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CHAPTER IX

A NEW FRONTIER IN CONSULTING: THE (ν SA) CONSULCUBE*

Sergio Barile and Mario Calabrese

SUMMARY: 1. A New scenario: the rise of complexity. – 2. A correct representation: organisations as viable systems. – 3. A new frontier in consulting: the (ν SA) Consulcube.

1. A NEW SCENARIO: THE RISE OF COMPLEXITY

Can every epoch be represented by synthetic analysis capable of rapidly representing the essence of its values. Many people, mainly in modern developed countries, may consider the twentieth century to be the century of certainties. Today there is a widespread idea that anyone can face and resolve any kind of problem, in any field, be it scientific, economic or social. The American way of life has become a global model, where hard work, determination and optimism towards the future can get you anywhere, give you a high quality of life, and good economical resources.

So which are the factors constituting the American model?

- 1) Intelligence can dominate nature.
- 2) Man strives towards the discovery of the laws which rule nature so as to become the leading species.
- 3) The bettering of conditions of life, and access to material goods are measures of personal success and happiness.

Most people nowadays, even in the aftermath of the economical and environmental crisis, seem to have little in concerns to what they expect from the future. A lot of them find it hard to explain rationally what their expectations are, and even though they confide in

* Although the views and ideas expressed in this paper are those of Sergio Barile and Mario Calabrese, the section 3 is attributed to Sergio Barile, the sections 1 and 2 are attributed to Mario Calabrese.

politicians, institutions and associations with less trust than in the past, they give the impression that they know what the future holds for them and what the turnout of the crisis will be.

The idea that only one solution to any given problem is possible has become widespread, and has given the various classes of the society the conviction that only one possible infallible interpretation and method to face the difficulties concerning anthropologic phenomena.

The postwar period was a period of optimism, a new society was rising, the general sense of responsible enthusiasm gave way to hopes and illusions for the future. The road towards modern industrialization, and need for new professions contributed to this push.

An optimistic vision of the future determines many social intentions. These people have the idea that they can always do better than tomorrow. This gives men and women a vision of endless growth, and the misleading concept that human resources are limitless.

In such a context, very few notice the instability and the economical difficulties afflicting a given system.

Occasionally one voice raises above the others, and is usually considered as an exception in comparison to status quo. The weak points which harm a system are seen as the result of incompetent high executives and bad strategy.

The general belief is that everything has to turn out well, and if things don't, the fault should be given to the bad application of protocols.

Nowadays managerial know-how is considered a science, with methods, techniques and instruments that are getting ever more better, and are acquiring the necessary skills to deal with every kind of question, operational or strategic.

Education, spanning from compulsory schooling to the most prestigious Business Schools, gives scholars the idea that they are part of a sturdy [and infallible] species with skillful and trustworthy [fallible] decision-makers.

The generation which comes from this point of view is defined by a precisely planned protocol.

Behavior must follow a strict set of universal formulized rules, which are applied to various fields of knowledge, from medicine to management and the public sector¹.

In this sense protocol behavior becomes the denominator for various social classes, and causes a reconditioning of socio-individual interactions, within the sub-systems constituting society:

- in healthcare, patients, apart from when dealing with specific pathologies, have to undergo standard therapy protocol, based on global standards;
- professions, such as engineering, ICT, electronics or plumbing not only formalized standard procedures, but have also reached a general standard form;
- teaching methods aim rather do an in-depth study of problem solving, by executing series of actions which can function in any situation. In this sense we would rather speak of a kind of training practice;
- management doesn't really care about performance, but rather on the results obtained. The reputation that many people have managers, especially in western countries, remains generally positive, ignoring the questions of successes or failures;
- the question of quantity of Work (experience, hours of work), especially in the public domain, seems to be the notion which is taken mainly into consideration, during the phase of evaluation, rather than skill or merit;
- professional consulting, predominantly in the business field, is a preferable option for small, close-knit environments. Business consultants today, who work according to recognized standards, are no longer the reference point for strategic policies, and have instead become a part of the process which, with skill and technical know-how, makes sure that everything goes smooth during the process.

