FOREWORD

by

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This book brings to mind a number of experiences.

In coaching an individual receiving some negative 360 feedback, she pleaded with me, "Just tell me what to do!" My response, "What do you think?", did not meet her needs for clarity.

When helping someone redirect their career, they played the 'if only …' game. If only I had taken that assignment, seen the political implications of my recommendation, not made that stupid comment, etc.

In a workshop where I was facilitating dialogue about building organisation capabilities, a participant pointedly asked me to just tell him what capability matters most so he could make it happen.

In redesigning an organisation, the leader met with the team and set the expectation of producing an organisation chart with roles and responsibilities.

In each of these (and many other) settings, people want easy, simple and memorable answers to the challenges they face. In this thoughtful and thorough book, Steve challenges this inevitable search for what he calls 'Silver Bullets' that derail personal, organisational and customer progress.

Over the years, the dysfunctions of Silver Bullets have been described in many ways:

- Shiny objects lose their lustre.
- Quick fixes create long-term cycles of cynicism.
- Fads fade.
- Simplistic solutions go unsolved.
- Pithy answers meant to reduce fear and anxiety often lead to more questions that increase angst.
- Clever slide decks have little sustaining power.
- Repackaging the past obfuscates the future.

Building on this logic, Steve reinforces that Silver Bullets often misfire or miss their target, causing more harm than good.

While dysfunctional, at one time or another, we have all wanted to discover the magic elixir or quick fix with the false hope that, with it, we could easily change ourselves, others, our organisation, or our work with customers. In reality, change requires enormous effort, persistence and dedication.

Steve's book does a marvellous job of laying out the false hopes of Silver Bullets, the reasons why they exist and persist (fear/anxiety), and their sources (poor business education, social media 'likes', and clever packaging of ideas to name a few). I could leave the book with a curmudgeon attitude that Silver Bullets will continue to exist causing more harm than good.

But Steve goes beyond the downsides of Silver Bullets to offer more realistic guidance about moving beyond them. His work reminds me that simplicity without complexity is simplistic; while simplicity on the other side of complexity enhances performance and enables change.

As we all know, the world is complex. There are 118 elements on the periodic table; over 10,000 diseases someone might catch; nearly 300 mental illnesses in the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual (DSM) of mental disorders; and numerable actions organisations can take to improve. To change there are so many places to source ideas: webinars, magazines, conferences, social media, books, articles, training programmes, coaches, peers, podcasts and beyond. It is easy to be so overwhelmed with the complexity that it paralyses action. Avoiding the trap of Silver Bullets requires sifting through this complexity to find tailored solutions that may be simple, but not simplistic.

Steve's work reminds us that the siren song of Silver Bullets with simplistic answers exists and will continue to do so, probably even more with AI which requires even less reflection and attention to process. Steve's book helps me understand that on the other side of oversimplification:

- Fads can become personal journeys.
- Shiny objects turn into grounded identities.
- 'Quick fixes' accumulate into sustainable results.
- Pithy answers lead to more challenging questions and a spiral of progress.
- Silver Bullets can morph into ways to make change actually happen.

Steve's personal journey to move from Silver Bullets to peaceful change, from answers to questions, fads to identities, results to process, and answers to questions can be a blueprint for each of us who want to improve our confidence that we can change.

This book reminds us that the complex challenge of changing human systems can be navigated; polite compliance can be morphed into thoughtful creativity; undiscussable problems can be dialogues for moving forward; anxieties that lead to helplessness can turn into decision making that leads to hopefulness; uncertainty can be replaced with certainty; learning occurs where the past is prologue for a future; advisers help others discover their strengths.

The solution to overcoming Silver Bullets is not another quick fix, but a thoughtful commitment to the process of change which requires divergence and convergence, independence and collaboration; sharing and co creating; listening and acting; and savouring uncertainty to find certainty.

This messy process of discovering simplicity on the other side of complexity requires new ways to question, think, act, experiment, reflect and learn.

Steve, thanks for sharing your journey and turning your insights into our experiences.

Explanations exist; they have existed for all time; there is always a well-known solution to every human problem — neat, plausible, and wrong.

H. L. Mencken, 1920[1]

1. Prejudices: Second Series by H. L. Mencken, Chapter 4: The Divine Afflatus, Borzoi: Alfred A. Knopf, New York: 1920

A Wee Preamble to Set the Scene

Once upon a time, there was a CEO responsible for the European division of a large global managed services company. Let's call him Sergio. In post for a few years, Sergio was wrestling with a challenge: in an organisation of several thousand people spread across multiple countries, profitability was not as high as it should be. Various parts of the business were not as efficient as he thought they could be and key to that was how the different country operations were led and managed, reflecting their local culture, rather than 'one company culture'.

So, he had a plan. A cunning plan. A two-step Silver Bullet to bring his organisation together. What if he a) stripped out a load of people (saving money and setting the stage for culture change), and b) set expectations for 'one way of working' across Europe?

Luckily, Sergio latched on to an approach to working with culture that would lead to a set of 'simple rules' that could be rolled out across the business and be the basis for how everyone worked, regardless of intercultural differences. These rules would transcend *values* and be focused specifically on the *behaviours* that they wanted to see more of. He got his HR and Organisation Development people on board. An external consultant came in, worked with a large group of senior leaders across Europe and they co-designed new simple rules that were to apply to everyone. They made a lot of sense on paper:

1. *Be clear about what you can and can't do in time.*
2. *Suggest a solution with every problem.*
3. *Celebrate success and excellence.*
4. *Invite the opinions and ideas of others.*

These were to inform how people operated and acted from now on – at all levels of the organisation. The vision was clear and outlined in a company communication: "One goal. One team. One set of 'simple rules', designed to respond to a business environment [that] continues to change."

Sounds great, doesn't it? Four rules rolled up into one 'code', an intervention and solution to a complex challenge that was going to change organisational culture. It was uniform across countries and set out to achieve consistency regardless of differences. Yet as I reflect on this now, I notice my own cynicism and despair at the language and wonder how those on the end of

this intervention must have felt. Actually, based on what transpired next, I think I know.

Reality bites back

Some months later, the redundancies and restructuring were done, and the pan-European leadership team assembled at a swanky airport hotel for a leadership retreat. The retreat's agenda included a session run by two external facilitators. Both were qualified in the methodology the client had used to arrive at the Simple Rules and were invited to run a two-and-a-half-hour session, to reinforce the messaging and extrapolate how things were going.

Enter reality stage left, wearing large hob-nailed boots. Reality can take many forms. Sometimes, it is external factors, e.g. the economy, regulation, COVID, etc. Even when it is, these then unfold at a human level, as those within organisations try and make sense of things and seek a suitable and meaningful response. That in turn unfolds at the level of people, culture and in groups, which is what happened here.

The facilitators quickly noticed something was amiss in the group. Participation was patchy and reeked of polite compliance. Part way through, the clients (the CEO and Heads of OD[2] (Organisation Development) and HR (Human Resources)) were smiling, nodding and indicating they thought it was going well. The facilitators were reassured but something niggled. As the session progressed, many of the sixty-odd people in the room seemed unwilling to be open, honest and truthful about what they were thinking and feeling.

At the end of the workshop, Sergio was pleased and appreciative, and the participants seemed mostly positive. The facilitators left, relatively satisfied if a little baffled by what they had experienced. Three weeks later, the evaluation data revealed that the session had left many people dissatisfied and, in no uncertain terms, they trashed the facilitators.

Which was rather disappointing, as I was one of them.

It is entirely possible we were awful and ran a poorly designed session, yet the client feedback in the room was positive to a design they approved. Feedback from the (previously happy) Head of Organisation Development was along the

2. Whenever I say 'OD' I am referring to Organisation Development rather than Organisation Design. If I am referring to the latter I will do so explicitly

lines of 'nice people but we don't want to work with you again'. Three months after the workshop, Sergio suddenly left his role as CEO.

