**THE LAW OF REQUISITE VARIETY AND ITS ROLE IN MANAGEMENT**

Stuart A. Umpleby

Department of Management

George Washington University

Washington, DC 20052

The Law of Requisite Variety was described by Ross Ashby in 1952 in his book, *Design for a Brain*. The law says that the variety in a regulator must be at least as great as the variety in the system being regulated. This is a very general law. It describes regulatory activities by businesses, government agencies, machines and individuals. When combined with George A. Miller’s article, “The Magical Number 7 Plus or Minus 2,” it is easy to wonder how human beings manage to cope with an increasingly complex society. Although the channel capacity of a human being is quite limited, versatility in conceptualizations is impressive. When combined with organizations that use the capabilities of many people and machines, the great variety of conceptualizations that human beings are capable of have so far been adequate to cope with great complexity. This paper will describe four strategies for amplifying management capability by combining organization with several fundamental types of conceptualization. As an example the paper will discuss the regulation of a country of several hundred million people.

**Stuart Umpleby** is professor emeritus in the Department of Management and Director of the Research Program in Social and Organizational Learning in the School of Business at The George Washington University. He has taught courses in cross-cultural management, organizational behavior, process improvement methods, systems thinking, managing complex systems, philosophy of science and research methods.  He is a past president of the American Society for Cybernetics. He is currently serving as president of the Executive Committee of the International Academy for Systems and Cybernetic Sciences ([www.iascys.org](http://www.iascys.org)). The address of his website is [www.gwu.edu/~umpleby](http://www.gwu.edu/~umpleby).