



# The Black Swan Exaptive Spiral

Ethics, orientation, and disciplined improvisation for complex and chaotic operations.

*Ratione Non Ira — By Reason, Not Rage*

## THE FIVE INTERDEPENDENT LAYERS

- 1 ETHICAL KEEL** *Who must we remain while acting?*  
 Inner command · Consequence honesty · Terrain sensitivity · Moral courage without guarantees  
**WITHOUT IT:** ADAPTATION BECOMES RATIONALIZATION
- 2 TRUST & SHARED ORIENTATION** *How do we stay coherent when control decentralizes?*  
 Mutual confidence · Shared standards · Self-limiting leadership (mission command) · Local initiative with mission coherence  
**WITHOUT IT:** FRAGMENTATION AND CROSS-PURPOSES
- 3 SENSEMAKING & DOMAIN AWARENESS** *What kind of world are we in right now?*  
 Domain recognition · Continuous reorientation · Honest assessment of what is actually happening  
**WITHOUT IT:** CATEGORY ERRORS AND STALE MAPS
- 4 VIABILITY & DISTRIBUTED COORDINATION** *How do we keep the system adaptive without overcentralizing?*  
 Requisite variety · Distributed cognition · Graceful extensibility · Nested governance  
**WITHOUT IT:** BRITTLINESS, OVERLOAD, FALSE CONTROL
- 5 EXAPTIVE ACTION** *What can be recombined to preserve or extend function?*  
 Disciplined improvisation · Bounded probes · Snowmobile logic · Selective TRIZ  
**WITHOUT IT:** HEROICS, WASTED MOTION, CLEVER FAILURE

**Tensegral, not stacked.** No single layer carries the load — coherence is held by the tension distributed across all five. Remove one and the whole loses its shape. The keel does not sit beneath the Spiral; it lives inside orientation.

## DOMAIN LOGIC — MATCH THE ACTION TO THE TERRAIN

DOMAIN	DEFAULT MODE	BLACK SWAN RULE	TYPICAL MISUSE
<b>CONFUSED / APORETIC</b> <small>sorting gate — not a place to settle</small>	Sort, don't settle	Admit the problem type isn't known yet. Decompose the incident, assign each part to its domain, and resist premature convergence.	Forcing the whole incident into the most familiar domain
<b>CLEAR</b>	Procedure	Follow the rule. Preserve consistency and discipline.	Reinventing routine work
<b>COMPLICATED</b>	Expert adaptation	Use analysis, engineering judgment, and contradiction-solving tools.	Mistaking expertise for bureaucracy
<b>COMPLEX</b>	Disciplined improvisation	Probe safely, recombine mastered principles, learn in motion — only with fluency behind it.	Guessing under pressure and calling it intuition
<b>CHAOTIC</b>	Stabilizing action	Act immediately to create order. Speed matters; elegance does not.	Trying to optimize before the bleeding stops

The sequence is **recursive, not linear**. An incident can snap back into chaos in the space of a single bad decision. The keel must be built before the Spiral is ever needed.

## THE DEEPER LOGIC

### TENSEGRAL COHERENCE

Integrity held through distributed, viable tension rather than a single dominant control. No layer holds alone.

### ADAPTIVE CAPACITY

The cultivated ability to metabolize volatility without losing orientation. It cannot be commanded — resource the conditions before the call comes in.

### VIABLE TENSION

Tension that sharpens orientation instead of degrading it. Read who carries the hidden load, and whether stress yields learning or only exhaustion.

*“A gyroscope only works if it is already spinning.”*

## FIELD DECISION PROMPTS

Seven questions for when the terrain shifts faster than the playbook anticipated.

- 1 What domain are we actually in – or are we still in the confused/aporetic center – and have we crossed a boundary since we last checked?
- 2 What is breaking orientation right now? What assumption has stopped fitting?
- 3 Where is brittleness emerging? What are we compensating for that we haven't named?
- 4 Does our control structure have enough variety for this problem, or are we suppressing complexity we cannot absorb?
- 5 What cognition or coordination is already happening outside formal hierarchy – and is it working with us or around us?
- 6 What can be repurposed without creating hidden fragility downstream?
- 7 What action fits this terrain right now – without violating the ethical keel that must hold under pressure?

If a proposed action cannot survive question 7, the action should not proceed.

## THE ETHICAL KEEL – QUICK REFERENCE

## INNER COMMAND

Stabilize yourself before you stabilize the environment. Cannot be built during the incident.

## CONSEQUENCE HONESTY

Judge action by what it actually produces – not by what the narrative says it should.

## TERRAIN SENSITIVITY

Refuse to force reality into an outdated model because the model is familiar or comfortable.

## MORAL COURAGE

Sustain right action when certainty, recognition, and institutional cover are all absent.

## HOW THIS FRAMEWORK FAILS

## DOMAIN RECOGNITION AS STALLING

"We're in the complex domain" becomes an excuse not to act. If it's complex, probe – don't wait.

## CONSEQUENCE HONESTY AS PARALYSIS

Reckoning with second-order effects until you lose the ability to act. A timely imperfect decision beats a delayed perfect one.

## MORAL COURAGE AS SELF-RIGHTEOUSNESS

Confusing being right with being useful. The keel constrains action – including telling everyone else they're wrong.

## FRAMEWORK AS IDENTITY

The moment you defend the Spiral instead of testing it, it has become a monument. Monuments don't move to the next site.

## DOMAIN RECOGNITION – QUICK CHECK

**Not sure which it is?** → **Confused / Aporitic.** Don't force it into the familiar one. Decompose, sort, then move.

Can you look up the answer? → **Clear.** Follow the procedure.

Can an expert solve it with time and analysis? → **Complicated.** Get the right expertise in the room.

Is it shifting while you assess it? → **Complex.** Probe, learn, adapt. Do not optimize.

Deteriorating faster than you can think? → **Chaotic.** Act now. Create order. Elegance can wait.

Been a while since you asked which domain you're in? → Ask again. The terrain may have moved.

## HALLWAY QUESTIONS

For the conversations between sessions.

- When did your team's domain last shift mid-incident – and did anyone name it in real time?
- How long does bad news take to travel from the person who sees it to the person who can act on it?
- What's the last workaround your team used that never made it into an after-action review?
- In your last debrief, did the senior leader account for their own errors first – before asking anyone else?
- If you ran your last major exercise through these seven questions, what would you find?