How can we explain it? Culturally we appear to have an unhealthy attachment, nay obsession, with quotes from old – and predominantly white – men, dead or alive. You probably know that Peter Drucker quote that has become a meme on LinkedIn and elsewhere, that 'Culture eats strategy for breakfast' – which he never actually said by the way,[3] but hey, never let that get in the way of oversimplification and making the complex a little less uncomfortable. Well, in this case Culture lurked in the shadows, licked its lips then lumbered out and tore Strategy into small and very bloody pieces. I think it took part of my left leg as well and evoked my own sense of shame and fragility as a consultant.

3. One of the things that fuels a sense of shame for leaders – which will be unpacked more in Chapter 2 – is the fear that you must know everything. You don't, and nonetheless I will fill in the gaps where I can. These nuggets are only here to help you make sense of the narrative in the book. So …
Peter Drucker was an Austrian-born American management consultant, educator and author, who is possibly best known for the eponymous Global Forum that takes place each year, the theory of 'management by objectives' and this one, short quote. Useful as it is, it has the effect of turning culture into a 'thing', rather than something that has to be worked with and in, that is co-created by all. Making culture a thing means it is easier for consultants and experts to sell solutions to clients to 'fix it', denying the less conscious dynamics around individual and group needs.
As for the 'culture eats strategy for breakfast thing', he never said it, as the Drucker Institute website state in their 'Did Peter Drucker Say That' section (https://drucker.institute/did-peter-drucker-say-that/). What he *actually* said is more nuanced: "Culture – no matter how defined – is singularly persistent."

Why did I Write this Book and Who's it for?

My overarching goal here is to encourage more critical thinking, to consider that, maybe, reaching for the obvious or accepting the smooth and convincing sales patter of a pedlar of Silver Bullets may not be the best option. I also hope that, by focusing on both sides of the buyer/seller relationship, the reader will develop more empathy and simultaneously flex their muscles for independent thinking and acting with integrity.

This is a book for clients and those that seek to help them by selling solutions or consultancy. It invites the different players to stand in each other's shoes and, crucially, understand why they are behaving the way they are. It is imperative that each engage in inquiry and dialogue around how all parties are complicit in this functional and defensive collusion. Such collusion works because services are bought and sold, revenue is generated (and wasted), and there is anxiety that business models and revenue streams may need to evolve. There is fear also of a loss of rich pickings within a capitalist model of market managerialism which seeks to defend itself, while lurking beneath is the ultimate existential anxiety of our mortality. To explore why we are smitten by Silver Bullets requires us to delve into our psyche and ways of relating.

If you are a client reading this: yes, it is important you read the chapter on consultant practice and ethics, because you need to get in their heads a bit.

Equally, consultants and practitioners of every sort, experts and gurus: it behoves you to go beyond a superficial understanding of 'client need' and get into the mush more, even when that means looking in the mirror and seeing you may not be as ethical or effective as you thought you were.

To that end, unless I say otherwise, the 'you' I address is anyone engaged in the buying and selling of Silver Bullets. If I am talking specifically to, say, the client, I will make that clear.

This book, ultimately, is an attempt to bridge the gap between logic and irrationality.

A brief word on stupidity

There is a risk in writing this book that you are left with the impression that I come from a place of pure judgement, that those of us who embark on quests for simple answers or quick fixes are there to be pitied or looked down on. Far from it. I recognise in myself the temptation – even desire – for someone or something to reduce the anxiety I sometimes feel when faced with things I cannot control.

Mats Alvesson and André Spicer, both academics specialising in organisational behaviour, and interested in "why smart people buy into stupid ideas" (2016: 8) coined the term 'functional stupidity' in their book *The Stupidity Paradox* (2016), which is "the inclination to reduce one's scope of thinking and focus on the narrow, technical aspects of the job" (ibid.: 9). The three tell-tale signs of this phenomenon are (ibid.: 78):

- Not thinking about your assumptions (reflexivity)
- Not asking why you are doing something (justification)
- Not considering the consequences or wider meaning of your actions (substantive reasoning)

What follows resonates with these ideas and seeks to go deeper in an attempt to understand how it is we seem particularly susceptible to Silver Bullets, and why we seem to find it hard to engage in thinking that is both the antithesis to functional stupidity and would go a long way to disrupting the market for fads, quick fixes and simplistic solutions.

What's on the menu

Introduction looks at the origins of the Silver Bullet alongside how and why the idea has infiltrated organisations and the work of consultants.

Chapter 1 explores in more detail what, exactly, a Silver Bullet is in the context of organisational change.

Chapter 2 explores the psychological roots of the anxiety that drives the need for certainty, and in turn for simple solutions and quick fixes to alleviate that discomfort.

Chapter 3 considers whether those of us that sell, design and deliver leadership development are really doing our jobs, given how prone our clients seem to be,

still, to look for simple solutions to complex problems. Further, it questions whether 'leadership development' is actually part of the problem, both in terms of how it is understood and delivered.

Chapter 4 looks at the institutions that have been a fertile breeding ground for Silver Bullets over the past seventy odd years: business schools and institutes offering Executive Education. While acknowledging they have a useful role to play, it suggests that there is a co-dependent relationship that can often fuel anxiety.

Chapter 5 shifts the spotlight to gurus, thought leaders and experts who either explicitly cultivate a profile that leans into the idea they have Silver Bullets, or equally end up, through no fault of their own, having the mantle of saviour foisted upon them because their clients are so desperate for someone to have 'The Answer'.

Chapter 6 examines how theories and methodologies end up as Silver Bullets, and how the complex and contradictory data that might make them less attractive is edited out, ignored or quietly forgotten.

Chapter 7 swerves back towards institutions that are in many ways the most powerful and influential when it comes to Silver Bullet narratives: the big global consultancies and professional service firms. It considers both their utility and culpability.

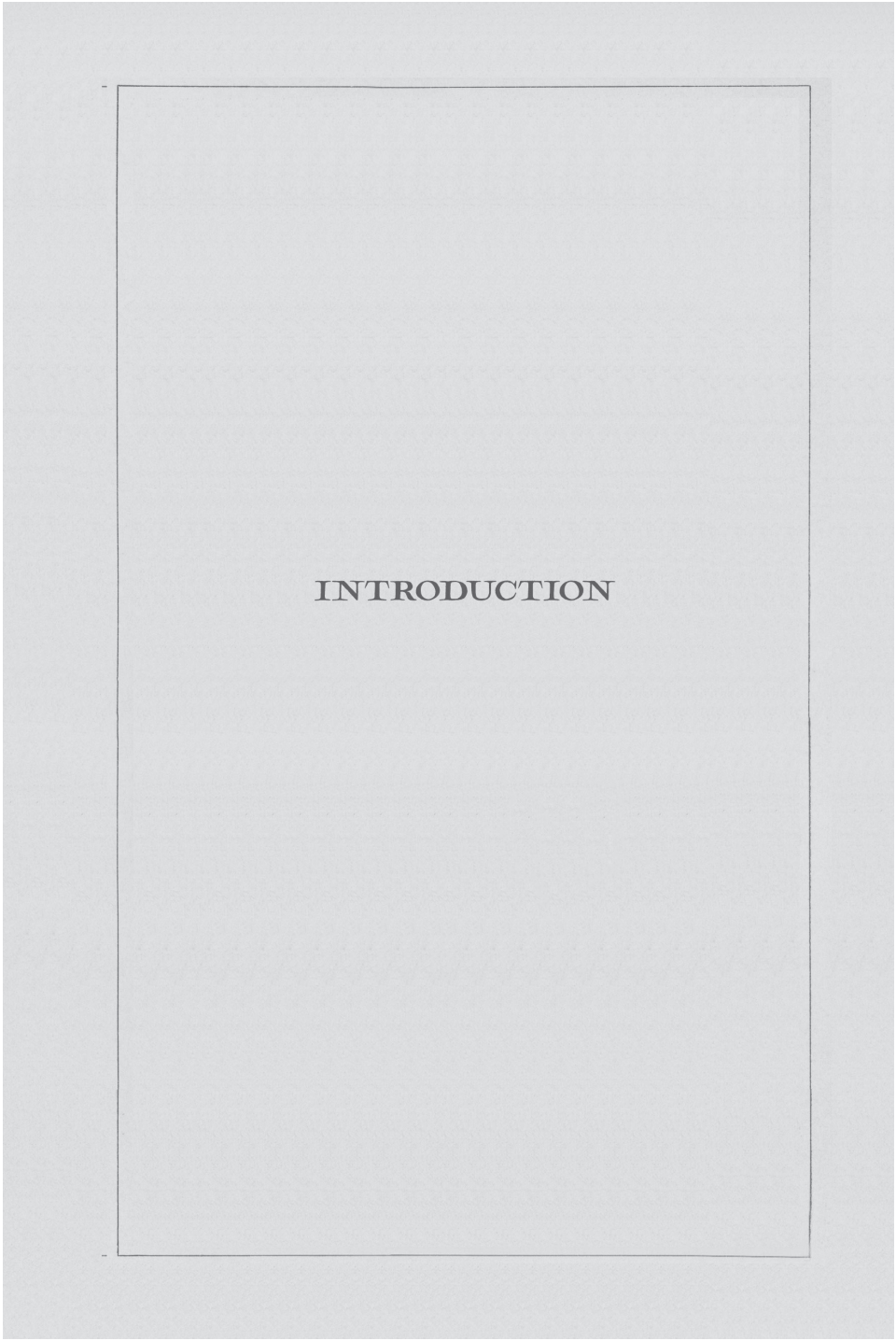
Chapter 8 builds on this, exploring consulting practice in more detail, considering the ethics and competency of consultants themselves rather than the firms they work for. It suggests that they have a key role to play in either perpetuating the myth of the Silver Bullet or supporting their clients to make more informed choices.

