

Defining and Exploring Highly Integrative Questions: Towards an Integrative Consultancy Approach in a Complex World

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„We think dealing with complexity is complicated. It is not about thinking complicated but finding the guiding principles that would help. So what kind of principles would help us develop a solution? And the world does not come in boxes, the world comes in a whole.“

Paul Keursten, co-founder of Kessels & Smit,

The Learning Company



As consultants we are facing complex questions and questions that need to be solved in multidisciplinary teams. Because of globalization and technological developments, we see more integrative questions emerge in our time. We call them: Highly Integrative Questions (HIQ's). Major societal and economical developments consequentially lead to more integrative and complex challenges for local and regional governmental organizations, but also for commercial organizations. The time is near that a city like Shanghai will order a 'smog-free city' at a group of non-obvious co-operating organizations (Jansen, 2017). Maybe Amsterdam will organize 'mobility' in the future, and Cape Town will order a poverty-free city.

We have gained experience in working with (Highly) Integrative Questions. We have been involved in building institutes for educational and health expertise. Or we have designed the process to create the backbone of the itinerary for the Dutch Railways, where many fields of knowledge and interests come together. More often, we see that these kind of questions and challenges are being approached through either a blueprint model, thoroughly followed-up by a dedicated project manager. Or through a 'kamikaze' chaotic creative process, initiated by enthusiastic and positive leaders, who actually do not have a clue what they put into motion.

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Both in our national and international projects of the past decade, we have been experimenting with approaches that aren't just 'blue' or 'chaotic'. We have been inspired by academics like Stephan Jansen and practitioners as Adam Kahane (author of 'Solving Tough Problems', 'Power and Love' and 'Collaborating With the Enemy'). In this article we would like to share our insights both from theory and from practice. The goal of this article is to raise awareness of what HIQ's can be and how to approach them. Therefore, the structure follows three guiding questions:

1. What are HIQ's?
2. Where do elements of HIQ's occur?
3. How can we approach HIQ's?

1. What are Highly Integrative Questions?

In today's globalized and interconnected world organizations have become more integrative. Imagine for example a gold mining company. The core business of such a company in the past was limited to the exercise of gold mining, executed by employees specialized in engineering. Nowadays, a gold mining company needs much more than engineers and gear to do mining. They need communication officers, sustainability experts, social workers that try to build a social license to operate with the surrounding community. In that sense, business is required to become and think more integrative in their work to catch up with the increasing complexity of markets, societies and our economy.

Logically, organizations that have become more integrative, also have to deal with more integrative questions and challenges. The Cynefin model, built by Dave Snowden, provides a lense to look at different types of questions that require different types of guidance. It is a sensemaking model that provides actors in a system with information about the domain they actually operate in, without saying one domain is more desirable than the other. Translated to HIQ's, it gives a very clear picture whether the question is embedded in a simple and/or complicated field, or whether it operates in a complex and/or chaotic up to a disordered field (being

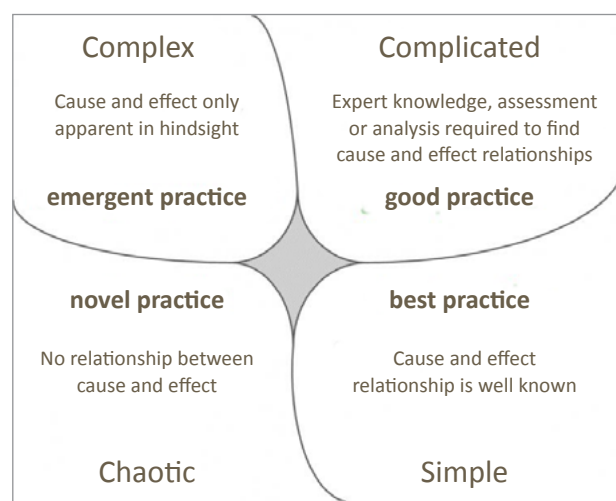


FIGURE 1, based on Dave Snowden

What are HIQ's?	What HIQ's are not
Intended result conflicts with reality.	First-hand questions that are easy to grasp.
Various actors with different interests involved who are willing to challenge the status quo.	Involves single stakeholders (e.g. organizations or individuals) who want to change the status quo.
A context characterized by complex power dynamics. Different layers of complexities and knowledge boundaries such as legislation borders.	Complicated questions that can be solved by a few experts.

