

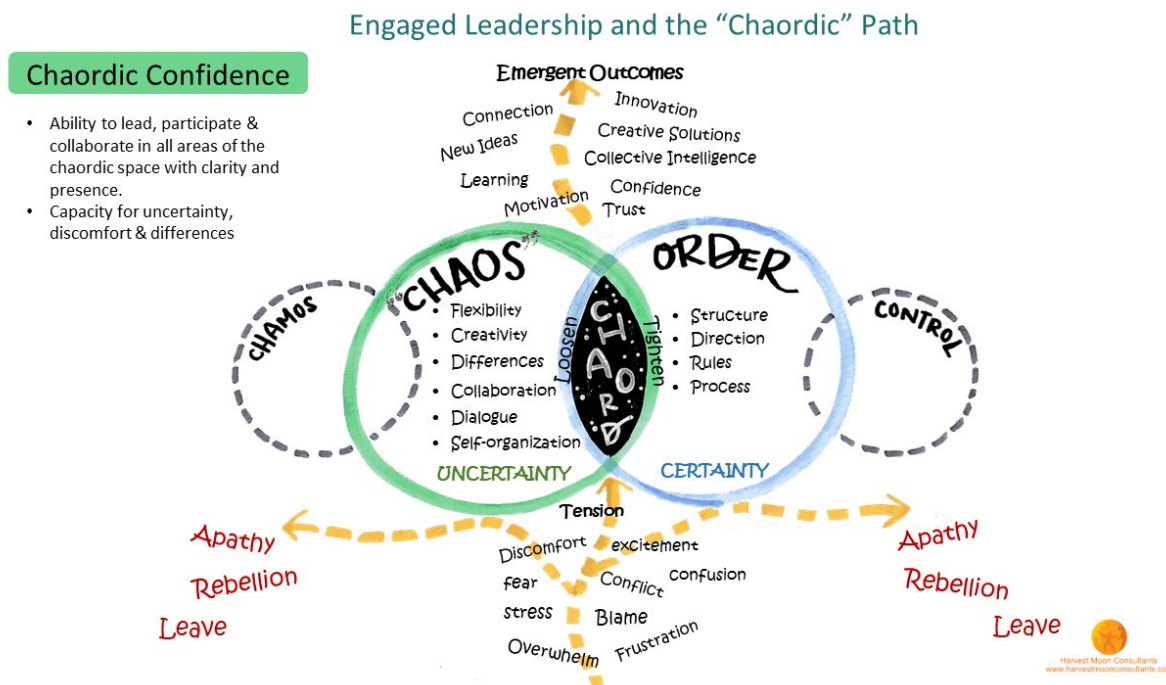
# Engaged Leadership: The Chaordic Path

## Overview

When we are wanting to innovate or we are working to understand and work effectively with complex problems, we need to bring leadership and process that actively engages people and allows for inquiry, exploration, and creative thinking with a diversity of input and perspectives. We need to act and respond in ways that create the conditions for learning to happen, insights to arise, connections to be made and new ways of seeing and acting to emerge.

The space that allows for what we call “generative emergence” in collaborative, human work, has been described by Dee Hock as the “Chaordic” space, or the “Chaordic” path. This generative space includes a creative tension between what he refers to as **“chaos”** (where there is more uncertainty, self-organization, creativity, flexibility, open process) and **“order”** (where there is more structure, direction, rules, and use of authority).

This valuable framework gives us a way to think effectively about our leadership approaches and process design when we are working with complex problems or when we are wanting to innovate or come up with new ideas. It can also help us to consider what we might want to try adjusting in our process when our current approaches are not working, when our work is stuck and not developing, or when people are becoming apathetic, rebelling, or leaving the process.



## The Chaordic Path

Living systems - which include organizations, teams, families and communities - contain both order and chaos. Neither is inherently good or bad, each serving a purpose and together expressed in different amounts and ways holding the potential to contribute to a creative tension and space that is where engagement and creativity happen and that is needed for generative emergence to occur. Dialogue and collaborative work that happens in this space is key to effectively engaging complex issues and accessing new ideas possibilities.

