LEADERSHIP AND DECISION-MAKING IN COMPLEX ENVIRONMENT

Assignment Blog Posts 1-7

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1.Interview Guide & Questions

This is a qualitative semi-structured interview (Sheppard, p.238) with an interview guide involving interview questions as a memo providing to the interviewee in advance. Those interview questions designed in the theoretical frameworks of ‘adaptive leadership’ and ‘black swan event’, trying to explore leadership approach in the complexity adaptive systems.

Interview guide:

The following questions are based on the interview of leadership and leadership strategies. It mainly focuses on the internal complexity of the organization and the theme of leadership decision-making.

1. Turnover of the employees:

Our current world is full of complicated factors. Specifically, the outside world we are facing is full of uncertainties, unknown factors, information asymmetric and frequent accidents. Such a state is becoming more and more common. Since you have been the dean for so many years, when you encounter emergencies, such as when an employee leaves suddenly and this position is vital and important, or when the organization suffers from unexpected impact, how did you think about and deal with it?

2. Employee performance appraisal:

What do you think when there are complex problems in the organization, such as rumors and employees' enquiry on performance appraisal? What do you think of the performance of the performance policy at this stage? What is its future development prospect?

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2. Reflection on Leadership dilemma

What does not kill me makes me stronger.

------Nietzsche

In this interview with my leader on 7th June, I proposed two questions and discussed with her centering around internal complexity. My leader believed that the biggest challenge for her is the dilemma resulting from emergencies emerging from internal organization. She told me a story about how she dealt with the former subdean's sudden resignation (the solution of this emergency will be discussed in the slideshow later)and how to handle the internal instability stemming from the impact of appraisal reform of universities around the nation. It seems every piece of this series of events cannot be retrospective and always occurred in unexpected times. My leader, the head of the school foreign language, choked and almost shed tears during her recalling. She said she was shocked and badly hit at that moment because she hadn't had any preparation for the emergent situations. In a word, how to implement adaptive leadership and

deal with the adaptive challenges within the organization can be the biggest issues for my leader.

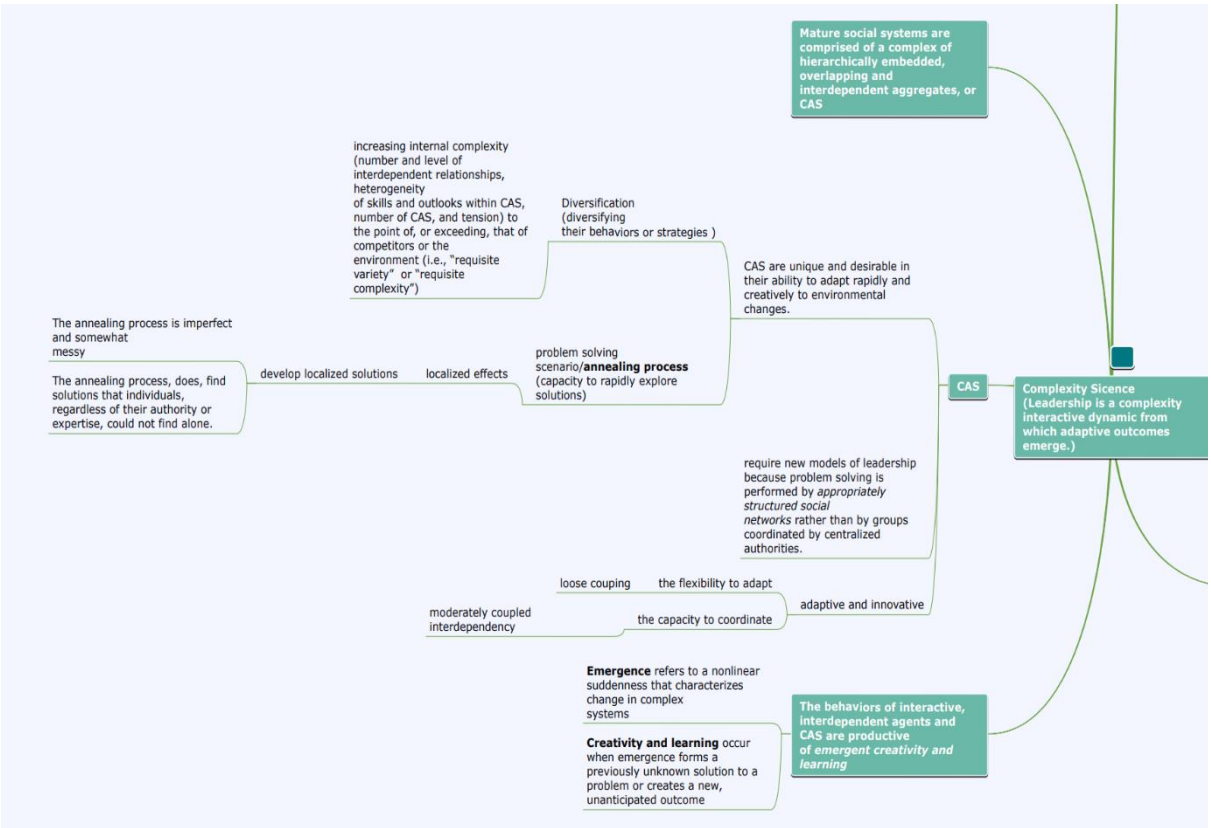

Figure 1: This is the part of my mind map of Complexity Science, based on Uhl-Bien et al, 2007

(HD diagraph has been attached in Appendix)

Adaptive leadership is defined as “Emergent change behaviors under conditions of interaction, interdependence, asymmetrical information, complex network dynamics, and tension. It manifests in CAS and interactions among agents rather than in individuals, and is recognizable when it has significance and impact” (Uhl-Bien et al, 2007, p.309). In other words, it is "generative dynamics that underlie emergent change activities" (Uhl-Bien et al, 2007, p.299), and the result of the structure of CAS that are aligned non-linear interaction between agents (McDaniel, 2007; Burgin et al, 2020). In this world of VUCA (volatility, uncertainty, complexity, and ambiguity), the early adopters who embrace complexity with adaptive strategies or adaptive leadership can survive (Chakhoyan, 2017). But in effect, we are stuck in

the flat and top-down structure, stressing efficiency and consistency, getting used to waiting for decisions to come down from the top hierarchy, which is the logic that comes from the industrial age. That is to say, we are confined by "path dependence", like the physics of inertia.

Figure 2: Douglass C. North, American economist, named “path dependence” and make it blossom (Source: Wikipedia)

Once in a path, either “good” or “bad”, we have to rely on it, which cannot be easily escaped (Vergne and Durand, 2010; Aaltonen et al, 2017). The notion of “path dependence” is criticized for its failure to account for human agency that is prone to create new paths (Garud and Karnoe, 2001). In this postmodern society, especially in the dawn of the knowledge era, network science and a post-hierarchical model is much fitful for running an organization like my work unit, a university, because it is a knowledge-producing organization with a large group of knowledge-based workers, who are a group of "thinking animals", with a strong desire for wealth, ambitions and great achievements. The expectation of their career development as well as satisfaction towards the organization is complex and various, which is hard to meet, control, and balance. So, in such a complex internal situation, bundling a huge number of intellectuals

with great variety together is far from being easy for any leader. No matter what, it is proved that the command-and-control approach cannot work within the context of a knowledge-producing organization, but only to end up with confusion, apathy, and distrust. That's one of the main reasons why the subdean felt unbearable and decided to leave this soul-crashing job.