Chapter 9 looks at another set of players in the landscape of Silver Bullets, namely the 'fields of practice': HR, Change, Organisation Development, Organisation Design and more. While they have a role to play in creating communities of practice, this chapter argues that they also are complicit in maintaining the idea that Silver Bullets exist, in no small part through the need to protect their own identities, income and existence.

Chapter 10 focuses on a series of case studies that draw the threads of the preceding chapters together, illustrating how the pattern of functional collusion is pervasive, and largely hidden.

Finally **Chapter 11** considers what one might do in the absence of Silver Bullets. No easy answers or quick fixes are offered; some useful starting points are.

Throughout, commentary from over thirty semi-structured interviews with clients, consultants, thinkers and academics is woven in to deepen the narrative.



Introduction

The Mythology of Silver Bullets

Silver Bullets have their origins in fairy stories, passed down via oral tradition and captured by the Brothers Grimm (Grimm & Grimm: 1812) in the tale of 'Two Brothers'. Here a bullet-proof witch is finally killed by being shot with silver buttons. Watch any werewolf movie from the past fifty years and it is likely that the protagonist will scrabble for the single silver bullet they have just dropped, loading into the chamber of their gun in the nick of time, and dispatching said monster. Like the Lone Ranger, riding in on a white stallion with a belt full of silver bullets for every baddy, this is a well-used and recognisable narrative.

Like most mythology, the problem is that it breaks down as soon as you examine it with anything approaching logic or reason. Even if werewolves were real, manufacturing and firing silver bullets is expensive and problematic. You can certainly find people experimenting with the process, and videos of how to do it, but it is not a simple task: as silver is lighter than lead, you would have to mix it into an alloy, there might be gun barrel pressure issues, and so on. In short, the simplicity of the myth, much like the simplicity of the four Simple Rules earlier, is a myth in and of itself.

Even the mythical figure of the Lone Ranger begins to tarnish upon closer inspection. Notice how Tonto has been written out of the story, so it fits better with the notion of 'Leader as Hero'. Similarly, the narrative of the charismatic leader or consultant who will singlehandedly save an organisation's culture conveniently ignores the many helping hands required along the way.

The Silver Bullet became a metaphor for a guaranteed solution to an apparently intractable problem. A Google News search[4] for the phrase in October 2023 for 'there is no silver bullet', demonstrates how far it has penetrated modern discourse by returning nigh on 500,000 results, revealing for example that there is no Silver Bullet for:

- reputational risk: 'Why there is no silver bullet for Qantas' reputational crisis' – Smart Company, 27-09-2023;

4. A search of academic articles on one of the research portals reveals the same, with over 20,000 papers with the term 'Silver Bullet' in the title alone.

- hiring staff: 'There Is No Silver Bullet For Hiring, But These 5 Principles Can Help Improve Your Odds' – Forbes, 16-03-2023;
- carbon-free energy: 'There's no silver bullet to carbon-free energy but hydrogen could be part of the solution', The House 26-03-2023;
- war: 'There's no silver bullet for Ukraine against Russia' – Times of India, 22-03-2023;
- migration: 'Suella Braverman warns there is no 'silver bullet' to solve Channel migrant crisis' – The Daily Mail, 14-11-2022.

COVID, climate change, health, transport, alcohol consumption, football, Brexit, crime, shark attacks, flooding, farming, education, poverty, gambling, porn filters, gender pay gaps, government policy, racism … You can find a story for each about the absence of Silver Bullets, a recognition that easy answers are hard to find for complex problems. Either explicitly or implicitly, many are leadership challenges. The problem is, the myth that Silver Bullets are real seems to pervade organisations, and the people in the middle of that are leaders and by extension their employees.

Here we run the risk of stepping into the dichotomous leader vs manager quagmire, which I'll come back to in Chapter 3, and for now let's assume that *both* will have a challenge along the lines suggested above. For you will never find the perfect solution, only the one that is the best fit based on your understanding of the situation and the assumptions you are making. What happens next will be a function of your willingness to experiment and learn through doing, with no guarantees. Because what you face as leaders or managers may seem big, hairy, scary and coming at you with teeth bared, but unlike a lupine threat, your challenges will not be felled by a Silver Bullet.

But … but … the Lone Ranger!

> "There is no silver bullet, but sometimes there is a Lone Ranger." — Gerald Weinberg (1994: 1, in Highsmith, 2013: 179)

Even when we accept there may be no Silver Bullet, the temptation is still to hope that a handsome, Stetson-wearing hero may, Lone Ranger style, ride to our rescue. Weinberg acknowledges the lack of a Silver Bullet, but Highsmith reframes this by noting that these Lone Rangers may have "arsenals of bullets for different situations" (ibid.); and the hard part for most managers lies in "understanding the different types of bullets and the situations in which each is most likely to succeed" (ibid.).

We love a good story, not just writing them, but also telling and then re-writing and re-telling. In that process, what gets omitted or edited out? For example, a word of warning from a client of mine that sharpens this:

> "Organisations are people and people are complex things and there is never one thing that fixes everything. Even the term: the use of the word 'bullet' implies you are going to cause harm."[5]

At the outset, notice that the idea of a Silver Bullet in and of itself implies the death of someone or something, if it is to work. In my own career, both as an employee and then as a consultant, I have seen multiple examples of this, including the classic move of bringing in consultants to solve a problem because the belief is that the skills and knowledge did not exist in-house; inspirational speakers wheeled in to inspire and fill a void; the elevation of a model or methodology because *if you just follow it* then everything will be OK … and so on. In many instances, there has been an unnecessary human cost. That is worth holding in mind as you read on.

And yet the allure of Silver Bullets is strong …

> "Often people want a Silver Bullet – to be able to take a successful initiative from one place and replicate it in their own. In reality, this rarely works. It is like breaking off the tip of an iceberg and trying to get it to float somewhere else, without the structure below that underpins it. That is because the real change is not the new initiative per se, but the learning and consequent transformation of people, relationships and systems which gave rise to the particular initiative." Celia Carrington (in Mezey, 2023)[6]

This book is an exploration of the phenomenon of seeking Silver Bullets for complex problems, an attempt to reveal our psychological desires for them, the damaging patterns that result and what we might do about them. For clarity, by 'complex' I am thinking of the kind of challenge Professor Emeritus at Warwick University, Keith Grint, uses to define his particular understanding of a Wicked Problem, i.e. "more complex, rather than just complicated – that is, it cannot be removed from its environment, solved, and returned without affecting the environment. Moreover, there is no clear relationship between cause and effect.

