The future of leadership: the art of leading people in a "post-managerial" environment

Tom Karp and Thomas Helgø

Tom Karp is an Associate Professor and Thomas Helgø is a Senior Lecturer, both at Oslo School of Management, Oslo, Norway.

Abstract

Purpose – The purpose of this paper is to explore the future concept of leadership. The paper argues a view of leadership in organisations as a shared social influence process of relating, thus challenging mainstream approaches to leadership and the emphasis on leadership as a specialized role.

Design/methodology/approach – Conceptual discussion

Findings – It is suggested herein that the central acts of leadership in the future will be to focus on the emergence of identity and relationships. It is contended that current paradigms of leadership are limited as they assert leadership as a role with fundamental influence over command and control enabling the design of appropriate interventions for future organisational success. This is not consistent with reality in most organisations today, and will be even less consistent in a near future with added complexity. Therefore a future view of leadership is proposed by paying attention to how leadership may be better understood as an emergent phenomenon when people interact.

Research limitations/implications – The research is conceptual in its nature, and not grounded in empirical evidence. Further research work is needed in order to formalize a full leadership theory.

Practical implications – Leaders must then take better account of how identity and relations emerges to understand what constitute leadership – by viewing leadership as a shared social influence process of relating. For a leader this necessitates acknowledging feelings of not being in control as crucial to the leadership process; enables followers to experience their ability and find their way to act in the moment.

Originality/value – The article challenges the current mainstream paradigm of leadership and its powerbase. Its primary value lies in how one thinks of leadership – as position or as something being emergent/dynamic/not in control.

Keywords Behaviour, Communication, Complexity theory, Leadership, Management theory

Paper type Conceptual paper

Introduction

In his latest book, Gary Hamel (Hamel and Breen, 2007) asks if we have reached the end of management, claiming that the "technology" of management has now reached a local peak. "We must learn how to coordinate the efforts of thousands of individuals without creating a burdensome hierarchy of overseers", according to Hamel. Modern management, and more specifically leadership, is not a set of tools and techniques, it is a paradigm. This leadership paradigm entails a view that that the essential function of leaders is to direct and control. This control is exercised by eliminating uncertainty and by dealing with negative deviances from the grand plan. Leaders then need to understand the whole system, see its connections, foresee the responses of people and, from this, design and execute appropriate interventions.

What is leadership? Like all terms in social science, the concept of leadership is obviously arbitrary and subjective. An observation by Bennis (1959, p. 259) is as true today as it was many years ago:

> ... the concept of leadership eludes us or turns up in another form to taunt us again with its slipperiness and complexity. So, we have invented an endless proliferation of terms to deal with it... and still the concept is not sufficiently defined.

Academics like Drucker (2004) focus leadership on opportunity, performing actions, and taking responsibility as the way to effective leadership. Others, like Mintzberg (2003), point to the different mind-sets a leader requires to lead successfully. Yet others argue the need for attributes like vision, discipline, and passion (Covey, 2004), the need to master capabilities such as sense making, relating, visioning, and inventing (Ancona *et al.,* 2007), or the need to mix personal humility with professional will (Collins, 2001). Most of these influential thoughts on leadership have their roots in the current management paradigm.

This article explores the concept of leadership into the future. In doing so, we will challenge the dominating paradigm of leadership. While the mainstream methods and tools of modern leadership and management were invented to solve the problems of control and efficiency, we will envision leadership in the future as serving the objective of multiplying human accomplishment – in a world with growing uncertainty, increasing pace of change, and increasing complexity. Hamel (Hamel and Breen, 2007) states that we are on the verge of a ''post-managerial'' society, perhaps even a ''post-organisational'' society. If this is the case, what is then the future concept of leadership?

