Dissolving Anchors: Acid Management on Mars

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It's not difficult to imagine a world where change is the norm. After all we live in a world where the tide changes twice a day, the seasons come and go each year, the cells in our own body are constantly dying off and being replaced with new ones – there is little stability in the natural world in which we exist. Or is there? The mountains look much the same as they have for many thousands of years, people still fall in and out of love, murder each other, and do I need to say anything about death and taxes? Perhaps we can rise above this false dichotomy and say change and stability both depend on our perspective.

If I look at my desk, my first thought is that it has not changed much in the time I have owned it. I can count on it to be there when I get home and do all of its deskly functions just as it did when I left it. However, if I look closer, the desk has changed in many ways – here is a small nick from dropping the stapler on it, here is a stain from a friend's child's crayon, the handle to this drawer has worn. And if I take a longer perspective the desk has changed from being a tree (or trees) to wooden boards, to the structure I call my desk. Who knows how many forms these same atoms will take over the next century, over the next millennium? So the question of change or stability seems to depend on the distance I am observing from, both physically and temporally.

The question of change versus stability becomes even more unclear when I move from the world of physical objects into the world of constructed meaning – the world of organisations. Consider the question of whether an organisation's structure has changed or been stabile over time. First I have to construct in my head what I mean by the organisation's structure since it doesn't exist out there in the physical world. Then I have to compare my conception of the structure at one time to my conception of the structure at a second time. If those two conceptions, those two mental models are the same then I call it stability, if they are different I call it change.

This is really not very different than the example of the desk. When I consider whether my desk has changed, I first have to create a conception of what I mean when I say "my desk." I first conceive of it as the place where I write. In that conception it is stabile from day to day. Then I conceive of it as piece of fine furniture, perhaps even a work of art, and use has changed it over time – the small nicks, the gentle wear. Finally I conceive of it as a collection of atoms over many years which are constantly changing their collective form. I tend to think of my desk as the place where I write and it is very useful for me to have some stability in this conception. It allows me to not have to think about where I will write, it simplifies the task of writing – it is what I will call an anchor.

I use anchors both to simplify my world and to signal to others how I am making sense of that world. For example, in academic articles, I would normally use references as anchors. Here I would reference writing on schemas, scripts, frames, and mental models in order to anchor my thinking for the reader. However, this is written as part of an effort to imagine change as a norm and my argument is that change as a norm is an assault on anchors, so I will not include any academic references. And I ask you to consider, how does it feel to not have the references, the signposts that allow you to place this writing in your taxonomy of academic thinking? How does it feel to be deprived of your anchors?

In it's most extreme case, a world where change is the norm is a world where all of your anchors are constantly changing – that is, the anchors do not hold, you are adrift in a sea of meaning. I recently lived in a world that was constantly assaulting my anchors. I moved from the United States to England, from Boston to Bath, a couple of years ago and had been slowly learning what is really meant by the phrase, "two peoples separated by a common language" (I'd tell you who said that, but that would be a reference, an anchor). Allow me to tell a brief story to illustrate my point.

I was compelled to conduct an experiment into one of my anchors – what the word "quite" means. I ask one of my British colleagues, "if I say something is sad, and then I say something is quite sad, which is more sad?" They tell me that sad is sadder than quite sad. My Canadian and American colleagues tell me that quite sad is sadder than sad. I look and find both definitions in the dictionary. I realise that for the better part of the last year I have been using "quite" to amplify the meaning of something and the Brits I have been speaking to have understood it as lessening the meaning. Although this may have worked to my advantage, unintentionally turning my American tendency for overstatement into the British tendency for understatement, my point is that I have been living in a world that differs in how it understands the word "quite" than I how I understand "quite" and I was unaware of that difference. I was acting from the tacit assumption that my anchor was stabile, which proved to be wrong.

This raises some interesting points about anchors. First, it makes me realise how many anchors I have, how vast the amount of meaning making I take for granted on a day-to-day basis is. Every word, every phrase assumes a certain amount of meaning making – language itself is a collection of anchors. I cannot function without anchors. Second, I realise that it isn't the anchors that I know have dissolved that are problematic, it is the ones that I don't know have dissolved. I was told early on that "fanny" did not refer to the buttocks, so I knew that was an anchor, a meaning making that I shouldn't make while living in England. But I didn't know that "quite" meant the opposite of what I thought it did. It is the change that I am unaware of rather than the change I aware of that is really problematic. Third, anchors are grounded in a specific meaning-making in a particular space and time. My understanding of "quite" was based on living in the United States in the later half of the twentieth century, and it didn't fit with living in England at the start of the twenty-first century. Even if I work very hard to stay in one place, I cannot stay put in time – change happens.

