

**Leading from the outside-in: Leadership lessons learned from Covid 19 - Interrogating
paradox and complexity**

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We are pleased to propose a two-part session for the conference, which may involve additional participants if relevant as discussed with the organizers. Part 1 will focus on findings from a current study of eighteen executive leaders' in-situ accounts of leading during Covid-19 (Gagnon and Klag), which calls into question the 'truisms' of crisis leadership and draws on theory in leadership in complex systems. Part 2 will focus on a conceptual discussion using the paper as a jumping off point, on the contributions and intersections of a) leadership in complex systems/complexity leadership, and b) paradox theory, for examining leadership in contemporary systems during 'crisis', and more generally. Professor Gail Fairhurst will join the authors for this panel discussion, which will also be fully participative with attendees.

Part 1: '*Leading from the outside-in*'

The parameters of the Covid-19 pandemic are still being understood, but its 'unprecedented'¹ nature is difficult to dispute given the global reach of the crisis and the magnitude of the toll on health and human life. Leadership scholars have begun to distill lessons for theory and practice - a traits or character-based approach privileging 'intra-individual' leadership appears to be prominent so far in the literature (e.g. Dusya et al, 2021; Seijts and Young Milani, 2022). Interestingly, we also note a strong focus drawing on learnings for organization studies from political leaders' actions during Covid (Gunasekaram et al., 2022; Wilson, 2021; Simpson et al.,

¹ We would qualify to say, unprecedented in the lives of many of today's executive leaders, although of course global crises have occurred previously (Spanish flu, etc.), and further, unprecedented in today's global context of rising turbulence and interconnectedness.

2021), suggestive in itself, perhaps, of the crisis' magnitude and complexity. Meanwhile, extant literature on crisis leadership prescribes a cohesive model of what leaders can and should *do* and how they should *be* in a crisis. For example: crisis leadership involves a series of phases of managing – these can be predicted and applied; the leader must solve or resolve the crisis through well identified practices; the requisite skills and traits for the leader are discernible and also predictable – e.g. courage, risk taking; and crisis management/leadership should follow a series of well developed steps involving high levels of control by the leader or leadership (Jaques, 2012; Grant and Mack, 2004; Wooten and James, 2008).

In this study, the lens of our data from eighteen CEOs' accounts in-situ during the crisis led us to examine the applicability of such theory, to interrogate its 'truisms'. The participants in the study represent a wide range of sectors, private, public and non-profit, and all sit at the top of large organizations headquartered in Canada. We spoke to these 18 CEOs during the pandemic, some in the early months and some nearly a full year after it began, gathering accounts of their lived experiences in the heat of the moment. There was distribution of gender - male (11) and female (7) and also variation in tenure (from two years to 25 years) among the participants. We wanted to understand their actions, challenges and approaches in addressing the pandemic in their organizations.

Analyzing the data, we centered the voices of these leaders in asking: what was similar and different about this crisis and about leading in this crisis from other experiences, and what are the leadership implications for the next inevitable global crisis? And, are there implications for leadership theory and practice more generally? Some of what we heard echoes what we know. There was resonance with the 'truisms', for example, the importance of leader accountability, leader responsiveness in providing training, the need to act quickly to bring together a team often in 'war room'- style internal communications. Other aspects of what we learned challenged what we thought we knew, and we documented how this crisis turned some leadership truisms on their head for some leaders. Examples here include the scope and character of the pandemic itself. A number of leaders said this was unlike anything they have seen and there were no experiences they could turn to; its radical and rapid nature, the notion that there was no visible end point to the crisis, no knowledge of the nature of its ultimate trajectory, made planning in the conventional

crisis management sense next to impossible. The foreseeable stages of crisis did not apply in this context; rather round after round of new information and new developments created what participants labelled radical change and uncertainty, leading to war metaphors (which we will interrogate further). Ultimately, some similarities and also distinctions led us as analysts to the limits of what we know when applied to this crisis, and surfaced leadership issues that suggest a reorientation of the lens through which we see executive leadership during ‘crisis’.

Further, other external dynamics and pressures emerged during this moment in time, for example the murder of George Floyd and ensuing protests by Black Lives Matter, that called for actions and decisions within and by organizations. Some leaders’ accounts suggest they were quite illiterate in the issues coming to the fore and affecting their employees and businesses in wholly new ways, that may have been building prior to the pandemic and were amplified by the pandemic. The pandemic ‘treated’ different people differently – inequities and inequality were magnified by the lens of the pandemic.

From here, we came to the notion of leading *from the outside in*, and the promise of leadership in complex systems as an important lens to understanding not only in these times, but perhaps in perpetuity – do the tried and true orientations to impacting the organizational environment to reach strategic goals still hold? At its core, the impossibility to a) predict or b) ‘solve’ this crisis may call for “innovation through crisis” (one respondent), recognizing a distinctive role within “radical uncertainty” (Tourish, 2020); and increasing attention paid to interwoven societal events . In today’s context, are age-old traditions of predicting outcomes, periodic reporting on these outcomes to boards of directors, and myriad other common business practices at the leadership level, coming to an end?

In our study, without a clear focus on the external context, executive leadership was emaciated and frustrated. The tensions of ‘leading from the outside-in’, a central paradox perhaps, within our participants’ accounts, became apparent. To highlight just one example – shutting down activities in order to keep employees healthy meant not fulfilling the mission of the organization and/or losing profit *whereas* if employees are not healthy, there is no business. Further distillation of our data and the full paper will examine the parameters of the central ‘outside-in’ paradox, how we recognized it and the challenges it posed, to present at the conference and discuss in Part 2 of our proposed session.

Part 2. Leadership in complex systems: The role of paradox

In this portion of the proposed session, the study authors (Gagnon and Klag) will provide a brief overview of leadership during COVID-19, drawing on their work above, to set the stage for the conceptual discussion. Professor Fairhurst will then discuss the importance of paradox and paradox theory for leadership studies, and the three panelists will discuss how the two (leadership in complex systems/complexity leadership theory and paradox theory) provide distinct yet related theoretical lenses for critical leadership studies. Session moderator Gagnon will ask all participants to comment and raise questions for a full discussion of these two seminal areas for the future of leadership scholarship. The central question is: How can these two lenses enrich our understanding of leadership in the context of today's systemic challenges, and how can critical leadership studies apply and expand these in future research? Depending on timing and levels of participation, we would organize roundtables for the initial portion of the discussion.

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