5. Interview 20th May 2020
6. https://matthewkalmanmezey.substack.com/p/the-possibility-of-autonomous-buurtzorg

Such problems are often intractable" (Grint, 2008: 12). It might also fall within the domains of what consultant and founder of the Cynefin Company, Dave Snowden terms either Complex or Chaotic challenges (Snowden & Boon: 2007) or Heifetz and Laurie's (1997) Adaptive Challenge. Regardless of your preferred definition, while many believe they have The Answer, this book argues these simple solutions and quick fixes do not exist.

Perhaps you are a manager or a leader, or maybe hope to be one someday. The challenges you will face are many and varied, all of them requiring a response of some sort from you. Much will be expected of and projected on to you, and if you search against the term 'look to leaders for' the results are revealing of just how much we expect, including but not limited to what behaviour, customs, attitudes and ways of communicating are acceptable; guidance, security, direction and stability; and the almost messianic notion that we look to them for notions of what is 'good'. The modern malaise of leadership and leading is that we are still addicted to the crack cocaine of heroic leadership, more of which in Chapter 3.

One key thing we need our leaders to do is make decisions, that is why they are paid so much, isn't it? You may be faced with the disruption wrought by COVID. Perhaps technological advancements mean that you need to rapidly move to becoming more digital, or to digitise or digitalise your business (and to know the difference). Maybe your competitors are innovating their socks off and you need to become more fleet of foot in response; customers are demanding more sophisticated products and services; your efficiency is plummeting and shareholders are twitchy; you are struggling to retain your young talent and are looking at the possibility of an ageing workforce without the ability to recruit for the long term; your workforce is increasingly monochrome in appearance and/or thinking, and on and on it goes …

Maybe you are even beginning to suffer from 'Silver Bullet Syndrome', which Techwalla describes as "the belief that the next big change in tools, resources or procedures will miraculously or magically solve all of an organisation's problems. This assumption is almost invariably erroneous."[7]

What … do … you … do? Well, that's easy, because there are plenty of people who say they have The Answer, The Fix, The Solution, The Cure. If you look long enough, you can find that magical Silver Bullet that will take the pain away

7. https://www.techwalla.com/articles/what-is-silver-bullet-syndrome

and make addressing the challenge if not easy, then certainly less troublesome.

If someone told you it would do that, it must be true, and there are plenty of places offering Silver Bullets, in one form or another. Business schools, large consultancies, small consultancies, thought leaders, gurus and experts. If that is not enough, you can find purveyors and pedlars of methodologies and tools that promise, with varying degrees of certainty, to be The Answer. Failing that, go to one of the specialist practitioners of HR, Organisation Development, Change or Organisation Design who have their own communities of practice and bodies that represent them, offering a particular lens that tallies with their world view.

The expectation, maybe even incentive, is to offer as much certainty as possible, making whatever is proposed *seem* sensible, rational and, crucially, entirely realistic. You as the leader, after all, *want* to believe. So your pain points will have a light shone on them and the reasons for your anxieties will be mirrored back to you, with a few risks added in just to emphasise the acute need for the presenter's services. Finally, a recommended solution will be proffered up as the most logical and attractive available: the Silver Bullet to make it all go away. The right solution, though, is rarely obvious. Opinions may differ within the senior leadership team around what approach to take, complicating decision making further. Even if you can agree on the response and come up with a strategy, execution is a whole other ball game as the gap between theory and reality often results in a rude awakening. What looked so neat in a beautiful slide deck starts to unravel the further away it gets from the sanitised and hermetically sealed environment of the boardroom.

Confusion, anxiety, shame … let's dance!

Underneath all of this, one fundamental truth exists: Silver Bullets do not exist. There is no quick fix to complex challenges in human systems. The evidence for that statement is simple: if there were one answer, all leaders would be buying the same book or going to the same person or vying for the services of one consultancy. That is not happening, though, is it? Yes, you may have your go-to resources and people, and many are talented, helpful and knowledgeable. The problem is, they cannot *guarantee* success and what works in one context, at one moment in time, may not work in another.

What intrigues me is *why* we persist in believing there are simple solutions to complex problems. In recent years I have mulled ever more on this. I noticed

how clients would look to me for certainty, and the resultant discomfort when I chose not to collude with that.

For example, I lost out on one piece of work with an internationally renowned cultural institute for a leadership development programme because I all too accurately reflected back the dysfunction in the system and suggested an approach to working with that. Here the tensions revolved around the behaviour of the CEO, and in turn the way in which the narrative surrounding middle managers was evolving. My assessment was bang on, I was told, but the client selected another provider because they were not ready to deal with the main issue and wanted to start with the managers. Remember: I had been told my diagnosis of the situation was accurate. What was too anxiety-inducing was any real attempt to engage with the primary issue.

I noticed among fellow consultants and practitioners, and myself, a propensity to look to our favourite 'tools' and models, the approaches we believed worked. Sometimes that might mean an instrument and intervention being proposed because it meant we felt more comfortable and at ease, rather than exploring more deeply what might be required. To be clear, I still have my favoured lenses and approaches, the question is can I recognise when I may need to step into my own discomfort with not knowing what the best approach might be.

Ten years or so ago I developed an interest in undiscussables – those things that are left unsaid in organisations and groups. I became fascinated by them, not so much what is undiscussable, but why we find it hard to talk about some things in certain contexts. I interviewed various people and started a blog on what I learned. My fascination with this remained long after I closed the website.

This fuelled my interest in the relationship between certainty and anxiety, starting with myself. I wrestled for years with my fear of conflict and how I struggle to make and maintain contact in relationships when under pressure (not ideal for a consultant). As the son of an alcoholic this is probably my life work, and I have learned a lot from it. In no small part, my ability to read what is going on in groups below the level of conversation comes from years of being trained to read non-verbal signals around the family dinner table.

Alongside this, I had started to reflect on shame. Initially my own, and increasingly, as I became more comfortable with the territory, wondering how it might relate to what I experienced in my client work. How is it people seem to be able to identify the problem they are facing and what it might consist of,

yet struggle with the idea there may not be a guaranteed solution? Why is there such a strong narrative that we all, apparently, do not believe in mythical Silver Bullets yet simultaneously seek them out? And why are there an equal number of people colluding with that need, selling solutions, tools, methodologies and more that offer quick fixes and certain outcomes? It struck me that there was some kind of dance going on, one where buyers and sellers both know something does not exist yet collude *as if* it did. My confusion would sharpen when I moved from conversations that were grounded in acceptance that complex problems are inherently messy and there is no easy solution to them, to others where I was being asked to offer certainty; or others still when I was struck by the earnestness and absurdity as people discussed uncertainty with certainty that there was an answer. Like the emperor wearing no clothes in the Hans Christian Andersen fairy tale, to which I will return, I found myself the boy wondering why all the grown-ups were not willing to tell him.

As I began writing, therefore, I knew this was about Silver Bullets and certainty. What I had not done was make sense of the deeper psychological processes at play. The epiphany came via talking with Dr. Graham Curtis, formerly Director of Operations at Roffey Park Institute, and reading his PhD dissertation.

A lurking dynamic driving human behaviour

Curtis's work explores what he terms a 'functional collusion' that emerges in groups and communities, and by extension organisations. In essence he describes unconscious patterns of relating, and accompanying behaviour, that people engage in to avoid uncomfortable emotions. Prime among these is shame, as people collude in an attempt to be seen as competent. The functional element is that the collusion serves a purpose, namely to defend against anxiety. It is also functional in the sense that it happens through people acting in specific roles, in the context of this book these being the buyers and sellers of Silver Bullets, which often means senior leaders and the experts who cater to them.

While collusion has negative connotations, given it is seen as synonymous with conspiracy, Curtis is using it to specifically talk to how *a form* of collusion might have a function.

Here, collusion is integral to relating and relatedness, and is an ongoing and unfolding process that takes place over time and space. Functional collusion, Curtis suggests, might consist of two important factors.