For years this has been considered as a winning policy, assuring economical growth and quality standards.

¹ Considering things *good* or *bad*, makes rules relative. They result as being *correct* in relation to a system of values, to certain ethics of context; ethics are not always to be considered as the highest sum of morality; in this sense one should attribute the concept of *good* to the above mentioned rules.

The recent global economical crisis touching all the layers of society, such as the economical, political, institutional sectors and general values, which they themselves show the drawbacks of this kind of method. This approach is winning in a context in which steps of procedure are highly formalized. The concepts of repeated and repeatable standards and efficiency should be considered categorical. On the contrary, it appears to be inadequate and misleading when wanting to alter varying instable contexts.

An approach which is based on repetitive action cannot be applied to disorientating contexts which change rapidly without warning: this is what can be considered as a moment of “emerging of complexity”.

The signs of this are to be seen in personal non-satisfaction and to the feeling of being inadequate in society, rather than in lack of skill.

A lot of managers, businessmen, professionals and academics feel that they do not have the necessary tools or theoretical principles and criteria of interpretation (protocols), which for this reason, seem inadequate in representing and resolving organizational dynamics (and individuals) in a post-modern context.

Today a new scenario has been put into place in which organizations are radically different from any pre-existing structures:

- ✓ in this case, where is the start and where is the end? The reference is the past and not the future. Obsolete company organizational plans were to design strategies which had certain goals to achieve. Today, it is preferable to consider current situations relatively, and have the belief that any possible alternative be preferable to the *status quo*;
- ✓ there has been growing difficulty in deciphering dynamics in context. The relation between cause and effect conducting to context change was, up till recent times, analyzed and case-codified. For an expert company decision-maker a possible result can be explained through analogies and acknowledged, experienced-based facts. The current scenario tells us of situations in which changes are mainstream, seemingly insignificant, but capable of producing unexpected effects, and disordering the original strategic plan;
- ✓ the “actors” acting within a certain environment are important factors in explaining context. Before, organisations and individuals seemed to manifest predictable and calculable behavior. In this new unstable scenario it seems difficult, if

not impossible, to anticipate the reactions of the various actors involved in emerging events. The modifications and shifts of reaction of the components characterizing a given context, does not depend on a gradual conformism to a specific situation, but is rather considered as non-contextualized, and leaded by strong emotional tension (stressful situations), and on an individual incapability of finding a solution to a problem, which may even lead on to hysterical behavior;

- ✓ role models are being ever more casted over with a shadow of doubt. The engendering of intra-system community models, sociologically speaking, generally depend on common heritage, same ideals, traditions and culture. From a service-orientated point of view, executive bodies are obliged to work on integration, praise hard work, and try to form partnerships where possible. The concept of hierarchy ceases to be of importance. In other words, the founding principles which have inspired and conditioned traditional managerial practice, have been radically challenged;
- ✓ a final change in decision-making dynamics during executive phases and phases of management. Decisions are no longer taken according only to rationality. The algorithms determining optimal procedures are now used to find the best possible way. The decision depends on what makes the decision-maker feel better at the present moment, rather than what can ethically and idealistically happen in an up and coming hypothetical future.

Today a new scenario is unfolding, and companies which interact within a specific context (actively and passively), and cannot have the intention to formulate, and thus formalize, guidelines to change in executive practice. There is a general sense of loss of direction amongst managers, businessmen, and a growing sense of impotence, making them incapable of understanding and facing the situation around them.

Uncertainty, unpredictability, inadequate knowledge and scarce information, contexts in continuous redefinition and inconstant, changing actors, are signs of complexity.

Complexity, from this viewpoint, emerges when the interaction resulting from types of relations no longer responds to recognizable, common criteria, and appears distant from original planning.

Privileging a similar view means foreshadows an implicit passage from an analytical perspective to one of based in a system.

Complexity is also linked to “quantity”. Complexity rises due to excessive growth of components, of relations, variables and other factors. But its origin depends on the behavior of the actors acting inside it.

In literary terms, we can assume that things get complex when the processes representing social dynamics become non linear².

