Chapter 5
Systemic Leadership: Ethical and Effective

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Editors' Introduction This volume devotes a number of chapters to the possible productive interface that there may be between systemic thinking, leadership, and gender. Systems thinking help us understand the relational networks and dynamics that individuals encounter within organizations, and hence provide us with clues as to why leadership patterns emerge in specific ways. The next few chapters present us with a more theoretical overview of systems thinking and explain the notion of "systemic leadership". After we have made the claims and assumptions of this approach clear, we will move towards a more focused discussion of what systemic leadership offer both male and female leaders in various contexts. In this first theoretical exposé of systemic leadership, Collier and Esteban propose that in postindustrial economies, "systemic leadership," that is, leading from the middle of an organization and managing that system, its human participants and its paradoxes – creates solid and sustainable communities where participatory management is successfully achieved.

Introduction

Work in leadership ethics should generate different ways of conceptualizing leadership, and new ways of asking research questions" (Ciulla, 1998, p. 18). This paper responds to that challenge by attempting to develop a view of leadership appropriate to post-industrial organizations[1] in situations of rapid change. Radical change is now the most pervasive feature of organizational life. Large organizations experience continual structural change associated with delayering, mergers and

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acquisitions, and joint ventures. Smaller companies, particularly those in the information technology sector, grapple with new technologies and fast-changing market conditions. Not-for-profit organizations face continual challenges to their identity and viability as a result of changing social, economic and political environments. It therefore no longer seems appropriate to characterise such organizations as discrete isolated entities. They are more usefully understood as "open systems" (Scott, 1998) nested within a fast-changing global systemic environment, shaping and in turn being shaped by that environment. In this climate of change organizations everywhere have found that survival requires a flexibility which allows continuous organizational renewal as practices and procedures continually adapt to changing circumstances (Senge, 1990; Kanter et al., 1992). Hierarchical organizational forms and bureaucratic control systems can be experienced as hindrances to that renewal, and are frequently abandoned in favour of flatter and more flexible ways of working that allow all organizational members to exercise their creativity and contribute to organizational survival.

It is in this context that this paper considers the nature of leadership. In organizational environments where change creates uncertainty and unpredictability understandings of leadership such as deciding what has to be done, developing strategy and vision, or having the final say, no longer make sense. Effective responsiveness to changing environmental and technological conditions requires entrepreneurial decision-taking across the organization, managerial autonomy, and the freedom to take risks and make mistakes. No one person has the knowledge or the overview to be the leader: leadership qualities of competence, judgement and decision-taking are needed throughout the organization (Ghoshal and Bartlett, 1998; Wheatley, 1999; Stacey, 1996; Senge, 1997; Bennis, 1999). In traditional hierarchical organizations purposes are formulated and pursued by those who control the organization, but in post-industrial corporate contexts there is shared responsibility, and this implies shared purposes and a shared commitment to pursue the common good.

What kind of organizational model supports this diffused view of leadership? We surely have to discard the hierarchical command and control models which form the basis of traditional organization theory. More metaphorical theoretical understandings (Hassard and Pym, 1990) which emphasise structure, function, negotiation, power, or symbolic construct also fail to reflect the reality and fluidity of organizational change situations. For these reasons theorists wishing to describe organizations in post-industrial situations borrow "systems" metaphors from biology and from physics (Flood and Jackson, 1991; Brown and Eisenhardt, 1998; Wheatley, 1999), and these metaphors allow us to theorise the organization in ways which clarify what leadership in these organizations entails.

Post-industrial organizations can be "redescribed"[1] as *complex adaptive* systems. They are complex because they are the result of multiple interconnecting relationships, so that the way they respond to their environment has the effect of creating new connections and thus increasing their complexity. They are adaptive in the sense that they develop fit to the forces of change in environments and technologies while retaining the coherence of their own purpose. They are systemic in that they

survive by exchanging energy, information and materials with the wider ecologies of which they are a part (Collier and Esteban, 1999, pp. 177–178).

Leadership in "Chaotic" Organizations

Complex adaptive systems are by definition self-organizing since complexity cannot be organized, and it is by means of self-organization that chaotic order emerges. In organizational terms this means firstly that organizing is the achievement of the members of the organization, so that the organization has no "reified existence independently of this process" (Hosking, 1988), and secondly that the process is participative in an operational sense. In the natural world the processes of self-organization are fed by energy, and the more turbulent the environment the more energy is needed to sustain self-organization (Anderson, 1999). In organizations the organizing process gains energy from outside in that it is driven by product, competitive and global innovations, and it gains energy internally by means of new ideas, improvisations and strategies. The organization is therefore emergent, characterised by "the unanticipated arising of new higher-level patterns or structures functioning according to new laws and consisting of new properties" (Goldstein, 1998, p. 1). It is continually created and recreated by self-organizing processes, and this emergence creates the newness, difference and self-renewal essential to sustainability. But survival is not the only objective, the organization must also go forward; hence management literature speaks of these organizations as not merely adaptive, but as generative in the sense that they continually find new ways of looking at the world which generate innovation and continual organizational renewal (Kezborn, 1998; Kets de Vries, 1996). We shall adopt this nomenclature.