1. Contextual history: this is key to understanding how collusion emerges and is maintained, and does so without any explicit planning or discussion between those involved.

2. Absence of discussion: the collusive patterns result in a disabling of conversations, further burying what is really going on.

Thus "functional collusion is a social phenomenon in which patterns of relating emerge over time as interdependent people interact with one another to maintain their ways of being together" (Curtis, 2018: 86). How these patterns arise connected deeply with what I had been observing and reflecting on in my own research. Curtis argues that it is as people seek to avoid the discomfort of emotions such as shame that the collusion arises, and in turn maintain existing power dynamics. He then links this directly to the notion of undiscussables, suggesting that patterns of collusion emerge *without discussion* and *between* people: this is a co-creation. That dance between buyers and sellers of Silver Bullets, where no one really admits they do not exist? This was it.

The question that then arises in Curtis's work is what it takes to discuss these, and that is a thread that runs through this book, culminating in Chapter 11. The decision as to whether to make the undiscussable discussable becomes one that is highly context dependent, relies on both the practical and relational skills of those involved, and the ethical judgements they choose to make – or not make.

Without using the words Silver Bullet, Curtis makes the link to my own work: these dilemmas born of functional collusion "cannot be solved simply through the application of universal rules" (ibid: 2). He also makes the important point that nobody is at fault here, or as he terms it "there are no rogues deliberately setting out to fool everyone" (ibid: 7). What drives these patterns is a need to be seen as competent, and people collude unconsciously to achieve that. This is key, because it talks to how both buyers and sellers of Silver Bullets – both client and helping sides – need to maintain their ego ideals, i.e. that of the leader who 'makes the right decisions', or the consultant who 'has the answers'. So "participants are required to collude with one another in what they hold to be true and what they assume to know for them to go on relating together", in no small part due to the "anticipation of shame" (ibid: 6).

Curtis goes a long way to explaining the kind of mental gymnastics that go on in organisations and the minds of consultants/practitioners hired to help them,

whereby we're able to pretend we're changing things while working hard to keep them the same. It also talks to our comfort with not knowing. Dr Eliat Aram, the CEO of the Tavistock Institute of Human Relations, points out that "shame is an affect of not knowing" and is "related to feelings of inferiority" (2001: 10). She goes on to highlight how it is an affect that is triggered when "panicking around not knowing because we have learned to link not knowing with a sense of inferiority" (ibid.). This is key to understanding how functional collusion happens, particularly when it comes to Silver Bullets. What arises in us if we do not know what to do, or do not know what the answer is to a client's problem?

With this in mind I invite you to read on and consider where you and I might be engaging in functional collusion.

The challenges of being a 'modern' leader

"Good managers [and leaders I suggest] fail when they attempt to use silver bullet solutions to complex problems" (Highsmith, 2013: 179). Given that a leader's main challenge is "creating an organisation that can thrive and change, or at least be comfortable in change", according to Diana Wu David,[8]that creates tension. Wu David is a former *Financial Times* Executive, was a management consultant and is currently a lecturer on Columbia Business School's EMBA Global Asia. Twenty years ago, through the advent of Lean, Six Sigma and Deming inspired approaches to efficiency, leaders were encouraged to become experts at 'just in time'.[9] Wu David says, that leaders "got good at 'just in time' and are having to get used to 'just in case'." Leaders have "got used to focusing on whatever crisis is at hand and extrapolating on that, rather than looking beyond that" and seeing the bigger picture and context, says Wu David.

8. Interview 21st April 2020

9. Lean is a production method that grew out of Toyota's 1930s operating model, *The Toyota Way*. The term 'lean' was coined by John Krafcik in 1988 before James Womack and Daniel Jones refined it into a set of five key principles in 1996. There is a cultural context to Lean that is worth mentioning, as it grew out of Kaizen, a Japanese approach to continuous improvement that covers all functions and employees, top to bottom.
Six Sigma is a set of techniques and tools for process improvement that was created by engineers at Motorola in the 1980s and became more widely known as a result of its adoption by Jack Welch at GE in the 1990s. It had a foothold in manufacturing particularly.
Lean Six Sigma is the union of the two approaches, as they are complementary and ideas from both have been combined to create (another) methodology that is open to organisations who are looking to change.
W. Edwards Deming was an American engineer, statistician, professor, author, lecturer and management consultant whose thinking has been highly influential in the world of manufacturing and continuous improvement. His Plan-Do-Check-Act cycle is particularly well known.

This is not helped, suggests Dr Richard Claydon (Chief Cognitive Officer of EQ Lab), by the "the degree to which many executives are wedded to the complicated strategies, expensive frameworks, and outdated developmental methodologies, also favoured by business schools and big consultancies" (2023: 8). He goes on to point out the promises being made, and the inherent absurdity of that expectation, which reflects a central premise of my own arguments regarding the buying and selling of Silver Bullets.

My own experience, through observing myself and others in organisations, is that we reduce anxiety by 'doing', i.e. taking action. Silver Bullets meet that need, promising quick fixes while simultaneously leaders are under corporate, reputational and narcissistic/egoic pressures to be seen to be potent and capable. This often drives short termism and unintended consequences. These can never be fully prevented, but their negative impacts could be mitigated to some extent, or adjusted to, through reflection and ongoing monitoring.

This book seeks to explore these and other tensions, implicitly talking about different forms of knowing, being and doing that fundamentally challenge the dominance of the managerialist paradigm. In this book, I see learning as being about questioning the status quo, and I seek to offer an emancipatory ethic.

For many leaders, the reality is that you simply *do not* and *cannot know* what will work, yet the pressures and expectations, both those you place on yourself and what is projected onto you by others, have the potential to generate anxiety, fear, distress and other uncomfortable thoughts and feelings, as you wrestle with the reality of not knowing what, precisely, is the best course of action to pursue.

Functional collusion presents another challenge to exploring these tensions, in that it connects directly with shame. After all, those of us comfortable enough to talk about how our shame may be influencing our behaviour and decisions are few. There are inherent risks of being seen to make the 'wrong decision', of being exposed as a fraud or having your persona as an infallible leader challenged.

The ask, aside from addressing whatever you are facing organisationally, is to get more comfortable with not knowing the answer. One clue to how you act when faced with situations like this might be the COVID pandemic, which provided a global case study on how to respond to something that is a personal unknown and has no obvious answer. While the scale and magnitude of change and uncertainty may differ, the challenge is similar in terms of understanding how we as human beings respond to 'not knowing'. As we saw in the very

public responses of politicians and leaders across the planet, those that were able to work *with* and *in* a state of not knowing ended up appearing far more in touch with reality. They did not make promises they could not keep, and they were better able to respond to what was emerging in a rapidly changing crisis. To offer just two examples, compare Jacinda Ardern and Donald Trump. It's hard to find a bigger contrast in modern leadership than those two in humility, humanity, collaborative practice and the ability to *respond* rather than *react*. You can decide which leader is which in this comparison.

I leave you to draw your own conclusions, but merely ask that you use these circumstances and examples to make that judgement, rather than leaping to conclusions, which is where the armoury of Silver Bullets is often to be found.

If there is no Silver Bullet, then what's the point of doing anything?

Having burst your balloon (sorry about that), now let me move to the upside. For starters, if you can move away from an anxiety-driven need for certainty, then you are on the way to recognising that the answer to successful change lies in a willingness to conduct experiments and to learn from them. You will begin to become less dependent on various 'experts,' and to see them as collaborative partners rather than saviours.

Doing so will reveal a range of possibilities opening beyond the ones habitually reached for. Some will be old ideas rehashed but still relevant and useful, others may be re-frames and spins on what came before. Occasionally, *very* occasionally, you may stumble upon that rare thing: a genuinely novel, new and different 'Answer'.

Like unicorns, these are rare animals, very hard to find. They often turn out to be a horse with a glittery plastic horn strapped on its head rather than anything more fantastic. If you are lucky, it's a horse, because a fair few will probably be well-disguised donkeys. To be clear, donkeys have utility, but not when you are paying over the odds and are expecting a unicorn farting rainbows.[10] Of course this metaphor brings us back to the central problem: that unicorns are fairy tales, and we need to get beyond these in leadership, consulting and organisational theory to something closer to reality.