There are moments when everything is stable and predictable and other times when things seem surprising, wild, unpredictable, or out of control. Good 'chaordic' leadership is being able to cope with the swings in states from chaos to order and to be able to work and lead effectively in the intersection of these two states, a place known as the "chaord."

Life throws different things at us every day, despite our best efforts to plan for desirable outcomes. Leaders who function well in the chaordic space are able to bring enough form and structure to a situation while allowing for new ideas, novel practices and fresh thinking. These leaders are able to create life-giving and engaging contexts for action, where employees, team members, partners, families and clients have some stability and structure but are able to express themselves and bring their own talent and capacity to work.

There are times when structures or conditions are too tight, and we need to allow for a little **more chaos** to enter into the picture.

This can be achieved a variety of ways including:

- loosening or less structure, rules
- less control is administered
- power is shared or dispersed
- more opportunity for people to take initiative
- more space for a diversity of ideas and perspectives
- more space for self-organization to occur\*

There are also times when **more order** and structure is required to stabilize situations and increase certainty and predictability, to meet timelines, move towards decisions or create more efficiency.

This can be achieved in a variety of ways including:

- More rules, directions, accountability
- power, control and decision making are more centralized
- time, focus, sharing of different perspectives is more constrained

*Management tends to include more ordered approaches that are appropriate for work that needs to get done efficiently and we have a known effective system of doing it. Leadership requires us to discern and include varying amounts of both 'chaos' and 'order' that create the life giving contexts of engagement that lead to the emergent outcomes we need.*

## A few words about “Chamos” and “Control”

**From a living systems perspective, life does not thrive in either of these two extremes.**

- **Chamos** describes the extreme, unhealthy levels of “chaos” where there is such high uncertainty and so little structure that nothing can get done, and creativity is not possible. This can result from leaders avoiding or abdicating responsible or effective use of their power and authority or lack of appropriate attention to process design.
- **Control** describes the extreme of “order” where there is so much rigid structure and so little flexibility or freedom that nothing creative or connecting can happen. This can result from leaders overly and irresponsibly using their power and authority to control, and in organizational cultures where structure and control are the default.

**Three common human responses connected to the frustration, low satisfaction and despair that often occur in these extremes are:**

- **Apathy:** people not taking initiative, loss of interest in their work or outcomes, unwilling to bring or challenge ideas.
- **Rebellion:** actively disrupt or undermine the conversation or work (other people's or the org); disrespectful behavior; loss of respect for or response to authority.
- **Exit/Leaving:** people simply leave the process or the organization if they can, due to frustration, despair, or low work satisfaction.

All can become culture issues with repeated instances of too much control or too much “chamos.”

**As a leader or facilitator** dealing with complex problems and looking for innovative new ways of doing things, you will be regularly “*walking the chaordic path*”, and leading others in that space.”

