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## **Introduction:**

Research on leadership in organizations mainly focuses dyadic influence, primarily between supervisor and subordinates (Lichtenstein and Plowman, 2009). Moreover, much of this work does not consider context, and yet Osborn et al. (2002) argue that “leadership and its effectiveness, in large part, is dependent on context, pg. 797”. Leadership research and theorizing is therefore generally dyadic and a-contextual. However, organizations are often described as complex systems or as a system operating within other systems and so leadership in organizations is fundamentally a systems phenomenon (Lichtenstein et al., 2006). Nevertheless, despite its evident importance, there are surprisingly few theories that explain the leadership of a system. Yammarino and Dansereau (2008) confirm that relatively little leadership research addresses levels of analysis which would be evident in a system. Even their Special Issue only considers the relationship between an individual (the leader) and a whole group (or part thereof) and not a wider discussion of levels. Responding to this void in leadership theory that “explicates how phenomena interconnect across organizational levels, pg. 133”, Kinicki et al. (2011) develop a multilevel systems model of leadership based on the principles of control theory with appropriate feedback loops. However they use this to explain how the strategic leadership of the top management team affects performance at different levels *within* the organization, and not beyond, so even their ambition is constrained to a part of the system.

This developmental paper begins to address the absence of a theory of systems leadership in existing literature first by characterizing organizations as a system, embedded in a system of systems and identifying the leadership challenge, and second by briefly describing four approaches to investigating leadership available currently and how they may potentially support a theory of systems leadership. It concludes with an enumeration of areas for further development.

## **System / System of systems:**

Organizations may be characterised as a sociotechnical system, which is defined as “the synergistic combination of humans, machines, environments, work activities and organisational structures and processes that comprise a given enterprise (Carayon, et al., 2015; pg. 550)”. This combines the local context where work activities are performed with wider organizational structures and culture, plus the social, economic, legal and political context within which the organization sits. Clearly this implies that elements interact with each other creating influence not only on themselves through feedback, but on other elements through feed-forward processes. It also suggests that there are multiple levels and that influence occurs across and between them. Rasmussen (1997) provides such a model for understanding safety systems. Furthermore it suggests that reductionist analysis of separate elements of an organization should be resisted and that holistic approaches to the investigation of organizations and the processes and practices within them (including leadership) are required.

Adopting a systems perspective on organisations and their contexts necessarily focuses attention on the achievement of coordination and control. Traditionally systems have been viewed as stand-alone entities where the goals of the system are unitary, problems are defined, boundaries are fixed (Keating et al., 2003) and the achievement of coordination and control is relatively straightforward. However systems rarely operate in isolation. As ambiguity and uncertainty increase so context becomes more important. And context itself

may be a system. Hence it may be more appropriate to consider systems of systems, where one complex system is embedded within another. This substantially alters the characteristics of the context: boundaries become fluid; goals are pluralistic; and problems are not only an inherent feature of the systems components, but emerge as a consequence of the interaction of system components (Keating et al., 2003). Management of boundaries and interfaces between components becomes crucial for effective operations and communication is key for coordination and control (Maier, 1998).

Leaders are charged with solving organizational problems (Grint, 2005). As noted above, the problems faced in a system differ from those in a system of systems. This distinction resembles the difference between tame and wicked problems defined by Rittel and Webber (1973), where on the one hand a known process will provide a clear solution to a tame problem and on the other solutions to wicked problems are satisficing and can only be found by asking the right questions. This has implications for the leader and leadership in these interactively complex systems – a simple focus on leader and follower and the goal is insufficient (Drath et al., 2008). The paper now attends to this.

