

# Reconstructors of elephants wanted

*Modern management rewards reductionism and avoids complexity but, in this era of super-specialisation, the ability to reconstruct the whole business picture has become an invaluable asset, argues Dr Leandro Herrero.*

‘Let’s cut this elephant into pieces’, was her favourite saying. It was a familiar cry whenever something slightly complicated was on the table. Any problem prompted that particular director to attack the issues ‘one by one’. One of her management team, a friend of mine, told me they used to have lots of elephant legs, tails and body parts on the table but she could not recall any time when they had actually comprehended – apprehended – the whole elephant! Vivisection was both required and considered ‘the achievement’ by that director.

Another friend told me at a conference that his boss was strongly against ‘broad pictures’. He maintained that project leaders should focus totally on their own project, and that any other ‘bigger picture’ was just a distraction. He insisted on giving them ‘just-in-time’ information. Their attendance, for example, at an overall project review outside their direct area of responsibility was taboo. He called it focus.

A group of managers has been asked to review a strategic presentation just given by their boss. The familiar ritual starts by moving to the syndicate room followed by the 15-minute ceremony to decide who is the leader and who is going to present the findings. ‘We are told to summarise our conclusions in five bullet points per flip chart, using only two flip charts’, the red jumper cum-MBA says. During the brainstorm, ‘the boss’s big idea’ is progressively trituated into a mixture of bits and pieces. Half an hour later, some preliminary bullet points start to emerge. Close to deadline, all bullet points are in place and a sense of destiny is running high in the group. Reporting back to the main group, the presenter elaborates on the bullet points in a form that is hardly

recognised by the rest of his group, adding a few extras from his own last minute inspiration – but this is a different matter.

These three vignettes all have one thing in common: the reduction of a complex issue into something simple. One could hardly argue against the beauty of simplicity. However, it has its limitations. The ‘vivisection-boss’ never understood what an elephant was. Unfortunately, during her career, she encountered a few of them and could not cope with the stampede. The ‘focus-boss’ is a real paradox. While preventing project leaders from seeing the more complex picture of a project’s inter-connections, he praises ‘helicopter views’ and ‘whole pictures’ and complains to others that not many people ‘have them’. Insight was never his forte. The ‘bullet-point boss’ has managed to elicit precise, simple, pre-digested and applause-winning information but, beyond the collective sense of achievement in the meeting room, nobody really remembers what it was all about the following day.

There is nothing wrong with reductionism. It is one of the essences of philosophy and a tradition of mankind when trying to understand reality in more basic terms or in a more comprehensible form. Examples close to home are those of biological activity reduced to physical processes, or mental activity reduced to physiological or biochemical brain processes (physicalism, materialism, behaviourism). Social structures and processes could be reduced to

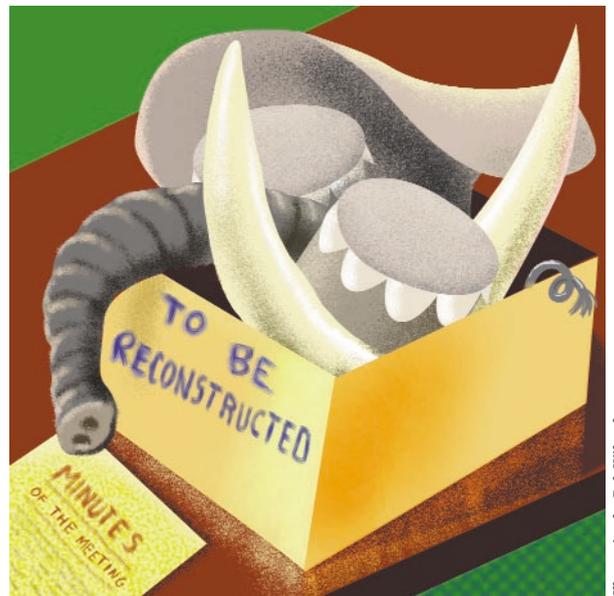


Illustration by Rob Witcockson

relationships between individuals (individualism). As one of the UK’s former prime ministers, Margaret Thatcher, liked to remind the world ‘There is no society, only individuals’. Just as mathematics itself has logic (logicism), almost every discipline has its ‘reduced’ version. In science, reductionism has paid off, particularly for methodological purposes.

However, efforts to simplify have to be balanced by some attempt to apprehend the whole (holism). In recent years, system thinking and system theory, complexity theory and chaos theory have tried to do the job.<sup>1,2</sup> In one form or another, all of these share the premise that the ‘pieces’ don’t make sense without the interaction between them – and there is no point in trying to understand them in isolation. Translated for the elephant-boss this would mean that, no matter how precise the analysis of legs and tails, the elephant itself

is not, unfortunately for her, the sum of its anatomical bits and pieces.

Although it is legitimate and certainly practical to cut a problem into pieces for methodological purposes of comprehension, sooner rather than later, somebody has to put the bits back together again and call an elephant an elephant. The trouble with the elephant-management team is that they become progressively skilful in not recognising elephants – a very dangerous competence. Similarly, pure ‘focus’, a skill hyped by modern management, can lead to tunnel vision. No matter how practical ‘focus’ can be, you will only see a few trees in the forest. The more managers become purely ‘focused’, the more they will need forest experts in their organisation.