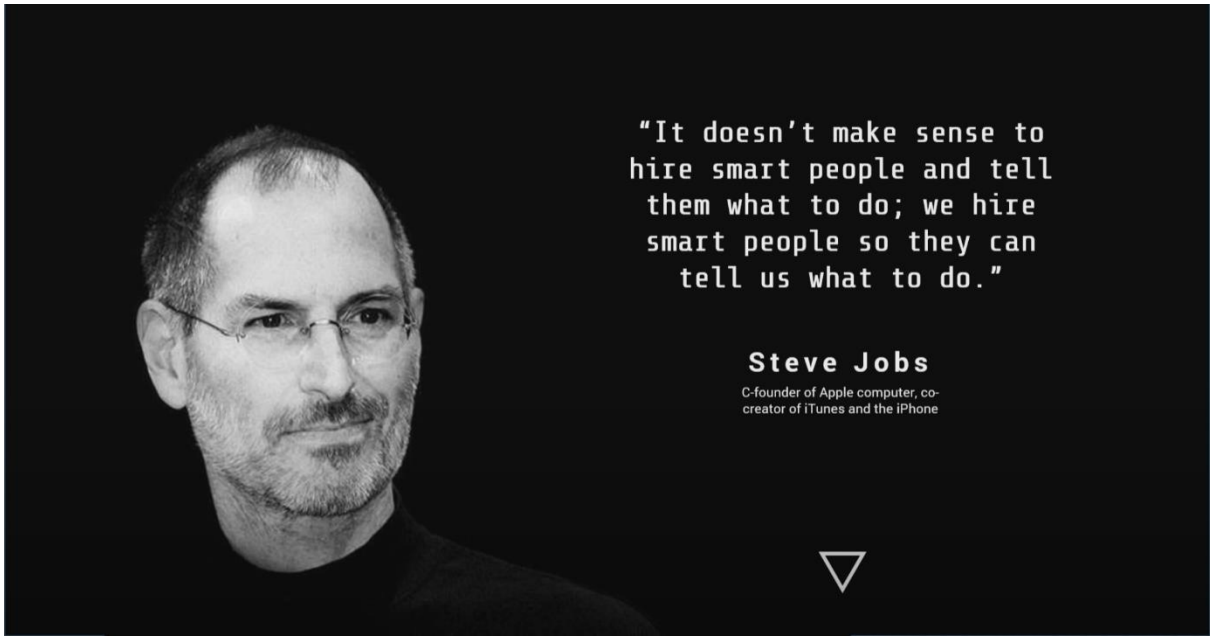

Figure 3: Stven Jobs' motto (Source: Andrew Chakhoyan | TEDxBucharest)

The rigid hierarchical imposed coordination, which stresses planning and forecasting, is incompatible with to inherent unpredictability of CAS (McDaniel, 2007, p.27). Polarization and volatility resulting from appraisal reform in university have become Black Swan for the dean, requiring her to make rapid and even improvised responses to the changing situation. It is worth noting that the randomness and disorder brought by Black Swan can result in 'wicked problems' (Brown et al., 2010) and sometimes can be devastating if not paying much heed to it or lack of vigilance or sensitivity. Taleb refers to antifragile when he advocates benefiting from shocks and volatility (2012, p. 3-4; Nikookar et al, 2021) where an effective and notable way to become stronger is to avoid being deprived of natural variations (mediocrity) and to stay away from Extremistan (Taleb, 2012, p.121-122).

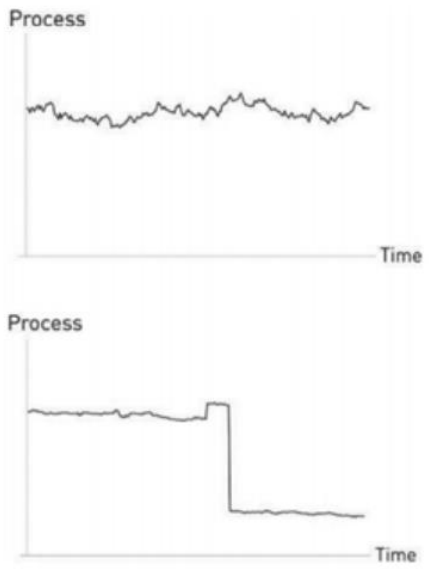

Figure 4: The second graph shows moves taking place from cascade to cascade, or Black Swan to Black Swan. Human overintervention to smooth or control processes causes a switch from one kind of system, Mediocristan, into another, Extremistan. This effect applies to all manner of systems with constrained volatility —health, politics, economics, even someone's mood with and without Prozac (Taleb, 2012).

Even though Mediocristan involves many variations that could be scary, but prone to offset in the total overtime (Taleb, 2012, p.120-122). On the contrary, for Extremistan, only one observation has a disproportionate effect on the average (Alam,2018). Therefore, randomness characterized by a kind of pseudo-smoothness is bound to bring big mistakes. In a word, if problems and contradictions could be exposed in time rather than being covered up and letting it escalate to become out of control, there would not be such an unexpected resignation and a total outbreak at the end. The dean, my leader, concluded that she should have to further consider a sort of more adaptive communication mechanism, by which transparency will be enhanced and information asymmetries can be relieved.

Tomorrow's wave of disruption and challenge will mainly come from randomness. The rigid hierarchy will be yield to a flexible network. The context in which the business or teams operate

will be necessarily ascribed more creativity and spontaneity. No matter how, the attempt to get even with probability is imperative (Taleb, 2021). As my leader said, she was afraid of nothing now.

For me, it was about prioritizing employees' voices, to give them the tools to help build a harmonious and sustainable world. I invite you, my dear readers to be on this journey together. And together, good as can be expected is limitless when the expectation is that by reshaping our environment, we can change the world.

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3. Reflections on the ‘tweets’

I think next century will be the century of complexity.

------ Stephen Hawking

Even though we don’t use Linkedin or tweeter as frequently as other western students do, we indeed use social media apps popular in the Chinese community in our daily life, such as Weibo and Wechat, etc. In retrospect, if we try to go to the world and push our influence upon much more people, we will be confined as long as we only use Weibo and WeChat. In this DBA group, we create an internal environment called 'post thread', in which we post reflections of the module we are learning. 'Post thread' is limited either because our posts and messages can only reach 16 students and circulate within the DBA group. However, in our research, we can obtain information and literature as widely as possible only under the premise of the possibility that we can reach various data sources.

Karl Marx indicated that the people's essence was the summation of all society relations (Marx and Engel, 2004).

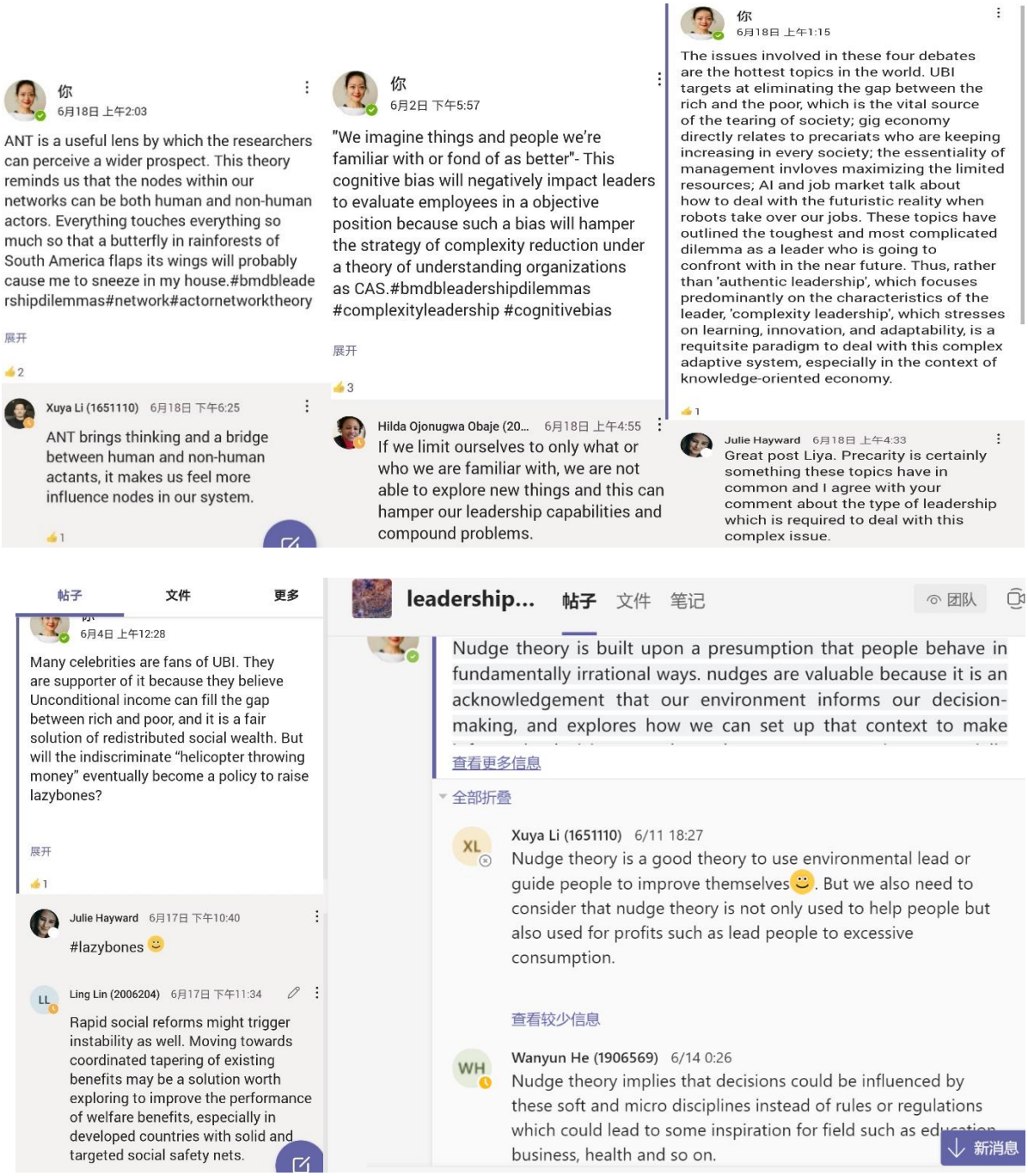

Figure 5: My posts in 'Post Thread'