So what do we mean when saying “non-linear relation”? Here are some positions:

- a useful means for facing complexity can be found “system” and not “structure”;
- complexity rises when we become incapable of acting, and try to orientate ourselves with rules and criteria which in the past resulted as handy and effective. Recovering a stable condition with diachronic elements is not necessarily a solution;
- the cohesion of the factors forming a social system, (in our case we refer to companies), depends on the action of the physical forces determining the laws of nature, which is in continuous evolution, and refers to pro tempore relations;
- the relations which are established within a changing context, usually generate illogical interactions amongst many of the actors “interacting” within a system.

The concept of interaction, functional or intentional, makes it possible for us to understand the meaning of a non-linear relationship³.

² It seems self-evident that the concept of *non-linearity* of mathematical systems and its physical outlets, are very much differently formulized from what is here exposed. Though it is possible to retain that the inspiring pattern of non-linearity in formal systems, and non-linearity in social systems, be the same.

³ There is a significant difference between the concepts of connection, relation and interaction. Connection, “to be in contact with”, a mental structure which can be seen as a tube, a wire connecting two components. A computer is connected to a printer, as are two telephones or a tap and a water etc. A classroom can be considered as an *in contact* location, where students and teachers come into contact; a place of work, a sports association or political party etc. Connection is mainly based on contact. Relation, instead, is the function attributed to contact. Three people in the same room can be in relation with each other in different ways: they can be colleagues, assistants, collaborators etc. relation gives function to connection. A computer and devices are connected; the protocol of communication defines the relation. Interaction attributes intentionality to relation. A printer interacts with a computer when printing a

By studying the relationship between a company and its environment, we are able to interpret the situation by allowing internal and external components to interact.

So focusing on the interactions enables us to make the following considerations:

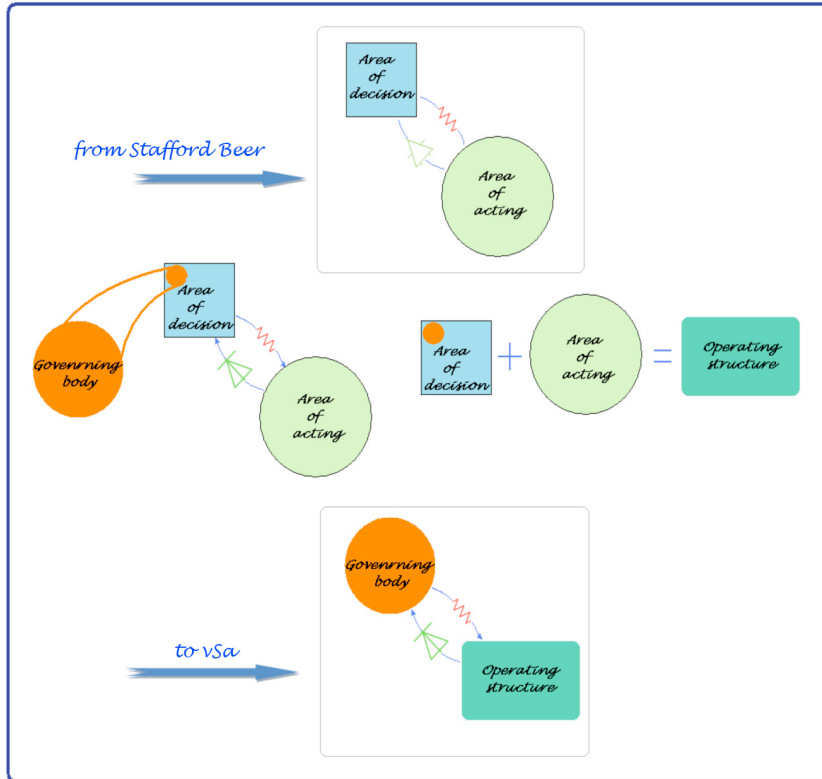
1. structure in the system boundaries are broken, the notion of internal or external complexity ends up being insignificant;
2. inter-system stability conditions are based on consolidated routine procedures. Relations become the norm, depend on the interactions of various factors, and are progressively turned into rules. But even rules are inclined to change; all habits and interactions are sensitive to the influences which are active in a dynamic context;
3. repeated systematic interaction between numerous agents is consolidated by relations which activate processes of reformulation. In homogeneous communities, the rules and the subjective application of norms rarely turns out to be the common denominator which in time will become a reference point;
4. the effect of point 3 brings to a progressive reduction of consonance with a specific context. With consonance we intend the capability of guaranteeing a form of compatibility between subjective processes and relevant supra-systems with which the system interacts and creates complexity.