Anglo-American management education, with notable exceptions, favours reductionism. Simplicity is rewarded, complexity is avoided. The bullet-point society rules. We teach, expect and reward managers for their reductionistic abilities. We expect ‘the net-net’, ‘the one-page bullet point’ and the ‘executive summary’. We praise people who can reduce, pre-digest and deliver a ‘simple message’.

I believe that three trends are responsible for accepting as the norm a unilateral, reductionistic, bullet-point society:

**Information pollution.** There is so much information out there.

We welcome pre-digestion, filtering and simplification because we are unable to accept everything. We simply gave up trying to distinguish between noise and signal a long time ago. In the material world, we have invented waste management, a whole industry that gets rid of waste of any kind and recycles as much as it can, so that it can be consumed again, waste-produced and wasted-managed. In the information/Internet-world, we have invented ‘portals’ that narrow the entry to what we want, or we use ‘individualised news’, which delivers the latest pre-selected topics. In any case, we tell ‘them’ what we want and ‘they’ filter, promising not to bother us with anything different.

Pre-selection and pre-digestion are very appealing, at least on paper. There is the additional element of making one feel different and unique (my news, my newspapers, my Amazon book selection). That is, until one starts getting saturated with ‘individualised’ news from different sources, leading to a super-customised, super-individualised,

unique, tailor-made, for-your-eyes-only, unbearable delivery of personalised pollution. **‘The end of time’.** We have also given up on the idea of setting aside time to think and reflect. Today, these are activities that only meditation centres and esoteric weekend retreats dare to promote. We are in the ‘doing’ business – so busy doing that we have no time for being. So if there is ‘no time’, there is even less for complexity or the holistic approach. At least, bits and pieces are more digestible.

We are also apologetic about the use of time. ‘Please skim through my paper and let me know what you think,’ we say. Who dares to ask, ‘please spend a lot of time and read it in its totality’? We produce reams of paper (electronically or old fashioned paper memos) but no-one in their right mind expects anyone to read everything! This ‘not-enough-time’ rationale rewards any kind of instant knowledge and instant comprehension which inevitably leads to superficialism.

**A ‘cut-and-paste’ education.** I have a brilliant daughter – I love her to pieces. Months ago, she had to write an essay on Israel and did not know where to start. She went onto the Internet – which, of course, is something nobody taught her how to do – and found plenty of pages, lots of pictures and articles, mostly from the official Israel Tourism Agency. She downloaded,

cut and pasted a wonderful essay. She got the highest marks. If only she had read something. She learnt nothing about Israel (I lie, she kept some sort of holiday information) and not only got away with it, but was well rewarded. My daughter has the

intellectual capacity to write a good essay on anything. She just did not need to use her judgement. The only thing I regret is that I did not take the teacher to court. I am sure, and sincerely hope, my daughter’s case does not represent the average education system standards, but I can see a worrying trend leading to a new qualification MsT (Master in Trivia).

A warning – beware of those who make a living on complexity fabrication. They can be identified by the number of bubble charts and the disproportionate gap between the task and the consulting fees. They do not reconstruct elephants. They create a whole safari park, count the elephants, herd them and slice them in flip charts and overheads with their pieces fitting somewhere in a pro-

prietary two-by-two grid called a template.

I am convinced that super-specialisation will continue and that Peter Drucker,<sup>3</sup> is right when he stresses that the manager of the future will be super-specialised. Market forces will push harder and harder for specific skills. But I am worried about super-specialisation in management. If this is indeed the trend, synthesis skills, not analytical ones, which is what job ads are full of, will become precious assets.

I propose to redefine leadership in terms of the ability to reconstruct elephants from their parts, reconstruct strategies from bullet points and reconstruct portfolios from individual projects. In looking for leaders, I have not seen any request for synthesis competence that I can remember. Cutting elephants? Yes, quite a lot. The bullet-point, cut-and-paste, I-have-no-time (management) education will not produce synthesis people. Where are we going to find these leaders?

A ‘cut-and-paste’ education glorifies the ‘fact-finding project’, the ‘initiation in quasi-scientific problem-solving in groups’,<sup>4</sup> the ‘practical approach’ and utilitarian knowledge. No wonder children are taught how to cut elephants before there is any reference to what an elephant is.

We Continentals have a tendency to prolong things. Latin verb and writing is longer. We are masters of subordinate clauses and we think that Hemingway’s acclaimed short-sentence English – used as an example of good readability – had more to do with his alcohol levels than beauty and simplicity by design. Among my compatriots, we have an old joke: a Latin parliamentarian would say: ‘I have a three-point proposal that I am going to summarise in seven’.

Perhaps, for a month, instead of rewarding simplicity and avoiding complexity, Anglo-American business schools could adopt the ‘Latin’ approach, and try to cope with the anxiety of discovering that something that looks like two pairs of legs and a long tube is in fact an elephant – shaking the ground as it lumbers towards you. 

## References

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•**Dr Leandro Herrero is a pharmaceutical executive with wide international experience, who writes and lectures on organisational development and human capital architecture.**