This totality of social interaction or relationships becomes decisive to human beings. In this post-modern era, social interaction in the networks has never restrained in 'a format of dualism

between human actors and social structures' (Michael, 2017, p.12). Rather, society is composed of human actants and non-human actants that together generate the social outcome, which stresses idiosyncratic and heterogeneous processes in social interconnection (Michael, 2017; Allen et al, 2006; John, 1992). Social media, this important non-human actor, seems to become indispensable and almost becomes a piece of part of the human body. Computer, by this intermediary, people can link to hundreds and thousands, even a blazing breadth of contacts, not just handfuls of connection with close friends and acquaintances instead (Turkle, 2017, p. xi). For a researcher nowadays, he (she) can do nothing without those non-human actants, such as web and electronic facilities. For the part of social media, in terms of the academy, I have so far benefited much from 'Research gate', 'Google Scholar', and 'Academia', on which I exchange research information with other scholars worldwide; I have opened tweet account and followed Obama and Michael, Joe Biden, Zhao Lijian (Spokesman of Foreign Ministry of China), and Ryo Takeuchi (a famous Japanese doc director who has made a doc series about Huawei), etc. Besides, I hope I could approach some employees of Huawei through Linkedin, which could be a major force to push my research forward. Accordingly, I don't believe I could make it during this DBA journey without interacting with others via the internet and many other digital technologies.

On the other hand, every coin has two sides, however. Harari has rung the bell and brought us a term that sounds alarming and hazardous—‘digital dictatorships’. He asserts biotech and infotech will erode human agency, and overturn human desires and create unprecedented turbulence in human society (Harari, 2018). I had ever randomly scanned a webpage about 'Volvo' wagon and received a recommendation from Volvo when I opened my smartphone the next day morning, which scared me much and made me hesitate to use the smartphone for quite a while because I felt I was virtually spied by someone from nowhere.

Therefore, even though non-human actants enable me to develop my networks to reach much more information sources and build my social order (John, 1992), I am a little bothered to publicize personal opinions on the open social platform as I am worried that it may be unsafe due to algorithms analysis and data gathering. It is indeed a paradox because, on the one hand, I need to reach those magnates to catch the trends of the world on the frontline, communicate and exchange ideas with my academic counterparts via various social media, but on the other hand, I am afraid of being dragged into turmoil by digital disruption.

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4. Network Analysis and Development Plan

“Six Degrees of Kevin Bacon” evidences the idea that everyone has embedded in a kind of dense web of ties in which anyone in the world can be connected to another random person within an average of 6 acquaintances (Teotonio, 2012). Networks have value because they are a kind of social capital. New properties emerge because of our embeddedness in social networks, and these properties in the structure of the networks, not just in the individuals within them. Like the difference between graphite and diamond, the secret resides in the ways of interconnections between the carbon atoms differently (Christakis, 2010). That's also the reason why an optimized network will produce effective outcomes and why the whole greater than the sum of its parts.

According to Willburn and Cullen (2014), a good network stresses quality over quantity, and an effective one is characterized with three features: openness, diversity, and depth, which are similar to Cross and Thomas' criteria as "structural, relational and behavioral" (2008, p.166). In terms of openness and depth, in the process of network designing, I have identified and categorized three systems: administrative system within the organization, social system outside

the organization, and academic system across my organization. I have boundary spanners who make me hear new messages earlier than other group members. And I cultivate and sustain those ties and make sure that I can leverage the resources when there is a need to implement my plans. Regarding the structural diversity, however, it seems some defects existing in the social system.

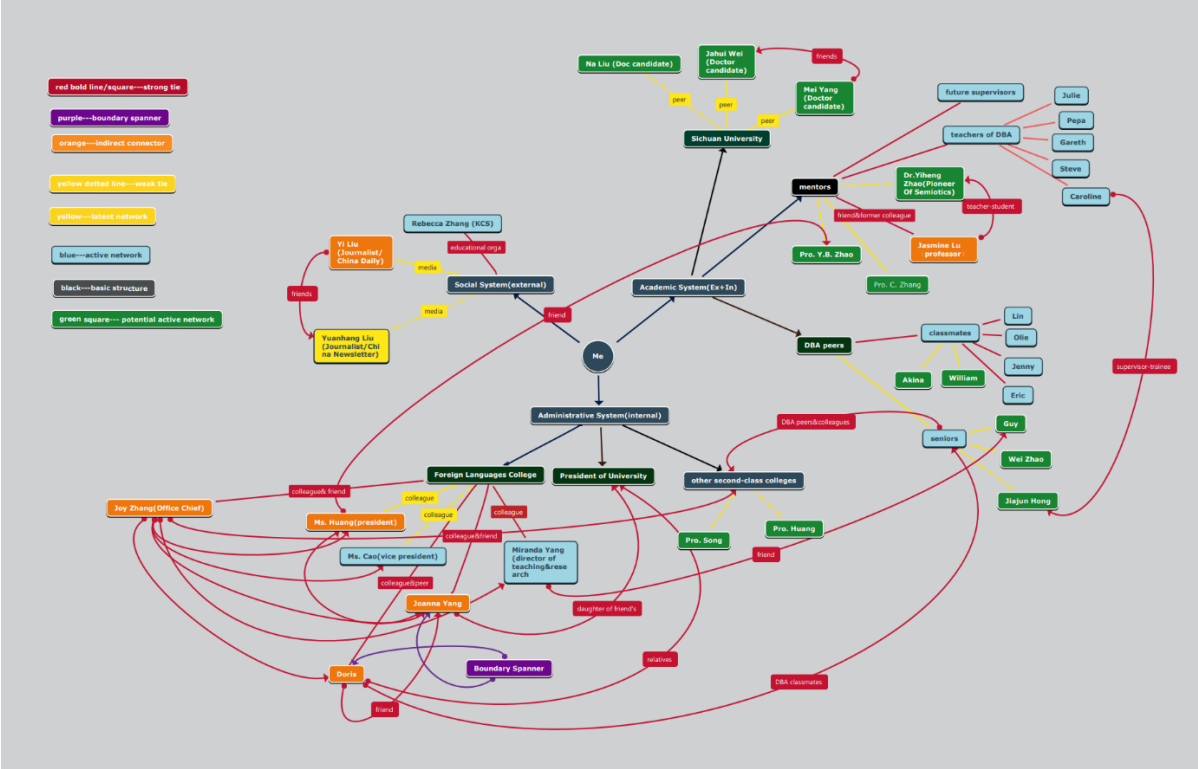

Figure 6: Interpersonal relationship in Personal network (HD diagraph is attached in Appendix)

By this visualized interpersonal relationship network, it seems I have close relation with academic and administrative systems but loose relation with the social circle. I have abounded academic resources resulting from a long-term connection with this circle, but my research targets Huawei company and its employees, which demand resources in the social system either. In effect, one of the difficulties of this research I am going to overcome is that I am an outsider of this organization so that I must manage to find someone who is the insider to help me to bridge this gap and to obtain first-hand data. My network needs to research at least the

indirect connections of the company. Therefore, I'm going to develop my network by connecting every possible node who will probably introduce me to the insiders of Huawei. In other words, for the sake of my future research demands, this network needs to be optimized and upgraded, expecting to reach more expanded social capital and thereof fuel my research progress.

Generally speaking, under the assessment of those standards, the existing structure of my network signifies my endeavor is on the right track. My network displays the typical characteristics of the scale-free structure, which contributes to the concepts as 'hubs and power law (Barabasi and Bonabeau, p.62-63; Easley and Kleinberg, 2010). I have maintained a strong tie with the ‘hub’, the heavily connect node (colored in orange). It is noted that the boundary spanners in my net take a position as vital as the 'hub' does because they connect one or two heavyweights. By those channels, the important information will be transferred to me in time comparing with other peers and keep me sharp in politically sensitive, which confers the advantage of taking an early lead in my career development. Both the hub and boundary spanners are potential connectors, expected to bridge more valuable ties to my network.

Instead of the "more-is-better" approach (Cross and Thomas, p.165-166), "less-is-more" is much more fitful to time-boxed modern life and avoids time and energy draining. "Richer-Get-Richer" effects imply the dynamics of information cascades and signify the importance of the hubs (Easley and Kleinberg, 2010, p.551). My network must increase the number of hubs on a small scale to improve the aspect of diversity in social resources.

