

A New Context, A New Framework

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A Context for our Decisions & Actions

As we know, all conscious decisions involve an objective: to buy a car, to get an education, to plant soy beans. However, objectives do require a context and we usually provide one that is based on a *desire*, a *need*, or a *problem*. However, objectives or goals created within such a context commonly lead to unintended consequences when achieved. If we define those goals and objectives within a *holistic* context we are much more likely to avoid those unintended consequences.

What was preventing many of us from making this shift in language and thinking was use of the term *holistic goal* (*later holisticgoal*TM). It kept the focus off the idea of context and on the idea of a goal that needed to be achieved. Thus, I (and the Savory Institute) now speak about the profound difference a *holistic context*TM makes when determining objectives and goals, making decisions, or planning actions. And the response has been deeply gratifying. These audiences have been diverse in cultures, interests and nationalities, and most, if not all, could fairly quickly see the power a *holistic context*TM gives them for making good, life-enhancing decisions. These experiences have been so compelling that we intend to drop the term *holisticgoal*TM in favour of *holistic context*TM. There is a difference in definition, which I hope will become clear below. But there remain many similarities, too. When we now proceed to attain objectives it is within a *holistic context*TM, we define that context using all the elements of the former *holisticgoal*TM – quality of life, forms of production, and future resource base.

Struggling to Define Something New

The concept of intentionally providing context for objectives that tie people's cultural, material and spiritual needs to their life-supporting environment is increasingly needed and quite novel to humanity. When in the early 1980s we first understood this need for something beyond a vision or mission for objectives and goals that would provide the context required, I felt we needed a new word to represent it. Naming a concept is not easy when it is so new. J.C. Smuts, whose construct of holism I used when developing the *holistic* framework, had to resort to ancient Greek to develop the word *holism*. When developing a new word I tried to use something I hoped people would understand was a new concept. Eventually that became *holisticgoal*TM – so that people would see it as different from a goal. But to my increasing dismay I found the word *goal* in *holisticgoal*TM was blocking the needed paradigm shift. The *holisticgoal*TM was not something we would hope to attain, it was something to provide a larger, *holistic context* so that the objectives and goals we sought to attain could be attained while enhancing what is most precious to us and what sustains us. Naming this concept a *holisticgoal*TM has not proven effective at accomplishing this shift in mindset.

The Key to Managing Holistically

The key to managing holistically lies in using a *holistic context*TM (as defined by the decision makers), when making decisions, planning actions, or planning strategies in each situation under management.

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No matter which of the many decision-making processes people use, they all focus on goals and objectives. All conscious decisions have an objective. The same can be said of development projects and government policies, such as the various wars on drugs, weeds, or terror, or any number of management initiatives – agroforestry, organic agriculture, integrated landscape or adaptive management.

Objectives need a context to be judged wise or unwise, suitable or unsuitable, good or bad. Objectives without context are like loose cannons on the deck. If I were to say, “I am going to light a fire” (objective) and ask your opinion, what would you say? You would have no idea what to say without a context. If the context was to cook your food it is good, if to burn down your house, bad. **So it is with every objective— a context is needed.**

What sort of context do we need for our objectives? With nature, societies and economies all being complex and functioning in wholes and patterns, if the context is simple the objectives might be achieved in simple cases, but in all others they are more likely to lead to unintended consequences – some favorable, but most unfavorable. When the context remains simple in more complex management situations, we not only fail to achieve objectives, but can experience a whole chain of unintended consequences. That’s why on a grand scale we continue to have more and more frequent multinational Rio-type conferences bemoaning the continued deterioration of the global situation despite all the good intentions, resolutions, committees, and conventions, and the allocation of vast amounts of funding.

Simple versus Complex

When we look broadly at today’s management we find for almost all objectives the context is simple, generally unspoken and assumed. Commonly it is to meet a “need” or “desire” or to “address a problem”. Let us look at examples to make this clear. You have the objective of buying the latest cell phone, flat screen television, computer software, or of going on holiday and the context is a need or desire. A large NGO is involved in many development projects in Africa or Latin America, each having an objective within the context of addressing various problems: poverty, social breakdown, disempowerment of women, drought emergency, disease outbreak, child malnutrition, etc. A small NGO could be promoting conservation agriculture, again with clear objectives and within the context of addressing a need or problem. When governments or international agencies form policies they will have various objectives within the context of addressing a current or foreseeable problem. I could go on into corporate policies, strategies and more, but consistently we will find that people are pursuing objectives and the context for the objectives is simple. While there is seldom anything wrong with our objectives and goals, we run into problems and failures due to simple contexts in a world of complexity.