Normally, I would now go into a lengthy discussion of how these ideas relate to the organisational literature – that is I would anchor these ideas about anchors. But, since my point is about anchors not holding, I will not do that. I will leave these ideas to drift in the sea and let you make whatever meaning of them you will. In one sense this is a great freedom, you can understand this writing as you would like. You can make the connection to your own anchors, your own discipline's thinking without my references and connections getting in the way. On the other hand it requires much more work on your part, you must find your own path with no guidance from me at all. Do you embrace the freedom or curse the extra work?

That of course, is the key question, raised by the assault on my anchors. Do I embrace the freedom, the learning, the heightened awareness and curiosity that the assault on my anchors entails, or do I hate the extra work that it requires? One of the great joys of travel and of the expatriate experience is the ways in which you learn about yourself. When my anchors are assaulted, I can question beliefs and assumptions that I might not have even known I had. A little over a decade ago I was working in Australia and heard a television reader talk about the "American drive to succeed." In a flash, I realised that I had always just acted from and assumed that everyone else acted from a drive to succeed. My time in Australia showed me that that wasn't always the case. I was happy to be able to question the anchor of having and wanting to succeed in my own life.

Now, for me wanting to succeed is a choice rather than unconscious assumption.

On the other hand, I find that I am quite angry (you decide which definition of "quite" I mean) with the assault on my anchors that being required to take a British driving test has been. I don't want to change my beliefs on coasting (from coasting being a good way to conserve fuel and fun besides to coasting being evil incarnate), but the world I live in demands that I do. I hate the extra time and effort it takes for me to accomplish simple tasks such as renting a tuxedo. I can't simply go to the tux store, I have to first find a store, which means first figuring out what heading to look under in the yellow pages ("clothing, men's, formal, hire" is the right answer, which is a long way from "tux rental").

The difference between enjoying the assault on my anchors and hating it seems to come down to the old saying "everyone likes to change, but no one likes to be changed." (you can look up who said it yourself and think about what it's like to have to do the extra work, to not have a useful anchor to simplify the process — are you enjoying it or cursing me for not providing the reference?) When my anchors are assaulted in such a way that allows me to question my own anchors in my own way and make choices about them, then it is a learning and growth process that I quite enjoy. But when the world assaults my anchors in such a way that I am being forced to change then I become quite angry and resistant – I boldly walk into the clothing hire shop and say that I want to rent a tux. The salesperson responds, "you mean you want to hire formalwear?" "Yeah, whatever," I respond. Neither of us are happy with the exchange.

Which brings me back to organisations. To think of organisations with change rather than stability as the norm is to think of a world where our anchors are constantly dissolving, a world where they hold for a brief time and then lose their meaning. The questions for me then become how many of my anchors have lost their grip, and how do I know when my anchors have lost their grip? I might think of these answers on a spectrum, with tourism at one end and complete chaos at the other. When not too many of my anchors have lost their grip and I have a lot of choice in the process of exploring my anchors then I have the pleasant experience of being a tourist in a foreign land, full of curiosity and learning about myself. At the other end of the spectrum when all of my anchors are changing rapidly and that change is being inflicted on me by external forces, then I have complete chaos and I find myself unable to function.

For those of you who are feeling uncomfortable with the lack of anchors in this writing, perhaps even questioning whether this could in any way be considered to be management scholarship, I will also think of those two questions in terms of a two by two matrix (see figure 1). On the vertical axis is control of the process (internal and external) and on the horizontal axis is temporal durability of anchors (long and short).

Control Of Process			
	Internal	American's visit to England	Acid Trip
	External	Plants	Earthling's visit to Mars
		Long	Short
		Temporal Durability	

Figure 1.

I'll start with the lower left square and move around the grid clockwise. When the change process is forced on you, but the pace of change is slow, the image of change is a plant. The plant is rooted in its place, but slowly moves to face the sun as the sun moves across the sky over the course of the day. This is the image of slow evolutionary growth of an organisation that adopts to the environment over time. The change is incremental and adaptive.