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5. Debate on Leadership Dilemma

I cannot teach anybody anything, I can only make them think.

------ Socrates

I have to admit that I was in quite a shock when I was scanning these four topics since all of these topics were the hottest issues around the world, which are widely discussed in politics, businesses, and academics. These topics are truly the most prominent dilemmas in human society in this post-industrial era. I thought to myself, Wow! How fashionable this module is!

I found our group had been assigned a topic about “Universal Basic Income” as our teacher released the schedule of the debate. Lin and I decided right away to be at the side of the opponent, upholding UBI was not the only way to redistribute wealth in the future of work, because both of us believed "only" was an arbitrary word which made the debate topic much harder to defend, but it was proved we were wrong later.

At the very beginning, I was lost in confusion and suffered a 'brain paralysis' because I didn't believe I could stand in the opposite of those tycoons who are the followers of UBI. According to Snowden, this kind of situation is called the domain of chaos, where searching for a way out is futile and useless as everything is in disorder and panic (2007).

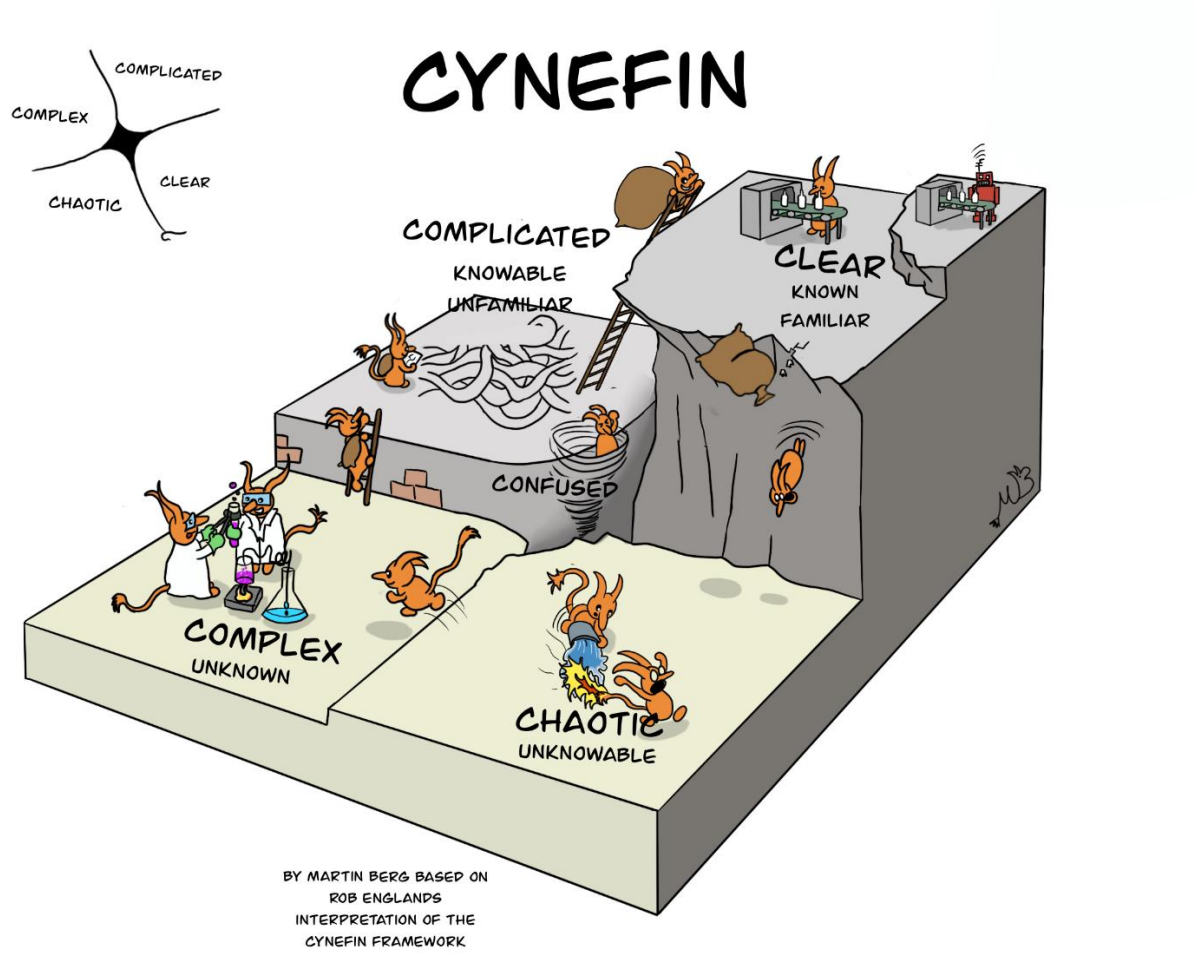

Figure 7: Cynefin Framework (Source: VIGE, https://www.vige.se/blog/2020/6/20/cynefinvige)

I put this topic aside for several days, waiting for recovering to calmness and rationale and trying to get out of this chaotic context. I didn't sure whether I could hold this task and had not the faintest idea about how to handle this issue until a program from one of my favorite podcasts suddenly recurred to my mind, in which UBI had been discussed by an economist from Fudan University. I jumped up and listened for the playback, from which the most important literature

was informed to me. With the help of this expert, I began to read relevant books and materials from the internet, gradually began to have an outline in my mind, and tried to create some slides, visualizing the thoughts and ideas. Thus, I came to go through complexity, complicatedness to clarity. During this struggle, I experienced the sensemaking process about how to "structuring the unknown" (Waterman, 1994, p.41) and "make the intractable actionable" (Ancona, 2012, p.4). Notably, I can never make it without various digital platforms, the so-called non-human actants, such as podcasts and MOOCs with which I can reach much more information through plenty of prestigious professionals and scholars online. The consolidation of heterogeneity of networks explains that it is not the individual parts but the interconnectivity that defines the system as a whole (Siew et al, 2019). The essence of the ANT approach resides in the processes of representation, mobilization, juxtaposition, and displacement among actants/actors (Murdoch,1998, 2006; Law, 1998). Hence, the actor-network theory provides a theoretical framework to understand how social practices in our daily life could be transferred to wider frameworks of relational networks in this technological society (Salazar, 2012, p. 867; Chen and Wu, 2021, p.3).

I became more confident after I finished my slides. But when the fighting started, my opponents swarmed me with series of questions and attacked me so fiercely that I couldn't provide an effective defense. These embarrassed experiences stroke me to reflect afterward on how biased it was about my understanding of this debate topic. According to Weick, as making sense of a situation, we often mobilize our previous knowledge and cognition, while confessing that “knowledge and ignorance coexist”, which refers that “adaptive sensemaking both honors and rejects the past” (Weick, 2005, p.412; Klein, 2014, p.10). I was too hasty to conclude that the opposition was easier to defend because I was stuck in my personal writing experiences with

prohibiting arbitrary expressions, without noticing the latter half of the topic —“in the future of work”.