2. A CORRECT REPRESENTATION: ORGANISATIONS AS VIABLE SYSTEMS

Analyzing the Viable Systems Approach (VSA). Makes it easier for us to understand the above scenarios. This approach, based on the theories of Stafford Beer redefines decision and action making (Beer, 1972), and recognizes two specific fields in which organisations are structured: the governing body, involved in decision-making strategy, and in structured operating decisions during activity (Figure 1) (Golinelli, 2000).

document in word or in excel. An assistant interacts with his superordinate for the preparation of a budget or book keeping etc.

Figure 1 - From Stafford Beer to (VSA)



Source: www.asvsa.com.

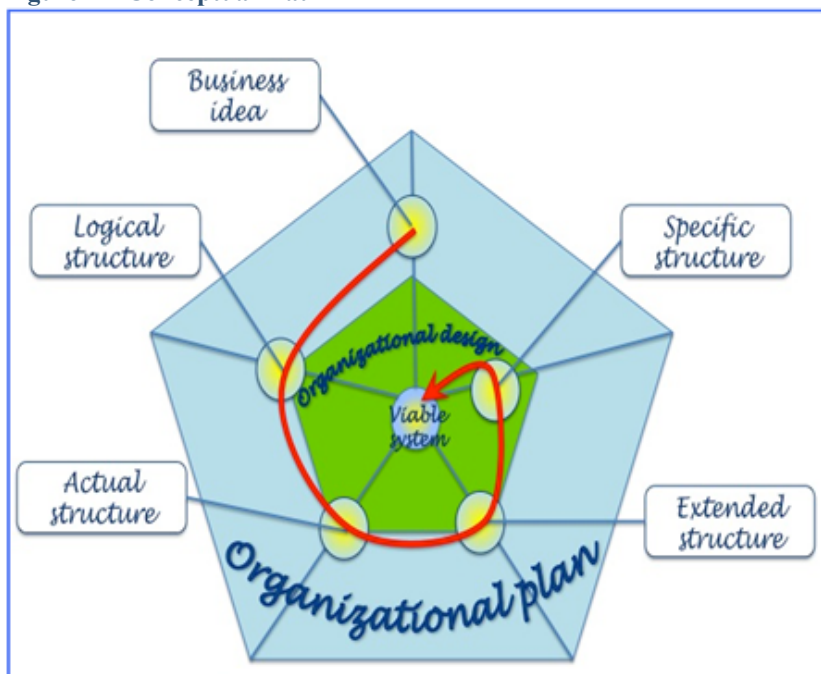
The approach is axiomatic and builds its basis on some of the founding economical theories:

- a) **Survival:** a Viable System has the aim to survive in a specific context;
- b) **Eidos:** from an ontological viewpoint a viable system can be considered in a structural and systemic prospective;
- c) **Isotropy:** in terms of behavior a viable system distinguishes an area of decision-making and one of acting;
- d) **Acting:** it's aim it to reach a result, an objective through the interaction of supra and subsystems from which they receive, but also supply, indications and rules;

e) Exhaustiveness: external entities are also viable system, components deriving from a superior level.

This paper shows the substantial difference between a superordinate system, in reference to structure, and the supra-system concept, the capability of a given (supra) system to be critical and influential upon another (Barile, 2002). The introduction of these concepts questions the boundaries of system structuring, a secondary aspect from our point of view. Contact creates participation; a given system tends to absorb as a whole (Barile, 2006). The definition of a conceptual matrix (Figure 2) is a further breakthrough (Golinelli, 2005). From this point of view the concept of “structure” can be analyzed in various ways, according to facts and conditions, which will prove to be a more adequate representation of a process and of the relations and interactions it depends on (Barile, 2008).