10. Hat tip to Olu Jenzen for this lovely turn of phrase.

This book *does not* give you easy answers or quick fixes. Nonetheless, it will suggest there are things you can do that might shift your experience so that you start to see different possibilities, begin to engage in more useful conversations and feel a lightening of the emotional load. Will all anxiety and stress evaporate through reading one book? Will you have got The Answer? Unlikely.

What I hope is that you will understand your own decision-making processes a bit better, get more comfortable with not knowing, and be ready to conduct an experiment or have a conversation that you would not have done before reading this book.

Postscript: that AI thing

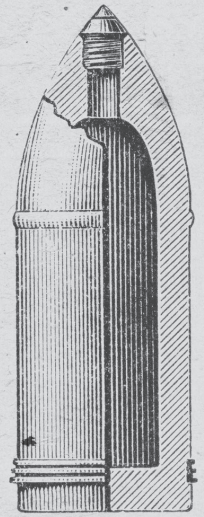
You will notice AI barely gets mentioned. Hardly anyone raised it in my research, and it is interesting what happens when you do an internet search on 'is AI a Silver Bullet?'. It becomes just one more 'tool' or 'thing' being weighed as a panacea for both organisational and wider societal problems, and found to be falling short. Rightly so, because on its own AI cannot 'fix' things like climate breakdown, culture, conflict, behaviour, organisational transformation and the panoply of complex challenges we face.

My own take on this is based on two observations. Firstly, my experience of trying to set up Lasting Power of Attorney for my mother with a UK bank that has removed *all* routes to talking to them other than a declining number of branches and one telephone line for complaints (if you search long and hard for it) suggests that the problem remains the people. The automated sections of the process worked reasonably well; it was the utter inability of the humans that remained to take responsibility and help join the dots that was the problem.

Which takes me to the second point. The logical solution may be to remove the remaining people and create a joined-up process run by AI. This is the scary scenario: one route to solving many complex challenges in organisations is simply to remove the people. If your challenge is in part or whole cultural, behavioural, to do with decision making or other areas where we display our collective capacity for dysfunction, then just swap out the nodes that are prone to that.

I am already hearing clients, colleagues and friends, from the Civil Service through to law, executive coaching and those in middle management roles in differing sectors, wondering if their days are numbered. Based on current

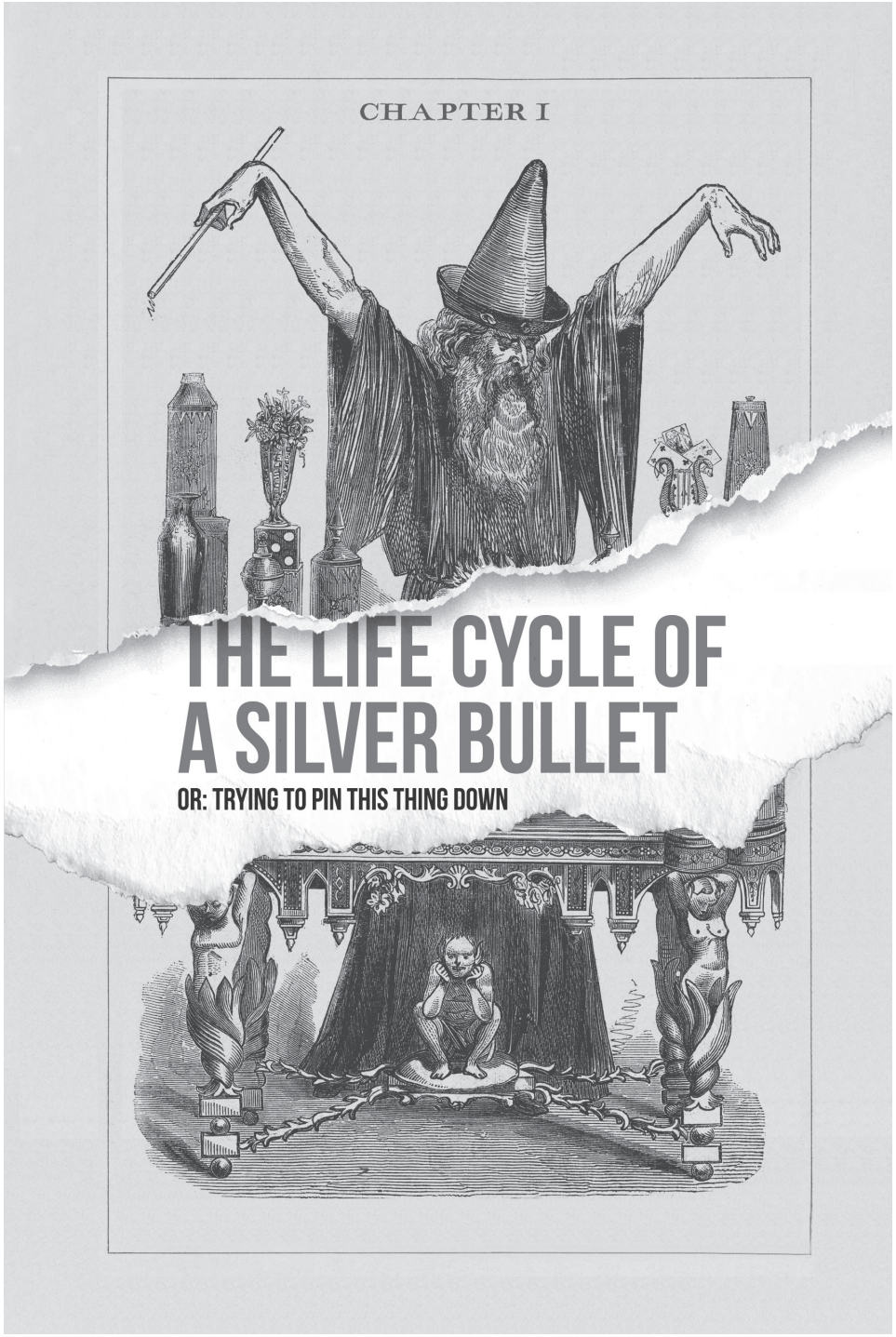
predictions by, amongst others, the International Monetary Fund, they are right to be worried: 60% of jobs in advanced economies are exposed to AI and half of these may be "negatively affected" – a euphemism if ever I heard one ('AI Will Transform the Global Economy. Let's Make Sure It Benefits Humanity', IMF.org 14-01-2024). Others are thinking and writing about the social, political and ethical issues around AI. As far as this book is concerned, add AI to the list of things that are no Silver Bullet, and read on.



SILVER BULLET NO. 9

REGURGITATED OLD IDEAS

Our approach is a three-step change model that looks nothing like all the other ones but in reality it still has three steps. They work because lots of people have them, but ours really is different. Honest.



Chapter 1:
The Life Cycle of a Silver Bullet

> "Models, methodologies, processes, or even consultants serve as psychological support for the denizens of corporate-land, much in the same way as teddy bears or security blankets provide three-year-olds with a sense of security that serves to facilitate emotional development." David Wastell (1996: 'The Fetish of Technique: Methodology as a Social Defence')

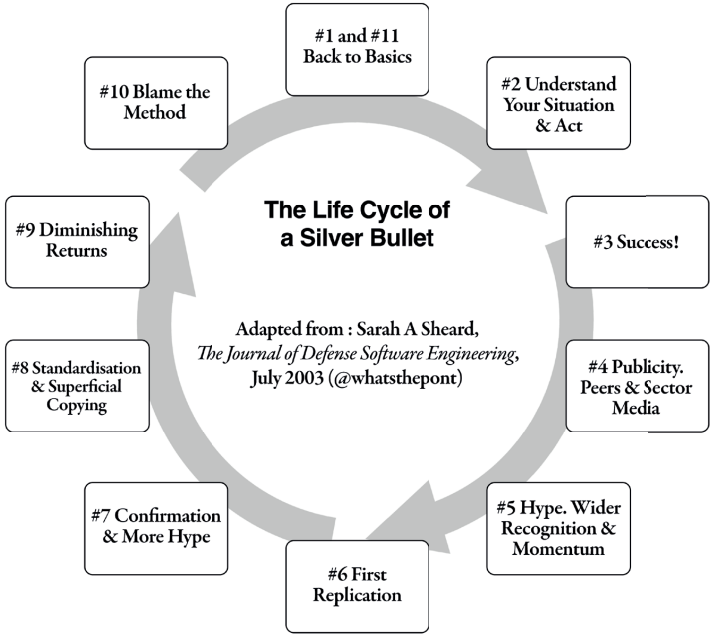
> "The Silver Bullet is based fundamentally on assumptions of command and control, of prediction, and response." Glenda Eoyang[11]

When I started research for this book, I was sure others would have already come to similar conclusions or made the same argument. In patches that was true and an early example was when several people who knew of my work sent me the link to a post by Chris Bolton, entitled 'The Lifecycle of a Silver Bullet'. His thinking, and that of fellow Welshman Matt Wyatt,[12] inform this chapter on the nature of Silver Bullets in organisational contexts.