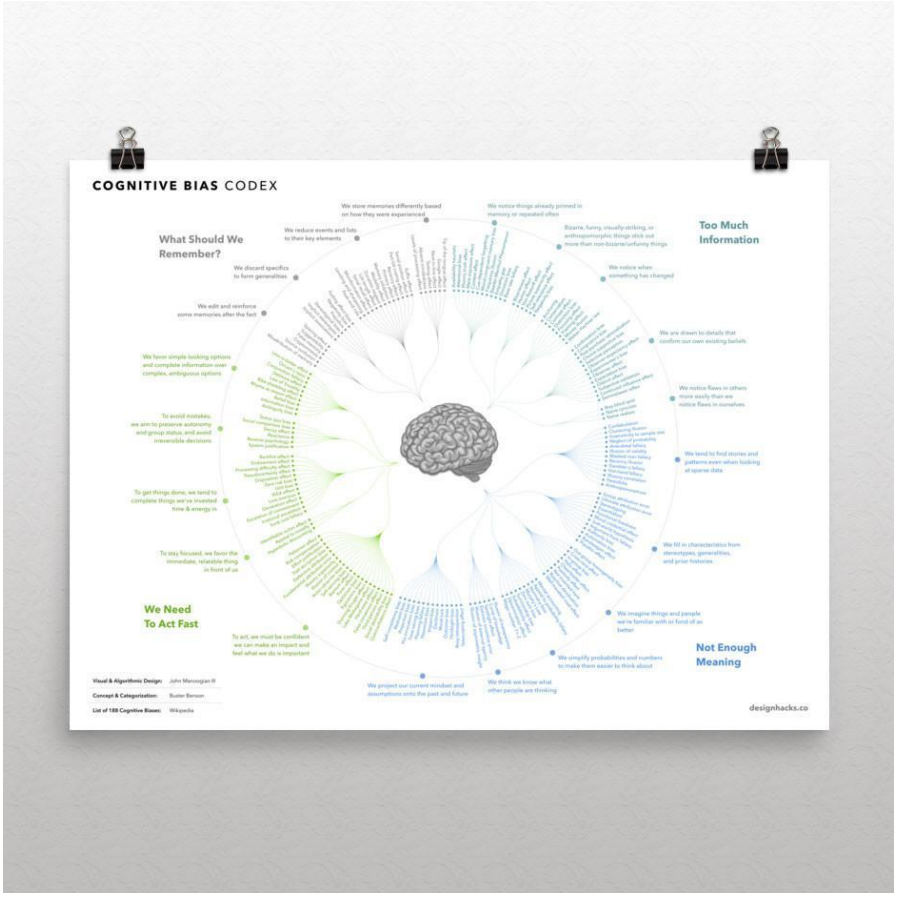

Figure 8: Cognitive Bias Codex, 2016

Namely, I have to offer an example as good as UBI to be adaptive to the future world, which indeed hasn't been formulated by those tycoons and experts yet, let alone me. I have learned from this lesson that people prefer options within a trusted framework, which has always turn out to trust those frameworks in the wrong way in the emerging situation. Thus, bias can stem from limited information, intelligence and cognition. If I could bracket my previous experiences and had some basic understanding of UBI at that time, I wouldn't make such an error and put myself into this dilemma in the debate task.

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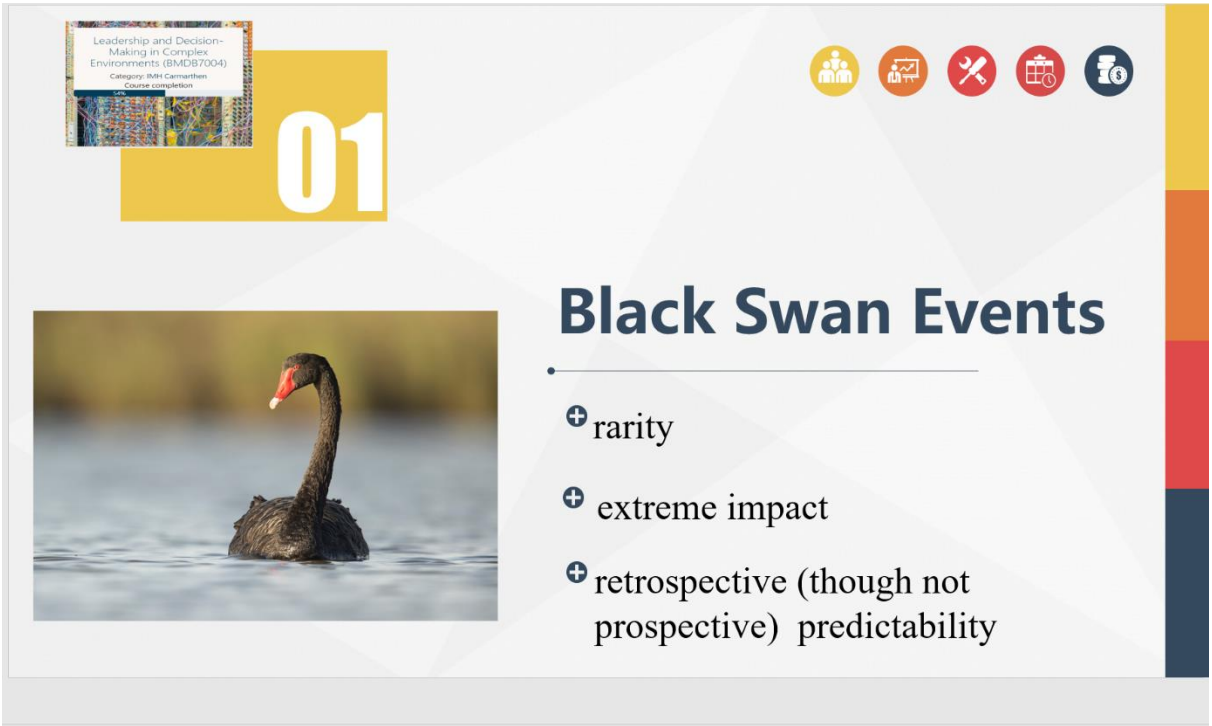
6. Presentation Slides



The internal complexity of my organization connects to "Black Swan", coined by Nassim Taleb for complete unexpected and surprising events (Ale et al, 2020). It is, thus, defined as 'rarity, extreme impact, and retrospective (though not prospective) predictability (Taleb, 2007). Black swan events have a close relationship with the Complexity Adaptive Systems, characterized by heterogeneous associations, evolving in rapidly changing states (Kovacs, L. C., and Corrie, S., 2017, p.75). Black Swan events are peculiarly prone to happen in CAS because Complexity Adaptive Systems are essentially organic, nonlinear, and unpredictable (Marion and Uhl-Bien, 2001).

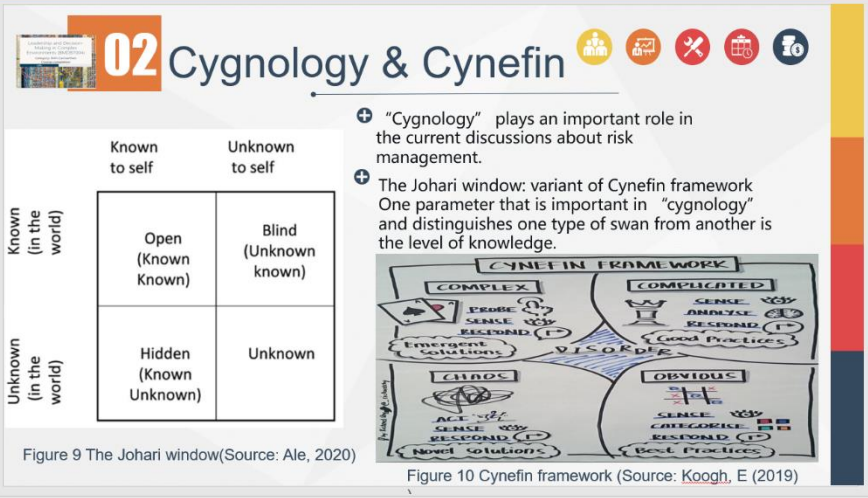


Figure 9 The Johari window(Source: Ale, 2020)

Figure 10 Cynefin framework (Source: Koogh, E (2019)

The Johari window is a variant of Cynefin framework. It was divided up into four quadrants: Unknown, Hidden, Blind and Open (Ale, 2020).

The dean, in this interview, revealed the details about the sudden resignation of the former subdean, which was totally out of her expectation. This emergent situation almost put her in desperation because no one, at that moment, could be experienced and sophisticated as he did to take over this position and to keep the organization running in order. She told me that she was informed by the subdean later that it was the long-term pressure and distress from his work that made the former subdean felt unbearable. Most importantly, the last straw breaking the camel was an anonymous tip-off about his inequality to the principal of our university, which he felt wronged and treated in injustice. Finally, he collapsed and promptly quit his office by delivering a letter of resignation directly to the president of the university, not went to the dean firstly according to procedures instead. When the dean was informed the resignation of the subdean from her supervisor, she felt a heavy blow and almost got into a panic because she didn't have any preparation for someone in such an important position made such a sudden leaving from his job.

In this emergent situation, my leader displays her adaptive leadership capability by using the Cynefin framework in complex dynamics at the edge of chaos of the organization. After a short period of panic, she calms down and promptly begins to explore the details of the event, sensemaking, learning, and analyzing the disadvantages and complicatedness involved. When confronting with a complex situation, she immediately takes a series of actions to bring order to the organization. Firstly, she publicized the message and tried to explain the reason why the subdean left (chaotic); Secondly, she associated with other departments to comfort team members of the organization, stopping rumors go viral (complex); Thirdly, she talked with the president of the university, the subdean, and other work staff engaged, to collect information and understand the situation; Simultaneously, she reported this event to the ministry of personnel and arranged relevant departments to carry out a cadre assessment and quickly turned on target in a very short time(complicated). Through this Johari window, it is helpful to perceive how my leader, thanks to her quick-mindedness and improvisation, pushed herself to move away from 'unknown unknowns' to 'known known' (Ancona, 2012; Ale, B. J.et al, 2020). The chaos resulting from the subdean's sudden resignation finally ends with her bold determination of promoting a capable young man to the vital position.