Figure 2 – Conceptual matrix



Source: www.asvsa.com.

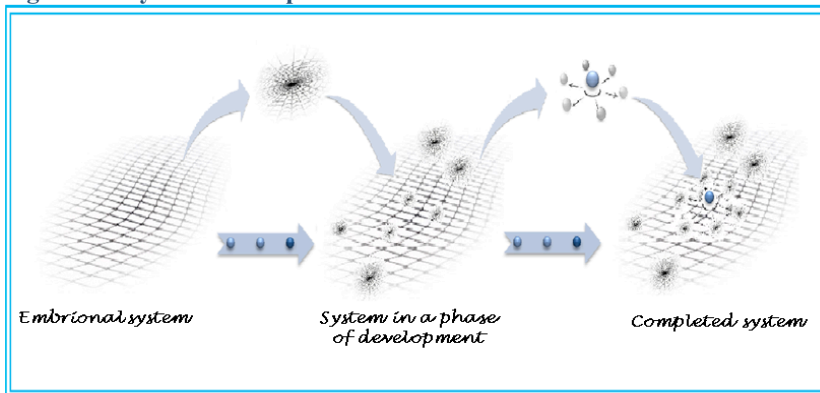
The concepts which we refer to as: adjustment, transformation, restructuring and redefinition, are closely linked to such forms of representation (Golinelli, Gatti, Vagnani, 2002).

These enable us to face different kinds of problems that organisations have to face, by proposing slight adjustments rather than radical changes. The need to understand certain dynamics of competitive and collaborative relations in organisations, and business set-ups in our case, brings us to elaborate the concepts of consonance and resonance (Proietti, Liguori, 2008).

While consonance is the capability of interacting systems to optimize disposable resources when interacting, resonance represents a virtuous or vice orientation, which respectively increase or decrease in time (Golinelli, Gatti, Siano, 2002).

Recent studies have brought to an easier understanding of system-development, and mainly have enabled us to individualize useful dimensions for measuring and representing levels of consonance and resonance (Saviano, 1999).

Figure 3 – System development



Source: www.asvsa.com.

The starting-point of this system of elaboration consists of establishing a substantial equivalence (isomorphism) between a viable system and the use of certain *information variety*, which is articulated in three parts: categorical values, interpretation schemes and information units (Barile, 2009). This makes it possible for us to assess, according to the relevance of in-context supra-systems, the use of certain *information variety* in specific viable systems, and the

possibility to establish a level of consonance, and solutions which can be shared and accepted.

$$Var_{inf}(k) = (U_{inf}(k), S_{int}(k), C_{val}(k)) \text{ with}$$

$Var_{inf}(k)$ = *information variety* (or information heritage) of viable system K ;

$U_{inf}(k)$ = *information units* belonging to the *information variety* of viable system K ;

$S_{int}(k)$ = *interpretation schemes (synthesis)* belonging to the *information variety* of viable system K ;

$C_{val}(k)$ = *categorical value* belonging to the *information variety* of viable system K .

The aim of this synthesis is to make some of the founding concepts of the (VSA) clear to the reader (Golinelli, 2000, 2002, 2005, 2008, 2009; Barile, 2000, 2002, 2006, 2008, 2009).

1. a viable system lives, exists and its aim is to survive within a context which is populated by other viable systems;
2. context should rather be envisioned as a construction built by a singular governing body of a viable system (the decision-maker) belonging to an environment (a macro-system in which the decision maker is immersed) according to an objective to reach;
3. context is the synthesis of a reticulum of viable systems, within which it is possible to further distinguish a series of systems (relevant supra-systems), which are able to condition the decisions of a governing body;
4. structural definition and the level of consonance between evolved components (interacting supra and sub systems), define the level of elaboration of a system;
5. a viable system has the capability of dynamically adjusting its structure (the phenomenon of auto-regulation), when trying to correctly interpret the signals inside a context (norms), and determines consequent “necessary” behavior (subjectively obtained rules), so as to conserve a certain level of consonance with context (responding by adjusting habits to the expectations of relevant viable systems) and in this way preserve its stability⁴;

⁴ Law is a norm with which we intend to regulate the future behavior of men, organized in different groupings orientated towards certain determined conditions. The complex of laws, a systemic organization of group, constitutes the jurisdictional

6. an organized structure is built out of: norms, rules, principles, values and beliefs, structures of interpretation, asserted “ways of doing things”, habits and routines.