## **Approaches to Leadership:**

### *1. Emergent Leadership*

A characteristic feature of systems (including Complex Adaptive Systems) is the property of emergence. Consequently, leadership occurs through the interactions of the systems components, rather than through the actions of a single individual, and emerges throughout the organization / system and is expressed in the outcomes. Lichtenstein and Plowman (2009) develop a conceptual model for the leadership of emergence. This indicates how nine behaviours can trigger four conditions that generate novelty. These behaviours resemble those of the adaptive leader described by Heifetz and Laurie (1997) in their consideration of the work of leadership. Heifetz and Laurie's (1997) distinction between technical and adaptive leadership can also be related to Rittel and Webber's (1973) typology of tame and wicked problems, describing the leader behaviours necessary to solve two different types of system problems.

However, Tourish (2019) in a recent critique of complexity leadership observes that in many studies adopting a complexity perspective the emergence of leadership is not explained rather it is assumed. In these studies leadership is considered to be independent of the system, lying outside it, acting upon it rather than emerging from within it. Nevertheless, adaptive or emergent leadership may indicate behaviours necessary for systems leadership.

### *2. Relational Leadership*

Historically relational leadership considered leaders to be discrete independent entities (Uhl-Bien, 2006). More recently, this relational perspective has focussed attention on the process of relating and not on the person, leading to the view that leadership arises from the connections and interdependencies of the organization with their members and their surroundings. This is a quite different philosophical perspective but one that more closely resembles the interactive complexity within a system. From an entity perspective coordination and control are achieved through the properties and behaviours of individual agents, and how these interact, for example in Leader-Member Exchange (LMX) Theory. In contrast to these entity approaches, a relational perspective focuses not on the individual but

on the collective and the communication of meaning between members of this collective, i.e. the social processes, and the context. Therefore, systems leadership may be achieved not through the work of individuals but through establishing shared meaning.

### 3. *Shared – Distributed Leadership*

Although the terms ‘shared’ and ‘distributed’ leadership are often used interchangeably (Fitzsimons et al., 2011) they have distinct definitions. Shared leadership stems from the ‘team-based’ literature and is defined as a “team process where leadership is carried out by the team as a whole, rather than solely by a single designated individual (Ensley et al., 2006; pg 220)”. While this conception of leadership may have application in a system it is unlikely that the team will cover the whole system.

On the other hand, distributed leadership refers to the examination of “how leadership may be handed over between people from one hierarchical level to another over time as well as across intra-organizational and inter-organizational boundaries (Denis et al., 2012; pg 213)”. The outcome of this type of leadership is demonstrated through the synergies achieved by collective action (Fitzsimons, et al., 2011). Distributed leadership may therefore effectively describe how leadership can be enacted in a systems context through concertive action and conjoint agency.

### 4. *DAC Leadership*

In a challenge to existing thinking, Drath et al. (2008) proposed that leadership has to do with the presence of Direction, Alignment and Commitment (DAC) rather than leaders, followers and shared goals. This is a different ontology of leadership. One that is focused on outcomes and which integrates across levels of analysis (Drath et al., 2008), enabling leadership to be stretched over different levels in a system, such that appropriate system level goals can be achieved. Within and across the system this conceptualisation of leadership requires a consideration and discussion of overall goals, aims and mission (Direction), coordination and organization of knowledge and work (Alignment), and a willingness to subsume personal interests for the benefit of the wider system (Commitment).

## **Conclusion**

While it is unlikely that any of these four different perspectives on leadership will provide complete insight into the leadership of a system, together they may contribute to our understanding of the leadership challenge of the systemic reality of modern organizations. The research challenge is to determine the extent to which these perspectives may be integrated into a single unifying concept of systems leadership. To achieve this, the work described in this developmental paper needs to be progressed by:

- i. Determining the underlying ontology and epistemology of each of these approaches;
- ii. Considering the methodologies and associated units of analysis used for empirical investigation of leadership within each perspective;
- iii. Establishing more explicitly the boundary conditions surrounding the application of each perspective;
- iv. Specifying how they exert their effects to create systems level outcomes;
- v. Drawing on the work of Schneider and Somers (2006) to more precisely define the systems perspective in use, differentiating between open systems described by general systems theory and complex adaptive systems developed from complexity theory.

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