When the change process is within the individual or organisation's control and the anchors are very durable, the image is that of the tourist visiting a culture that is somewhat, but not too different from their own – the American in England. The tourist's anchors work well enough to still function quite effectively, but the cultural

differences highlight anchors that the tourist may not have consciously thought about before. I can laugh about small misunderstandings such as when an American colleague asked an English colleague if he wore knickers. The Englishman answered, "well, sometimes with my mates." Over several beers we sorted out that my American colleague had been referring to trousers that come down just below the knee, while my British colleague had been referring to women's underwear. We all learned something that evening.

My image for change that is rapid and the control of the process is internal is an acid trip. The hallucinations create a rapidly changing world, where what is a chair one minute is a giant lizard the next. The anchors do not hold, but the curiosity and sense of adventure dominate (at least on a good trip). Effective functioning in the classic plan and control sense is replaced with a sense of surfing an emergent reality – self organisation and chaos in vivid colours. We don't know where we are headed, but that doesn't matter because the trip is the thing.

When change is still rapid, but the control is external, my image is taking a trip to Mars. All of my cultural references, from language to social interactions may be wrong. The penalties and problems of acting from anchors that don't hold are unknown, but possibly fatal. Even the physics of the world are different – objects fall at a different speed, I can't breathe the atmosphere. All of my instincts are suspect and it is now a question of survival rather than curiosity. I step out of my space ship onto the surface of Mars and climb a nearby pile of rocks to get a better view. It turns out that climbing that pile of rocks is how Martians declare war. I decide the planet is unpopulated because I don't recognise the dust creatures as being life forms. Mars attacks the Earth and we wonder why.

If I am to take current, popular writing on management seriously, we live in a world of ever increasing change – that is the temporal durability of our anchors is getting shorter and shorter. We no longer have the option of being plants or tourists. Our only choices are the acid trip or the trip to Mars. As with all two by two matrixes, the dichotomy is false and the line between the Acid trip and trip to Mars is unclear. Our experience is likely to be some of each – an acid trip on Mars if you will. Imagine again, if you will, my trip to Mars, but this time I am taking acid (in a metaphorical sense, of course — I do not condone taking illegal drugs nor visiting other planets). My altered perception and openness to different realities allows me to perceive the Martian dust creatures as intelligent life. My willingness to question and engage my own anchors serves as a model for the Martians and we co-create a new meaning for standing on that pile of rocks. In short, we become friends and learn from each other, both of our lives and futures being forever changed by the encounter.

However, I generally don't take much of current, popular writing on management too seriously (especially my own, assuming that it is not too egotistical to think that it might sometime, somehow qualify as popular). I suspect that there are still many opportunities to be a plant or to be a tourist. So if we are to start to think of organisations with change rather than stability as the norm, one place to start might be this simple matrix. We might start to ask diagnostic questions about specific organizations, do the members of the organization experience it as plants, tourists, acid trippers, or being on Mars? We could start to prescribe management advice — what should acid management on Mars look like?

I posit there are two fundamental prescriptive aspects to acid management on Mars. The first is the recognition that all of my anchors may not hold. This suggests an on-going awareness and attention to your anchors, if not a constant questioning, at least being open to the possibility that the anchor may have lost its grip. The second aspect is taking some control of the process. It is Mars, so there are a large number of my anchors that will lose their grip or at least be threatened. But in as much I can recognize that the meaning is socially constructed I have the opportunity to actively participate in that construction. I cannot dictate what the anchors will mean, but I can be involved in the co-construction of

those anchors. I will try and illustrate something of this with a brief story of my own experience in the classroom.

A couple of years ago, I was teaching an undergraduate organisational behaviour class. My plan was to briefly introduce some theoretical concepts about the difference between management and leadership and then ask the students to use those concepts in discussion of some short stories about organisational experience that they had been assigned to read for the class. The discussion started slowly and I asked the class if they had actually read the stories. Only one of the thirty-five students had. The anchor I had that the students would do the assigned reading had lost it's grip. In a very real sense, I was on Mars. I was a relatively new teacher, still a student myself (working on my doctorate), and I depended heavily on following my plan in the classroom. My anchor didn't hold and I was adrift.

