

Learning To Groove With The Gremlins

How To Embrace The Inevitable: Chaos And Complexity

By Dr. Linda J. Burrs

You rush to add the finishing touch to an eight-week project you've poured your heart and

soul into—when the server crashes and you can't find your work. You need to retrieve it quickly because the senior executive expects it in an hour. What happened?

Gremlins!

Your best employee tells you she's leaving the organization to work for your #1 competitor. She cites a lack of meaningful work and a less-than-appealing work environment. You thought she was happy. What happened?

Gremlins!

You wait until the last minute to leave for work because you're watching an interesting news video. The story has special meaning, and you believe the concepts expressed in this news piece may help your team move beyond a sticking point. You plan to share this with your team at your 8:30 a.m. meeting. As you jump into your vehicle and speed away, you realize you have a flat tire. Why today, of all days?

Gremlins!

Most of us have heard of the butterfly effect. Can a butterfly flap its wings in China and create a hurricane in the U.S.? The question is asked not necessarily to be answered, but to demonstrate how small and seemingly insignificant changes in one area may have a major, even catastrophic impact in another place. In our linear way of thinking, if we knew or thought we could control or stop an unwanted event from happening, we would need only to capture that

butterfly and imprison it forever, or smash it and the problem would be solved. Well, would it? Most likely not.

On the Edge of Chaos

We all live at the edge of chaos without recognizing it, so let's explore this terrain a bit more. The baggage that surrounds the word *chaos* is so negative that we often miss the positive impact of a more nuanced understanding of the word. Yes, chaos typically refers to a state of confusion and uncontrollable experiences or events. But it can also be viewed as the natural disorder and unpredictability in our lives that may help us get what we want.

The fact is, uncontrollable events are always at play in our lives. We can't do enough controlling to make chaos go away without sacrificing creativity and innovation, ultimately destroying our ability to grow and evolve into the successful people we desire to be.

Remember Gizmo, the adorable, fuzzy and exotic little creature from the movie "Gremlins." In the gremlins' world, there were only three rules: 1. Don't get the Mogwai wet; 2. Don't put the Mogwai in bright light; and 3. Don't feed the Mogwai after midnight. Nothing mind-blowing, earth-shattering or complex. These simple rules should have been simple to follow. Yet, in spite of best efforts, water was accidentally spilled on Gizmo (the Mogwai's new name), and the

