



## Adaptive Leadership Networks in Global Organizations - learning to see the networks in our midst

Mary Stacey, Context Consulting (2016)

Much of Context's work is in support of leadership teams who are building and leading global networks in their interconnected environment of increasing volatility, uncertainty, complexity, and ambiguity (VUCA).

Members of these teams have earned a seat at the table through their functional excellence, and together they create strong *organizational leadership teams*. Yet they come to realize that building and leading a global network requires them to expand beyond the approaches that have helped them succeed in hierarchical and matrix structures, and to navigate in ways that are more collective, adaptive, and systemic.

Our view is that the most effective way to build and lead a complex global network is to become an *adaptive network leadership team*. Our starting place is to sharpen the team's ability to see that they're surrounded by thriving networks and that, like the rest of us, their vision has been clouded by a

century which privileged organizational leadership and its emphasis on organizing resources and managing the delivery of goods and services.

We share the story of US Airways Flight 1549 which is a brilliant example of *adaptive network leadership in complexity*. In 2009, just after take-off from La Guardia airport, the flight was hit by multiple bird strikes and lost power in both engines. In the time available--less than 5 minutes--the crew considered three landing scenarios while responding to multiple emerging realities. The flight made a 'controlled ditch' on the Hudson River and all 155 people on board were rescued. This [video](#) provides a good overview.

This case evokes two narratives. The first is similar to the media reports at the time, which referred to the incident as the 'Miracle on the Hudson'. This narrative focuses on the heroic action of Captain 'Sully' Sullenberger and went viral as he appeared on late night TV and received White House honors. The second narrative is common with groups of seasoned leaders who advocate that the successful landing was due to the crew's competence.

Both of these narratives value technical expertise, directive lines of authority, and heroic execution. Taken together, they create an ideal image of the mindset that is dominant in today's global organizations, and a window into the limitations of relying exclusively on this mindset in a VUCA environment.

When we deconstruct the landing of Flight 1549, teams quickly see that the crew (and others not acknowledged in either narrative) had to respond to many emerging situations: the fuselage ripped open on impact, a passenger opened a rear door and further flooded the cabin, and the length of time the plane would stay afloat were all unknowns except in hindsight. The situation was complex, not merely complicated, which is the first indicator that an adaptive network response is required.

Teams also begin to see that the missing dimension in both narratives is that the landing was successful because of the interdependent efforts of an *adaptive network leadership team*: the cockpit and cabin crews, the air traffic personnel and airport response teams, the commercial and private rescue operators who rushed to the scene, and even the passengers themselves were pivotal to the successful landing.

There is much analysis about what happened to Flight 1549. In *Team of Teams: New Rules of Engagement for a Complex World*, Retired General S. McChrystal notes that the crew's technical training was of limited use, as no procedure for low altitude dual engine failure existed anywhere in the industry. "It was their interactive ability that proved critical. Because of time constraints they had to work intuitively and in a close-knit fashion. The pilot credited Crew Resource Management (CRM) training for providing them with the skills they needed to build a team quickly, open lines of communication, share common goals and work together." In other words, they had the capacity to work as an adaptive network leadership team, in-flux in-flight.

Organizational leadership teams can face a long road to becoming an *adaptive network leadership team* because of the significant shift of mind that is required. The journey begins by seeing past the myth that heroic, hierarchical, and technical leadership is sufficient in complex situations, and by committing to collectively develop the personal, relational, and systemic capabilities that are well matched to today's VUCA conditions, which will in turn build capacity in their global network.