

Journal of Change Management

Reframing Leadership and Organizational Practice

ISSN: (Print) (Online) Journal homepage: <https://www.tandfonline.com/loi/rjcm20>

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To cite this article: Lucia Crevani, Mary Uhl-Bien, Stewart Clegg & Rune Todnem By (2021) Changing Leadership in Changing Times II, Journal of Change Management, 21:2, 133-143, DOI: [10.1080/14697017.2021.1917489](https://doi.org/10.1080/14697017.2021.1917489)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/14697017.2021.1917489>



Published online: 27 Apr 2021.



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LEADING ARTICLE



Changing Leadership in Changing Times II

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MAD statement

This leading article aims at Making a Difference (MAD) by inspiring to engage in new conventions for leadership and organizational change at a time when there is an opening for new practices to emerge. The COVID-19 pandemic upended much of what we take for granted, making us more aware of the ambiguity and multiplicity of reality, of the need for collaboration, adaptation and resilience, and of the embodied and material dimension of work life.

Introduction

What has changed in our organizational lives in the past year? Everything and nothing. We now book Zoom meetings, check whether the borders are open in the rare case we travel, offices are often empty due to their health risk, and crisis management is an everyday experience, no longer something written in some document. At the same time, we still hold meetings as we always have, still produce strategies and plans, and still receive considerable advice as to how a heroic leader can save the day (see Sergi et al., 2021, in this issue). While the circumstances we currently experience may result in an opening for new practices to emerge (Uhl-Bien, 2021, in this issue) there is also a need for high-quality scholarship that engages with new conventions and their impact on organizations.

Following on from the first part of the special issue *Changing Leadership in Changing Times* (Alvehus, 2021; Beer, 2021; By, 2021; Clegg et al., 2021; Ford et al., 2021; Kempster & Jackson, 2021; Maak et al., 2021), this second part focuses primarily on leadership as a process, answering the call made by Rost (1993) decades ago to re-focus scholarship on leadership and change (see also, for similar early calls, Hosking & Morley, 1988). Articles in this issue help push forward new avenues for leadership scholarship and practice by challenging us to think primarily through the lens of complexity, plurality and relationality. All of the articles recognize leadership as a dispersed, complex, collaborative, collective and multimodal endeavour, including material elements. Taken together, they bring focus to the human element of leadership as a non-coercive relationship seeking mutual beneficial outcomes (see De Sousa & van Dierendonck, 2021, in this issue), something that is more complex and distributed than how leadership practice has traditionally been understood.

Changing Times

Our circumstances over the past year have not only been challenging and profoundly personal for many, they have also upended much of what we take for granted in an unprecedented way. Whether this will lead to renewal is an open question, but the ways in which leadership will be practiced after the pandemic will be crucial. Interestingly, we are all in some ways touched by the unsettling of much of how we have lived our lives, being put in a position where we need to take a stand on small, as well as large, issues of choice, obedience and acceptance. Governments around the world have asked, to a larger or smaller extent, their citizens to take personal responsibility for their actions in relation to the risk of spreading the virus. We can no longer just do what we have always done.

Consider something as trivial as the practice of going to and organizing conferences. The conference is central to academic life, as well as to the development of academic knowledge. Due to the need for maintaining physical distance, conferences have been postponed, moved to digital platforms or cancelled, and international air travel is no longer an option for those who attend from afar. Many readers will long for the day when they will be able to meet their colleagues from around the world in person and again feel the energy of a good conversation, as well as having the possibility of renewing friendships, making new acquaintances and meeting other researchers. For others, participating online is more convenient since it helps balance private and work life, has a lower environmental impact and is more accessible in terms of cost—while for those in disparate time zones its affordances are not so easy to accept.

When organizing a conference there are now different alternatives available. For organizers, this means adding other pressing issues to the possibility of whether in-person meetings will be feasible in the near future and whether an “old-style” conference will soon be possible. Whatever alternative will be chosen, some people will be included, and some excluded, in a more tangible way, given that now it is possible to have a conference in different ways. While just one trivial example, this shows the range of alternatives we now have to choose from and how matters of inclusion and exclusion may become more visible and tangible, as well as the different values and interests mobilized in making decisions. Leading organizational change will probably be affected by this new context in which multiplicity is, for better or worse, more clearly present.

