

# Ongoing Discussion “Thought Piece”

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**Surviving The Perfect Storm**  
**Capabilities for avoiding catastrophe in today's business "Perfect Storm"**  
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A **Perfect Storm** is the term that describes the situation some organizations and programs (and for that matter, some countries) are experiencing today (<http://tlainc1.wordpress.com/2011/03/21/triple-bottom-line-tbl-sustainability-via-interactive-planning/>). This situation is a product of an exceptionally new and rare combination of unforeseen circumstances. Circumstances that produce severe business turbulence that drastically exasperate an already perilous situation. Sounds familiar?

Today's Perfect Storm is characterized by increased rate of change and dynamic complexity. Specifically, what to do when: *"managing as usual is no longer an option"*. Examples and signs of this problem abound:

"Organizations worldwide, of every kind and in every industry, are now stepping back and re-thinking the basics; questioning their most fundamental structural tenets. Doing so is necessary for their survival and long-term growth. And our own industry is no exception, where we must question our most fundamental assumptions about infrastructure & apps." Ray Ozzie (Microsoft Chief S/W Architect), Memo: Dawn of a New Day, October 28, 2010

"While the term "systemic risk" has historically referred mainly to collapses in finance, recent decades of globalization have created new and broader risks. There has been an exponential increase in the number of nodes and pathways through which materials, capital, information, and knowledge can be transmitted at lightning speeds and with global reach." Ian Goldin, Seed Magazine, January 13, 2011

"We've had revolution in countries of north Africa; in Yemen, Jordan and Syria suddenly protests have appeared. In Ireland young techno-savvy professionals are agitating for a "Second Republic"; in France the youth from banlieues battled police on the streets to defend the retirement rights of 60-year olds; in Greece striking and rioting have become a national pastime. And in Britain we've had riots and student occupations that changed the political mood ... horizontalism has become endemic because technology makes it easy: it kills vertical hierarchies spontaneously" Paul Mason (BBC UK), Twenty reasons why it's kicking off everywhere, February 5, 2011d:

It is becoming increasingly evident that today's systemic challenges cannot be overcome by the application of reductionist thinking, linear approaches, or by top-down management styles or by the use of so called experts- yet this is how organizations and governments are attempting to cope with the Perfect Storm situation over and over again! New ways of thinking, organizing, and co-evolving are needed.

The challenge remains to understand:

1. Why don't executives and managers appreciate the serious impact of this new era of dynamic complexity on their decision making?
2. What is happening when successful managers operate in their normal manner only to discover that their organizations are performing dismally?
3. Why are organizations not learning and adopting new leadership styles appropriate for dealing with dynamic complexity?

## Biography

John is Affiliated Faculty, Organizational Dynamics at the University of Pennsylvania. He is also Associate Director, [Ackoff Collaboratory for Advancement of Systems Approaches](#) and Adjunct Professor, Systems Engineering, in the School of Engineering and Applied Science. John is engaged in the field of organizational management, using systems thinking as a world view and communicating its implications for management. As a scholar-practitioner, he has been involved with numerous projects helping management teams with the resolution of complex problems. He has taught at the undergraduate and graduate level, worked as an educator/consultant with for-profit and not-for-profit organizations and government agencies, and has also been a co-principal investigator in a number of research programs.

John's primary areas of interest include implications of systems thinking in complex problem formulation (including complex project management) and systems redesign. He is a member of the Editorial Board of the journal, *Systems Research and Behavioral Science*; a member of the Academy of Management; and an honorary member of the Society for Organizational Excellence in Bulgaria. His applied scholarship also includes knowledge development in the creation of new products and services, and the development of socio-technical systems for learning and knowledge-to-wisdom management in complex adaptive systems. He has also been integrating a series of thematic concepts such as idealized design, business model design, open innovation and Enterprise 2.0 into an integrated workable whole.

John is a leader in “design thinking,” as well as a Fellow of the Da Vinci Institute for Technology and Management in Rivonia Gauteng, South Africa. In February 2008, he was awarded a Fulbright Scholarship to visit the New Bulgarian University in Sophia, Bulgaria to help create the "Design Institute" for the practice of design thinking using trans-disciplinary teams to cope with complex and intractable problems. In Bulgaria and globally, he has presented lectures, mostly on systems thinking, in various educational, corporate and government institutions.

John received his Ph.D. in Systems Sciences from the Wharton School at the University of Pennsylvania.