I touched on the mythology of the Silver Bullet in the Introduction, and now we come to what that mythology looks like when transmogrified into solutions that offer guaranteed outcomes for organisations. 'Transmogrified' seems the right word here, because it means 'to transform in a surprising or magical manner', and Silver Bullets are nothing if not magical.

'The Life Cycle of a Silver Bullet' was the subject of a 2003 paper in *The Journal of Defense Software Engineering* written by Sarah A. Sheard, a researcher and consultant in software engineering. It neatly describes the trajectory that many Silver Bullets take, from inception to eventual decline and either death or ignominious neglect. Chris Bolton, a Welsh consultant and blogger, helpfully translated Sheard's paper into a graphic and accompanying explanation.[13]

11. Interview 5th May 2020
12. There is a coven of complexity thinkers in Wales who do interesting and useful work e.g. www.complexwales.com
13. https://whatsthepont.blog/2017/05/29/the-life-cycle-of-a-silver-bullet/



Stage #1 Back to Basics. This involves throwing out all of the existing Silver Bullets and having a good look at your organisation, because you really should know it better than people from outside.

Stage #2 Understand Your Situation & Act. The most important part. This involves a proper examination of what does and doesn't work for the organisation. Done by the people who are involved in the actual work, not external consultants. Managers listen (properly) and help to make good things happen.

Stage #3 Success. The organisation reaps the rewards of having people working at the jobs they understand and are good at.

Stage #4 Publicity. Peers and Sector Media. People start to notice good things happening and case studies and other reports start to emerge. I'm not against case studies, but beware. There is always a tendency to 're-imagine' what happened in getting from A to B, so that it all neatly fits together and looks like there was a glorious plan (Hindsight Bias).

Stage #5 Hype. Wider Recognition and Momentum. People start to pay attention now and look at how they might copy the recipe for success. This really helps if the original approach is given a name (say the Balle-Argentee Method, to add some Francophile elegance to the term 'Silver Bullet') and a 'model' created that you can easily draw on office flipcharts.

Stage #6 First Replication. Things haven't gone horribly wrong YET. The first people to replicate do a lot of work to understand why the Balle-Argentee Method works. They probably talk closely with the people who originally used it, and modify the process to suit their own circumstances.

Stage #7 Confirmation and More Hype. The First Replicators have success in using the method. This confirmation is all that is needed for the sector media and other commentators to 'cash in' and produce literature promoting the method. This is where the management consultant and others get involved offering to help organisations implement the Balle-Argentee Method. (Does any of this sound familiar yet?)

Stage #8 Standardisation and Superficial Copying. This is where things really start to go wrong. In a world of tight budgets, conflicting demands, initiative overload and dubious leadership, the people within organisations are forced to implement the Balle-Argentee Method. This will be fresh on the heels of the last improvement methodology that head office has sent down the line. Just to make things worse, it has been standardised and simplified by the Central Team so that anyone can understand it (this might get called 'designing out the idiot' in some organisations …).

Stage #9 Diminishing Returns. No surprise here. Staff resist having something else forced upon them and the Balle-Argentee Method fails to solve the problems of the organisation.

Stage #10 Blame the Method. The Balle-Argentee method is discredited. This is backed up by evidence from front-line delivery where staff complain that the method makes them do stupid things (this always helps in getting shot of something).

Stage #11 Start Afresh & Back to Basics. Someone sensible throws out the Balle-Argentee Method. They have a good look at their organisation, because they really should know it better than people from outside. And the whole cycle starts again, just like a Silver Boomerang.

This life cycle contains an erroneous assumption: that the unique is also universal. It shows up in the love that clients have for case studies, plus the willingness of purveyors of Silver Bullets to offer them. The gritty reality is we may not get the same nourishment from following the same recipe: therein lies the off-the-shelf smoke and mirrors of doctor-patient consultancy, rather than the self-awareness and self-efficacy of collaborative and process consulting to create bespoke, context-specific solutions. What other people did 'there and then' is of interest, but only insofar as it inspires or provokes us to notice what we might choose to do 'here and now'. The challenge this presents is that it requires you to resist the temptation to use – or provide – a case study, except by way of reflective practice for introspection and further self-awareness.

Management fads

> "In the face of sagging fortunes, companies become noticeably more willing to experiment with new ideas." Richard Pascale (1990: 18)

Management fads – those business ideas that periodically emerge, become popular and then lose credence over time – share key characteristics of Silver Bullets. Management theorist Richard Pascale documents fads from 1950 to 2000 in *Managing On The Edge* (1990). He covers everything from theory X/Y and management by objectives, through to value chains, quality circles, 'wellness', 'excellence', Kanban, one-minute managing and more. A fad for every day of the month, and all to varying degrees pedalled with certainty that, this time, we had 'the answer' to something challenging. As Pascale notes, with a sigh you can almost hear, "not surprisingly, ideas acquired with ease are discarded with ease" (ibid.: 20).

Some 'fads' are useful and offer value, even if they are not Silver Bullets e.g. if you explore the history of Total Quality Management (TQM) it morphs into Business Process Re-engineering (BPR), before Lean becomes all the rage, and then Six Sigma appears and Lean Six Sigma is the go-to approach. More of methodologies as Silver Bullets later in Chapter 6.

In a certain irony, given its propensity for being a channel through which many new ideas and fads are disseminated, the *Harvard Business Review* (HBR) in 2002 neatly offered a simple guide to spotting management fads, for they tend to be:

- simple
- prescriptive
- falsely encouraging
- one-size-fits-all
- easy to cut-and-paste
- in tune with the zeitgeist
- novel not radical
- legitimised by gurus and disciples

Silver Bullets, in other words. The question is what distinguishes these from thoughtful experimentation? I like Pascale's framing, when he suggests the difference is one of "commitment and follow through, *whether or not* the initial attempt is a success *or* a failure. When a new idea fails, we give up instead of investigating the causes of failure and addressing them systematically" (ibid.: 21). As we will see in Chapter 10, this 'giving up' can cost hundreds of millions of $, all because it is easier to write that off than investigate.

The Wizard of Oz Factor

> **OZ'S VOICE:** Do not arouse the wrath of the great and powerful Oz! I said come back tomorrow!
>
> **DOROTHY:** If you were really great and powerful you would keep your promises!
>
> **OZ'S VOICE:** Do you presume to criticise the Great Oz! You ungrateful creature! Think yourself lucky that I am giving you audience tomorrow instead of twenty years from now … The Great Oz has spoken. Oh … pay no attention to that man behind the curtain. The Great Oz has spoken.
> **DOROTHY:** Who are you?
>
> **OZ'S VOICE:** Well, I – I – I am the Great and Powerful – Wizard of Oz.
>
> **DOROTHY:** You are?
>
> **WIZARD:** Uhhhh …
>
> **DOROTHY:** I don't believe you!
>
> **WIZARD:** No, I'm afraid it's true. There's no other Wizard except me.

SCARECROW: You humbug!

