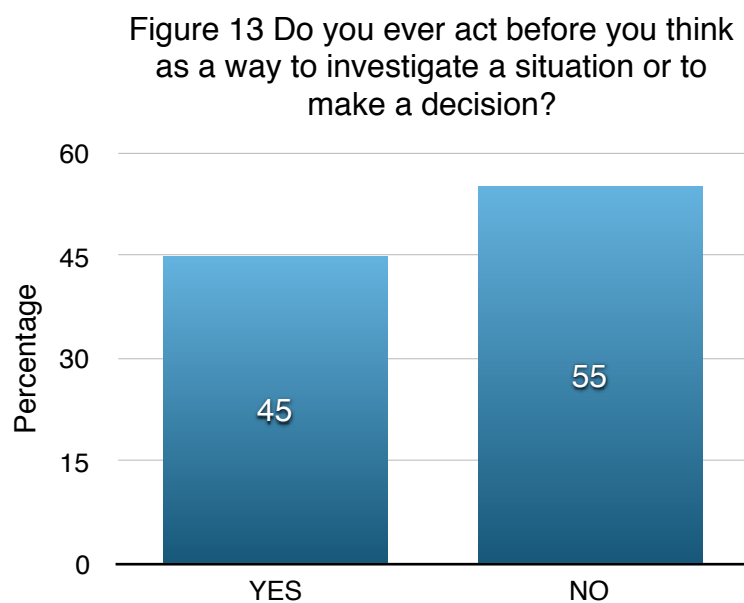
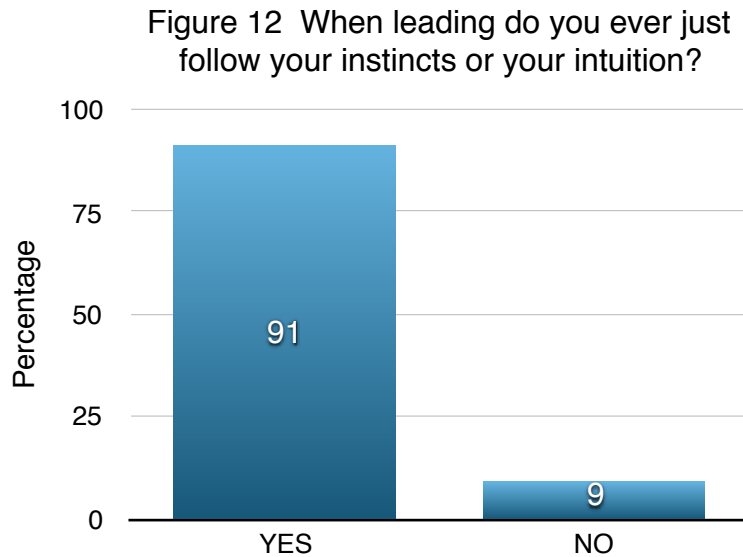
Beyond our dreams

Leadership is often celebrated when it is visionary. However it is clear from Figure 11, that leaders commonly have experienced outcomes under their leadership beyond their dreams or rationalisation. This is yet another reminder that organisations are complex systems, embedded in other complex systems and they cannot be entirely predicted. They have the capacity to surprise, both in good and bad ways. The prepared leader is one who can leverage the positive surprises and is resilient in the face of the negative ones.



Intuition and Instinct in leaders

The final two results in Figures 12 and 13 provide insights into the decision-making styles of leaders. What is clear is that leaders do not always take a rational or considered approach to decision-making. Almost all leaders say they follow their instincts or intuition at times (91%, figure 12), and almost half (45%, figure 13) will take action before engaging in a lot of thinking as a strategy to investigate a situation or even make a decision.



Conclusions

The Chaos Theory of Careers (CTC) (Pryor & Bright, 2007, 2011) provides a new way of considering organisational performance and organisational career development issues that encapsulates complexity, change, chance, stability, pattern and emergent culture. Within this framework, both individuals and their organisations can be reconceptualised as complex dynamical systems whose behaviour produces emergent order which reproduces itself as patterns of functioning over different times and contexts. This is called fractal behaviour.

The fractal nature of organisations means that if vision, feedback, ongoing learning, creativity and experimentation are encouraged and rewarded then ideas, possibilities, trial and error, and small projects of discovery are likely to occur at varying levels within the company as ways to respond to competition, change and growth. This becomes an organizational culture that employees imbue and participate in, if they wish to remain in the company. Successful enterprises have fractal qualities.

Organisations and individuals using a “missed it by that much” philosophy are not working smartly because it indicates a focused and inflexible approach that fails to recognise the complexity of influences on performance, the emergent patterns at work and the creative possibilities for personal and organisational success that can develop working on the edge of chaos.

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