A ''post-managerial'' society with increasing complexity

The current paradigms of leadership predominately reflect the assumption that it involves a process whereby intentional influence is exerted by an appointed person over other people to facilitate activities in a group of people or in an organisation. A large body of academic literature conceptualizes the above by identifying what leadership is and what makes successful leaders. Much of this work prescribes the characteristics of leaders and the styles to be applied in different situations (e.g. Yukl, 2006). This literature suggests that the leader can sit outside the organisation as an objective individual, design and apply deliberate interventions to move the organisation or group of people forward. We will argue that it is today, and even more so in the future, not possible to identify the preferred leadership attributes of the ''ideal leader'' and then conclude that a person with the requisite attributes will perform effectively as a leader because how the leader performs will depend just as much on the kind of recognition and the kinds of responses of others as it does on personal attributes.

Whether leadership should be viewed as a specialized role or as a shared social influence process is controversial in leadership theory. In this paper we will argue the latter. Regardless of their school of leadership theory, most academics and practitioners agree that the objective of leadership thinking and practice is to construct a way of making sense and direction of organisational life. In leadership we are concerned with the control and manipulation of social systems. During the last two decades, physicists, meteorologists, chemists, biologists, economists, psychologists and computer scientists have worked across their disciplines to develop alternative theories of systems. This work presents a glimpse of the future of leadership. Their work goes under such titles as chaos theory, dissipative structures, complex adaptive systems, and nonlinear dynamics, disciplines commonly referred to as complexity sciences. Independently of this work in the natural sciences, similar ideas related to social systems have been appearing in sociology and psychology. These sciences may give us new knowledge of leadership and human interaction in organisations into the future.

The social sciences do not have anything comparable to the physical elements of the natural sciences. The whole structure that makes up the foundation of human interaction is a construct of the human mind (North, 2005). If complexity theory is applied to leadership, then organisations should be regarded as responsive processes of relating and communicating between people; a psychology based on relationships between people (Stacey, 2003). Complexity thinking related to social sciences therefore focuses attention not on some abstract macro-system but on what people are doing in their relationships with each other on a micro-level (Shaw, 2002). We will argue that the trends are clear. A

''post-managerial'' or ''post-organisational'' society will operate on increased complexity levels, meaning some of the following:

- Organisations – private or public – operate today and even more in the future, in complex external and internal environments; vital assumptions continuously change due to dynamic developments and events (in the marketplace, in the industry, in the organisation, and so forth).

- Organisations are and will become rich in people diversity, structure, activities, processes and culture, and it is not possible for a management team or a single leader to understand cause-effect loops, as well as systemic connections.

- Organisations behave like ongoing reality construction entities – there is often no one reality leaders can decide on.

- People together construct a future that is a function of their history, their identity, and their own agenda, but which is always open to further shaping as people continue to communicate and interact.

- People construct their future not as a single ''vision'', ''values'' or ''strategy'', but in terms of what actions become possible and sensible for them, given their circumstances.

- People in the organisations influence and affect each other, through loops of interaction that create individual and collective motivation, behaviour and identity. These influences arise in dynamic relationships between people – and in specific and changing contexts.

- People are constantly shaping and shifting the width and depth of their relationships, depending on the context, and individuals and groups form and are formed by each other simultaneously.

- People in organisations are not the rational actors leaders wish them to be; they behave and react in a number of unpredictable ways.

The above claims are supported by a body of literature and research; of particular interest are the works by Shaw (2002), Stacey (2003), North (2005) and Beinhocker (2006). Today and even more so in the future, leaders will not always have choices and will not have the control that the current leadership paradigm suggests. This will be further amplified in the years to come. In a world with growing complexity, the best a leader can do is to enter, with his or hers intentions, into interactions with others with their intentions, out of which something will be created under no one individual's control. This is because the future is under perpetual construction and the past is continually reconstructed in relation to the present moment, therefore we cannot fully determine what happens or choose it, regardless of any clever foresight methods or tools. This does not mean, however, that there is no personal choice or freedom; we can as leaders have intentions and be purposeful about our intentions in relation to others. There is still plenty of room for leadership, but this leadership will come in another wrapping