We hope that the two special issues *Changing Leadership in Changing Times* provide a good ground to build on in order to take into consideration the distributed nature of leadership. The trivial example above also shows two specific ways in which the COVID-19 pandemic has unsettled organizational life relative to practicing leadership. The first is the eventfulness of organizations having to deal with uncertainty and ambiguity, while the second is the susceptibility of embodied and material work practices to exogenous events. Both have important consequences for leadership and change.

First, not only do we have too little information to predict what will happen next but, to paraphrase Annearie Mol (2002), the pandemic is multiple. We have learnt to deal with different—at times divergent—materializations of the pandemic. Experts from different fields have described different problems and different solutions in traditional and social media, aided by multiple types of graphical visualization. Intensive care units' images; statistics detailing the rate of beds still available in those units as well as of the deaths

they have suffered; schools closed around the world, each the occasion for multiple stories of children, parents and teachers; empty cities, empty streetcars, empty subways; online learning practices hastily acquired—or not; parodies of Zoom meetings on social media; frequent press conferences by authorities, experts and/or politicians managing the media if not the pandemic. These are just some of the ways in which the pandemic has materialized and there is no grand narrative that can neatly accommodate all of them. When providing leadership in organizations, initiatives or groups, we may now have more or less accepted that uncertainty and ambiguity cannot be resolved, that they need to be handled; that events cannot be predicted where and when they occur or with what global consequences. Insight related to resilience, collaboration and shared-power contexts in relation to leadership offer a fruitful ground on which to build. In this special issue, several of the articles contribute to this construction. What the authors show, in different ways, is the necessity of a shift from celebrating independence to appreciating and learning to work with interdependence when dealing with leadership and change (see also Crosby & Bryson, 2005; Dachler & Hosking, 1995; Fletcher, 2004; Uhl-Bien & Ospina, 2012).

The second unsettling of organizational life is the fact that we cannot meet physically to the same extent as previously: for many of us the organization in which we work has been disrupted as a place of interactions. For a large number of employees – including managers - remote work has become the new normal. This may have accelerated a trend that was already underway with increasing digitalization, or it may just be a parenthesis in the evolution of workplaces. In the past, we worked with our bodies and with others as well as with technology. For many occupations entailing ‘body-work’, however, working remotely is not an option. Presently, for digital workers other bodies, except those we share households with, are largely out of the picture—and if the work we do cannot be completed digitally, so are our employment opportunities endangered. Frustration, discomfort and burnout created by digital meetings, as well as the satisfaction that can also accompany digital work, have shown clearly that leadership is not just a matter of discourse. Interactions between people very much matter, both materially and socially.

Why is it so difficult to create the same energy and commitment in a digital meeting, and what can we do about it? There are still rather few answers other than to formalize meetings through a more rigid structure. Fields such as online learning may provide some inspiration (Vaughan et al., 2013), having dealt with the issue of creating a digital presence for some time. However, what needs to be taken into consideration is also how remote work through digitalization affects leadership processes and practices. We need to be humble about how much we still need to study. The body, the senses, energy, technology, presence make themselves noticeable when we meet digitally, but they are equally in need of more understanding when we meet physically. The difference is that we were not forced to pay attention to them to the same extent in the past. Several articles in this issue take material aspects into consideration, although not always theoretically foregrounding them (Bryson et al., 2021; Oliveira & Cunha, 2021; Sarkara & Clegg, 2021; Sergi et al., 2021; Uhl-Bien, 2021), and we hope that further contributions to the Journal will explore such issues in greater depth.

Changing Leadership

“Changing leadership” in the title of this special issue may be interpreted as a call for more studies exploring changing leadership practices but also as an invitation to engage as researchers in changing, not only criticizing, the way in which leadership is understood, studied, reported on and practiced. As described above, circumstances have made us more aware of the ambiguity and multiplicity of reality, of the need for collaboration, adaptation and resilience, and of the embodied and material dimension of work life, among other aspects. During the last decades, there have been different streams of research studying leadership as a process and practice that could provide interesting ground to build on in order to renew the way we do, and talk about, leadership (for instance, Barker, 2001; Carroll et al., 2008; Crevani et al., 2010; Cunliffe & Eriksen, 2011; Denis et al., 2012; Drath et al., 2008; Gronn, 2002; Hansen et al., 2007; Hosking, 1988; Küpers, 2013; Ospina & Foldy, 2010; Raelin, 2016; Ropo et al., 2015; Simpson et al., 2018; Spillane, 2012; Uhl-Bien et al., 2007). Although different labels have been applied, what these studies share is an interest in what Rost (1993) in *Leadership for the Twenty-First Century* called the essential nature of leadership, that is the focus on what leadership actually is: a process. These studies also share an understanding that “what happens” is distributed across several actors, including nonhuman ones, such as technology and place. Before introducing the articles in this special issue that in different ways approach Rost’s call to further develop our understanding of leadership, we want to extend the call for “changing leadership” to more scholars and practitioners interested in developing knowledge on leadership as a process, accomplished in relations and interactions that are both social and material, situated in places and spaces that are both constraining/enabling of leadership and change processes but that, at the same time, are re-produced as these processes unfold.

