

“The biggest paradigm shifts happening right now are ironically the increasing awareness of the existence of paradigms...”

Paradigms are a worldview shared amongst a group of people so they can experience group identity and achieve a common purpose. Our world is governed by them very much like seas influence the life of a fish. Examples of paradigms include the idea of countries, money, religion. They are a set of beliefs, values and stories which enable collaboration with greater numbers of people and even with people in different locations. It is our ability to use paradigms that enabled us climb to the top of the species hierarchy. One monkey left on a deserted island might survive better than one person (unless he's Bear Grylls). But if you put one hundred people on the island then they would organise themselves more effectively than the monkeys.

But there are a few problems with paradigms.

Evolution is constantly doing its thing; situations change and so should the paradigms we use so that we can organise ourselves more effectively and adapt to our new reality quickly.

But we don't. We're faced with Brexit, climate change, rising inequality, populism, poverty and probably another recession, but we've shown we're not very adept at responding. In fact, we're paradigm blind. We're being told we should swim away from one shark after another not realising that what we need to do, is get out of the water. The water is the paradigm and we're as blind to it as a fish are to the sea.

As a result, we tend to cling to paradigms longer than is healthy. Even when we know we should embark on another path; we experience *paradigm inertia*. This leads to a build-up of painful events as lessons are repeated, which leads see us trying to get back to *business as usual* instead of *paradigm shifting*. That exacerbates the problem and delays the inevitable.

Which is probably why Thomas Kuhn, who coined the term '*paradigm shifts*', also wrote that advancement was not evolutionary but rather a "*series of peaceful interludes punctuated by intellectually violent revolutions*" when "*one conceptual worldview is replaced by another*".

Paradigms are useful filters for problem solving and decision making. But as Kuhn observed with scientific researchers, clinging to the wrong paradigm means you can miss the blindingly obvious, dismiss the right answer for one that fits and arrive at wrong conclusions.

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Spotting paradigm shifts early on is difficult to do. The people best placed in an organisation to notice shifts are those on the coal face or those on the outside or edges of the system, the mavericks. Also, people moving jobs or to a completely new field because they're unencumbered with paradigm blindness. They see with fresh eyes.

Here are some archetypal paradigm stages we find in society and business:

The 'Start-up' paradigm.

Every new idea has to compete for its place in the Universe. This is the paradigm entrepreneurs thrive in. As legendary investor John Doerr observed;

"...entrepreneurs do more than anyone thinks possible with less than anyone thinks possible."

New ideas must prove themselves worthwhile and trying to skip this stage by attracting funding, doesn't always ensure long term success. According to the Wall Street Journal, 70% of venture backed projects fail. It's a roller coaster ride at this stage but once entrepreneurs have achieved a foothold they can move onto the next paradigm.

The 'Good to great' paradigm.

Once an idea has achieved some measure of success, processes and rules are introduced to cope with continued growth. The 'Good to great' paradigm is a *management* stage that relies less on people and more on measurement and discipline to keep on the growth path. This is where everything, including people, becomes *widgetized*. This is when a business will be making good money and paradoxically when leaders should begin to look for the next paradigm shift. It will have already begun to germinate into existence.

The 'Bigger is better' paradigm.

The human ego is really only scared of two things. Not getting what it wants and when it's got it, losing it. Leaders often avoid looking for the next paradigm shift and head towards what seems like the safer option; the *bigger is better* paradigm. That of creating more certainty with more processes, rules and barriers to entry for new players. We'll often see the emergence of imposing buildings, hierarchies, more layers of management, more rules and gate keepers.

There'll be take-overs. However; one mediocre business acquiring another mediocre business will not make for a better bigger business.

The '*Shifts Happen!*' paradigm.

Generally, paradigm shifts develop over a period of time but seem to appear overnight. A disruptive influence will be born at some point, go unnoticed but eventually cause the system to experience what seems like a sudden collapse. The situation is exacerbated by the human tendency for denial. In fact, anybody who does bring attention to the threat will probably be sacked as we saw in the banking crisis where whistle-blowers were attacked by the banking system.

Effective leaders don't shoot messengers. Paradigm shifts are a facet of life and people should be encouraged to challenge and speak up. It's a good idea to have a reconnaissance team looking out for new trends or threats on the horizon.

The '*Great Turnaround*' paradigm

After a period of denial, the system eventually accepts there is a problem. This begins a period of shedding all the excess that the ***bigger is better*** period accumulated. A bit like dumping the baggage from a hot air balloon that's losing height. This is often when the bean counters use the crisis as an excuse to wrestle back control. They prioritise survival of the present paradigm over people, who are once again *widgetized*. Austerity was a classic example of this.