LION: Yeah!

WIZARD: Yes-s-s – that … that's exactly so. I'm a humbug!

The Wizard of OZ (1939)

The truth is often far less impressive or neat when we finally see how things really are. Like Dorothy in *The Wizard of Oz*, the short man frantically pulling levers behind a curtain is an approximation of what really happens when Silver Bullets are devised.

Matt Wells, another of the community of complexity and change practitioners I found in Wales, commented on a blog that most Silver Bullets are the product of muddling through. This muddling through is then opportunistically monetised:

> "… they look back over what they did (which is never documented very well) and make up a perfectly plausible and rational explanation of the steps they took to succeed, as if they were there all along and followed from the beginning. They were not … they just don't really understand how they actually did the stuff themselves and kid themselves into believing their own hype." (Matt Wells, 22-05-2027 at 6:43 pm, comment on Chris Bolton, *Silver Bullet Syndrome and Richard Pascale's Management Fads,* on What's The Pont blog 14-05-2017)[14]

Believing in one's own hype, when you are in the business of selling Silver Bullets, is a good example of the logical fallacy of assuming that one thing caused another merely because the first thing preceded the other.[15]

I love this idea of muddling through because it is far closer to what really happens. To muddle through we need reflection and connection, and we cannot do it alone. This means paying attention to relationship and relating and working together. Silver Bullets offer an illusory way of bypassing and avoiding that work.

14. https://whatsthepont.blog/2017/05/14/silver-bullet-syndrome-and-richard-pascales-management-fads/
15. "Post hoc, ergo propter hoc" – "after this, therefore because of this" https://rationalwiki.org/wiki/Post_hoc,_ergo_propter_hoc

Just like the Wizard of Oz, behind the smooth consultancy offering snazzy slide decks stuffed with impressive models and graphs, things are messier and less functional than they'd have you believe. The Life Cycle of a Silver Bullet is in part sustained because we choose not to look behind the curtain and acknowledge the muddling. The 'expert' who is prepared to own their fallibility and imperfection is not as common as it could be, which is to our collective detriment.

How to dodge a Silver Bullet

In her paper, Sheard suggests that the morals of her story are as follows:

1. A sequence of steps, each consisting of decisions made for good reasons, does not necessarily lead to a good result.
2. For best results, start at Phase 1 and stop at Phase 3.
3. Only by really looking at your company's problems can you solve them. Other people's strategies worked for them because the strategies were made for them. If you want to make real improvements, you have to do the work of determining your business problems and applying methods that make sense to fix them.
4. Do not assume that people who claim to be using a method really are using it.
5. There is nothing like the original. Do not read everyone else's interpretation of a method, read the original. If possible, talk to the creator. Find out the principles behind the steps, so you can ensure your adaptation is consistent with the principles.
6. The ROIs of multiple improvement initiatives do not add up; they interfere. Focus on what problems you want to solve, and work out as executives how the initiatives contribute to solutions. Determine where the initiatives will appear as conflicting to the workers and reconcile them. Display a unified front to the workers.
7. Do not assume other companies' ROI numbers will apply to you. They started from a different place and made different investments.

These morals, I suggest, serve as a backdrop to what you will read in subsequent chapters, and reinforce Sheard's argument.

She goes on to offer guidance on how to avoid Silver Bullets, which Bolton (*The Life Cycle of a Silver Bullet,* on What's The Pont blog 29-05-2017) helpfully summarises as:

EVERYONE – Remember that methods are just a means to an end.

EXECUTIVES – Understand your organisation, and also understand the methods you are promoting and listen to messages from below.

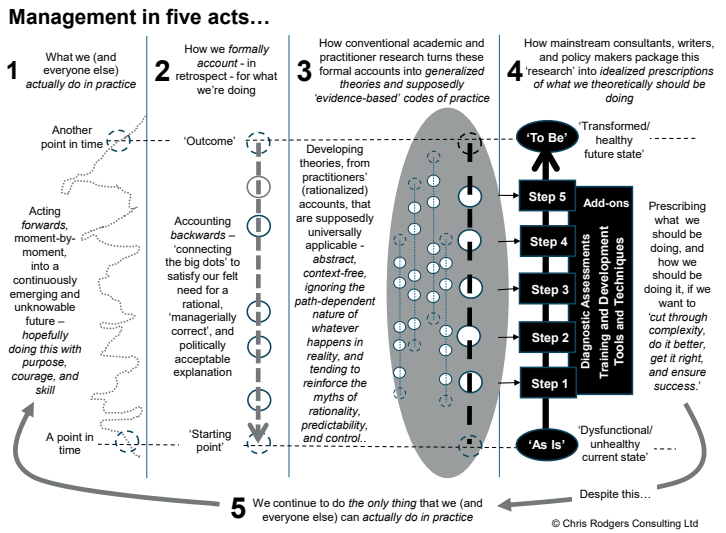
MANAGERS – Really need to understand the methods they are pushing.

PROCESS/POLICY STAFF – Push back if things don't look sensible, especially any targets imposed.

Finally, Sheard's 'big message' is that it is crucial to understand your own context and situation, and not rely on someone else's, which are a form of 'second generation Silver Bullet'. That is a leitmotif in this book.

Let's just pretend the world is a lot neater than it really is

Chris Rodgers, in *The Wiggly World of Organisation* (2021), simplified the Lifecycle of the Silver Bullet. Here we see how the messiness of organisational activity (Phase 1) is post-rationalised into a story that makes sense of our experience and edits out the uncomfortable elements (e.g. mistakes, pain, loss, failure, shame, etc.) into a more comfortable narrative for future storytelling (Phase 2). These neatened stories are further word smithed and polished by academics and practitioners into generalisable theories that, crucially, "reinforce the myths of rationality, predictability and control" (Phase 3 below). Lastly (Phase 4), we get the full transformation of the generalisable into idealised prescriptions and solutions that can be sold with certainty to clients who are looking for, well, certainty.



This is reminiscent of Wile E. Coyote from the Warner Brothers cartoons. Wile is a lovely example of leadership addicted to Silver Bullets. The coyote seemingly faces the same core problem again and again, namely, how to catch the roadrunner. However, he fails to acknowledge how circumstances are subtly changing over time. He endlessly goes back to Acme to buy different supposed solutions to his problem … and fails on each occasion, not because the instrument is faulty, but because he fails to attend to what is happening around him and prefers action to thought, as everything he does has to be done at speed.

In Rodgers' model we see more clearly the collusion that exists between all the parties involved, and how clients, in many ways, sow the seeds for them to be sold solutions that emanated from their own contexts and learning. There is a certain irony in clients being sold things they have, in essence, come up with themselves.

It also highlights how collusion has a function as a defence against anxiety (something we will explore more in Chapter 2) and is functional in the sense of being a workable and useful strategy/orientation, even if it cannot offer a guaranteed solution. Thus collusion can be simultaneously defensively functional and pragmatically dysfunctional.

Understanding the Lifecycle of a Silver Bullet is not enough

Firstly, if understanding the Lifecycle of a Silver Bullet was sufficient, then these ideas would have travelled far and wide and we would all be a lot less susceptible. Given the sheer number of people with a vested interest in maintaining the fiction, it should not be a surprise that a few lone voices are struggling to be heard.

Secondly, I am not convinced that there is a sufficiently deep understanding of either the psychology of Silver Bullets, or just how pervasive the functional collusion that sustains them is.

The rest of this book, therefore, is an attempt to peel the curtain away more fully, a little like the small dog in *The Wizard of Oz,* so that the fiction of Silver Bullets for complex organisational challenges can be seen more clearly. Maybe, at that point, there might be a little less easy acceptance of the bellowing macho voices, glamour, smoke and lights emanating from behind the curtain.

Reflective Questions

- What Silver Bullets have you picked up and sought to use – and how did that work out for you?
- Have you ever been bedazzled by the smoke and lightshow of a wizard? What will stop that happening again?
- Have you ever hired a Lone Ranger, or played that role with a client?
- What myths do you still believe in, even though part of you knows they are not really true?
- What management fads are you susceptible to?