

Most of us have heard the phrase “that’s only the tip of the iceberg.” It’s often used when a team is working to solve a thorny problem...used for describing that tip of the iceberg, you know, the 10% that’s probably a bit obvious but pretty much missing a key part or two of the full picture! The reason is, only about 10% of an iceberg is visible above the water line. And the part of the iceberg that may cause the real problems are under the surface of the water...invisible...the part we can’t easily see!

Today, we’re going to consider the idea of looking below the waters for the other 90% of the iceberg, specifically for supply chains! The other 90% may hold the key to issues that your enterprise may be missing. This approach is totally key: be sure to look at the full iceberg, both holistically and in its parts!

Let’s start with the big picture. Supply chains are often so complex that even the folks who consider themselves the top professionals in the field have many quite different ways to try to solve challenges and riddles. Yeah, supply chain pros work hard to try to differentiate themselves with clever slogans like “the *six types* of supply chain management” or “the *five steps* of supply chain management” or “the *four components* of supply chain management.” And they may be right! But, truly, any one approach is likely not very comprehensive. That’s because strong supply chains in a place like America require a whole lot of knowledge about many things: software, equipment, operations, innovation, flexibility, government regulation, costs, competition, marketing, economics, and change—well, the list we could build is huge, even bigger than that core list. And here’s the deal: pretty much every enterprise has a supply chain!

So the point is, in very key ways, many modern, complex supply chains can be a whole lot like icebergs, where people assume that the 10% they see or maybe even the, say, 30% that they discern pretty much tells enough of the story of what they need to address. You know, like where a person may try to deploy simplistic thinking like just ordering some more inventory from a wholesaler. But awareness has changed! A couple of key developments starting several years ago caused lots of businesspeople to realize afresh that supply chains are often more complex and possibly much more fragile than they had been thinking.

Like COVID and toilet paper. You mean that Walmart doesn’t just go harvest a bunch of cases of toilet paper from a toilet paper forest somewhere? No, creating and getting toilet paper to store shelves is an intricate process! Don’t think so? Then *you* personally go produce one roll of toilet paper from scratch in the next year! You see, it’s a major task just to create one roll of toilet paper from scratch!

Now we know that supply chains in a modern economy are intricate. Remember that jar of pickles that we rather unthinkingly take off a grocery store shelf? Who grew the cucumbers? Who provided the fertilizer? Who built the farmer’s tractor? Who made the tires for that tractor? What process and company and people forged the parts for that tractor? What processes moved the cucumbers to pickle status? Who provided the vinegar? For that matter, who made the glass jar? The metal lid? The label? The color dies for the writing on the label? What about the trucks shipping the pickles to the retail stores? How about all the workers involved...the managers...the refrigerators...the buildings...the roads...? Well, you get the idea! And what do consumers do? We’re in the grocery aisle, thinking that jar of pickles costs a dime too much! *That’s* the challenge for leaders working to create *and* sustain efficient supply chains.

Yes, it’s pretty easy for all of us to take complex supply chains for granted. So, let’s acknowledge that most all our supply chains have “90%-submerged” complexities that we need to fully understand and address—and do that before they become a problem. Look, this is beyond digital vs. non-digital...it’s about addressing the company’s processes holistically: every person, every task, every vendor relationship...how does each ultimately add value to the customer? So, let’s dive into some cool features about icebergs that can help convince us to sharpen our focus on the full 100% of our enterprises’ supply chains features.

First, supply chain composition. Icebergs are freshwater masses of ice, sometimes containing algae or sediment. Icebergs come in different “official” shapes, say, from *dome* to *wedge* to *tabular*, the latter tabular types typically breaking off a giant ice shelf in Antarctica.

Like iceberg structures, every supply chain is unique in composition and shape—and that’s often based on where and how it was formed. Just like the Antarctic area forms unique tabular-shaped icebergs, the supply chains in a place like America can and often do look appreciably different than the supply chains in, say, Nigeria or Australia or India...that’s due to real differences in infrastructure, business processes, legal issues, government involvement, cultures, and so on. So how about that international expansion your enterprise is considering...have supply chain approaches been fully researched, vetted, and crafted?

Second, shifting is critical. Icebergs always drift and create risks for ships...and winds and ocean currents can move icebergs to shorelines and cause *seabed gouging* of offshore installations like oil pipelines.

Likewise, with Amazon’s hybrid market shift to both a massive digital catalogue and porch-level deliveries, Jeff Bezos migrated from selling books online to fully challenging established bricks-and-mortar retail supply chain models. That meant companies overemphasizing just physical presence in a local mall were stunned that many customers quickly moved from picking up a gadget on their store shelf to picking it up on their porch after Amazon delivered it! Truthfully, Amazon challenged just about every job and process in a traditional retail model. Accordingly, many retailers had to shift their understanding to be far broader than simple physical inventory presence and clerks in bricks-and-mortar stores. Amazon forged a real-world type of seabed-gouging—in retail! Here’s the lesson: there are both winners and losers in shifting!

Third, fracturing due to outside forces. Icebergs fracture and melt due to superior forces—and those processes change the mass, surface area, volume, and stability of ice. And as icebergs fracture or melt, they can suddenly capsize.

Likewise, fully-digitally-enabled innovations can and do fracture vulnerable supply chains! Of course, Netflix blew away Blockbuster’s 9,000-store-location-based supply chain by mailing DVDs and then morphing that delivery into digitally streaming movies. Netflix CEO Reed Hastings challenged the people, processes, and buildings needed on a very detailed basis. Yes, Netflix created a completely new supply chain...and Blockbuster’s supply chain capsized! And how about the non-digital innovation that radically changed supply chains—the building of railroads that crisscrossed the nation. And how about FedEx?

Hey, *your* enterprise can be sitting there minding its own business when someone’s new supply chain innovation that considers a fuller picture significantly throws your business model for a loop. Vigilance is the key—great stewards must always be challenging the ever-changing nature of supply chains! But it’s not all downside! The opportunity is in taking the lead with the crafting, forging, and constant tweaking of supply chains. How about something close to home for serious Christians? In our era, Kingdom-focused ministries globalized, affordable travel and mobility exploded, and gospel programming used satellites and the internet...bringing eternal 1st-century capital-T truths via 21st-century supply chain tactics! Wow.

So, here’s a huge lesson from icebergs that all come and go. Great leaders constantly re-challenge *the full 100% of current supply chains*, where, like icebergs, they too can be deteriorating, drifting, and vulnerable to debilitating forces. But here’s the key: there’s no magic wand, no consultant’s trick, no 5-point foolproof instructions about how to survive, thrive, and drive supply chain leadership. Still, this much is *truly* true: don’t just look at the 10% that’s easy to see—*dig fully into the full 100%...then go beyond that!* Like Bezos and the team for Amazon. Like Hastings and the team for Netflix. Like Jesus and the team for the Kingdom.

A&A: Application & Action

1. Quick, for your workplace organization, name exactly what enterprise is the leader in your industry or service sector in supply-chain leadership? And exactly what is that enterprise doing better than all its competitors? (Is the leader your workplace?) Discuss.
2. Have you fully honed the actions you take in your role or position in your workplace to ensure that you are doing all you can to make your part of the full-100% supply chain work smoothly? If not, do you think your enterprise's attitudes and practices hamper you from doing so...and what can you do to change that? Discuss.
3. Do you think the American church is effective at effecting strong supply chain delivery of the gospel of the Kingdom of God? Domestically? Internationally? How about your local church? And how about you personally? Discuss.