The future of leadership: identity forming

As the position element, structural element and power configuration of leadership will decrease in importance, the future concept of leadership will contain other elements. One of this is leadership as identity forming. Leaders lead groups or organisations, and groups or organisations are reflections of our identities (Stacey, 2003; Covey, 2004). According to Shaw (2002), the way we talk in the group or in the organisation reflects how we see ourselves in the organisation. New ways of talking are new ways of making sense of the group or the organisation and of ourselves (Weick, 2001). The experimental psychologist Kurt Lewin was the first to write about the importance of the group in shaping the behaviour of its members (Burnes, 2004). Individuals form groups and are also being formed by the groups. The important aspect, according to, for instance, the philosopher Hegel (1807), the sociologist Elias (1991) and the neurobiologist Cozolino (2006), is that the self is relational, and organisational movement resulting from the influence of some kind of leadership is then the shifting identities accomplished by organisational conversations.

People communicate in organisations to couple their practical activities in the organisation with those around them; to create meaning and to express identity. In these attempts, according to Shaw (2002), people are constructing relationships. What is interesting is how people develop and sustain certain ways of relating to each other in their conversations and then, from conversations, make sense of their surroundings and themselves. When leaders influence the way people talk in organisations, they construct new forms of relationships, and to construct new forms of relationships is to construct new ways of being for ourselves. These conclusions are supported by Stacey (2003) and Shaw (2002). What emerges from such conversations, and is continually iterated, is a diversity of identities in which each participant recognizes and is recognized in the differences (Stacey, 2003). One such difference is obviously the role of the leader. This is the emergence of leadership by an appointed leader or by a person not appointed who takes leadership in a given situation. The leader is as much formed by the group as he or she forms the group in his or her recognition of others (Griffin and Stacey, 2005). The (formal or informal) role of the leader emerges, and is continually iterated in social processes of recognition (Griffin, 2002). The act of leadership will more and more be created simultaneously between leaders and followers, as complexity increases.

Following this argumentation, the concept of leadership will in the future be better understood as a dynamic process which occurs between people rather than depending on the individual characteristics of the leadership role – appointed or not. Today's general obsession with the characteristics of the leadership role is coupled with a tendency to see an organisation in terms of its leader; to locate the responsibility for the life of an organisation, in its widest sense, with a special individual. Leadership is not static or permanently possessed (even though somebody has this in his or her job description) but emerges from the ongoing interaction between leaders and followers in the present. ''The real work of leadership is in leaving the models behind and discovering in the here and now, with this group of people, this organisation and in this context, what leadership is possible and needed'' (Binney *et al.,* 2005).

What is being recognized in the leader-follower relationship is a configuration of power in which the power balance is tilted towards the leader (Griffin and Stacey, 2005). The one who is recognized as a leader (being formal, informal, appointed or not) is the one who has the capacity to influence the group. Obviously such a capacity is not static. The potential for a shift in power is therefore present in any given moment as long as there is interaction going on. Who is momentarily taking the lead will therefore be whoever is presently able to make tentative sense of what is going on. The reason for this paradoxical nature of leadership is therefore that it is a complex process of being and not being in control. The act of acknowledging feelings of not being in control is essential to the process that enables others to act.

We will also claim that leaders' struggle to hold on to a sense of order in a world with increasing uncertainty is linked to a wish to reduce anxieties associated with disorder and unpredictability. In their anxieties, leaders and employees in organisations want to believe that someone, somewhere, is in control. However, the notion of the leader as the one who is in control is not consistent with reality, as discussed above. Precious leadership time and effort will, in the future, be better spent on paying attention to identity and relationship issues.

The argumentation in this paper is a way of understanding the role of the leader that is different from today's dominant paradigm in which the leader stands outside the system: designs interventions and tries to stay in control. We argue that the concept of leadership will, in the future, be about dealing with the unknown and the emergence of new patterns of communication and behaviour. The action of the leader is therefore not split off from the nature of leadership, and we contend that the future of leadership is then best understood as the movement from idealized to the actual experience between people. This claim is supported by the work of Griffin and Stacey (2005).

