

One-man team

 By [Mike Freedman](#)

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Here's a question for anyone following [COP17](#) and the English Premier League - why is climate change like Robin van Persie?

You don't have to be a fan of Arsenal to know that Van Persie has been on fire this season and year, scoring virtually a goal a game, putting him in front of the lauded Messi and moody Rooney. But Arsenal is in a fight for fourth place and a Champions League spot, following a disastrous opening to the campaign, leading many to scoff that the club is a one-man team.

Climate change has been making headlines for the past decade, to the extent that we forget about the loss of biodiversity, peak oil, peak water, precarious food supplies, growing consumption and growing population. Climate Change is the one-man team of Disaster Rovers.

Disaster Rovers vs Planet City

To extend the analogy (hopefully not to breaking point) we have the match of the new millennium: Disaster Rovers vs Planet City. Added to the Rovers team listed above, and with Climate Change as the striker, are Disease, Poverty, Terrorism, Dictatorship, Unemployment and War. Playing for the Planet we have Biodiversity, Technology, Human Ingenuity, Constitutional Democracy, Global Alliances, Entrepreneurs, Wisdom, Courage and Compassion.

It's one heck of a match, the bookies are divided and while most agree the managers' strategy and tactics will triumph, the complicating issue is that we are managers for both teams.

In a revealing biography of the self-destructing comic, John Belushi, writer Bob Woodward sums up "what made him good, made him bad" and that pretty well encapsulates the human condition. We split the atom, creating new energy possibilities and weapons of mass destruction. We build the Internet so we can collaborate across space and time, allowing the basest pornography and bomb-making 101 to flourish.

Winning this match, which may take 50 years or more to decide, will not depend on one player - however powerful - because of the law of unintended consequences.

Systems thinking

It is easier to tackle problems in isolation - it's also far more dangerous. Put three players to snaffle out the threat of Van

Persie, then Walcott and Gervinho have space to roam. Mark them and you give midfield and the back four more licence.

Trying to contain Climate Change alone will not contain Climate Change. Carbon taxes and cutting emissions are doomed to the dustbin of history, unless they embrace the pressing challenges of Poverty and Unemployment, of Biodiversity Loss, spiralling consumption and population. Otherwise we fall victim to unintended consequences and run ever more furiously on wheels that go nowhere.

Peter Senge, in the Fifth Discipline Fieldbook gives a simple example of a hospital that operates well under capacity. A communications campaign brings in the patients, but as the queues grow longer and admissions are unable to cope, disillusioned patients go elsewhere, telling friends and anyone else who is prepared to listen, until again the beds are empty, a new communications campaign gets underway and the cycle repeats. It was too much to ask to develop more reception facilities and communications while making a loss; when the tide turned, hurried solutions often went awry, creating negative publicity and so by treating an issue, rather than a system, new issues inevitably arose.

If it's difficult and costly to solve a hospital's dilemma, a planet's problems need unimagined complexity to resolve - or breakthrough simplicity.

The focus fallacy

In this increasingly complex world, most of us are encouraged to become specialists in ever-smaller spheres of competence. In my old world of advertising, below the line veered off from above the line, promotions and sponsorships took different paths, brand architects and designers sprouted and now digital agencies, plus social media consultancies, grab other parts of the diminishing cake.

Generalists, whether in medicine, academia, business or communications, are at the bottom of the heap. You either know less about more or more about less and given that there is so much to know, the specialist is more trusted, better rewarded.

We look to focus and so are prepared to sacrifice any avenue of exploration outside our self-imposed blinkers. We may find inspired solutions to partial problems and unwittingly cause more harm than good. The troubled history of DDT is a tragic example. An effective mosquito repellent, indiscriminate spraying caused the "Silent Spring" of Rachel Carson's exposé, leading to its banning and the resurgence of malaria-carrying mosquitos, possibly killing more in Africa than the AIDS epidemic.

Today, fracking in the Karoo can bring decent jobs to an impoverished area; it can also pollute underground water supplies and possibly tip the balance of selecting the side to build the USD\$2 billion "Square Kilometre Array" telescope away from South Africa to Australia. The true agendas of big business and local trophy game farms are often hidden in the high-sounding rhetoric and also need to be taken into account. To focus on any one issue leads to unintended consequences. Instead, we need to see the whole system.

Einstein managed to find simplicity inside complexity with $E=MC^2$ - perhaps our answer lies in unwrapping an overarching strategy for sustainable development, perhaps by creating and developing the principles of shared, long-term value.

The whole team

The only way for specialists to adopt a systems approach is through ego-less, agenda-less collaboration - a step or two too far for the negotiators at COP 17, the United Nations, even the directors of many a corporate board.

We see it sometimes - during an off-site strategy session when for a period of time many minds become one that reaches up to co-create rather than stumbling to compromise. In those glorious sporting moments when the team mysteriously gels into one body of co-ordinated, anticipated movement, flowing from one side of the field to score at the other. Robin van Persie may have notched up one more glorious goal, but without the 33 passes before, it would not have happened.

An holistic organisation consists of parts, but it is more than the sum of its parts, and if these parts are taken to pieces the organism is destroyed and cannot be reconstituted by again putting together the severed parts ...

"A whole, which is more than the sum of its parts, has something internal, some inwardness of structure and function, some specific inner relations, some internality of character or nature, which constitutes that more," Jan Smuts *Holism & Evolution*, MacMillan, London (1926).

ABOUT MIKE FREEDMAN

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