

ABSTRACT

Deconstructing leadership discourse to make it accessible to all: enhancing systems thinking in leadership

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The aim of this paper is to explore how deconstruction applied to leadership could enhance systems thinking, collaboration and open problem solving in organizations. The boundaries-based thinking of organizations is challenged, because only seldom few actors or one organization can solve the complex pressing societal problems by themselves (Imperial et al., 2016). Leadership has been recognized to play an important role in connecting the different actors to find needed responses to those problems. Our approach to leadership in this paper draws on relational leadership theories (Cunliffe & Eriksen, 2010; Ospina & Foldy, 2010) and connects it to thinking of leadership as an open system because it needs dynamic equilibrium through the continuous inflow of materials, energy, and information (Kast, & Rosenzweig, 1972).

In this view to leadership, leaders achieve a comprehensive understanding because of the existence of feedback loops in an open system (Shaked, & Schechter, 2020). System thinking as a holistic approach to leadership entails circular thinking (Senge, 2006) hence enables leadership to move beyond the individual formal leaders thus creating a wider construction of leadership capacity (Ospina & Foldy, 2010, 2016; Cunliffe & Eriksen, 2010). From a feedback-loop perspective, understanding leadership as a whole system is needed for decision-making because there is dynamic relationship between different events and the first influences the second and vice-versa (Shaked, & Schechter, 2020).

Systemic thinking requires open-minded leaders to have the ability to interact both with employees and other stakeholders in the network. To do that, for example the leader/follower hierarchy needs to be deconstructed, because if the hierarchy remains, leadership would not be accessible for others (Cunliffe & Eriksen, 2010). Deconstruction in any hierarchical terms or stances in leadership needs a new definitional and understanding of leadership (Isaac et al.,

2009). In this research we ask how deconstruction enhances our understanding of systemic thinking in leadership?

By a systematic approach, the current leadership's discourses need to be deconstructed because the aim of deconstruction is to challenge the accepted status quo (Fuchs & Ward, 1994). According to Derrida (1988, p.3) deconstruction is "an analysis, a critique, a method, or even an act or operation" (Derrida, 1988, p.3). Deconstruction allows us to criticize the idea of leadership as a static closed system of leader and followers because this idea disconnect leadership from a wider social reality (Alvesson, 2019), thus ignores the interactions between different components in a system. We argue that deconstruction allows us to move to relational forms of leadership which in turn enhances collaboration and systems thinking.

In this study we follow a qualitative narrative method. The data consists of interviews and written documents of the leadership with leaders in university hospitals in Finland who participated in Executive MBA training. Leadership is in major change as there is ongoing remarkable reform in health care sector in Finland. There is a new kind of need for collaboration between different actors, for example public sector organizations, private sector organizations and even ordinary citizens to make the reform happen in practice in the hospitals. Traditionally the hospitals have been bureaucratic organizations based on the authority of the doctor-leaders but now there is a need to change the leadership and understand the operations in a more holistic and systemic way.

In conclusion, we will discuss through the deconstruction of the hierarchical terms and discussions in leadership, a system of differences in interactions (Derrida, 1988). Through the dynamic nature of the system of differences, leadership will be considered as a mix of social, material, and discursive practices that are mobilized among individual attributes, interpersonal relationships or social constructs (Cox & Hassard, 2018, p. 534). Through our study we will contribute to the relational theories of leadership and systems thinking.

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Systems change and leadership in a global health context: Reflections on theory and practice

Proposed paper for 'The Leadership Dynamics of Systems Change', 21st International Studying Leadership Conference, 10th-12th December 2023, Copenhagen Business School, Denmark

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Abstract

'We need systemic change' is a frequently heard cry, and many interventions that might once have been referred to as Organization Development (OD), Business model innovation, leadership development and capacity building are now encumbered with the aims (if not the titles) of 'changing the system'; or, even transforming it. But what does this mean, or rather what do the advocates of these interventions mean, and how is the guidance to be put into practice? If the intention is to bring about change at individual, team and organisational levels, does this add up to changing the 'system'? Conversely, can initiatives that aim to conserve but improve a system sometimes result in systemic-wide changes? Are these the same thing, that is, are changes in practices that permeate across a system (such as health care improvements) the same or different to 'system change'?