Overview of Articles

In this special issue, the reader will find some excellent examples of what scholarship aiming at developing new conventions has to offer by asking new questions and focusing attention on core aspects of the phenomenon of leadership that are still poorly understood. The issue gathers prominent scholars presenting some increasingly recognized approaches and theories that acknowledge what we have above labelled multiplicity, ambiguity, materiality and the emergent and relational nature of leadership. Leadership can thus be explored in terms of complexity, resilience, adaptation or as collective, processual, distributed, and servant. The authors contribute to reframing our understanding of leadership, in particular in relation to current societal challenges such as the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic, increasing threats to democracy, as well as the long-term issues related to grand challenges of inequality and climate change.

Mary Uhl-Bien’s (2021) article starts with an inviting reflection on the fact that the pandemic was predictable and that complexity offers sophisticated means to explore and understand the increasingly connected world in which we live. Still, leadership development programs do not yet prepare for complexity, that is they do not train or facilitate in enabling adaptive responses. Poor responses to the pandemic can thus be considered as examples of failing to work adaptively. In her article, Uhl-Bien combines generative emergence

(Lichtenstein, 2014) and complexity leadership theory (CLT) (Uhl-Bien et al., 2007) to propose a way of making sense of how certain things could change so quickly during the pandemic, such as the production of home-made masks to address PPE shortages, as a way of learning how to lead by adapting. CLT offers a systemic approach to change that happens through phases, in the interplay between what is called the entrepreneurial system (exploration) and the operational system (exploitation). Generative emergence is about actors actively striving to create a new order, driven by entrepreneurial passion. Uhl-Bien proposes that as a response to pressure on a system, agent(s) can activate entrepreneurial leadership, as the system is now open for innovation in a way it was not before; for instance, remote work in organizations. Once adaptive solutions are found through collective creativity processes, enabling leaders work to scale them into a system-wide shift, where operational leaders then incorporate them into the operational system to generate a new adaptive order. Generative emergence is thus about acknowledging that things have changed and that, rather than trying pulling back to the old equilibrium, challenges should be embraced and new solutions sought. The article offers an entire set of concepts to make sense of leadership in new ways, as for instance “creative abrasion” or conflicting-and-connecting as part of enabling leadership. It also explains how what is described as successful responses can be understood as a combination of top-down and relational/distributed/collective leadership—one does not exclude the other. Followership is also foregrounded as crucial—failed leadership is also failed followership.

Whereas the first article digs into complexity, the second article explores plurality and persisting, as well as emerging, romances of leadership (Meindl et al., 1985). Sergi et al. (2021) explore representations of leadership in the media during the first months of the COVID-19 pandemic. As the authors describe, once the pandemic exploded, interest in leadership and the provision of advice, and asking for advice, surged in many different fora. The representation of leadership found in the popular discourse during those months mainly reproduced images of heroic leadership, leaning on the repertoire we all know well from leadership genre books, movies and training programs. Hence, the common conception of leadership as individual, masculine and heroic was once more repeated over and over again. The need for decisive action by leaders was restated, along with a new emphasis on resilience, framed as the need for resilient leaders. The authors argue that fascination with individual leaders, the “romance of leadership” (Meindl et al., 1985), prevents a deeper understanding of how certain courses of action are shaped in organizing. Sergi, Lusiani and Langley thus propose to answer Rost’s (1993) call for focusing on the central aspects of the phenomenon, that is leadership as a social and relational process, by building on two broad streams of research: processual approaches to leadership and collective leadership approaches. What they both have in common is plurality as central to leadership, a plurality that also includes material elements. Reading the empirical material supported by the sensitizing device of plurality, the authors show that beyond a surface of heroic leadership, plural aspects of the phenomenon are very much present. Accounts in the business and popular press may put leaders in the spotlight but they also narrate leadership as collectively produced. Still, when the collective and pluralistic nature of leadership is foregrounded, we may see a tendency to once again glorify individuals, although differently: caring leaders or female leadership are popular constructions. Such a tension between putting our hopes in individuals and recognizing the collective accomplishment of leadership may

never be resolved but the authors suggest talking of “leading” rather than leadership both within and outside of academic discussions, in order to dilute the romance and acknowledge the complexity of this practice.