3. A NEW FRONTIER IN CONSULTING: THE (VSA) CONSULCUBE

In the first paragraph, we have underlined the fact that a widespread orientation to strategic and operative problem-solving is being done through methodological protocol. Studies have shown how this standard way of procedure has clearly shown its limits. The quality of performance has worsened, and efficiency has deteriorated; these elements tell us that we need to change our approach.

Professional consulting has moved towards a standardization of elaborated procedures, bringing to the shaping of global professionals. Public and private consulting companies offer contracts which refer to specific periods and prove in the long run to have loose backup principles. For this reason today many public companies are progressively turning themselves into interim companies, capable of compressing costs (not always respecting the law) and guaranteeing flexibility.

Today, if our goal is to we wish to rediscover the original meaning of business consulting and give back its prestige, we believe that a re-elaboration of methods, techniques and instruments be fundamental. What seems necessary, if not indispensable, is not an in-depth technical know-how of any phase of production, nor an ingenuous individualization of a possible resolution, but the capability of knowing how to specify the context of reference, learn how to identify relevant supra-systems, and in conclusion find a solution which, consonant with an identified context, can effectively work.

We believe that, in complex situations, solutions which apparently seem excellent, risk being inapplicable due to a lack of consonance. Organizational adjustment, instead of applying, for

order. Norms are assimilated to *rules of conduct*, which impose a certain form of behavior upon individuals. Norms are not to be confused with laws. While they are prescriptive, norms are the consequent act. Norms are usually deduced from written statements (constitution, law, regulations etc.) which confer a high level of certainty and continuity in time. With the word *rule* we intend the declination of established codified, coordinate norms in a given system.

instance, tested business software, has proved to be useless. Introducing specific products and measures in pre-existing structures, appears to be highly difficult. Take public administration for instance, and its aspiration to technical modernization according to ITC best way practice.

Taking into consideration the above, the new approach would allow consulting:

- the possibility to measure and assess points of view and the opinions of participants in decision-making, and not limit itself to the application of impartial objective measuring criteria of incoming and outgoing phenomena of analysis;
- consider specific characteristics of context, the management and governance of a project, and a financial portfolio;
- adapt to different needs and cultural contexts;
- obtain more knowledge concerning any specific area, and calculate more precise measurements of feedback about client satisfaction (consonance);
- understand the relevance of interactions the components which compose context, and participate with the dynamics of a system in its whole;
- enable us to define personal operative context oriented models, specific to given situations, moments and places⁵.

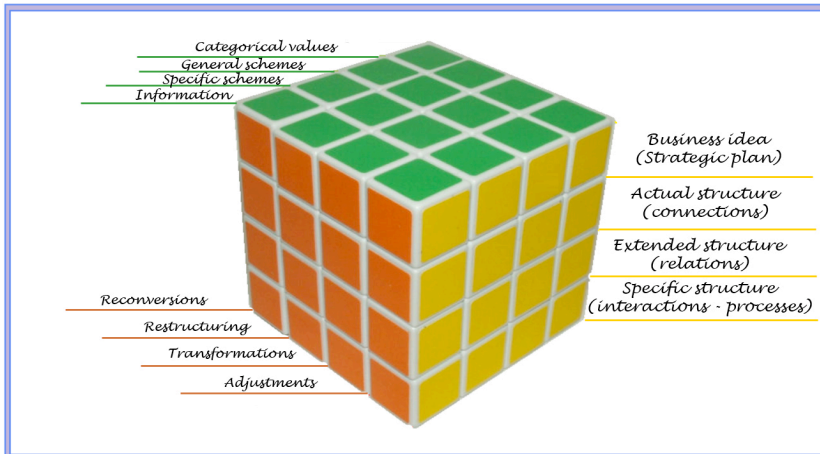
The (VSA) Consulcube proves to be an efficient model in analysis, in qualifying and measuring various connections, relations and interactions existing in a single viable system and in the dynamics between several systems, based on recursion. The ratio of recursion enables us, thanks to the possibilities of contextualization within which we evaluate and measure consonance, to consider many diverse outcomes.

