Wucker, Michele – The Gray Rhino

St. Martin's Press, 2016, [Surrounding Knowledge] Grade ★ ★ ★

Language commends a powerful grip over the mind. That which we have no words for hides in the shade while an expression like for example the black swan as popularized by Nassim Taleb spurs discussion around the subject at hand. In this book the Chicago based journalist, author and opinion maker Michele Wucker launches the concept of a gray rhino as a highly probable and largely predictable, high-impact, yet willfully neglected threat. The question the book tries to answer is why decision makers often keep failing to address these obvious hazards until they turn into a full-blown imminent crisis. Wucker's aim with this book is to make people react earlier.

After two introductory chapters defining the gray rhino concept, presenting the general outline of the book and discussing the difficulty of forecasting the future, the book dedicates one chapter each to the stages of the below described framework before finishing of with a couple of concluding sections – including a side note on real rhinos. The framework describes a typical but unfortunate five-stage response to facing a gray rhino: 1) denial, 2) muddling, 3) diagnosis, 4) panic and 5) action. The response is unfortunate as it's too slow. Activities to handle the issue are only done when the threat is imminent and immediate, not earlier when it would have been much cheaper to do something. The gray rhinos that the author brings up are generally something out of the UNs Sustainable Development Goals or sometimes from the last financial crisis but the framework can clearly be applied to any crisis. The human capacity to procrastinate is universal.

In the first stage of the framework the delay, as I read Wucker, is mainly psychological and the threat simply isn't picked up due to individual biases or groupthink. Since the future is never set in stone the uncertainty gives an excuse to turn the other way. In the second stage the threat is recognized but then more social and institutional obstacles for actions come in play. Naysayers are disruptive for the efficiency of organizations as they walk in the opposite direction from everybody else and the cost of postponing something is in the future while the cost of action hits this year's budget.

Diagnosing the threat to know how to counter it might be necessary but the process could turn into a delaying tactic in itself. The success of handling the threat comes from the speed of recognizing and defining it plus in prioritizing and acting on the choices made. If the analyzing phase has taken too long leading to inaction, the next stage is panic – ironically leading to everyone freezing for a period before finally acting. The problem of acting while under stress is that the choices made tend to be less thought through.

The author's solution, which I think is a very wise one, is to create automated systems to aid in the handling of gray rhinos - a system that sends up progressively more red flags as the threat grows larger and that automates responses in accordance to procedures thought out in advance when everyone was in a calm and rational state of mind. Otherwise the general advice from the author is to set up processes and incentive systems to create the ability to think in long-term horizons.

The topic is interesting, I agree with the solutions although it isn't always easy to - from historical experiences - construct automated systems that will handle future events, but the book isn't as good as it should have been. Wucker never strongly motivates her framework to start with and the later chapters where the response stages are discussed contain tons of loosely connected stories that bounce back and forth – I lack a stringent story-line. If one removes the many case examples there are very little new generalizable detail in later chapters compared to the initial presentation. The presentation of this important topic, in my opinion, becomes superficial and jumbled.

Instead of focusing too much on unknown unknowns, we should try to handle the unknown knowns; what we should know but refuse to acknowledge. Wucker at least gives us a fair start.

Mats Larsson, January 03, 2018