Bryson et al. (2021) also propose a move towards conceiving the notion of leading as a dispersed, complex, collaborative, multimodal endeavour by focusing on “leading a social transformation to create public value and advance the common good”, building on an understanding of leadership/leading in terms of direction, alignment, and commitment (Drath et al., 2008). Social transformations entail substantial change at a societal, if not global level, something that, the authors argue is required for dealing with the grand challenges of our time, such as climate change or abiding inequality. Such transformations thus imply changes in relation to several issues, levels, organizations, sectors and countries, going well beyond single organizations and collaborations. Common purpose is distributed across several initiatives that need to be coordinated and co-aligned. Throughout the article, the authors build on the idea of creating public value and advancing the common good. This means considering the public purposes that organizations should serve as well as the role played by managers and other formal leaders in its achievement. Through a critical discussion of different approaches and some rich empirical illustrations, the authors lead the reader to understand social transformations as being about change beyond the scope of single collaborations, entailing deep systemic change, including different levels (national, global, etc.) – what the authors call *out*, *down* and *up*. This is illustrated by visualizing levels of deep structures, regimes and actions. Leading, in terms of social transformation, is thus more complex and distributed than how leadership practice has traditionally been understood, resembling a loosely coaligned social movement. It is therefore proposed that a theory of transformation cannot be based on cause-effect assumptions but rather should integrate multiple theories of change to provide an adaptable set of shared guiding principles. Leading needs then to be relational, visionary, political and adaptive, embracing, rather than avoiding, emergence, holism, dynamism, boundary issues.

In the fourth article in this special issue, Oliveira and Cunha (2021) continue the exploration of leadership as distributed by focusing on non-hierarchical organizing, and in particular on the specific area of patient-developed solutions on an online platform during the first phase of the COVID-19 pandemic. The authors build on streams of research considering leadership as embedded in a system, dispersed among the members of an organization, arguing for the need for a centre rather than an apex, as well as for fruitful tension between distributing and retaining leadership. They address the question of how to distribute leadership in contemporary non-hierarchical and agile organizing without ending up with chaos. To this end, they study the Patient Innovation platform, an open digital platform for sharing solutions to health problems. On this platform, actors with different interests, knowledges, legitimacy, etc., met and produced fast responses to the pandemic within the highly conservative sector of healthcare. When creating the platform, the tension between centralization and decentralization emerged as issues related, for instance, to how the safety of the solutions shared could be guaranteed. Critical to the potential to promote innovation for open and non-hierarchical organizing is the articulation of tension between centre and periphery, rather than a top-down steering. Much like the enabling leadership function and adaptive space described in complexity leadership theory by Uhl-Bien (2021), the authors argue for working with a

state of paradoxical synergy where “the center *both* distributes leadership *and* retains leadership” (italics in original), that is where the platform empowers actors for some actions while limiting others. Leadership can therefore be understood as “reciprocal influence, a process in which a plurality of stakeholders contribute distinctively to respond to a plurality of interests in a mutually reinforcing manner”.