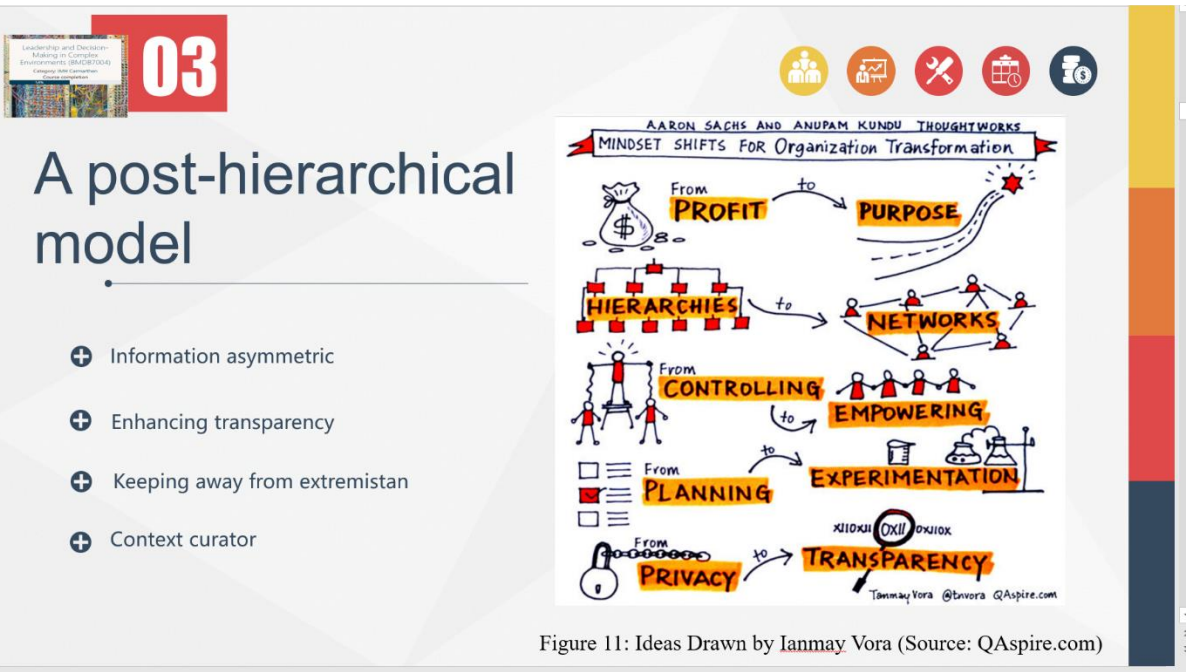


Figure 11: Ideas Drawn by Ianmay Vora (Source: QAspire.com)

The dean ascribed the chaos to information asymmetric suffered by both leaders and employees. The top-down hierarchy with a flat structure gets in the way of overcoming bias and information cocoon. When we talked about the solution for enhancing the transparency of decision-making, she said planning and implementing alone cannot reach a consensus view It's time to send zeitgeist well into the organization. Maybe a much more friendly and flexible communication mechanism needs to be introduced to discover the problems in time and keep away from extremistan. Furthermore, she believed frequent and relax communication will be helpful to increase the sense of security. Her idea is aligned with one of the principles of adaptive leadership, called "regulate distress", which firstly, creates a holding environment where people can feel safe tackling difficult problems, but not so much so that they can avoid the problem; secondly, provides direction, protection, orientation, and productive norms (Northouse, 2021). As Chakhoyan talked in his TED show, context curator is a proper name for today's leaders. Their job is not to assign tasks and monitor performance but to care, help, or catalyze their team members(2019).

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7. My leadership model: Ladder-Nudge Leadership

Leaders give their intentions, not instructions.

------David Marquet

Towards the end of the interview, my leader admitted that information transparency and trust were the most emergent issues, which are the bane of Black Swan events within our organizaiton. Hence, an idea about the "Ladder-Nudge" leadership model came into my mind, which targets creating a healthier environment to enable group members to achieve both personal goals and the vision planning of the organization.

This model comprises three dimensions: intent-based, adaptive, and administrative. These three dimensions coordinate to generate a sort of leadership that can strengthen mutual respect and trust, as well as enhance the bond between individualists and the organization.

The intent-based dimension stresses catalyzing instead of instructing. According to Marquet, intent means leaders make a conscious and deliberate mindful decision, not execute a series of operations (2017). Namely, the leaders make key decisions that could have gone either way. This dimension is prone to "share the voice", listen to employees' opinions, and encourage leaders to keep silent as much as possible (Marquet, 2020. P.22). On the other hand, it emphasizes coordinate "competing commitment" and bridges the gap behaviors and espoused values (Northouse, 2021, p.265), which are adaptive challenges hampering both internal and external harmony.

Adaptive dimension functions as a pushing hand to promoting innovation and make a workplace more fulfilling for staff members, which is conducive to help people drop their masks and become more authentically (Fox, 2019, p.47). Adaptive strategies come out from asymmetrical interactions (Uhl-Bien, 2007, p.306). If a leadership event rests on preferences differences, it will foster adaptive outcomes with new knowledge and solutions, where all group members can create an environment together for both employees themselves and the organization per se. Specifically, in the office, we wanted to create an environment where people treated each other just a little bit better, a little bit more respect and consideration than in the outside world. What we need to do is to cultivate safe and conducive conditions for new and innovative ideas to evolve and thrive (Goldman, 2018). Importantly, in this context of full self-expression and self-fulfillment, bias and rumors can be effectively prohibited and repressed.

According to Uhl-Bein, the administrative dimension has been included as almost all organizations are never leaving bureaucracies nowadays. Other dimensions necessarily interact

with formal top-down structures in organizations (2007, p.305). One cannot disentangle hierarchical authority when the system and environment are stable.

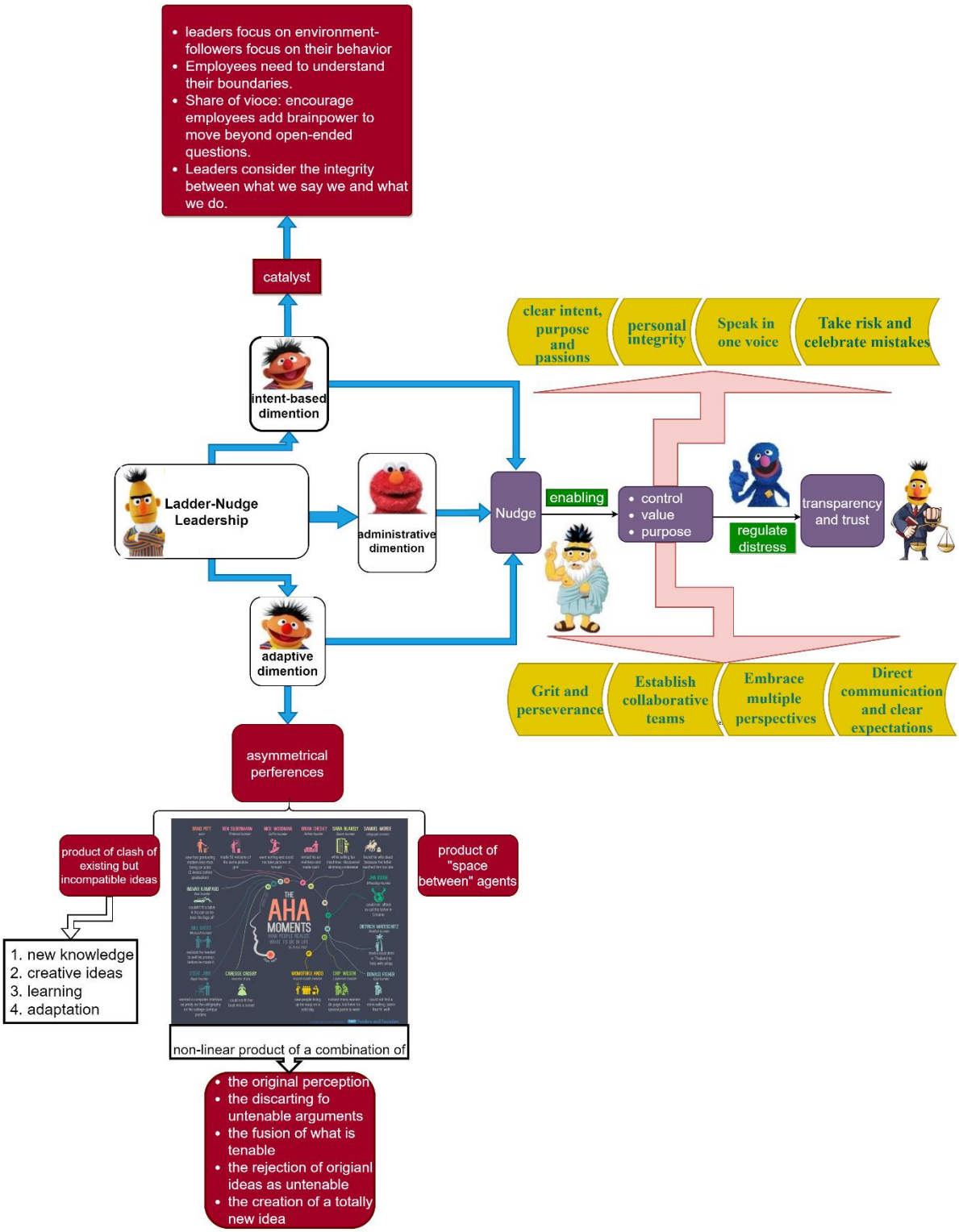

Figure 12: Ladder-Nudge leadership model (Source: Cartoon figures come from *Sesame Street*)