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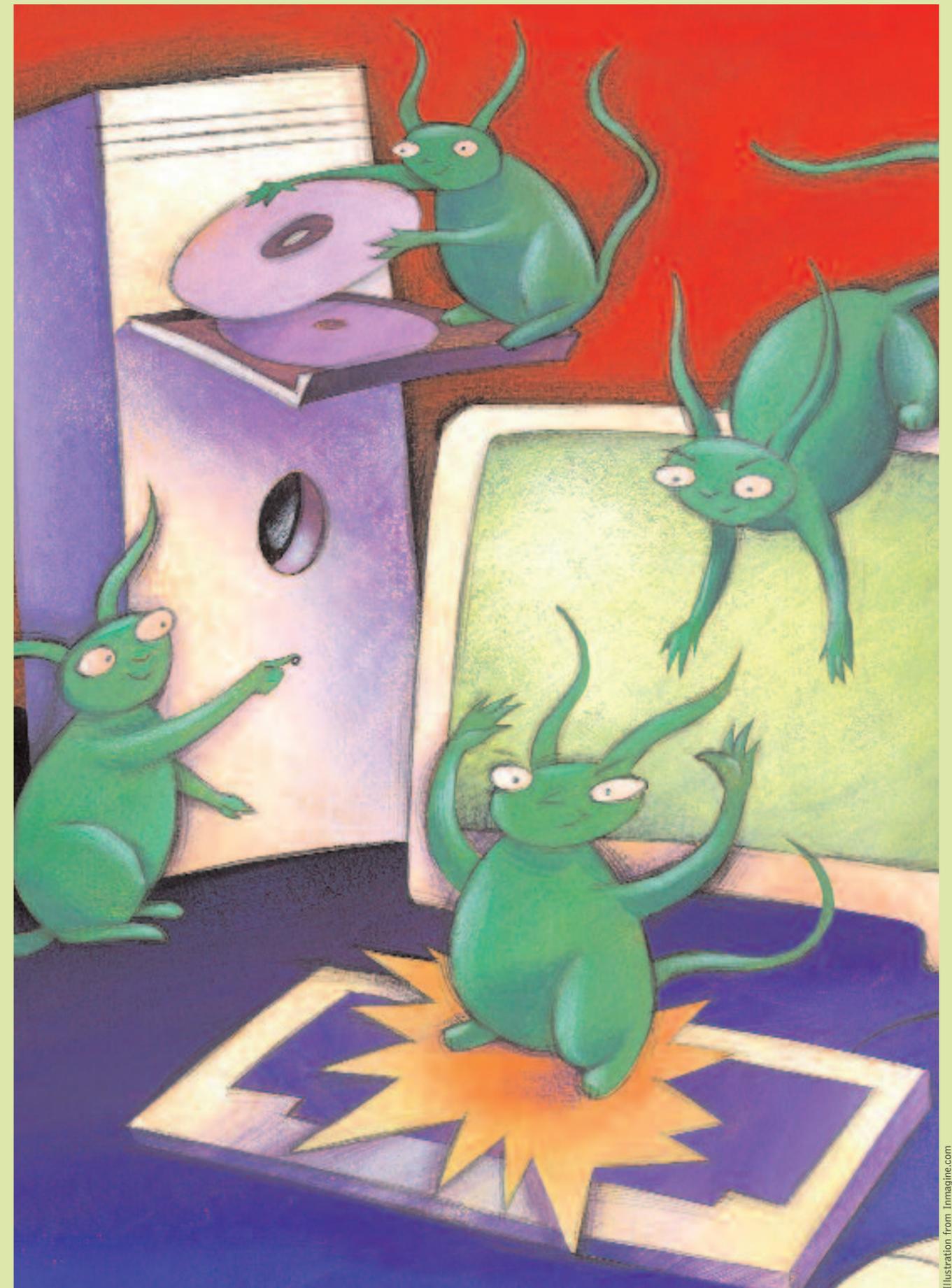


Illustration from Imagine.com

impending chaos wreaked havoc on the entire town.

Most of us have firsthand experience from encounters with gremlins in the many areas of our lives. This is not news. What *is* news is that by drawing from the gremlin experience, we can find order, growth and help in accomplishing our goals.

So how can we make troublesome, uncontrollable events work in our favor? We've all been conditioned to make every effort to control what is uncontrollable. We like to believe that



if there are enough rules and regulations, we can eliminate ambiguity and chaotic unpredictability.

But just as in the Gremlins movie, in spite of our best efforts to follow the rules, we often find chaos running just beneath the surface, outside our field of vision. One way to explain how gremlins get and stay in the system is through a simple understanding of complexity. Complexity science helps us understand why chaos and unpredictability exist, and how they may help us.

The World of Linear And Nonlinear Systems

Complexity can be simply explained as a whole containing many parts in a relationship in which the parts are unpredictable and dynamic. In a linear system—and we like to believe we live in one—the whole is simply the sum of all the parts. I'm a human being (whole) made up bone, tissue,

blood, organs, etc. (parts). If I put enough controls in place, I may contain all the parts and make them work the way I want. If I eat the right foods, exercise daily and get enough sleep, I should be able to control my health and stay well. But alas, that's not always the case.

In the nonlinear system (complex adaptive system), the whole is *greater* than the sum of its parts. This means that the parts each have their own multidirectional, complex system that's constantly supporting, feeding and balancing the whole with unanticipated, unexpected and unpredictable outcomes—which are most often uncontrollable. To deal effectively with these complex relationships that compound our existence, we need help.

Learn to Live With The Gremlins

We can't control chaos, so we have to learn to live with the gremlins. Every choice we make leads to complex behaviors that influence outcomes, none of which can be predicted or controlled.

But we think we're more in control than we actually are, so when gremlins show up in the system, we're thrown off balance. So servers crash, good employees leave, and tires go flat at the most inopportune times. What can be done about these gremlins?

Indeed, reality is a moving target, and uncertainty is a fact of life. When we don't accept this fact, gremlins can wreak havoc in our lives and we feel out of control and stressed. However, when we understand and acknowledge the fact that complex systems reside within every interaction and every relationship, we're less stressed and more capable. How do we get there?