BOX 1: (Built upon academic literature from Rogers (2007), Osburg & Schmidpeter (2013), Snowden (2007))

not aware of the dimension that you are in). Thus, (Highly) Integrative Questions emerge on different layers that require different knowledge and expertise to approach them.

We define HIQ's as follows:

Highly Integrative Questions are urgent questions in which the intended result is at conflict with reality. Various actors with different interests are involved and the context of the question is characterized by complex dynamics of power and interests, such as legislation, knowledge or state boundaries.

in Box 1 you find a short elaboration on the characteristics of HIQ's. What are HIQ's and what are complicated questions, but not necessarily HIQ's? Next to that, we will step into three components that characterize HIQ's.

HIQ Component 1: Intended result conflicts reality

HIQ's address a conflict between an interest, desire, and reality. In order to cope with this tension between intended result and reality, HIQ's require integrative thinking. Integrative thinking refers to the ability to hold different views and form a new model that contains single elements of these views. In contrast to traditional management processes that aim to predict the outcome as accurate as possible, an integrative thinker has a positive attitude towards complexity and the ability to use different concepts to form a synthesis. In terms of HIQ's we can conclude that before formulating a question, an integrative thinker aims to deeply understand the whole landscape in which the question is embedded.

HIQ Component 2: Various actors with different interests involved

HIQ's emerge often as an outcome of collaborations between science, NGO's and governments to react to current societal and economical challenges. We see that these different parties work along an agenda that aims at a higher scale. Collaboration then happens in a space where people can connect not only on a content level but also on a relational level. Therefore, different interests need guidance for designing appropriate instruments or products to facilitate understanding of the overall concept (e.g. a timeline, agenda, history line, monologues).

HIQ Component 3: Different layers of complexities, power dynamics and knowledge boundaries

HIQ's occur in a context of power dynamics with different interests involved. It is therefore important to be aware of those dynamics and design a process in which the right people are at the table. Namely, those who are able to decide or bring the topic to the decision makers.

STOP & REFLECT

In the consultancy industry we see new types of questions emerging.

- Why is it important to be aware of the field in which our question is embedded (Cynefin model)?
- How do the 3 components of HIQ's help to understand if we are dealing with an complicated or (Highly) Integrative Question?
- Are there other components that you would put under the umbrella of (Highly) Integrative Questions?

2. Where do elements of Highly Integrative Questions occur?

Where do we find examples of HIQ's and how can we link these to theory? In this section, we tap into 3 concrete examples of K&S colleagues working with (Highly) Integrative Questions. How do they work on those questions now and how can this be linked to theoretical concepts of HIQ's?



Example 1: OPEN, co-working spaces

OPEN is a collaborative workspace located in several cities around South Africa. These workspaces create environments for working, meeting and innovating. To grow their entrepreneurial and innovative community, OPEN partners with more than 25 selected eco-system players (e.g. Growthpoint Properties, Rhiza Babuyile). By helping individuals, teams, and companies to interact in a bigger community, OPEN aims to engage in major issues in South Africa such as inequality and poverty. They tackle these challenges by acting upon guiding principles. For instance, their guiding principle of a level playing field defines how they make coffee, their pricing and their layout for the physical design. Box 2 summarizes questions from OPEN that include components of HIQ's and gives a glimpse of OPEN's approach to these questions.

