

# Managing Chaos

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**W**hen you walk into the council chambers to prepare for the evening's open council meeting, you notice a group in the audience whom you do not recognize and whose members seem uninterested in the meeting for its own sake. Clearly, they are not there to improve their understanding of their community's government. The thought crosses your mind that this council meeting may not be as smooth as the agenda had led you to believe.

During the period for public comment, you realize that this group has a hot issue; until then, you had thought it was a minor one, already being addressed. The council agrees with the group that staff should immediately attend to the issue. At once, the course of the meeting, and your week, have changed.

What brought about this change? How could it have been planned for? Often, the events that lead to a change are unpredictable. As we know, our environments are always somewhat chaotic. Today's world of increasing service demands, decreasing budgets, and a faster pace has greatly contributed to this chaos. Managers face the challenge of having to estimate and forecast a multitude of variables before every decision. The manager is well aware of having to navigate in a chaotic environment. Chaos theory seeks to explain such an environment better.

## **Chaos and Management**

Chaos theory was developed in the scientific world and has only recently been applied to management. A study of

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**Use It**

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**To Your**

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**Advantage**

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it can lead to a manager's appreciation of chaos and of times of uncertainty and stress in management.

Chaos theory is based on the notion that seemingly insignificant and unrelated events can affect actions. According to the theory, the events in the world are so complex and dynamic as to seem disordered, but in fact there is an underlying order to the chaos. Granted, this underlying order is difficult, if not impossible, to predict because of the myriad factors involved. But chaos theory discerns patterns of order in seemingly chaotic behaviors.

One example that is used to explain the workings of the theory is the "butterfly effect." A butterfly flapping its wings on one side of the globe potentially can alter weather patterns on the other side of the globe as the weather system twists and churns over time. The point of the butterfly effect, a metaphor that is a cornerstone of chaos theory, is that a small and seemingly unrelated action can alter and magnify patterns of change so as to cause great future upheaval.

This theory holds appeal for management. The manager knows that any of a variety of small events can greatly affect a manager's day. Two useful examples relate to the budget process and to council meetings.

### Levels of Chaos

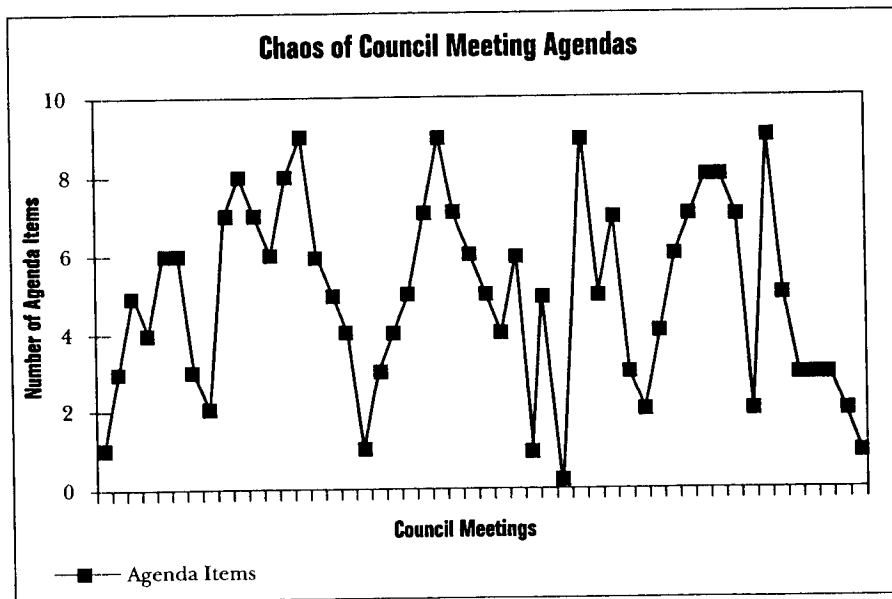
The budget process is chaotic in its very nature. Pieces of the budget flow to the budget analyst from all parts of the organization. Each part appears discrete and ordered, yet the pieces do not fit together and may seem incongruent in many respects—completely chaotic, in short. Not until the analyst begins to work with each part, trying to recognize a pattern, do the parts begin to come together. Eventually, a budget arises out of the many parts.

There are multiple levels of chaos. Organizations, no matter what their

size, type, or mission, are filled with chaos. As described above, there can be discord among groups—staff, council, and public. There also is disagreement and confusion within each of these groups.

