

Conceptualising Leadership and Systems Change: A Review of theory and research

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In the face of grand challenges, such as climate change, pandemics, war, social inequality and economic uncertainty, we are witnessing increasingly strong calls for leadership that is able to transcend boundaries between organisations, professions, communities and societies. Theories and practices that focus on the qualities and behaviours of leaders within teams and organisations are inadequate to account for the complexities of power and influence in such situations. Furthermore, theories and practices informing the leadership and/or management of change tend to assume lines of hierarchy and authority that do not apply in cross-boundary, multi-stakeholder environments.

Despite growing recognition of the need for leadership that is able to mobilise and support widescale ‘system(s) change’ our conceptual frameworks seem largely inadequate to inform effective and enduring practice. As Senge et al. (2015) suggest ‘we are at the beginning of the beginning in learning how to catalyse and guide systemic change at a scale commensurate with the scale of the problems we face, and all of us see but dimly’.

The aim of this paper is to review extant literature on leadership and systems change, to identify important similarities and differences between key concepts and frameworks, and priorities for further research and development.

From leading organisations to leading systems

Throughout the 20th Century most leadership theory and research focussed on leadership *in, of and by* organisations, with an overwhelming focus on the skills, attributes and behaviours of formal ‘leaders’. Since the turn of the millennium there has been increasing interest in distributed, shared and collective leadership, which emphasise the nature of leadership as a relational, emergent process of social influence (Ospina et al., 2020). Such approaches have proved invaluable in reconceptualising leadership beyond the individual and to develop a more nuanced, contextualised understanding of leadership practice. Despite these successes, however, much research and the theoretical development remains firmly situated within discrete organisations rather than across broader partnerships, networks, places and/or communities.

The contested, negotiated and co-constructed nature of collective leadership poses particular challenges in cross-boundary, multi-level environments, where creating a sense of shared ‘direction, alignment and commitment’ (Drath et al., 2008) may not be possible. Instead, it may be necessary to recognise and embrace inherent paradoxes and tensions to maintain a form of dynamic equilibrium from which it may be possible to nudge or tip the ‘system’ towards stability or change (Murphy et al, 2017).

The concept of ‘system(s) leadership’ has gained momentum in recent years as a potential response to the question of how to address wicked problems in networked environments – and calls for a paradigm shift in how public services are organized and delivered (Ghate et al., 2013). At the heart of such an approach is the notion of leading across boundaries in contexts of complexity and uncertainty. There are, however, varying schools of thought around the nature of systems from quite functionalist to far more fluid and emergent.

The functionalist end of the spectrum is informed by work from engineering and computing that aims to map system architectures in order to achieve efficiencies. Such ideas have been applied to management and organisations through interventions such as Lean and Six Sigma.

In each of these cases the ‘system’ is perceived as a relatively tangible entity comprising nodes and connections that can be mapped and remapped to meet the needs of system designers, engineers or managers. From such a perspective it is possible to observe and intervene by standing outside the system – with a ‘whole system’ perspective.

The far end of the spectrum is characterised by the work of people such as Ralph Stacey, who argues that there is no such thing as a ‘system’ or ‘organisation’ - only ‘patterns of interaction between people that are iterated as the present’ (Stacey and Griffin, 2006, p. 4). His theory of *complex response processes of relating* (CRPR) places emphasis on the importance of stories and conversations in creating and mobilising change, and that ‘the role of leader is to participate actively in local interactions to widen and deepen communication’ (ibid, p. 301). Stacey (2006, p. 30) argues that ‘a particularly naive form of systems thinking has become the fundamental notion underlying public sector governance today’ and that this is harmful as it creates the assumption that leaders can exert some form of rational control over organisations.

In brief, despite the use of similar terminology there are significant variations within approaches to systems change and leadership, which impact upon the approach taken. Commenting on policy and practice in the education sector, Hatcher (2008, p. 28) suggests that ‘[t]he dominant discourse of system leadership represents a technocratic managerial solution based on a claimed expertise in the management and leadership of change’. Far from promoting greater inclusion and democratic representation, he suggests that: ‘[...] system leadership can best be understood as a reconfiguring of state power, attempting to create new vehicles for the implementation of policy under the control of a reliable new technocratic management cadre’ (ibid, p. 30). Such analyses call for a more critical engagement with both the theory and practice of systems leadership and the need to expose underlying assumptions to critical scrutiny.