Stick to Your Theories, But Expect The Unexpected

Relax and learn to share your space with gremlins. You may also want to take some time to understand and embrace complexity and chaos theories.

A study of complexity helps us recognize that systems nested inside other systems are unpredictable and at times seem unmanageable. Complexity burns energy, and you'll burn yourself to a crisp trying to control the gremlins. Instead, learn how to expect the unexpected.

Today, a friend called because she dropped her car key last night in a pile of snow but couldn't find it. When she looked for the key this morning, she realized that the snowplow had piled the snow even higher over the place she dropped the key. She decided to have the car dealership make her another key using her VIN number. It was bitter cold outdoors, with a wind chill at -3 degrees. She tried to walk but got too cold. By the time she called me, she was in a bit of a quandary.

Clearly, gremlins were loose in the system, and they proliferated rapidly. I picked her up and took her to the dealership, only to find out they

couldn't make the computerized key. They recommended another dealership, but the gremlins foiled us again. Finally, we used our own smarts to hunt down the key at a third location.

The secret to managing this type of constantly changing complexity? Expect the unexpected by formulating a Plan B at the same time that you come up with Plan A. This way, you aren't derailed when the gremlins pop up again.

Focus on Present Possibilities

Prepare for the future by focusing on and staying in the present. According to a colleague, focusing on present possibilities helps keep us sane. He suggests that when we aren't focused on the here and now, we miss opportunities and experiences that may help us navigate the waves of chaos we encounter everyday. For anyone who has ever witnessed rush hour in Grand Central Station, the need to stay

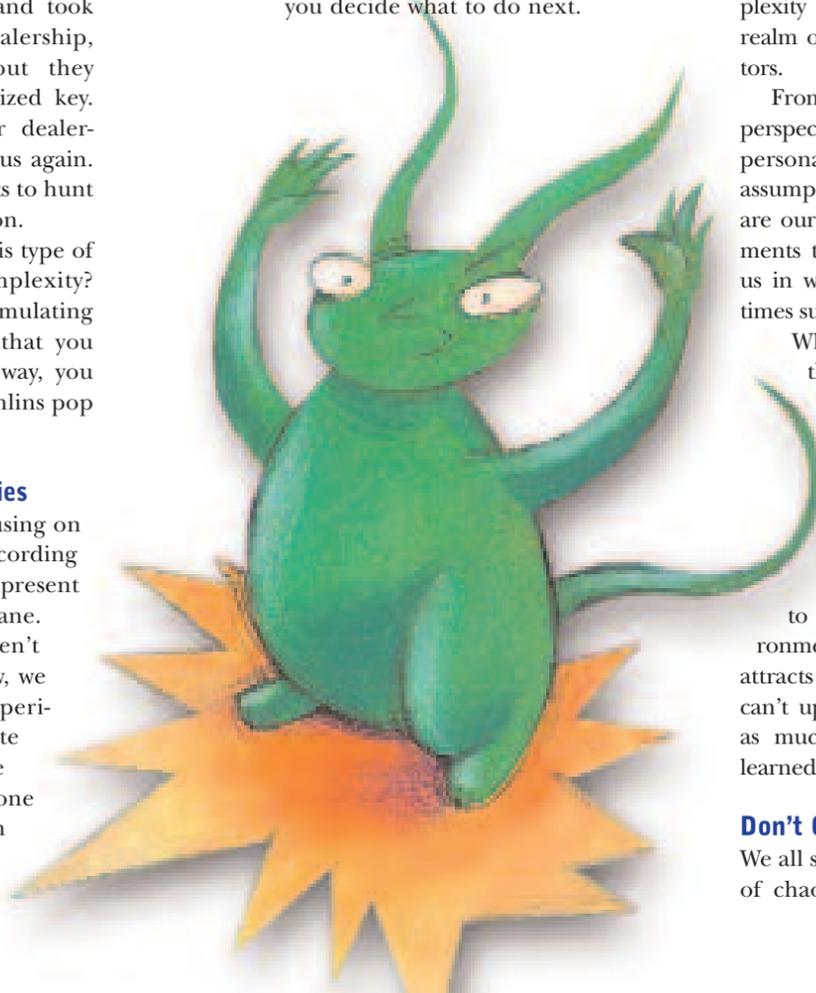
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focused on the present may be understood all too well.