Let me clarify what I mean by complexity. If we look at all the things we “make” using technology in some form, we find we achieve our objectives with amazing success – from the development of the first Stone Age tools to putting a man on the moon. The things we make involve what in Systems Science are called **hard systems** and defined as:

- Man-made
- Complicated but not complex
- Do what they are designed to do

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- Have emergent properties (whole is greater than sum of the parts like a computer that with many parts put together computes)
- Have no unexpected emergent properties
- Do not work if a part is missing because they are not self-organizing
- When problems arise they are relatively easy to solve

If we look at the things we “manage” but do not make (human organizations, agriculture, natural resources, economies, finance, etc), we find we are running into ever-mounting problems. Problems such as we are experiencing with global finance, economies, agriculture producing more eroding soil than food and accelerating desertification with its symptoms of mounting poverty, droughts, social breakdown, emigration, violence and global climate change. These things we manage are all in Systems Science language known as **soft or natural systems** and defined as:

- Complex
- Self-organizing (work with components missing by reorganizing)
- Have emergent properties, including unexpected, unplanned and in many cases unknown emergent properties and feedback loops
- When problems arise they are extremely difficult to solve

Thus, the things we manage involve complexity. This is what Smuts was alerting us to when he said (in *Holism and Evolution*, 1926), that nature only functions in wholes and patterns with neither parts nor interconnections, which are mechanical concepts. Arising from this awareness it is clear that the context for objectives in management cannot be simple if objectives are to be achieved without unintended consequences.

A holistic context™ is required for management to be holistic. Creating objectives outside a holistic context™ leads to one-dimensional management, when we in fact operate in—and management is influenced by—multiple dimensions. And this applies even when we strive to work as integrated teams, or go with the flow of adaptive management, or any number of “more holistic” approaches.

We Don't Have Time

If we are to successfully address the problems facing us today—including climate change—management clearly needs to be holistic. Because climate change will continue, even in a post fossil-fuel world, unless we address the contributions made to carbon emissions by agriculture, this problem is a high priority. Agriculture is today not only producing more eroding soil than food, but also biodiversity loss and desertification, which in turn are producing the effects or “symptoms” of degradation we’re acutely aware of: increasing droughts and flood, poverty, social breakdown, violence, emigration, cultural genocide, recruitment to dissident organizations, and so on. Note that all these symptoms are now being blamed on climate change, when climate change instead is in great part a result of agriculture.

Management throughout agriculture—defined as the production of food and fibre from the world’s land and waters—needs to be holistic if we are to avert tragedy beyond imagination. Until we can bring this about—on a global scale—there is negligible chance of success in dealing with the perfect storm that is approaching.

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The Role of Research

Research, by definition, is reductionist. But the information it provides is often expected to be used in management, which we recognize needs to be holistic. Research is generally based on one or more objectives, although many of our greatest breakthroughs have occurred by accident, and outside of the original objectives, by very observant researchers. Because research is not management a holistic context™ is not generally required. However, in the case of agriculture (or any other “natural system”), it is important to have a holistic context™, for orienting research to management needs. Without such a context, much of the research cannot successfully inform management in complex situations, and when it does, it leads to unintended consequences. Millions of dollars have been spent on researching various management systems that ignored the complexity of nature, with poor, and sometimes disastrous, results, while fundamental knowledge gaps remain unresearched.

As we move forward in managing agriculture holistically we will need research to address issues relevant to management and to fill knowledge gaps. Because research is costly, it will be desirable to ensure far greater collaboration between research and management and this can be done using a holistic context™ for research objectives.

Guidelines

To manage holistically in each management situation—farm, ranch, agro-pastoral or pastoral community, organization, village, town, city, nation, international organization, or whatever—the people making decisions need a holistic context™ for their objectives. It is a context unique to them in that whole situation – their holistic context™ for their objectives. The guidelines for describing this holistic context™ remain as before:

- The holistic context™ for any whole under management is described by those making the decisions and those with veto power over decisions.
- If an entity was formed for a specific purpose then a statement of purpose is required.
- The holistic context™ is described (and written down), using a specific format:
 1. How do people want their lives to be, based upon what they value most – culturally, materially and spiritually;
 2. What has to be produced to live such lives (and purpose if required); embedded in,
 3. A description of their resource base as it would have to be to enable people hundreds of years from now to be living such lives.
- It cannot contain any decision already made
- No prejudice against any future action/tool
- Nothing quantified or prioritized

All objectives, goals, missions and visions can be assessed within this holistic context™ using the filtering questions of the holistic framework to ensure actions are socially, economically and environmentally sound both short and long term and that unintended consequences are minimized.