A review of theory and research

In developing this paper for presentation at the ISLC I intend to complete a thorough review of theory and research on leadership and systems change to identify key themes and trends within the literature. Particular attention will be given to variations between sector and country in relation to the main conceptualisations of leadership AND system(s) change and the extent to which this represents a functionalist or critical perspective on the issues. Attention will also be paid to the relationship with change management/leadership literature and how such concepts are deployed in practice. The paper will conclude with an assessment of the state of current scholarship in the field and recommendations for further research.

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Planned disruption as strategy of public sector reform – new complexities in public leadership spaces.

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Abstract for the 21st International Studying Leadership Conference 10th-12th December 2023 on Leadership Dynamics of Systems Change

This paper examines current Danish reform initiatives with a critical discourse analytical perspective. It focuses on a certain paradigmatic shift in public sector reform and offers a diagnosis of the present form of governing as characterized by 'planned disruption' – which means a paradoxical form of societal planning by way of a dynamic of deliberate political interventions, spatial and social parameters that urge innovative response strategies from public welfare organizations.

The paper falls in three parts. First it examines current reform programs and their reform trajectories and puts them into an institutional historical context. Secondly, it unfolds the diagnosis of how systemic change is made possible in the void denoted as 'proximity' and 'free setting' in current reform programs. Which social horizons, forms of autonomy and creative spaces do these reform discourses and governing strategies offer public leaders and managers? How can public leaders orient themselves towards these constraints and be creative and innovative at the same time? Finally, the paper discusses the broader perspectives of systemic change and in what sense the emerging governing regime can be seen as a confrontation or a corrective to post-political management thinking (as represented by the New Public Management paradigm). How should we understand contemporary counter-movements – as populist politics or a new kind of bottom-up reform strategy? Why and how does it matter for leadership dynamics of systems change?

To be presented in an oral form, debate or by short paper...

The Leadership Dynamics of Systems Change
The 21st International Studying Leadership Conference

Different spokes, same folks:

Leadership roles in partnerships for systems change

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Extended Abstract

This paper draws on a place-based systems change project where the authors are participating with other community stakeholders. Extant literature gives emphasis to three roles suggested to be evident in leadership in systems change. We pursue an ethnographic appreciation of how complex political contexts and the diffuse ways that these three roles become manifest and only occasionally brought to useful impact. We conclude with some implications for exploring these three roles to understand the dynamics of leadership for systems change.

Literature Review

We bridge across the leadership dynamics of systems change with the leadership literature on sustainability. While 'sustainability leadership' and sustainable development are suggested to be problematic collocations (Bendell et al, 2018), this bridge allows a more specific normative aim for understanding the material changes that underlie often vague pronouncements of systems change. Sustainability in this regard is enacted as the central conceptual catch-all of wicked

problems such as climate change and grand challenges. However, it also supplies a conduit for 'ecological sensemaking' (Whiteman & Cooper, 2011) in the study of these leadership dynamics. In the context of the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), the field of sites for forming these understandings is extended from the historical view of the Global South, to be 'for all people, in all countries' (Rowlands, 2016). Thus the leadership dynamics of systems change become contested spaces for reflexive exercises in picturing politics, proximity to the poor, and how 'progress' is conceived (Stanberry & Balda, 2023).

Although we are critical leadership scholars, our study aims to go beyond critiques of 'bad leadership practice' to create an ethical and normative framework for leadership (Western, 2008, p. 21) that takes as foundational personhood and agency. In the development economist Amartya Sen's words:

We...have to go beyond the role of human beings specifically as 'consumers' or as 'people with needs', and consider, more broadly, their general role as agents of change who can—given the opportunity—think, assess, evaluate, resolve, inspire, agitate, and, through these means, reshape the world. (2013, p. 7)

In the work of Kempster and Carroll (2018), exploring the emerging debates surrounding responsible leadership, they offer an argument for both realism and romanticism acting in a complementary manner. Indeed many theories of leadership implicitly adopt idealised notions of how people should lead. For example, the idea of competencies assumes the right set of skills for leading. On the flip side, critical leadership studies underscore the limits of competencies. These critical analyses attack the competency approach for 1) an overly reductionist view of the management role, 2) universalising the capabilities regardless of context, and 2) reinforcing traditional notions of leadership (Bolden et al, 2011, p. 79). One response to the limits of the competency approach is to re-conceive the person-centred frameworks for leadership development through collective leadership (Eva et al, 2021). Notions of collective, distributed or shared leadership give emphasis to a plurality of people engaging in leading in response to context and emerging needs. It is in this context we explore the idea of multiple roles in the leadership dynamics of systems change. We build on the ideas of Stanberry and Murphy (date?) gives prominence to three key roles that emerged in cross sector partnerships seeking to implement the SDGs:

The Convener

The Convener (Table 3 and Table 4) identifies the "practical" side of working together as the focus. This perspective considered more formal ways of organising together with attention to the partnering process itself and the immediate context, rather than systemic challenges.