In this paper we consider these questions in relation to a series of health systems interventions in southern Africa that we contributed to. We begin with an account of how we came to be thinking about systems leadership and systems change in this context. Prompted by an invitation to contribute to a series of papers for the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation (BMGF) in 2014, desk research and interview data on global malaria programme management resulted in a set of recommendations concerning the challenge of changing from malaria prevention to malaria elimination service provision where circumstances were conducive (Global Health Group, 2014; Gosling et al., 2015). This preparatory work was followed by a series of funded field interventions in the Greater Mekong Sub-region and southern Africa which provided valuable opportunities to test concepts and approaches to changing malaria health service delivery (Aginis et al., 2022; Marr Chung et al., 2020, 2022). For the past three years, our focus has shifted from malaria healthcare to HIV prevention and Voluntary Male Medical Circumcision (VMMC) in particular (Case et al., 2023). We explain how our malaria and VMMC interventions were informed by an admixture of open-systems theory (Lawlor and Sher, 2023; Miller and Rice, 1967), OD (Schein, 1999), QI (Colbourn 2013), leadership development (Revans, 1971; Kolb, 1984), concepts of distributed leadership (Bolden, 2011) and systems leadership (Bigland et al., 2020; Bolden et al., 2019; Drier et al., 2019; Senge et al., 2015; Snowden & Boone, 2007; Gray, 2017). Over time, we began to formalise our intervention methodology and develop an approach known as the Leadership & Engagement for Improved Accountability & Delivery of Services Framework (LEAD)(Malaria Elimination Initiative, 2021).

The disease-oriented interventions we implemented required changes to the wider health systems in the countries we worked in. In the case of malaria elimination in Zimbabwe, Eswatini and Namibia, the changes were to the roles, responsibilities, training and equipping of key personnel, the order of activities through which cases were responded to, and the ways in which decisions and

resources flowed through the health service hierarchy. With the VMMC in Zimbabwe, the changes were ostensibly customised improvements to local services, but took place in a context in which 'vertical' VMMC programmes were being integrated into 'horizontal' mainstream HIV prevention measures. The VMMC intervention thus formed part of a substantial systemic change in command structures, funding, (inter)dependencies and so forth.

Employing a theoretical model proposed by Bolden et al. (2023) to analyse of our case examples enables us to identify various ways in which the operational and systemic are woven together, confounding a neat distinction between what is and is not 'systems thinking'. We suggest that our health-system cases exemplify different aspects of this model. Firstly, the commission from the BMGF was predicated on a 'tipping points' concept both with regards to the epidemiology of malaria (embedded in natural and social systems) and the image of a tipping point at which services might shift from prevention to elimination. Secondly, our intervention was predicated on a 'complex systems' perspective, with the focus on immediate localised problem-solving and adaptive organisational responses. Thirdly, some of the difficulties we faced in the malaria programme (in Eswatini especially) and the widening brief for the VMMC interventions arose because 'the system' has a structural and political dimension that warranted a different approach.

Our conclusions are that many interventions are better understood as attempts to ensure system continuity, some with enhanced adaptability to cope with contextual changes. Our own examples fall into this category. Seemingly modest interventions may nonetheless induce or contribute to: a) system-wide changes; and b) systemic change. Informed by Bolden et al. (2023), our analysis articulates three contrasting assumptions about the nature and causes of system-change and system-continuity, demonstrating the model's effectiveness in illuminating certain aspects of the process of systems-change interventions. The paper concludes by considering some implications for intervention strategies such as leadership development, Organisation Development and system-change consultancy.

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Enabling Leadership: A Needed Concept in System's Change

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Enabling Leadership: A Needed Concept in System's Change

The Covid-19 pandemic challenged the world order and required leaders to rethink how to lead. Effective leadership pivots when challenges appear. Organizations in the 21st century are facing complex adaptive challenges as the continuation of remote work has ruptured the entire bureaucratic structure. Remote work began as many assumed was a temporary but necessary response to the Covid-19 pandemic. This complex adaptive challenge was thrust on the workforce across all three economic sectors with no notice, training, and understanding of what remote workers or leaders would need for organizations to continue to function (Uhl-Bien, 2021).

Remote work was a drastic change in the way organizations conducted operations, an adaptive challenge. An adaptive challenge is defined by Uhl-Bien (2021) as a situation that has no known solution, requires people to work together in new partnerships, is characterized by conflicting views, and where people have high interdependence such that in extreme circumstances, they must adapt together or perish. Adaptive challenges require adaptive responses created by people working together to find solutions. They are not the norm in bureaucratic organizations (Uhl Bien, 2021). Remote work was one way that adaptive leaders and followers working together found a solution.