We contend that leaders act and leadership is therefore action. Leaders emerge in the interaction between people as the act of recognizing and being recognized, as well as the

act of gaining the necessary trust, credibility, and respect to perform as a leader. Leadership is then an emergent phenomenon of people in interaction. The leader is embodied in an individual person but, more importantly, leadership is a social phenomenon that emerges only in interaction – and has no value without interaction.

In terms of leadership capabilities, it is therefore our view that we more and more will speak of the forming of leadership identity rather than skills/characteristics/traits, the former containing movement as opposed to the latter. This forming of leadership identity is a result of hard work related to the understanding and development of oneself. An in-depth study by George *et al.* (2007) on how people become and remain leaders showed that individuals do not have to be born with any universal characteristics or traits of a leader. Following their findings, they argue that leadership begins with an understanding of individual leaders' own life; understandings which involved overcoming difficult experiences and using these events to give meaning to people's lives. Today's debate about leadership skills/characteristics/style, suggest something permanent can exist and be possessed by a person appointed to the task. We think that rather than viewing leadership as something that can be possessed, it should be viewed as a dynamic process emerging between people (dependent obviously on context but, more importantly, on identity and relationships.

Leadership in the future: paying attention to relationships

The future concept of leadership will emerge not only as a function of identity, but also as a result of relationships. This is the forming and being formed relationship between leaders and followers in a group. Recent developments in the field of neuroscience have showed that we live in constant relationship to other people and that these people play a part in regulating our social and emotional behaviour. According to the clinical psychologist Cozolino (2006), the human brain itself is a social organ, and brains themselves exist and develop in relationship to other brains.

Such shifting relationships between people in a group are predominately governed by dynamic (emotions, trust, motivation, identity issues), social (group forming and norming), cognitive (perception, learning, knowledge gathering), and coordination/power related psychological processes. Current approaches to leadership theory have, in the past few years, given attention to the area of relationships. Models and theories have been produced to account for such thinking. Chief examples are the work by Peter Senge (1990). He talks about visions – visions as governing ideas of the organisation – as well as purpose and values, all together governing what people in organisations believe in. By this, Senge wants to stimulate emotional, motivational, identity, group norms, and cognitive issues. Another example is the research by Daniel Goleman *et al.* (2002). They prescribe that leaders should pay attention to emotional intelligence; how we handle ourselves and our relationships can be managed to determine success in business and personal life. On the cognitive side, the Harvard psychologist Howard Gardner (2004) has provided influential insights. He draws on cognitive research to provide frameworks that bring about significant changes in perspectives and behaviours. Other examples of the prescriptions on how to better manage relationships in organisations include work by Haslebo (2004), Gratton (2000), and several others, as well as the steady stream of new (and re-circulated) tools and methods such as storytelling, vision building, communication models, motivational concepts, team building, value development, and cultural discovery, just to mention a few of the concepts in widespread use in organisations today and even more so in the future.

In using such tools and methods, a leader should note that the psychological processes in question are not manageable, but emerge between people influenced by communication as a result of a complex mixture of motivation, trust, feelings, emotions, group norms, knowledge acquisition, learning, sense making, as well as hard and soft power play (Kaufmann and Kaufmann, 1996). If leadership influence is designed and planned for by the use of a certain method or tool, we argue that it is not possible to design people's response to these, and predict how people will react to planned initiatives, interventions, campaigns, and the like.

Following this, we contend that much of today's mainstream practice of leadership is dealing with organisational complexity by adding more complexity – by the use of more and more sophisticated management tools, concepts, and models. This is, in our view, a paradox because relational issues of leadership are created simultaneously between leaders and followers. Leadership is the process which occurs between people emerging from the ongoing interaction between leaders and followers in the present. Taking account of relationships in the act of leading is therefore better understood as leading by acting in the moment but at the same time paying attention to our experience. This will mean allowing for a thinking and feeling self in the presence of others through listening to one's own bodily physical, cognitive and emotional responses and taking account of these in the act of leadership. This is leading by being reflexive when in a leadership role and, by this, influencing the processes of ongoing interaction between people. Leading this way is certainly a risky process at an identity level where personal stakes may be high, hence we claim that leadership in the future is certainly not for everyone. Such argument is supported by the work of George *et al.* (2007). These researchers have found that successful leaders frame their life stories in ways that allow them to see themselves not as passive observers of their lives but as individuals who determinedly develop self-awareness from their experiences. Not everyone has the capacity to transform such experiences into something of value for their way of leading. Neither will everyone necessarily connect with a leader's way of framing his or her experiences into a personal take on what is important while leading.