The Connector

The Connector (Table 5 and Table 6) viewpoint brings attention to power and the possibilities of collaboration as empowerment. This viewpoint considers partnering to be an essentially relational process where those leading the partnership give space to others to enable a shared experience of meaning-making and shared decision-making.

The Chair

The capabilities for partnering that are most important to The Chair (Table 7 and Table 8) form a leader-centric view of collaborating with others. The Chair is unlikely to use language of power differences or to introduce conflicting notions. They bring a positive, upbeat, and motivating approach to sharing their confident views on how partnering works best. This viewpoint echoes much of the literature that describes a Western-originating heroic view of leadership.

We shall draw on these three roles as helpful to make sense of our experiences of leadership of systems change

Research Context

In the seven months of meeting together, the group, which we term the 'Hub', various people have been drawn into it and have left from it. The meeting host occupies a paid role to support her participation, but the long term reliability of that funding is in question. Thus various sub-projects have required volunteers from the often dwindling numbers of consistent participants. At one level the Hub has a clear systems change goal, 'impacting upon the wider social, economic, and environmental factors that make us healthy '(Project Document 1). The wide scope of this definition means that the whole range of stakeholders presume systems change through individual frames that are hinted at but rarely articulated. In name, the Hub project emerged from a remit to support small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) to embed the SDGs in their organisational practise. In written description and meeting dialogues the work broadened to 1) include the addition of the local voluntary sector as a target, 2) include an aim to support social value, and 3) provide opportunities for closer working with anchor organisations.

A network of organisations brought together by the NHS commissioned the work of the Hub. This network is driven to embed locally the 'anchor organisation 'concept through placed-based alignment of SMEs .

[Collective] assets that can be used to support local community wealth building and development, through procurement and spending power, workforce and training, and assets such as buildings and land [...] to advance the welfare of the populations they serve. [To] a powerful voice in where and how resources are spent and can influence the health and wellbeing of communities by impacting upon the wider social, economic and environmental factors that make us healthy.

This goal is summarised by the Hub as the broad intention to 'make a difference to local people by widening access to quality work, purchasing and Commissioning for social benefit, using buildings and spaces to support communities, reducing environmental impact, and reducing inequalities '(Project Document 1).

An entanglement of concepts, related to the public good, supports the project, and are often poorly explicated or simply not defined. These communication byways point to a shared discourse that subjectively interprets and reinterprets what would entail 'systems change 'and

what would not. These include 'community wealth building '(CITE), harnessing supply chains to provide 'social value '(CITE), and the broad aim of 'reducing environmental impact', and 'reducing inequalities'. These terms are interpreted by stakeholders including local government in various subjective and context-dependent framings both in Hub meetings and in adjacent policy support related forums. There is no explicit shared understanding of what would entail systems change is, thus the various suggestions, sub-projects, and announcements of related work are necessary for 'colouring in 'the lines of these understandings.

Conclusion

What we seek to offer in our formative paper is our ethnographic appreciation of complex political contexts and the diffuse ways that these three necessary roles or apparent necessary roles have not been manifest and only occasionally brought to useful impact.

By the time of the conference the ethnographic appreciation would have been significantly developed. Overall we intend the paper to contribute a critique around leadership within complex systems change. Policy discourses seeking the realisation of well-being economies are becoming much more common. Governments of New Zealand, Iceland, Canada, Scotland and Wales are explicitly seeking to develop policies to realise well-being economies. At a local level, various initiatives are emerging for how this can occur (see for example: Thriving Places, and Doughnut Economic Action Lab, and Well-being Economy clusters). The climate for systems change is becoming most encouraging. However we caution that such opportunity needs to be realised through those leading being able to respond to the variety of stakeholder interests and conflicts.

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‘Real and perceived’ challenges of paying for urban adaptation using insights from Singapore, London, and Copenhagen.