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Question	HIQ Component	Approach to this Question
How can we create an environment which is a level playing field for rich and poor, young and old in a country that is very divided?	Intended results that conflict reality	<p>The co-working spaces of OPEN create an environment in which everyone is treated in the same way. They treat the student the same as they treat the CEO. From that basic principle, their clients can intersect and interact in a meaningful way because most boundaries that hinder them outside from OPEN are not present inside of OPEN.</p> <p>How?</p> <p>To make the workspace accessible, OPEN creates low-cost memberships. On top of that, they provide open spaces for people who can't afford the membership.</p>
How to create a coral reef for ideas, innovation, and entrepreneurship?	Various actors and interest involved who want to challenge the status quo	<p>With their workspaces, OPEN invites individuals, teams, and companies to connect and grow a community. OPEN provides equal environments, meaning that they don't have higher and lower grade offices, but they mix entrepreneurs with different interests and capacities.</p> <p>OPEN partners with 25 selected actors (NGO's, policy maker, corporates) who add value to their members and guests. Together with their partners, they create an ecosystem that connects different interests and actors.</p>

BOX 2

Example 2: IDH, The Sustainable Trade Initiative

IDH is a Dutch foundation with the goal to promote sustainable trade. They bundle and leverage public and private interests to create inclusive green growth. The organization acts as a facilitator and investor to organize cooperation between companies, NGO's, governments, knowledge institutes, and banks-trade unions. In these cooperations, they work around six different landscapes (Apparel, Palm Oil, Fresh and Ingredients, Coffee, Cotton, Tea) and tackle issues such as deforestation, water pollution, and poverty. Box 3 illustrates components of (Highly) Integrative Questions that IDH approaches through their work.



Question	HIQ Component	Approach to this Question
How to create sustainable trades on an international scale?	Intended result that conflicts reality	While working with different stakeholders in an underdeveloped setting, most of the times there is a conflict between intended results and reality. In such processes, all voices want to be heard. That is why IDH designs an agenda, involving local organizations, NGO's, governmental bodies and commercial companies to fully understand the landscape of the problem (e.g. deforestation, resource scarcity).
How can we create a multi-stakeholder approach to find collective solutions for local producer's (tea, cotton, coffee etc.) to major challenges like Health and Safety or deforestation?	Various actors with different interests involved	IDH acts as a facilitator and convener to organize cooperation between companies, NGO's, governments, knowledge institutes, and banks-trade unions. They look for momentums to bring people together. For example, an ongoing NGO campaign around the topic Health and Safety in the Garment industry. In this case, companies are worried about their branding. NGO's are on top of these companies. Then IDH steps in, brings the different stakeholders together and challenges their interest. From this point, an agenda and consequentially relevant action can emerge.

BOX 3

Example 3: Cape Town Water Crisis

The Cape Town Water Crisis is an ongoing situation that was pushed by the Cape Town government. After recognizing the water crisis, a whole range of panic initiatives emerged. The governmental bodies mainly try to counteract against the crisis by forcing the population of Cape Town to reduce their water use to a minimum. Besides the governmental initiatives, there are all kinds of private initiatives and companies trying to make money out of this like providing special water filters and saving raindrops. Most initiatives rush to find a problem and rush to find a solution which won't solve the initial problem. The initial question in this case is how Cape Town can achieve a long-term, sustainable water supply for the city?



Question	HIQ Component	How do they approach HIQ's?
How to achieve a long-term, sustainable water supply for the city?	A context characterized by complex power dynamics. Different layers of complexities and knowledge boundaries such as legislation borders.	<p>In the Cape Town water-crisis example, small initiatives (governmental, local, illegal) emerged to solve the problem of water scarcity. Yet, they missed the deeper analysis which would help them to find an integrative and long-term solution to their water supply problem. Instead, they directly jumped into the implementation phase.</p> <p>Mark Turpin, consultant at Kessels and Smit, The Learning Company suggests using the logic level framework to find answers to the Cape Town Water Crisis. He believes that this model would enable the initiatives to deeply understand the situation with all its complexity. The logic level framework is based on Gregory Bateson and Robert Dilts and applies the logic that people and organization can think on different levels.</p> <p>If someone is stuck on one level you can touch the problem by going on a higher level. The consequence is that a change in a higher level affects than the lower levels. In the Cape Town water crisis, this framework enables government and local initiatives to share their understanding and let them connect on a more meaningful level. Mark Turpin believes that working with such a framework brings complex problems of Cape Town such as inequality and separation to the surface and consequentially leads to a long-term approach rather than short-term emergency solutions.</p>

BOX 4

3. How can we approach Highly Integrated Questions? How should we deal with HIQ's? What kind of facilitation does a HIQ need?

In this section, we step into guiding principles that will give us insights on how to approach HIQ's.