The penultimate article takes issue with populism, a phenomenon described as increasingly threatening democracy and gaining ground in the wake of a resurgence of nationalist sentiments and technological disruption, among other factors. In such a context, De Sousa and van Dierendonck (2021) argue for the importance of focusing on leadership that addresses people’s concerns in a way that strengthens democracy. The authors propose servant leadership as central to this purpose and also embrace Rost’s (1993) call for focusing on the process of leadership, in particular for considering leadership as a non-coercive relationship seeking mutual beneficial outcomes. The article thus details the differences between populism and servant leadership in order to create space for more servant leadership. Defining elements of populism are described in terms of the centrality of the people in ruling and guiding political action; the notion of “the people” animating an ideology implying an antagonism between the oppressed people and some form of elites; and victimization, an ideology that is one mechanism through which populism gains traction. Other elements include the simplification and polarization of tensions in political discourse that prevents pluralism and the personification of the people in the figure of the leader, often a man portraying himself as humble and sacrificing much in vindicating the oppressed. Servant leadership foregrounds people as well but does so in a different way. Greenleaf’s (2002) influential work puts the growth of others at the centre of servant leadership: the servant leader works with and for others, supporting the building of communities and setting direction. Reviewing the work done in the last decades, the authors characterize servant leadership along the same dimensions analysed for populism, thus foregrounding people-centricity as a celebration of unique individual potential (prioritizing individuals over organizations); people as accountable individuals, not as innocent victims; pluralism and reconciliation involving stakeholders, not simplification and polarization; authentic humility and empowerment. The authors conclude with further differentiation of servant leadership from populism by considering meaning-making systems that can be characterized as self-centred and promoting a simplistic understanding of reality for populist leaders, whereas servant leaders present complex meaning-making systems that are consistently other-centred, making reconciliation, experimentation and learning central to finding solutions.

Finally, the last article in this special issue brings our attention to the matter of resilience. Sarkara and Clegg (2021) integrate the literature on sense-making with that on resilience to understand how leaders in small businesses navigated an unprecedented crisis once the COVID-19 pandemic broke out and activated resilience. Social distancing, lockdowns and other measures taken to contain the pandemic abruptly disrupted large as well as small businesses across the world in early 2020, presenting them with very rapid and unexpected change, an extreme crisis. Small businesses were in a particularly exposed and vulnerable position in such crises; the way their leadership adapted to the changing circumstances was crucial. The extraordinary situation during 2020 thus enabled the authors to inquire into how organizations can activate resilience, by closely following the developments in a few small businesses. Resilience is defined as “elasticity under pressure”, being the ability

to adjust, adapt and reinvent what the organization does. Sarkara and Clegg argue that the way sense-making is enacted is central to resilience. In a disruptive crisis, thinking by acting and learning to learn is crucial, meaning the need for openness to do new things and seeing new opportunities. In the companies studied, after a first phase of not only perceiving, but also interpreting, the changing circumstances, an important phase of accepting followed when leaders started realizing the implications of the change, as well as an intense period of stocktaking. At this point, the stage was set for enacting sense-making and adapting leading to new business models and the reconfiguring of available resources through bricolage. The authors thus discuss how resilience is produced in the interplay of cognitive shifts and shifts in practice. Interestingly, digital technology was essential in supporting resilience by offering rapid access to markets. The last article thus, in a sense, closes the circle started by Uhl-Bien's article by also addressing the issue of adaptation and renewal, providing a similar account that mobilizes a different vocabulary to further enrich our understanding.

The collection of articles in this special issue address similar concerns and mobilize similar, at times overlapping, concepts to make sense of leadership as processual and relational, without limiting explanations to single individuals. In this sense, they provide an example of collective leadership through a multi-voiced invitation to further explore this avenue of research. The articles also surface tensions, paradoxes, as well as the co-existence of different dynamics, thus refusing to overly simplify the multifaceted and multiple realities in which we live. In the same vein, the importance of learning, constructive confrontations, conflicts, communication, collaboration, holism and empathy are highlighted in different ways. No single actor has power in these conceptualizations; rather power is produced in the more or less coordinated and aligned relationalities of multiple actors. To be noticed, some of these actors are actants—they are objects or technologies, such as online platforms, visualizations, machines, etc. The authors also position their work in the wider societal context and take responsibility, in different ways, for the world they contribute to producing, whether by reminding us of societal consequences of failing leadership, gendered leadership ideals or populism, bringing important societal challenges to the fore or pointing to opportunities opened by innovation and adaptation. Leadership, in other words, is not studied as a neutral instrument for change. Studying leadership means playing a role in renewing the societies in which we live.

In short, no simple answers are offered. Changing leadership is not about more of the same. It is about questioning taken-for-granted assumptions, adopting new vocabularies, recognizing tension and embracing emergence. By doing this, we can advance research findings that have more impact and relevance regarding the complex realities that characterize the lived experience of constructing and co-constructing leadership.

Acknowledgements

Lucia Crevani's work was carried out within the Digitized management – what can we learn from England and Sweden?-program, financed by FORTE (grant no: 2016-07210).

Funding

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