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Abstract (794 words)

Private capital plays a crucial role in the response to climate change mitigation in cities, it is yet to play a role in urban climate change adaptation. Successive international climate change agreements stress the need for the finance system to urgently transform and step up to the challenges of paying for climate change both mitigation (reducing greenhouse emissions to save the planet) and adaptation (responding to the physical risk of climate change and reducing our vulnerability) (Reckien & Petkova 2019). Without massive investments in adaptation cities are highly vulnerable to climate-induced extreme events which will be very costly to all. The economies, infrastructure, and people of our cities are all at great risk (Espinosa 2018). Solving this complex challenge requires both leadership and systems change. Systems thinking needs to be applied to our study of the phenomenon to look at the interacting dynamics of individual, organisation, sector, and community responses, including creating business models that align with broader societal values and purposes.

COP27 in Egypt in 2022, stressed there is a need to transform the finance system to pay for climate change - its structures and processes, and to engage governments, central banks, commercial banks, institutional investors, and other financial actors (IPCC 2022). Other ambitious views see the need for government in cities to take an enabling, entrepreneurial, and synergistic investment role that compliments private capital (ClimateKic 2020; IISD 2022; Mazzucato 2015; Mazzucato & Penna 2016; Mazzucato & Semieniuk 2018). Despite this rhetoric however little is known of what such a transformation of the finance system could entail.

In this paper, evolutionary economics, socio-technical perspectives, sustainable transitions, and innovation systems theory provide us with a useful basis for assessing changes in both socio-technical and finance systems/regimes (Geddes & Schmidt 2020; Geels 2012; Hafner et al. 2019; Naidoo 2019; Smith & Raven 2012; Steffen & Schmidt 2021; Whittaker & Jespersen 2022). Insights for other related scholarly such as leadership and organisational theories are also used to help grasp the strategic, institutional, and political economy dimensions of addressing the financing of climate adaptation.

‘Socioeconomic regimes also serve as mechanisms of governance that structure and organize an arena, often amid considerable contestations.’ (Wittenben et al. 2012:24)

Several authors in the adaptation space have contributed to the conceptualization of 'transforming' activity with respect to adaptation planning, and in a few cases adaptation investment, (Hölscher & Loorbach 2019; Kates, Travis, and Wilbanks 2012; Nalau & Handmer 2015; Termeer et al. 2017). Whilst other leadership and organisational scholars have explored how individuals, organizations, and communities can respond to such grand challenges (Kempster et al., 2019; Mair & Seelos 2021, Reinecke & Ansari 2016). Likewise, the IPCC (2022:99) describes system or deep-rooted transformation of systems as important for:

'Opening new options for adapting to the impacts and risks of climate change [...] by changing the fundamental attributes of a system, including altered goals or values, and addressing the root causes of vulnerability. [...] (TS.D.11)'

Banerjee et al. (2017) encourage theorizing on the policy and regulatory changes needed to generate transformational change when sketching an alternative political economy *'reimagining social and economic relations within planetary capacities in a post-growth era'*. (Banerjee et al. 2020:1). They signal the need for more reflective analysis on the underlying structures and conditions and broad-based questioning of the assumptions that drive economic systems. *'Understanding the hegemonic formations of growth may enable different formulations [...] and point the way to a radically different set of solutions'* (Ibid, 2020:3). Meadows (2019) also discusses the most effective leverage points in a change process.

However, a 'mitigation bias' dominates the existing scholarly climate finance literature, with the study of financing adaptation in a very nascent and fragmented state and very limited scholarly work into investor perceptions (Abadie et al. 2013, Whittaker & Nguyen 2023). We argue that much of the research that does exist overly stresses the difficulties of monetising climate adaptation. To discern how those in the financial sector are really thinking about climate adaptation we attempt to draw out an 'investors' viewpoint taking a sustainable transitions lens (Christophers 2019). There are market failures which conflate and reinforce 'perceived and real' challenges to investing in urban adaptation. This research validates the 'perceived and real' challenges with regards to private capital paying for urban climate change adaptation through interviews and workshops with both governments and investors (>100 hours) in three capital cities in the Global North. Where the challenges are real we argue a transforming of the finance regime will be required. We advance a conceptual framework drawing on contributions from a number of areas, for transforming the finance system to tackle the market failures and dissonance we find blocking the financing of urban adaptation. We identify fourteen critical agency, markets and governing conditions for a more credible response to paying for urban adaptation, underscoring the vital role of creating 'a sense of urgency' and 'vesting value' in adaptation.

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