We know from literature and our own experience with the Dutch Railway that dealing with an increasing complexity asks for a highly integrative approach.

We argue that you need at least four pillars to approach HIQ's.

We define Highly Integrative Approach as follows:

A highly integrative approach is an approach to deal with complex questions by making urgency explicit, bringing the right stakeholders to the table, create the right structure and frequency of coming together and facilitating the right conversation by different interventions.

In order to achieve results, it is important to look at the urgency. To whom is this question really urgent? If nobody lays awake at night of the question, it is likely that nobody will stand up and puts energy in the solution. The 'urgency-owners' could be called initiators or owners of the question. They could either get to the table themselves or invite the right people to the table. Right stakeholders are people who either have mandate to take decisions or people who easily find their way to decision makers.

To make the 'get-together' effective, it is helpful to build in a frequency and structure into the meetings. For example, a regular scheduled meeting, with a clear division of roles within the meetings. Besides the structure, it is important to have the right conversation to take place. This asks for facilitation and multiple partiality. The facilitation is about ensuring that the group or team achieve its fullest potential and enabling different stakeholders involved to express their interests. It is about seeking to understand before being understood. This isn't done by facilitation of the conversation only, also designing appropriate instruments or products is a powerful tool to facilitate the understanding of the overall concept.



STOP & REFLECT

In her new role as a police department officer, Mrs. Jones is confronted with upcoming complexities that come with her job role such as international teams, various expertise and new forms of crime. At her work she notices that the police department aims to use modern technology and tools to fight criminality. Yet, due to the upcoming challenges, she does not know how to work on all these various levels simultaneously. All in all, her work gets more uncertain and unpredictable.

To what extent can an integrative approach help to deal with these upcoming complexities in her work?

Our own ambition for HIQ's?

In this section, we step into our own ambitions. We will answer the question where do we see the potential for K&S in working with HIQ's and how do we envision the future of this project?

Marijke:

To me HIQ's are highly interesting, present-day and challenging. For K&S colleagues it asks for teamwork and tapping into different talents. It asks for working together between different parties, facilitating conversations and designing new and innovative tools. In other words, it asks for skills that are in the DNA of K&S. I would love to further work with that, challenge ourselves and grow in our own potential.



PJ:

We can only deal with the world's biggest challenges when we conceive them as Highly Integrated Questions. These are the challenges where many parties, stakeholders and opposing stakes are involved. During my visits to South-Africa I was inspired by the concept of Interdependence. That requires an interdependent approach to societal and business issues. Personally, I'm eager to use my creativity to invite people to step into the framework of Interdependence and connect their own personal interests with others to solve a common, highly integrated, problem.



Jaro:

When picturing HIQ's, I see a puzzle that is a collection of interacting images, stories and shared knowledge. This puzzle is as a whole far more interesting than the sum of its single pieces. K&S colleagues constantly build new puzzles in their work with multidisciplinary teams who address complex questions. They know how to create and facilitate spaces where every person in the room has a voice to express their thoughts and feelings. Once being able to capture this potential and make it accessible to the outside world, I believe K&S enables organizations to successfully operate in a highly complex world— namely through shared consciousness, value creation and collectivity. I would like to elaborate on the idea of HIQ's, deepen the conversation and translate it to my future job roles.



Derk:

Thinking of HIQ's I realize organization journalism, as a K&S work field, is unmissable. In order to understand the complexity of an HIQ's its necessary to understand the (hi) stories behind it from a multiple perspective view. With multiple perspectives, I mean people from all kind of angles. By diving into these stories, and bringing them together I intent to build a bridge. A bridge that creates understanding for each other's perspectives. Therefore, it is necessary to bring stories together, in a magazine, newspaper, blogs and/or vlogs. By reading those different perspectives organization journalism can be seen as an accelerator to a successful solution towards a HIQ. To this I would like to add that there is a power in teaching people to interview each other. This helps not to be in discussion with anyone, but to be curious about someone's standpoint. I envision that K&S builds up a highly storytelling and storycatching expertise. This helps to build bridges in order to understand the complexity of an HIQ and to work towards a solution by the unifying power of stories.



Further Readings

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