I'd like to tell you that I handled it very smoothly, that I engaged the emergent process and enjoyed the acid trip experience of that moment, that I practised acid management on Mars. However, my own behaviour was more plant-like. What did happen was that I was angry with the students – how dare they not prepare for my class? I was afraid because I didn't know what to do, I had no contingency plan. In short, my reaction to being forced to question the anchor I had been taking for granted and depending on in the moment, was to panic. Practising acid management on Mars would require me to have questioned my anchors in the moment in a more positive and open way, to stay relaxed and inquiring in the moment rather than panicking. Instead, I made the smallest adaptation I could and continued on keeping as much of my anchor as was possible. It was only later that I really actively questioned my anchor.

As I questioned my anchor that the students would do the reading, I had a couple of choices. I could adopt a more cynical anchor such as "students are lazy and I can't depend on them so all of my lessons must be completely self contained" — I could just lecture for the entire class period. My questioning of my anchor lead me to understand that the panic was based in my own need to be in control of the situation and my own understanding of the power dynamics of the situation. For the students to not do the reading was a direct assault on my authority as a teacher, which was something that felt very tenuous to me as new teacher. My need for control and understanding of the power dynamic were based in some rather traditional models of teaching in which the teacher has complete responsibility for what goes on in the classroom, including the students' learning. I had intellectually adopted a teaching philosophy that I was trying to create mutuality in the classroom and that the students should take co-responsibility for their own learning. My lived anchor was in conflict with this philosophy. The philosophy suggested a different anchor entirely, it suggested an anchor that we (the students and me) should deal with the situation together.

This questioning and exploration of my anchor didn't take place in the moment, it was done as part of a later process of off-line reflection. In the moment, I panicked and unilaterally made up an exercise that we could do that didn't require the students to have done the reading. If I could have acted out of the anchor that the students were co-responsible for their own learning then I could have moved on to my second point about acid management on Mars — co-construction of anchors. As my anchor dissolved, I could have engaged in a dialogue about my anchor with the students and we could have co-created a new anchor. I don't know what that knew anchor would have been. Co-creation of anchors is an unpredictable, potentially transformative process. We might have been able to actively engage with our conceptions of teaching and the roles of teacher and students and the idea of responsibility for learning. Questioning deeply held anchors is not an easy process. Those anchors can be part of our core sense of identity. I was able to question my anchors, in part because I have made a choice to not identify myself as "the sage on the stage," and was able to create new anchors that were consistent with my espoused core teacher identity as "facilitator of learning."

The practice of acid management on Mars is simply the ongoing explicit questioning and co-construction of our anchors. I say simply, but it is far from being a simple task. As a new teacher, my abilities to manage change were far more plant-like. I could make some simple reactions to changes that were inflicted on me – I was anchored, I was my anchors. As a plant, I didn't like the experience of being on Mars and I certainly didn't have the wherewithal to metaphorically take acid and enjoy the trip. Now, as a slightly more experienced teacher I react with a certain joy when there is an opportunity for tourism in the classroom, when something happens that makes me question an anchor. I find something of the acid experience when I work with doctoral students to exploring their inquiries as we jointly question anchors. And I often experience reading reviewers' comments about my writing as a quick trip to Mars.

So I find myself in every quadrant of my matrix, there is no stability, as an anchor it doesn't hold. But it does provide a language for me to start to talk about my experience of this constantly changing and stabile world that I inhabit. It is perhaps a somewhat silly language – plants, acid trips, tourists, trips to Mars – however, I believe that explicit silliness is in short supply in management theory (I won't comment on implicit silliness) and that it might be useful for thinking about change as the norm. And seriousness reifies anchors, it makes them seem solid and permanent – in short, stabile.

It is the reification of anchors that is the defining characteristic of conceptualising stability as the norm. We cannot avoid anchors because they are a fundamental aspect of how we make meaning about the world. The idea of anchor's dissolving, is itself an anchor, a bit of constructed meaning that is ephemeral and likely to dissolve. The idea of conceptualising change as the norm is an anchor, a bit of stability from which to launch these articles in this special issue. That is to say, constructing meaning is an act of creating, if only for the moment, a stabile conception – an anchor. But we do not have to let those anchors be forged in hardened steel, we do not have to reify them. We can make our anchors from corn meal so that they dissolve in the water – perhaps freeing ourselves to float on to Mars?