

CHAPTER 18

Leadership for Change: How Did We Get There and Where Do We Go From Here?

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Leadership field was once characterised as “still water” by a prominent scholar in the field, the late Professor Jerry Hunt, my academic mentor (personal communication; see also Hunt, 1991)¹. We discussed how leadership thinking has evolved from scientific management theory with a managerialist perspective to various leader-centric models, such as leader traits, behavioural styles and leadership contingencies, all of which have been described over and over again across decades. The field seemed to be in a stalemate. As Boal and Hooijberg (2001) conclude: “little new theory was developed” (p. 515). A fundamental change in leadership views took place in the 1980s. Major societal and organisational changes and transformations were taking place, starting in the US: deregulation and internationalisation of major industries such as airline and banking, as well as mergers and acquisitions cut across major economic and societal sectors. Along with large organisational changes, the concept of *strategic leadership* was introduced. Leadership was no longer viewed as

1 Jerry Hunt was the external examiner of my dissertation in 1989 that focused on multi-level leadership change processes in the Finnish banking industry. Although having a mainstream approach to leadership, Jerry was a rebel in his time, challenging the status-quo and curious of new vistas of leadership. He supported my out-of-the box approach and invited me to work with him, first for a summer, then for an academic year 1992–93 at Texas Tech University. This was followed by many shorter meetings both in the USA and Finland. The conversation about the “still water” of leadership research took place sitting on a bench in a hallway of the business school: Jerry was originally going out and I was going in. We ended up talking the whole morning.

a supervisory function but as a more profound factor for organisational performance: Leadership matters, as the saying goes. The strategic nature of leadership was first emphasised by Hambrick and Mason (1984) in their Upper Echelon Theory, followed by an increased interest in the study of chief executives, top management teams and boards of directors (Daily & Schwenk, 1996; Finkelstein, Hambrick & Cannella, 2009; Hambrick, 1987). Charismatic (e.g. Conger & Kanungo, 1987; Shamir, House & Arthur, 1993), visionary and transformational leader theories (e.g. Bass, 1985; Bass & Avolio, 1994) were labelled as the “new leadership theory” (Bryman, 1992). Strong hierarchical leader-centricity continued to characterise the mostly North-American strategic leadership literature.

Beyond acknowledging the strategic importance of leadership at the top level, a broader organisational and environmental *context* was increasingly recognised to play a major role in understanding leadership as a phenomenon. Leadership in context has been addressed in several special issues of journals, such as *Human Relations* (Liden, Antonakis & Fairhurst, 2009), *Journal of World Business* (Steers, Sanchez-Runde & Nardon, 2012) and *Leadership* (Schedlitzki, Case & Knights, 2017).

In leadership research, context is understood in various and distinctive ways. Although they advocate context and leadership differently, Fiedler’s (1967) early contingency model of leadership and House and Mitchell’s (1974) path-goal theory of leadership are both founded on Lewin’s (1947) system theoretical notion that human behaviour is contingent on context. While Fiedler suggests that leaders need to be fitted to situations according to their rather stable leadership styles, House and Mitchell argue that leaders need to adapt their style according to the situation. At the time, it was a breakthrough idea that leadership does not occur in a vacuum, but the context needs to be considered. This view is particularly furthered in cultural leadership research considering both global, national and organisational cultures (e.g. House, Hanges, Mansour, Dorfman & Gupta, 2004; Schein, 1990; Smith & Peterson, 1988).

Multi-level leadership approaches provide ways to address leadership in context as an organisation hierarchical issue (e.g. Chun, Yammarino, Dionne, Sosik & Moon, 2009; Hunt & Ropo, 1995) or as a dynamic interaction between individual, organisational and environmental levels

(Ropo, 1989). To advance relational interactions, Carter, DeChurch, Braun and Contractor (2015) offer a social network approach to leadership by emphasising complex, patterned relational processes that interact with the embedding social context. Uhl-Bien, Marion and McKelvey (2007) introduced a complexity theory of leadership around the idea of complex adaptive systems (CAS) emphasising the constant flux of living systems (see also Hunt & Ropo, 2003). Uhl-Bien et al.'s framework suggests three entangled leadership "roles", as they call them: adaptive, administrative and enabling leadership. These "reflect a dynamic relationship between the bureaucratic, administrative functions of the organization and the emergent, informal dynamics of complex adaptive systems" (p. 298). CAS "refers to the nature of interactions and interdependencies among agents (people, ideas etc.), hierarchical divisions, organizations and environments" (p. 299). According to the authors, CAS and leadership are socially constructed. The complexity approach to leadership emphasises emerging processes in context and interactive dynamics. First and foremost, it stresses the distinction between leader and leadership. From this perspective, leading change in a complex world is a collective effort and takes place with and/or without formal leaders. Sutherland (2015) introduces the notion of leaderless leadership, claiming that, if there are no leaders it does not mean there is no leadership.