It takes a huge effort to stop the downward momentum towards death of the system. Everybody is in a state of high anxiety. There is an urgent need to get back to being comfortable, back to '***Business as Usual***'. Of course, this is an impossibility because you cannot step on the same piece of river twice. However, it's not all bad news because effective leaders look for the next stage:

'*New Opportunities*' paradigm

Once in recovery stage there is either an attempt to get back to '*business as usual*' or the alternative, which is to look to embrace the disruptive elements. Looking for *new opportunities* is a positive response. It's how we can create a more evolved and advanced world and many successful companies were born out of recession. It's a counter-intuitive move, but moving towards the solution as opposed to running from the problem is a higher-level response. Every systemic and chaotic collapse involves an equal amount of disruption and opportunity. You lose the old but can gain from the new, but only if you look for and embrace the new opportunities. Of course, if we don't learn from past mistakes we enter:

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The *'Lessons are repeated until they're learnt'* paradigm

Generally, in consolidated organisations, the entrepreneurs, mavericks and innovators who, with passion and enthusiasm, drove the organisation into existence are bought out, forced out or leave the system out of bureaucratic boredom. Think Steve Jobs ala Apple.

So even after the bean counters have slashed the excess, there is still nothing new to offer. Until some fundamental lessons are learnt then the same mistakes often re-surface. Disruption, whilst usually perceived as a threat is actually a significant growth opportunity but not if you suffer from paradigm inertia.

"The important thing is this: to be able to give up in any given moment all that we are for what we can become" ~ DeSeaux

The *'Death'* paradigm.

In order to imagine a future world, it is necessary to accept reality and let go of the beliefs and behaviours of the old paradigm. Death is a part of evolution. What worked in the last paradigm will not work in the next.

As Daniel Priestley noted: *"Your best thinking from five years ago will be your baggage today"*

There is a myth that people are scared of change. That's not true. People change all the time so they can stay in the same place. What we're really scared of is transformation. Often, we have to let the old paradigm die to allow the birth of the next one.

The *'We're all in this together'* Paradigm

Whenever you create a highly structured and consolidated system, you'll eventually see failures in its inability to adapt and evolve. The cost of trying to create a sense of certainty with processes is that it sometimes limits the behaviours and potential of people so they can be easily managed.

To overcome this, some organisations recognise the need for special units as was the case in WWII when the Special Air Service was formed. Its *modus operandi* was to send small teams into the African Desert to cause havoc behind enemy lines. These teams, separated from the main organisation, work on special projects which require a high degree of autonomy to maximise potential.

Lockheed Martin's Skunkworks project produced jet planes faster than was expected because they were separate from the bureaucratic rules and processes within the rest of the company. Sociologist Everett Rogers defined 'skunkworks' as an

"enriched environment that is intended to help a small group of individuals design a new idea by escaping routine organizational procedures".

These smaller teams are intra-dependent and as a group, capable of independent thought and behaviours. They exhibit high performance, creativity and self-management. This means they can handle more complexity and adapt effectively.

The 'Brave New World' Paradigm.

When a team is allowed to experiment, a leader is able to leverage more of the collective intelligence of the group. The benefits for this, is that they are more open to shifting worldviews, often by creating new products and services and enter the 'Brave New World' paradigm.

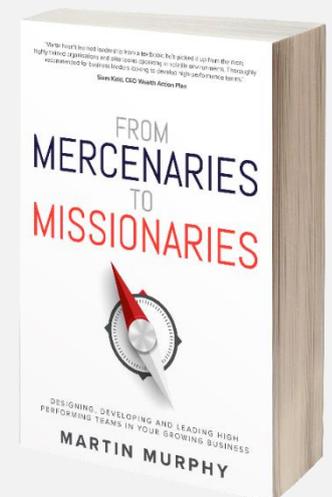
Most big companies that have been around for a while have had to change dramatically.

IBM seeing the threat of cheaper computers on the horizon, shifted their business model from hardware to services.

Nokia was originally a paper mill on the banks of a river in Finland. Now it is involved in space communications.

Under Armour began its life as a producer of sportswear but it has now shifted to becoming a digital business which helps people achieve their fitness goals. Those that haven't adapted quickly enough have disappeared, as Blockbuster did, displaced by Netflix and Borders succumbing to Amazon.

With the present social, political and economic landscape entering a period of sustained seismic shifts, one of the vital skills a leader needs today is to be familiar and able to recognise paradigms and overcome paradigm blindness and inertia.



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