In Figure 4 we can visualize the dimensions embodying varied forms of information, representation, and credibility, thus:

⁵ This specific condition is well explained with the famous saying: Paganini cannot be repeated. From a (VSA) viewpoint, Paganini does not repeat himself not because he doesn't want to, but because he can't. If his composition is the result of the whole context, we may retain that even the yawning of the spectator in the third row may have influenced his performance. For this reason it is impossible to re-create with an encore, the conditions which have produced a particular performance.

- there are several possibilities which create the conceptual space within which context, business projects, and strategic plans are formulated; there are variables (components, connection, relations, interactions) that come into play during consonance;
- the viable system levels, the different points of view that the possible solutions have to respect, and the contributions that the various actors are obliged to add in order to pursue objectives;
- an estimation of possible project-value, which considers relevant suprasystems, their expectations, satisfaction in reference to problems solved.

Figure 4 – (VSA) Consulcube



Source: www.asvsa.com.

Project work can be identified by two correlated and consequential factors which are crucial in managing and governing projects with different objectives and contributions:

- consonance inside context and the specific analyzed viable system; its measurement enables us to establish parameters concerning:
 - ✓ the capability of maintaining specific orientations and objectives;
 - ✓ the possibility to converge towards new objectives;

- ✓ the distance between an average level of consonance and specific context;
- the existence of possible factors capable of influencing resonance, of contributing in or impeding consonance;
- the probability of new projects, objectives and results to pursue, and new rules to abide to.

Measuring consonance is done through questionnaires and information collected from the indicators included in the Consulcube in Figure 4 (Esposito De Falco, 2008).

Sud Dream constructing company, for instance, which is facing a particularly difficult moment. This is due to the time they have lost while waiting for administrative help for the construction of residential area buildings; now a short or medium period plan seems highly improbable. The company is obliged to face the following negative conditions:

- a. clients not respecting delivery terms;
- b. contracts with primary suppliers which are not respected;
- c. financial payments to banks and financiers which are not finished;
- d. delays on work, and consequent fines;
- e. difficulties regarding personnel, consultants and workers.

The possible strategies that a consulting company can give are:

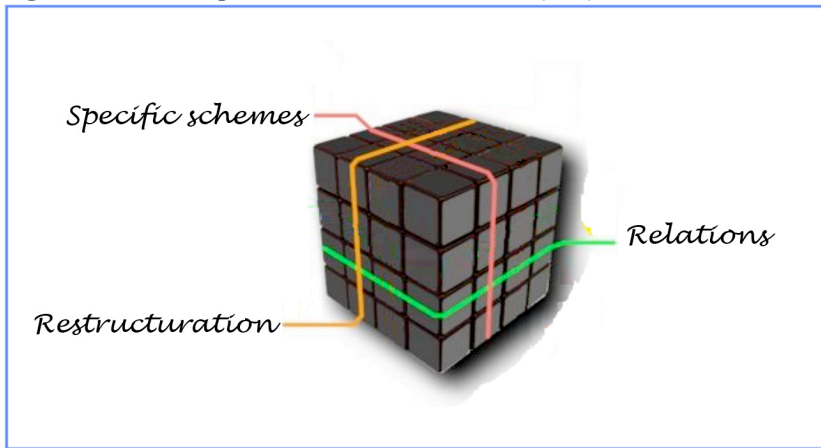
- I. a debt moratorium for creditors according to definable priorities. A deferred payment of a semester should re-establish conditions for an overall balancing;
- II. a redefinition of organizational set-up through redimensioning organs and areas of business. The choice of working opportunities characterized by a higher level of marginality would bring to an overall recovery of value for the company;
- III. the search for a financial partner capable of decongesting receivable accounts which have major priority. The presence of an investor may contribute to recovering the reputation of a company.