Council meeting agendas, therefore, are examples of chaotic events, though they demonstrate the underlying order expounded by chaos theory. When there is no set limit to agenda items, the number of items on the agenda can vary freely with each meeting.

The accompanying graph demonstrates the essential chaos of council meetings. It shows that the actual number of agenda items can vary randomly from meeting to meeting. For example, there is only one item on the agenda for the first meeting, three items scheduled for the second, five on the following, and so forth.



Agenda items are added as needs arise. At some meetings, the agenda can be full, including the number of items that reasonably can be considered in the amount of time that the council devotes to a meeting. Other meetings have light agendas, with only a few items or occasionally (*very* occasionally) without any items.

In any event, although there is no

set number of agenda items because they are added as needed, there is an underlying order. The graph demonstrates the example that the underlying order of council meeting agendas is between zero and 10. At no time are there fewer than zero or more than 10 agenda items. Thus, the manager can be assured that, although it is difficult to predict the particular number of agenda items for a future meeting, the agenda items will number between 10 and zero.

### Insights Gained

Five lessons can be learned from chaos theory that will help managers understand how to function within their ever-changing environments.

1. Rely less on precise planning. Chaos theory shows that precise

planning is not beneficial. Too many minor variables can change, altering a precise plan. An approach more conducive to the chaotic environment is keeping sight of goals and allowing the organizational structure to evolve, as it must evolve, to meet those goals.

In other words, don't rely on a strict organizational-chart view of

your organization. Rather, concentrate on the informal processes and relationships in meeting goals. A manager's world consists of relationships and processes.

Management has for too long emphasized order and structure. Yet organizations are filled with chaos and change, which must be considered when managers chart their courses. Not all courses can be charted precisely because a complex set of factors affects the course being set out.

**2. Be responsive.** Knowing that small changes can create havoc is a good reason for a manager to be responsive. Responsiveness can be directed toward a councilmember's request, a citizen's inquiry, or a situation within the organization. Responsiveness emphasizes management practice over theory because the manager must immediately consider and act on a number of changing variables.

For too long, management theory has emphasized order and structure even though organizations are filled with chaos and change. Managers who act quickly will meet the change early and help guide it in a positive direction.

**3. Be adaptive and flexible.** Although chaos theory holds that there is an underlying order to things, large fluctuations can occur within the bounds. It is important to be aware of these possible fluctuations and to adapt to them. Though we all realize this fact, it still is important to remember that events can change in a heartbeat. To be best prepared for the fluctuations, a manager should avoid longer-term forecasts and instead rely on shorter-term views. Reassessing situations more frequently also can result in a renewal of one's self and of the organization because it may provide fresh approaches to the meeting of needs.

**4. Keep a dynamic attitude.** The fundamental reason that public man-

agers do the activities they do is to serve the public. A dynamic attitude can help the manager maintain a stable level of government service in an unstable environment. Being able to change constantly as the environment changes while keeping sight of goals can help public managers best serve their communities.


A dynamic attitude can assist managers in another way as well. Understanding that chaos is at work and being motivated to continue meeting goals in the changing environment provides the manager with an opportunity to learn and be creative. For example, budget processes often remain consistent from year to year, yet they are greatly affected by a number of small, sometimes seemingly unrelated, events. A dynamic attitude will aid managers in successfully navigating the process each year and will provide them with the chance to learn the many variations of the budget process, thus making it likelier that future budget years will be successful ones.

**5. Use chaos to your advantage.** Understanding that small changes can lead to greater changes can benefit a manager. The manager who understands chaos can use it to his or her advantage by directing its workings within the organization. The manager can create minor changes knowing that they can cause greater, positive changes. Chaos can energize the organization toward improvements.

An example of the energizing of an organization is employee empowerment. Employee empowerment involves managers' granting authority to subordinates to make a wider range of decisions. This grant of authority blurs the line between managers and subordinates by permitting subordinates to control many aspects of their daily responsibilities as they see fit and to gain increased levels of authority within the organization. Employee empowerment gives employees the tools and support to find

solutions or innovative ways of accomplishing their jobs. Such empowerment is an example of managers' using chaos to the advantage of their organizations by creating environments in which multiple "butterflies" can cause positive change throughout the structure.

Many managers and management methods attempt to seek a balance through various control processes, applying the controls more rigorously when predictability is dissipating. Fortunately, real change and new structures are found in the very chaos that these managers seek to prevent.

Whether you avoid chaotic environments or thrive in them, they exist. Groups, cities, counties, corporations, and projects are filled with chaos. The manager who understands chaos and can recognize "butterflies" can excel. 

## References

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