## **Leadership/Hosting in the Chaordic Space Requires:**

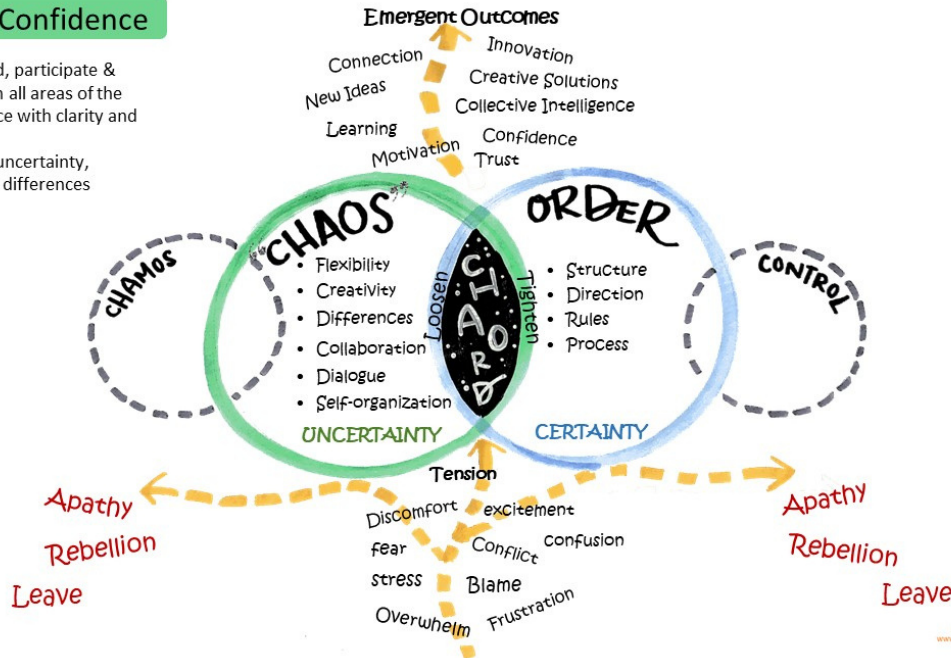
- **Context/understanding:**
  - Understanding about the “Chaordic Path” and being able to discern when it is needed to actively create “chaordic” space, or to respond effectively in chaordic space, and discern the mix of chaos and order needed to create and hold the generative creative tension in a given situation.
- **Skills, tools/methods:**
  - Knowing how to design process and take leadership actions that can both bring more or less chaos and more or less order.
    - There are some methods you can learn and use.
    - Observe other leaders/facilitators doing this effectively and learn.
- **Chaordic Confidence:**
  - Personal capability to lead, participate and collaborate in the “chaordic space” with clarity and presence.
  - Ability to be and lead in uncertainty and discomfort.
  - Awareness of your own tendencies and reactive patterns under stress, and bring rigorous personal leadership self-development to grow your ability to be present and non-reactive.

# Leadership in Chaordic Path Reflection Exercise

## Engaged Leadership and the “Chaordic” Path

### Chaordic Confidence

- Ability to lead, participate & collaborate in all areas of the chaordic space with clarity and presence.
- Capacity for uncertainty, discomfort & differences



## Current Practices Made Visible:

What effective leadership actions do you already take that help to bring more positive or helpful “chaos” (flexibility, openness, creativity, self-organization) into collaborative dialogue or work situations when needed?

- Describe the specific situation.
- What is the action, approach or process you brought?
- What do you notice about the positive impact of intentionally bringing in more ‘chaos’ in this situation?

**What effective leadership actions do you already take that help to bring more positive or helpful “order” into collaborative dialogue or work situations when needed?**

- Describe the specific situation.
- What is the action or process you bring?
- What do you notice about the impact of intentionally bringing in more order in this situation?

## Action PRACTICE Exercise:

### Individual Practice:

Practice intentionally bringing more “chaos” or “order” in process you are leading, where you think that could be helpful to bring more life, innovation, creativity, insight to the work at hand.

Make note of what you do, and what you observe and learn. This could be in conversations, meetings, decision making, design and planning, conversations.

Remember: the measure of successful chaordic leadership is NOT comfort. There may be some discomfort that happens by inviting / holding the chaordic space.

Watch for positive signs of life and good work happening in the chaordic space. Notice what helps it move toward generative emergence.

### Notes:

Describe the specific situation.

What did you try? What did you learn?

# Leading Self: Personal Leadership Patterns in the Chaordic Space

## Individual Practice:

Observe yourself in chaordic space, either when you are a participant or when you are leading.

## Strengths:

What strengths and helpful qualities are you able to bring to the chaordic space? As a leader? As a participant? What helps you to show up this way more often and more effectively?

## Limiting Patterns:

When there is uncertainty or discomfort in that space, notice your own reactive tendencies. Be specific. Do you get controlling? If yes, specifically what do you do or say? Do you get overly 'chaordic' by loosening structure too much, avoiding or abdicating your leadership responsibility? Or do you 'blow it up' rebelliously? Or do you leave/flee? Be specific about how this plays out in your actions and communication.

*(Note: Apply the Lead Self: Limiting Beliefs Inquiry exercises to shift reactivity and limiting patterns.)*



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