Given inspired partially by Nudge theory, the whole model is called “Ladder-Nudge”. Nudging is “an acknowledgment that our environment informs our decision-making, and explores how we can set up that context to make informed decisions, rather than an automatic, potentially uninformed decision" (Burt, 2019). In other words, nudging specializes in enabling, catalyzing, and helps people nudge for good (Thaler,2018). Ladder works as a metaphor, embodying assistance granted and focusing on the employees' ownership of the tasks. Thereby, mutual understanding and information transparency will generate from the process of listening, collaborating, tolerating, and creating.

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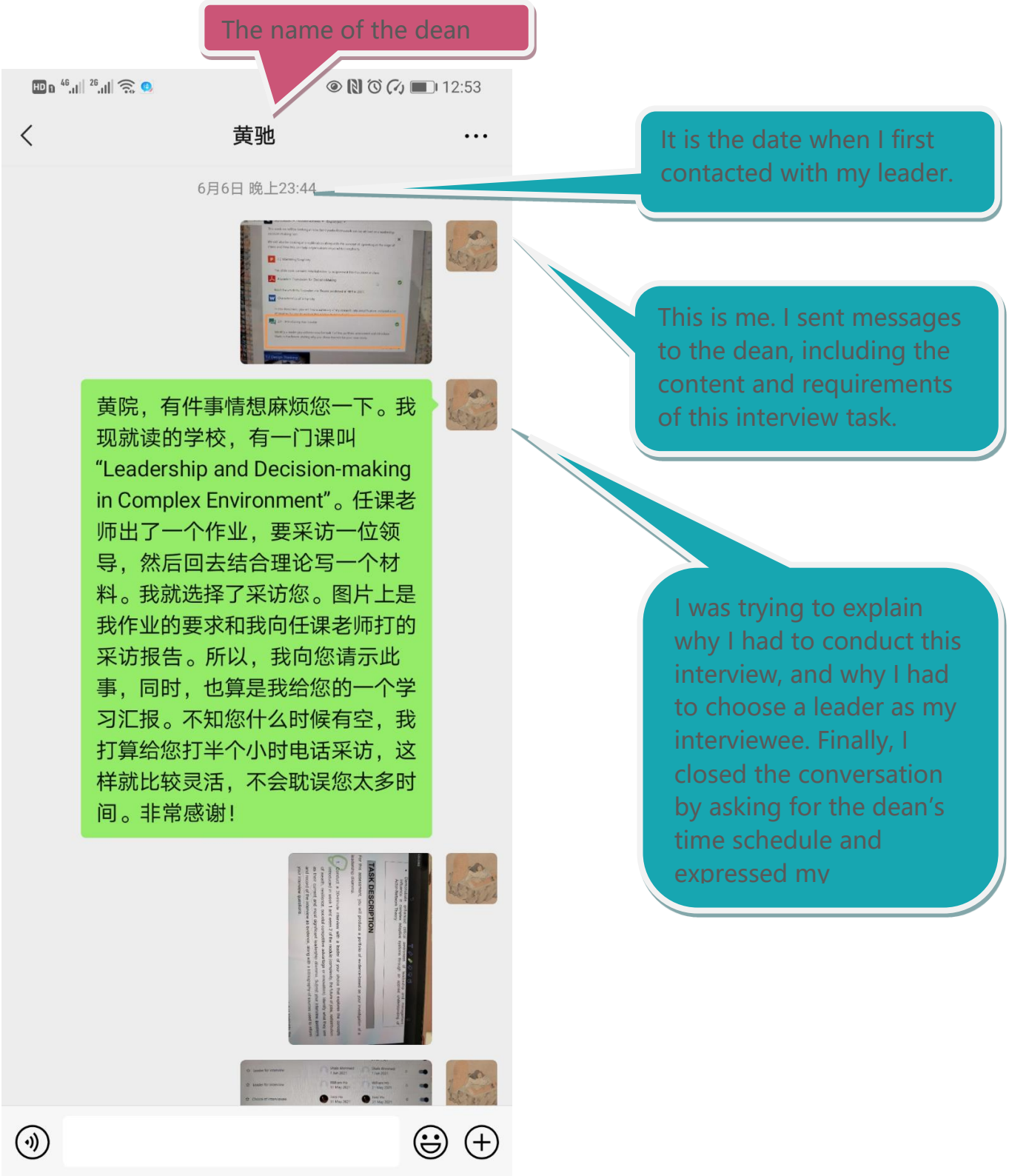
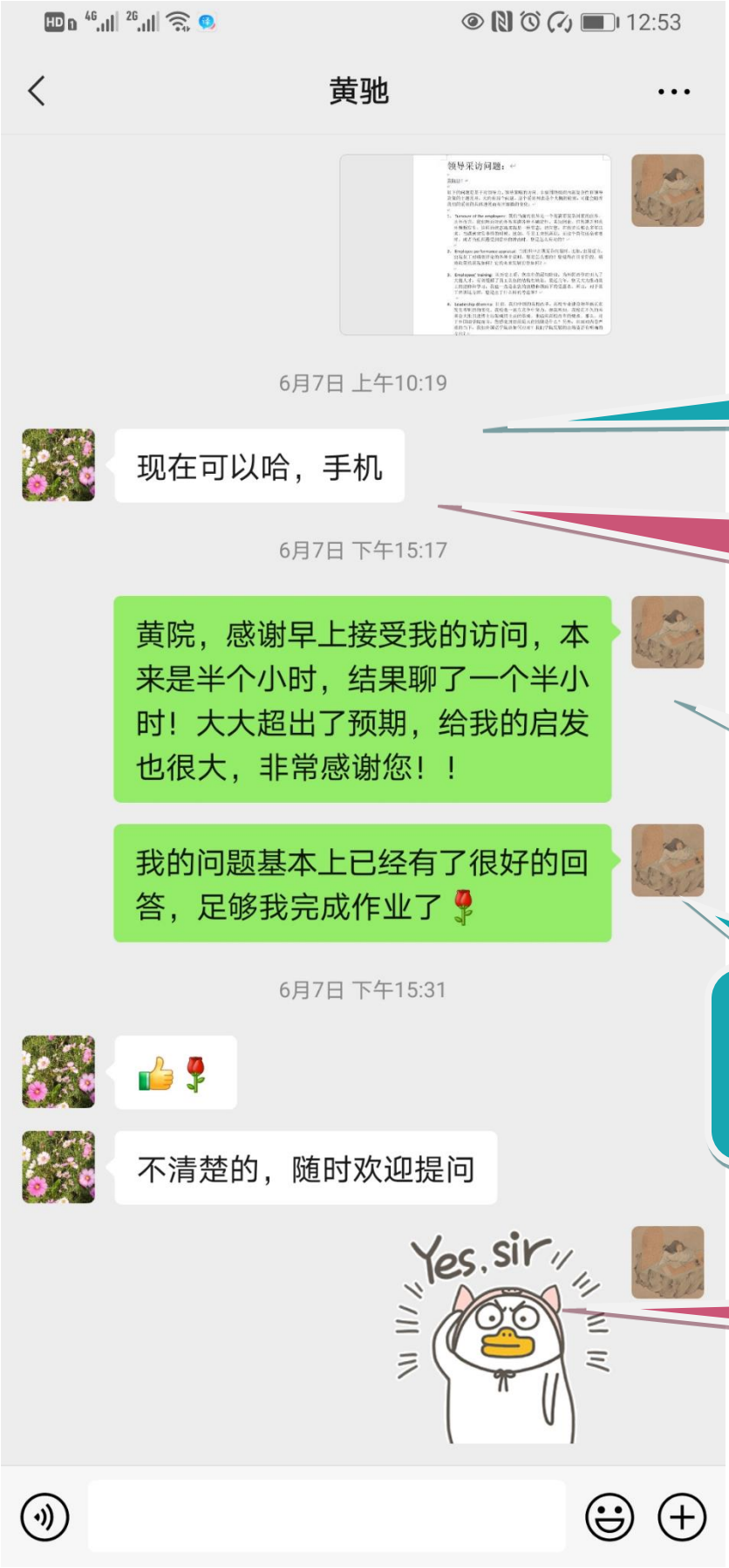
Appendix:

1. Evidence for interview

The following is the screenshots from the WeChat, evidencing the date and in-advance preparation of the interview.