A classical approach to business consulting demands a risk-convenience approach. Elements concerning budget, and the indicators of market and financial indexes would bring to a calculation showing us the best hypothesis. This approach is strictly based on calculation; with the use of statistics it may be possible to estimate the grade of trust that stakeholders show towards several proposals; the

result of calculation will incontrovertibly supply with the most appropriate choice.

On the contrary, the (VSA) consulcube does not say which proposal is best, or which one prevails, in close connection the level of consonance between a proposal, and the average level of consonance between a company and its context. The idiosyncrasies, the categorical value hypothesizing the assignment of shares in a family business, as stated in hypothesis III, may even seem convenient and less risky, but appears highly difficult to apply.

Figure 5 - Possible paths of evaluation that the (VSA)



Source: www.asvsa.com.

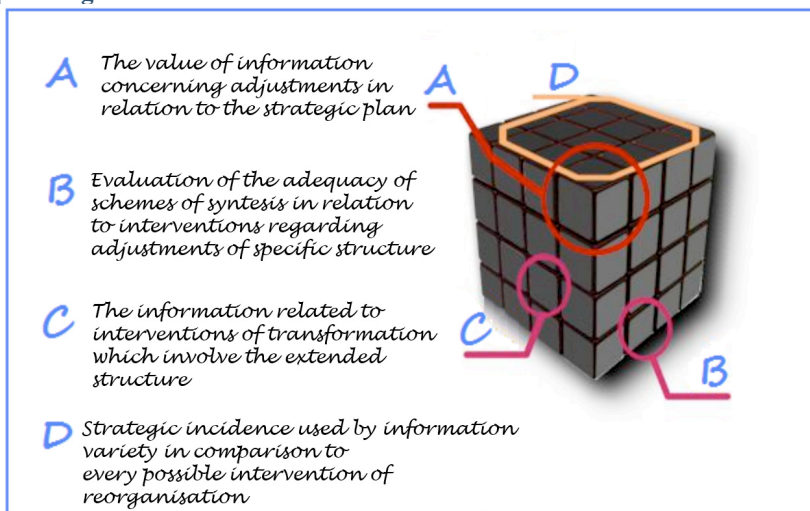
Figure 5 shows possible ways of evaluation that the (VSA) consulcube suggests to calculateate consonance. Figure 6 presents cases which individualize essential characteristics connected to certain pathologies:

- A. enabling us to evaluate the incidence of consonance coming from acquired information in the phase of adjustment, in relation to a wide strategic plan. This corresponds to the typical case in which, when trying to re-establish stability, marginal aspects are conditioned. These interventions progressively damage trust in company missions, resulting from an the implicit received information of an operative structure;
- B. enabling us to calculate the correspondence, the consonance, between specific business patterns (tacit knowledge) and the hypothesis of organizational adjustment. In many cases,

- interventions which may seem easy, result as inapplicable due to the resistance coming from established structures;
- C. the possibility to act on a extended structure, redesigning main function processes which needs a close verification of consonance and perception of the operative structure in regards to hypothesized transformation. In many cases the components of structure which are ousted or redimensioned in the phase of transformation tend to react negatively;
 - D. variety significantly influences every possible act of reorganization. Rethinking strategy, a modification of underlying layers [categorical values and interpretation schemes (general)], with the use of information variety, is compulsory for a company to obtain specific goals.

The figure gives us some examples of possible interpretations of the dimensions composing the (VSA) consulcube. Decomposing every possible hypothesis and reorganizing certain components relative to modalities of action, rather than levels of systemic structural representation and informative components, gives us the possibility to have a wider picture. This method is capable of analyzing the consonance, the initial and consequent resonance from the application of every possible intervention, and establishes the most appropriate.

Figure 6 - Cases which spot essential characteristics connected to certain pathologies



Source: www.asvsa.com.

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