Visitors to the city who aren't familiar with the amazing apparent chaos of systems embedded into more and more systems may be overwhelmed at the sight. In spite of apparent chaos, just beneath the surface lies a structure that brings order to the seeming madness. Focusing on only the complexity of the matrix blinds you to opportunities to enjoy the energy and excitement of one of this nation's most energized cities. Stay focused on what needs to get done now and know that even then, you should be ready for gremlins.

Recognize Emotion Before Making a Decision

You make choices every day without much thought to the outcomes. When you experience stress or get the feeling something needs to change in your life, you should stop, look and listen for gremlins. Once you acknowledge that you can't control the uncontrollable (gremlins), you can be at peace with yourself and others. And when the unexpected does show up, you can allow yourself time to acknowledge what you're feeling *before* you decide what to do next.



Learn from your fears. Allow yourself the luxury of acknowledging your feelings. Learning to live with chaos means thinking creatively and instinctively. Pay attention to those instincts and use them to inform your decisions.

Perspective Is Everything

Sometimes change is hard. For years we've been told that we're resistant to change. For a while, I felt out of place because I didn't feel as if I were resisting change. In fact, I liked some change, and liked it a lot.

Complexity helps me understand why I'm not resistant to change—and why you most likely aren't, either. Perhaps you'd done everything you could to retain that great employee, but she chose a job closer to home.

What we sometimes forget is that change activates possibilities in ways we could never have imagined if we allow the gremlins to have their way. I believe that instead of trying to control gremlins, we need to control our linear, straight-line thinking to more flexibly manage change and eliminate problems that keep us stressed and confused.

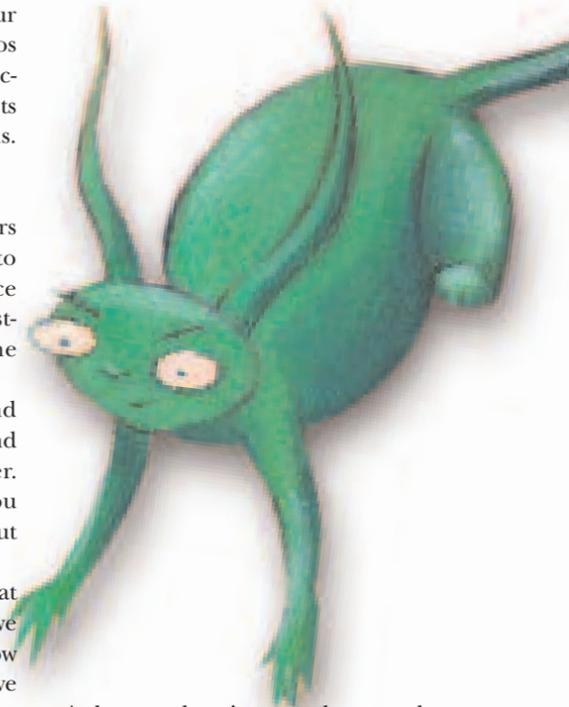
Let's look at what complexity teaches us. Complexity takes us into the realm of chaos and attractors.

From a social science perspective, for many of us, personal values, beliefs, assumptions and culture are our attractors; the elements that push and pull us in ways that are sometimes surprising.

When we examine this process closely, we gain a different perspective of our behavior and what attracts us to respond as we do. When we give up our need to control our environment based on what attracts us, the gremlins can't upset the apple cart as much as they used to, before we learned to let go.

Don't Contain Complexity

We all share our lives with the gremlins of chaos, dissonance and complexity.



As long as there's some chaos, we know we're alive. Perhaps we've been overly conditioned to fight and resist the work of chaos and complexity—no matter how hard we resist, chaos will prevail.

Cells are dying, and new ones are taking their place. Hairs are falling out of our heads; sometimes they come back, and sometimes they don't.

As long as we're subjected to negative conditioning toward chaos and complexity, we'll remain stressed and fearful. When we try to over-control or over-contain the work of the gremlins in our systems, we persistently miss opportunities for greater learning, greater personal growth and greater influence. Instead of corralling them, follow the rule of complexity and learn to coexist with the gremlins in your systems. You may gain some unique insights from embracing

change instead of resisting it. The gremlins will always be there, forcing you to adjust your coping mechanisms. You can either spend your life fighting them, or simply adapt to their existence and plan accordingly. ☒

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