I sent the interview guidance to the

The date when interview happened.

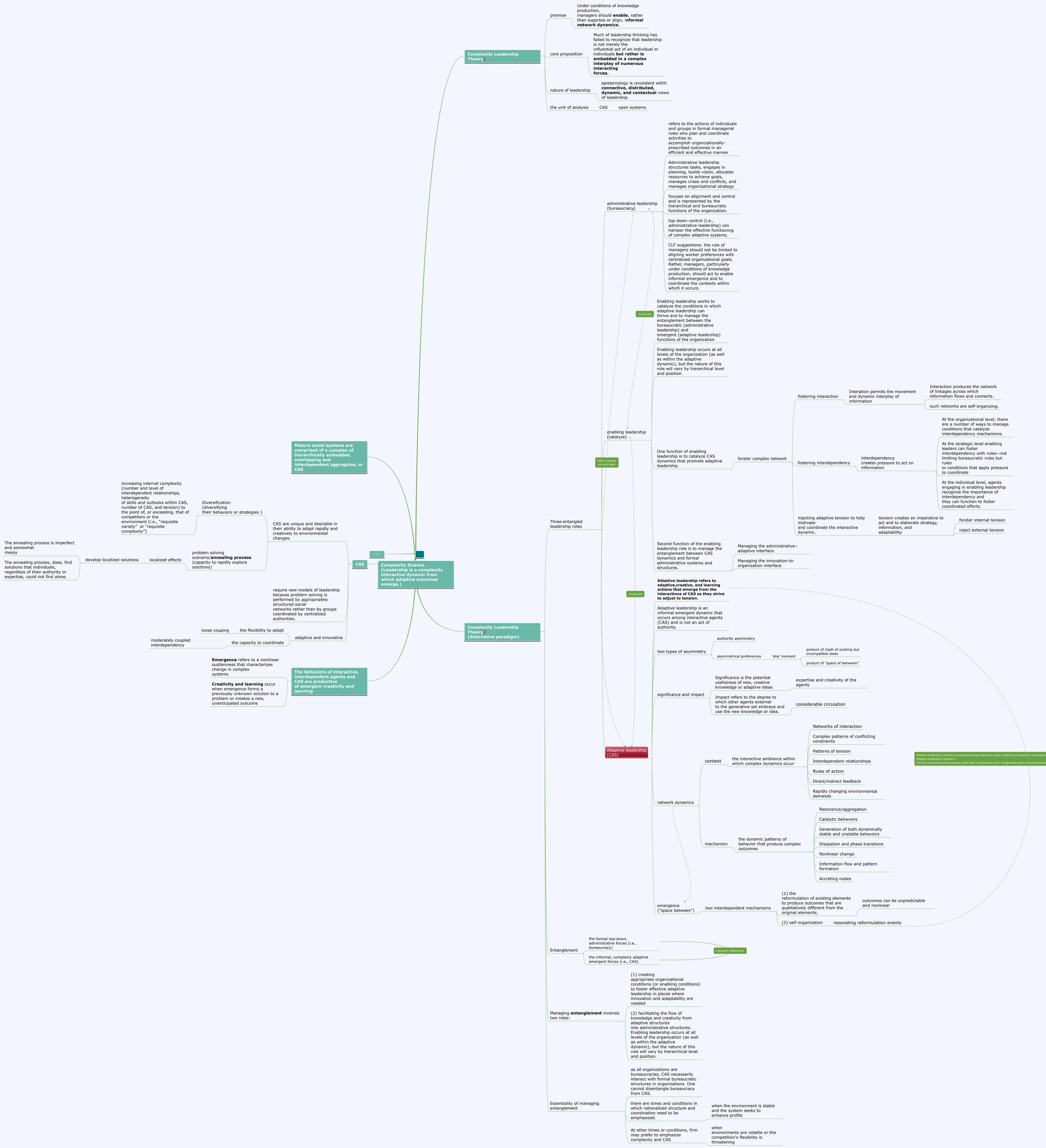
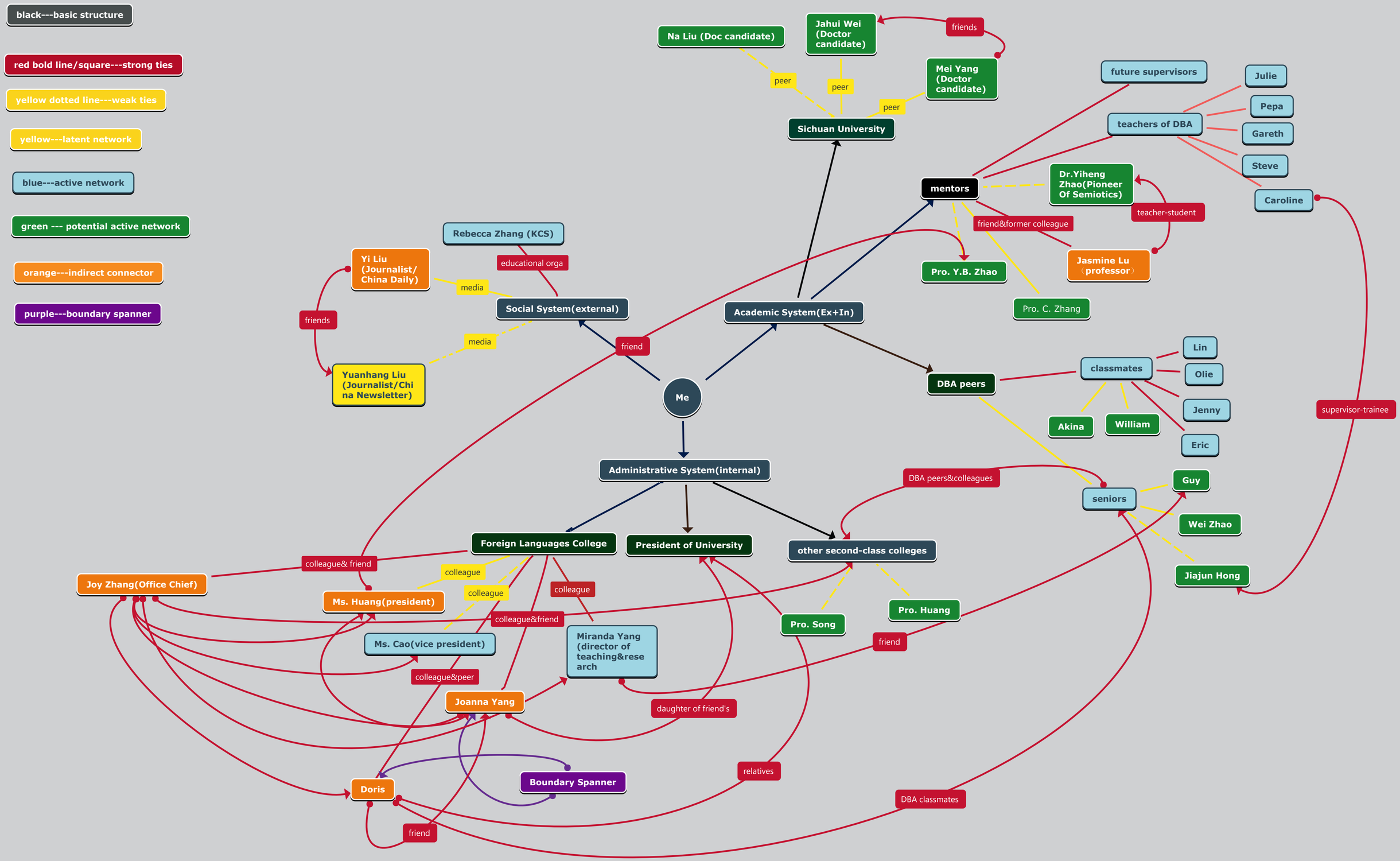
The consent from the dean: she agreed to have a telephone conversation.

My appreciation to the dean

I expressed that I had a wonderful enlightenment through this interview.

The encouragement from the dean

Appendix 2:Comlexity Science & Complexity Leadership Theory



Appendix 3: Interpersonal Network (HD diagraph)