According to Kotter (1990), the process of leadership establishes direction, aligns people, and is motivating and inspiring. However, adaptive responses in complex organizations call for enabling leadership (Uhl-Bien & Arena, 2017). Enabling leadership challenges Kotter's definition to provide direction, motivation, and encouragement by asking leaders to develop, nurture, and unleash followers' capacities to enact adaptive solutions to new challenges (Uhl-Bien & Arena, 2017). Senge (2015) cites three core abilities that system leaders need to develop

to foster collective leadership: the ability to “see the larger system,” foster reflection and conversations, and change the focus “from reactive problem solving to co-creating the future” (p. 29). Ultimately, these authors would agree that leadership is still about behavior (Kotter, 2013).

Enabling leaders have learned to use discourse to involve workers and move organizations forward. When leaders and workers are not collocated, communication must be managed to show compassion, build trust, and create relationships. As a result of the Covid-19 pandemic, remote work situations have increased exponentially, and even though there is some resistance, the trend is holding in many organizations. This contemporary working style is about more than providing remote workers with equipment and meeting their technological needs; it is about communicating in an entirely new way. Leaders are giving directions to workers they may never have met in person. Workers are on teams with people they may never have met. Different time zones come into play, along with workers' schedule preferences. An astute leader must overcome these obstacles and continue to move the organization forward. Creating teams of geographically disparate people with complementary skills but different mindsets require enabling leadership.

Uhl-Bien and Arena (2018) state that leadership development and education must identify and train leaders in the skills and knowledge needed to operate in the complex adaptive organizational world. This paper will focus on one set of skills needed by leaders, returning to the basics of leader/follower relationships. Employees must be respected for their intrinsic value and their concerns must be heard and their needs met. An enabling leader must develop three skills: increasing trust and trustworthiness, generative listening, and using dialogue to enable adaptive responses.

The word “dialogue” comes from two Greek roots, *dia* (“through” or “with each other”) and *logos* (“the word”). It has been suggested that “dialogue” has a sense of “meaning flowing through” (Senge et al., 1994, p. 353). Evidence suggests that humans have gathered in small groups to talk together for millennia (Senge et al., 1994). Using dialogue effectively incorporates trust and generative listening, along with reflection, advocacy, and inquiry skills. It can be used with both large and small groups. Bohm (1996) wrote that “it can provide a stream of meaning flowing among and through us . . . out of which will come some new understanding” (p. 1). Utilizing this new skill allows leaders to pivot to adaptive responses and move the organization forward in a complex world. At the same time, individual leaders will develop the ability to grow followers into agents capable of functioning and thriving amid uncertainty, conflict, and tension.

Leadership has always involved a tolerance for ambiguity. Uhl-Bien and Arena (2018) state that companies must help people find their way through ambiguity not only to survive, but also to thrive in organizations focused on performance and adaptability. This presentation will highlight skills that develop individuals to be enabling leaders.

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Tensions in leadership: How middle managers translate agile leadership in a bureaucratic organisation

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Abstract

Aim: This paper explores how middle managers construct the idea of agile leadership in a public organisation through a translation process. Following the increasingly prominent digitalisation agenda, new ideas of agile working methods have emerged, and with this, new ideas of agile leadership follow. Agile methods were initially developed for software development in the private sector but have now spread and reached broader organisational developments and also gained more traction in the public sector. *Methods and Theory:* This study builds on an extensive ethnographic study of a large-scale agile transformation in the Danish Tax Administration, zooming in on the particular translation of agile leadership. We apply translation theory covering both programmatic and operational elements to explore how the middle managers interpreted and created meaning in relation to their own positions in the organisation by, first, designing the ideals and ambitions of agile leadership and, second, by adapting their behaviour as the organisation starts implementing the new idea of agile leadership fundamentally breaks with their prevailing managerial work and responsibilities. *Contributions:* This study contributes to the literature on leadership in translation processes by, first, demonstrating how agile leadership is constructed in between idealistic meaning and enacted practices, and second, by theorising the action of middle managers as prominent translators. We also contribute to practice by explaining why, even with meticulous orchestration of change, managers fall back into old habits handling tasks they were not supposed to be responsible for anymore.