As the complexity of leadership contexts have grown, the foci and emphases in leadership and organising need to change: from rigid, hierarchical and leader-centric organising where the outcome spurs from top-down influence, division of labor and centralised control and performance measures, toward swift and flexible organising, where interaction, interdependency of multiple actors and ambiguity are the prominent features of organisational and social life. Along with this perspective, pluralist leadership theories (e.g. Denis, Langley & Sergi, 2012) where leadership functions are dispersed and mundane interactions are brought to the fore, have recently gained footage. Leadership is here conceived as practice (Carroll, Levy & Richmond, 2008; Crevani, Lindgren & Packendorff, 2010; Raelin, 2016) rather than as influence of the leader on followers. The leadership-as-practice perspective continues to maintain that relational and collective effort

is deeply rooted in context (for relational leadership approaches, see also Dachler & Hosking, 1995; Uhl-Bien, 2006; Uhl-Bien & Ospina, 2012). These post-heroic leadership theories provide ample ways to address the dynamism of a complex world and leading change.²

Comments on the LFC Framework and Suggestions for Future Study

This book develops and discusses a transdisciplinary framework for leading change in a complex world. First, it points out that contemporary change processes are complex and systemic. Second, it argues that issues and problems crossing traditional institutional boundaries cannot be resolved by a single actor or sector. Third, it shows that complex environments are marked by ambiguity and uncertainty. As general as the framework is, the overall starting point of the model follows the argumentation of recent developments in leadership research and broader social discussions in contemporary (western) society.

The proposed framework describes the complexities of the world as systemic, interconnected and unpredictable. In organisations and as a society we are confronted relentlessly with wicked problems that are unstructured and cut across all sectors of social life. The book presents a many-sided picture of the world in the midst of fundamental challenges, such as an aging population (Salminen, Chapter 5), pluralist beliefs and values

2 My collaboration with Jerry Hunt lasted about fifteen years and focused on multi-level leadership and complexity issues. These were methodologically based on qualitative, grounded theory-driven case studies that was all new to the field at the time. When I began to be interested in the constructionist approach and especially aesthetic epistemology in the early 2000s, we slowly drifted apart. There was the annual Academy of Management Meeting in Hawaii in 2005 where I had a PDW on the aesthetic leadership approach with a few colleagues. I recall Jerry saying: "I understand that something new needs to be developed in the field, and you guys may be on something, but DO NOT call it AESTHETICS". During the same meeting, another colleague said that the term "bodily" reminds him of bodily fluids, not of scholarly ways of knowing. These two utterances give a good indication of how deeply-rooted the positivist perspective of leadership was at the time – and continues to be.

(many chapters in this volume), digitalisation (Voutilainen and Koskinen, Chapter 17; Nieminen, Chapter 6), the unequal roles of rural and urban regions and ways of life (Heikkinen, Nieminen, Kujala, Mäkelä, Jokinen & Lehtonen, Chapter 2; Karppi & Vakkuri, Chapter 3), and in financial and political status (Juutinen, Chapter 16). If not addressed properly, these fundamental issues will eventually create problems in maintaining peace and security among nations and populations. Juntunen and Virta (Chapter 4) identify this context and step out from the traditional security logic by introducing resilience as an intersecting activity of various societal processes and policies.

Everything is interconnected. How to deal with the complexity of these problems? Who decides where to go, how are the problems framed, choices made and on which criteria outcomes are evaluated? From whose perspective and interests? To understand the complex change context, the book suggests a relational approach. It emphasises that multiple actors are needed to resolve these problems. Formal leaders are needed, but this is not enough. Everyone's input is important whether they be ordinary consumers or leaders in business or political life.

Kujala, Lehtimäki & Freeman (Chapter 7) emphasise a broad stakeholder perspective, while Yrjölä, Kuusela, Närvänen, Rintamäki and Saarijärvi (Chapter 8) point out customer-orientation in leading change. The latter approach leads us to ponder who are the customers in different situations and to what extent customer values are homogenous. Rannisto and Saloranta (Chapter 10) write about the importance of evaluating whether the direction of change follows the objectives. This warrants a consensus regarding the objectives of change as well as performance measurement (Rajala, Chapter 11). Both of these views can be challenged in a complex world.

In a democratic society, it is reasonable to assume that leadership in a complex world cannot reside in the hands of a few. This is also the view underlying the relational leadership perspective and pluralist leadership advocates. But how does this resemble the current situation in organisational, economic and political spheres? We live in a great divide of economic and political power regimes, technological innovations disrupting old industries and creating new ones, inequalities of human rights and living conditions. These developments create ambiguity, uncertainty and

tensions between people, organisations, institutions and societies. They can also create stagnation in political and organisational decision-making and defensive frontiers in society. The call for charismatic leaders, or saviors of the world, typically arises in times of crises and chaos. Every time in history such leaders have appeared, with or without credentials other than strong self-reliance and self-efficacy. With their (sometimes even toxic) charismatic and seductive leadership, they frame the world in simplistic terms and provide quasi-solutions to fix problems.