Conclusion

In this article we have explored the concept of leadership in the future. We have argued that the leadership is better viewed as a psychology based on relationships between people, by focusing attention not on some abstract macro-system but on what people are actually doing in their relationships with each other on a micro-level.

This has important implications for the future concept of leadership, meaning that leaders do not always have choices and are not in control, as the current management paradigm suggests. We therefore argue that leaders today, and even more in the future, will need to engage, with their intentions, in interactions with others who have their own intentions, out of which something is created that is under no one individual's control.

We conclude in this article that sustainable and forceful leadership will more and more come from sources of recognition, credibility, trust, and respect, all psychological processes that emerge from human interaction. The future concept of leadership is therefore best understood as the emergence of identity and relationships as central to the acts of leadership. Leadership is action and leading entails paying attention to one's own experience when interacting with others; how people relate to another. Hence, leading people in organisations is an emergent phenomenon when people interact. The leader is embodied in the individual but, more importantly, leadership is a social phenomenon loaded with symbolism and power relating that emerges through interaction between leaders and followers.

This interaction will be the essence of the future concept of leadership when leading people in organisations – a complex dynamic process of being and not being in control. The necessity for leaders to acknowledge feelings of not being in control is crucial to a leadership process that enables others to experience their ability to act in the moment.

References

Ancona, D., Malone, T.W., Orlikowski, W.J. and Senge, P.M. (2007), ''In praise of the incomplete leader'', *Harvard Business Review*, February.

Beinhocker, E.D. (2006), *The Origin of Wealth: Evolution, Complexity and the Radial Remaking of Economics*, Random House Business Books, London.

Bennis, W.G. (1959), ''Leadership theory and administrative behavior: the problem of authority'', *Administrative Science Quarterly*, Vol. 4, pp. 259-60.

Binney, G., Wilke, G. and Williams, C. (2005), *Living Leadership: A Practical Guide for Ordinary Heroes*, Pearson Education, Harlow.

Burnes, B. (2004), ''Kurt Lewin and the planned approach to change: a re-appraisal'', *Journal of Management Studies*, Vol. 41 No. 6.

Collins, J. (2001), ''Level 5 leadership'', *Harvard Business Review*, January, pp. 66-76.

Covey, S.R. (2004), *The 8th Habit: From Effectiveness to Greatness*, Simon & Schuster, New York, NY.

Cozolino, L. (2006), *The Neuroscience of Human Relationships: Attachment and the Developing Social Brain*, W.W. Norton & Company, New York, NY.

Drucker, P. (2004), ''What makes an effective executive'', *Harvard Business Review*, June, pp. 58-63.

Elias, N. (1991), *The Society of Individuals*, Blackwell Publishing, Oxford.

Gardner, H. (2004), *Changing Minds: The Art and Science of Changing Our Own and Other People's Minds*, Harvard Business School Press, Boston, MA.

George, B., Gergen, D. and Sims, P. (2007), *True North: Discovering Your Authentic Leadership*, John Wiley & Sons, San Francisco, CA.

Goleman, D., Boyatzis, R. and McKee, A. (2002), *Primal Leadership – Realizing the Power of Emotional Intelligence*, Harvard Business School Press, Boston, MA.

Gratton, L. (2000), *Living Strategy: Putting People at the Heart of Corporate Purpose*, Pearson Education, Harlow.

Griffin, D. (2002), *The Emergence of Leadership: Linking Self-organization and Ethics*, Routledge, London.

Griffin, D. and Stacey, R. (2005), *Complexity and the Experience of Leading Organizations*, Routledge, London.

Hamel, G. and Breen, B. (2007), *The Future of Management*, Harvard Business School Press, Boston, MA.

Haslebo, G. (2004), *relationer i Organisationer – En verden til forskel*, Dansk Psykologisk Forlag, Virum.

Hegel, G.W.F. (1807), *The Phenomenology of the Spirit*, Joseph Anton Goebhardt, Bamberg, Oxford University Press, Oxford, translated by A.V. Miller.

Kaufmann, G. and Kaufmann, A. (1996), *Psykologi i organisasjon og ledelse*, 3 utgave, Fagbokforlaget, Bergen.

Mintzberg, H. (2003), ''The five minds of a manager'', *Harvard Business Review*, November, p. 54.

North, D.C. (2005), *Understanding the Process of Economic Change*, Princeton University Press, Princeton, NJ.

Senge, P.M. (1990), *The Fifth Discipline: The Art and Practice of the Learning Organization*, Doubleday, New York, NY.

Shaw, P. (2002), *Changing Conversations in Organizations: A Complexity Approach to Change*, Routledge, London.

Stacey, R.D. (2003), *Strategic Management and Organizational Dynamics: The Challenge of Complexity*, Pearson Education Limited, Harlow.

Weick, K.E. (2001), *Making Sense of the Organization*, Blackwell Publishing, Malden.

Yukl, G. (2006), *Leadership in Organizations*, 6th ed., Pearson Education, Upper Saddle River, NJ.

Further reading

Arthur, W.B., Durlauf, S.N. and Lane, D.A. (1997), *The Economy as an Evolving System II*, Addison-Wesley, Reading, MA.

Badaracco, J.L. Jr (2006), *Questions of Character: Illuminating the Heart of Leadership through Literature*, Harvard Business School Press, Boston, MA.

Charan, R. (2005), ''Conquering a culture of indecision'', *Harvard Business Review on Leading through Change*, Harvard Business School Press, Boston, MA.

Collins, J. and Porras, J. (1994), *Build to Last: Successful Habits of Visionary Companies*, HarperCollins Publishers, New York, NY.

Csikszentmihalyi, M. (1996), *Creativity: Flow and the Psychology of Discovery and Invention*, Harper Collins Publisher, New York, NY.

Dennett, D. (1990), ''Memes and the exploitation of imagination'', *J Aesthetics Art Criticism*, No. 48, pp. 127-35.

IBM Business Consulting Services (2004), *Your Turn – The Global CEO Study 2004*, Armonk, NY.

IBM Business Consulting Services (2006), *Expanding the Innovation Horizon – Global CEO Study 2006*, Armonk, NY.

Kets de Vries, M. (2001), *The Leadership Mystique: A User's Manual For the Human Enterprise*, Financial Times Prentice-Hall, Englewood Cliffs, NJ.

Kim, W.C. and Mauborgne, R. (2005), *Blue Ocean Strategy: How to Create Uncontested Market Space and Make the Competition Irrelevant*, Harvard Business School Press, Boston, MA.

Rock, D. and Schwartz, J. (2006), ''The neuroscience of leadership'', *Strategy + Business*, No. 43.

Saunders, R.M. (2005), ''Communicating change: a dozen tips from the experts'', *Managing Change to Reduce Resistance*, Harvard Business School Press, Boston, MA.

Schein, E.H. (1992), *Organizational Culture and Leadership*, 2nd ed., John Wiley & Sons, San Francisco, CA.

Shotter, J. (1993), *Conversational Realities: Constructing Life through Language*, Sage Publications, London.

Stacey, R.D. (Ed.) (2005), *Experiencing Emergence in Organizations: Local Interaction and the Emergence of Global Patterns*, Routledge, London.

Streatfield, P.J. (2001), *The Paradox of Control in Organizations*, Routledge, London.

Corresponding author

Tom Karp can be contacted at: tom@karp.as