While being analytically well-grounded and credible, the elite's complexity framework of the world is founded on intellect and rational thinking, whereas the human experience of it is emotional and embodied. This is the fundamental challenge current scholarly theories face in trying to make sense of the societal and organisational complexities of problems. Acknowledging a different way of knowing could open up a new avenue to conceive leadership and change in a complex world. In addition to the

traditional way of developing knowledge through the intellect, knowing in and through the body by aesthetic senses, feelings and emotions, as well as memories and histories offers an alternative way to comprehend human and social life. Embodied ways of knowing and developing scholarly knowledge of social phenomena were originally introduced in gender studies, but also developed in aesthetic organisational theory literature (e.g. Strati, 1999). Recently, specific fields such as leadership have adopted embodiment and aesthetic notions to rethink old leadership questions (Ladkin, 2010) through an aesthetic and embodied lens (Hansen, Ropo & Sauer, 2007; Ladkin & Taylor, 2010;

Ropo & Salovaara, 2018; Ropo, Parviainen & Koivunen, 2002; Ropo, Sauer & Salovaara, 2013; Ropo, Salovaara, Sauer & De Paoli, 2015; Sinclair, 2005; Taylor & Hansen, 2005).

What embodied leadership for change in systemic, emerging processes would entail is worth exploring in the future development of the LFC framework. Listening to the narratives of various stakeholders, both

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ordinary people and those in positions of power, and providing fora for mediation between conflicting views might give genuine insights into the many ways the complex world is conceived and experienced.

The framework developed in this book, as well as many of the cases examined in the individual chapters, challenges the traditional view that changes are rationally planned and executed under the control of wise and competent leaders. Even if this was the case, the magnitude of the problems and their connectedness could not be solved by a small number of executives, no matter how wise they are. The LFC framework suggests, in contrast, that changes are emerging continuously and non-linearly. The world is on the move all the time, in different sectors of society and at different levels of organisations and institutions. The multi-level leadership approaches and complexity theory of leadership touched upon earlier might give some advice to structure and comprehend complex systemic change conceptually and practically. As Hunt and Ropo (2003) state: “Although abstract and complex in and of themselves, chaos and complexity theories provide the underlying notions for dynamic systems” (p. 316). They assert that complex dynamic systems cannot be represented by reductionism. Instead they need to be viewed as a holistic synergy; as more than the sum of its parts. Synergetic forces create an emerging order from self-organising interactions and resonances between the units in the system. Kaufman (1993) used the term “order is free” to point out that the order in dynamic systems is formed from the bottom up with no overriding central ordering force from above (Hunt & Ropo, 2003, p. 318).

Consequently, self-organising is a model that has been increasingly suggested as a way to lead change in a complex world. While introducing the perspective of systemic self-organising, Griffin (2002) links it with ethics in everyday social interaction, an issue that becomes central in leading change in a complex world. Another significant issue is the technology of communicating. Ten years ago, Shirky (2009) claimed that the tools of cooperating are not solely in the hands of governments and institutions. He explored how technology can empower social and political organisers. Martela and Jarenko (2017) go as far as to claim that self-organising is vital for organisational performance. However, they emphasise there are necessary conditions for self-organising to be successful: self-interested

actors, the possibility to use one's own core competence, knowledge sharing, and mechanism for preventing free-riding.

While considering dynamic change as emergent, a processual view needs to be adopted in the LFC framework. Recently, processual organisation research has been given great attention both in publications (e.g. Helin, Hernes, Hjorth & Holt, 2014; Langley, Smallman, Tsoukas & de Ven, 2013; Tsoukas & Chia, 2002) and in conferences (e.g. the Standing Work Group at the EGOS colloquium). In contrast to the traditional entitative view of process as an unfolding sequence of events or states, processual ontology is increasingly applied to grasp the “becoming” of phenomena where various agents are actively engaged in material-discursive practices. How to conceive, study, write about and practice a truly processual (Abdallah, Lusiani & Langley, 2018) perspective to leading change in a complex world would need to be seriously addressed to further develop the framework and its theoretical and practical relevance. Materiality and performativity have been introduced as central in process studies (e.g. Barad, 2003). The LFC framework might benefit from the insights of the “material turn” in organisation (Carlile, Nicolini, Langley & Tsoukas, 2013; Dale, 2005; Orlikowski & Scott, 2008) and leadership studies (Hawkins, 2015; Oborn, Barrett & Dawson, 2013; Pullen & Vachhani, 2013; Ropo et al., 2013). An important input to understand the sociomaterial nature of change is the “Wastebusters” (Närvänen, Mattila & Mesiranta, Chapter 14) project to reduce food waste.

In summary, the LFC framework developed in the contributions to this book provides the beginnings to conceive a world view that is systemic and overarching. *First*, it identifies some key characteristics of the changing contexts of human life. *Second*, it holds a positive undertone that state-of-the-art can be challenged and changed, be it power inequalities or challenges in reducing food waste. *Third*, no matter how conservative the notion is, it also makes the important observation that change calls for continuity. Leadership for change is about people, and people also need balance and continuity. The LFC framework introduced in this book provides ways of disturbing the “still water” of leadership by bringing transdisciplinary views to transcend, understand and lead in the complex and dynamic world.

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