Leadership in these generative organizations is the systemic capability, diffused throughout the organization and nurtured by its members, of finding organizational direction, of generating and maintaining continual renewal by encouraging, harnessing and directing creative and innovative capabilities, while simultaneously holding in tension the processes of responsiveness to the environment on the one hand, and the maintenance of internal integrity of purpose on the other. Systemic leadership exists throughout the organization; it is grounded in the freedom of organizational members to be creative, and to generate processes and practices by which creativity can be translated into organizational learning, and into ethical and effective choices (Krantz, 1990; Edgeman and Scherer, 1999; Edgeman and Dahlgaard, 1998).[2] This view conceptualises the nature of leadership not in terms of the person of the leader, not as structurally defined or imposed, but as an ongoing direction-finding process, which is innovative and continually emergent.

It may be argued that this view bears little relation to the various understandings of leadership in the literature which speak of actions or characteristics of "leaders" (Bass, 1990; Burns, 1978; Rost, 1991; Northouse, 1991). However, the notion of systemic leadership is coherent with the two strands of leadership studies which have been dominant in the last decade – the relational aspect of leadership in terms of qualities of collaboration, stewardship, trust and care (Bennis and Nanus, 1985;

Kouzes and Posner, 1995; Block, 1993; Greenleaf, 1977), and the role of leadership in influencing direction and ensuring quality, performance and customer focus in organizational change situations (Dering, 1998). Furthermore, this view of leadership is reflected in the new softer focus, which is emerging from the work of consultants, and others involved with change organizations in turbulent environments. Warren Bennis talks about the "end of leadership" and its replacement with diverse creative alliances (Bennis, 1999). It is "the way in which human beings create new realities... It is really quite important that we begin thinking about leadership communities – diverse people, working collaboratively in the service of something they care about" (Fulmer and Keys, 1998, p. 39). And in the knowledge era which is now upon us "leadership in the future will be distributed among diverse individuals and teams who share the responsibility for creating the organization's future" (Senge, 1997, p. 30). However, while these views support the notion of systemic leadership, they do not offer detailed descriptive or normative accounts of its processes. We now develop these aspects.

Dynamics of Systemic Leadership

Systemic leadership is the task of every member of the organization. However, there is a distinction to be made between systemic leadership and shared or collective leadership. Organizational members do not all lead at the same time, nor do they collectively participate in every decision. The leadership dynamic is asymmetric: people have different capabilities, and roles and responsibilities will shift between different people at different times (Kelly and Allison, 1998). We think of systemic leadership as analogous to lightening which moves across the organizational landscape, touching different people and energizing them at different times. The process of systemic leadership is grounded in three descriptors.

Influence and Intention

Systemic leadership is a relational and hence political process based on "mutual influencing, bargaining, coalition building" (Barker, 1997, p. 351). People collaborate to realise their shared aspirations, but since values and ideals will always differ' reciprocal interaction will involve "constructive conflict" (Kets de Vries, 1996). Rost advances a supporting construct of leadership as "an influence relationship among leaders and their collaborators who intend real changes that reflect their mutual purpose" (Rust, 1993, p. 99). Rost's view emphasises the multidirectional nature of the influence process as it shifts within the organization; it also highlights the fact that the leadership process "intend" outcomes coherent with mutual purpose. Since systemic leadership involves all members of the organization intended outcomes represent a "common good", but because the links between purposes, actions and outcomes are never stable in chaotic situations, the "common good" (Burns, 1978; Barker, 1997, p. 351) has itself to be seen as an emergent outcome of systemic leadership.

Openness and Communication

Maintaining the tension between the processes of responding to environmental demands and organizational purposing hinges on the communicative capability of the organization. There must be a completely free flow of information and maximum openness; apart from the few things which need to remain confidential everything can and should be openly discussed (Fairtlough, 1999). Sharing information generates dialogue and questioning and thus potentiates learning. However, openness has to be not merely participative but also reflective in that people have to be prepared to challenge their own convictions and presuppositions, and if necessary dare to dissent from accepted positions. Deep openness is difficult to practice; it can expose vulnerabilities and thus provoke hostility, but it also nurtures trust because people recognise that the process of selforganization seeks to build on capability strengths rather than highlight weaknesses, so that mistakes are sources of growth rather than occasions for blame. People then learn from one another rather than privatizing their successes and hiding their errors.

Autonomy and Accountability

Although autonomy as a value has to be seen in the context of the needs of the group, each person has the obligation to become a fully responsible autonomous agent, committed to the project and the practices of systemic leadership. As autonomous agents people have the power of judgement and decision and the moral obligation to respect, trust and understand those with whom they work. Organizational agents must accept colleagues as they are: they must respect and affirm them as human persons rather than on the basis of status or achievement. They must recognise the right of others to create their own views of reality, to interpret experience in their own way, and to express their views in dialogue and debate. They must understand the capabilities of others and support their efforts. They must also recognise that others are uniquely responsible for their own performance, and therefore can be held accountable for it.

Community and Systemic Leadership

The generative quality of systemic leadership as it "grows" creativity and fosters organizational learning changes the basis of relationship between the organization and its members from one of contract to one of community (Dallmayr, 1978), to "a social configuration in which our enterprises are defined as worth pursuing and our participation is recognisable as competence" (Wenger, 1998, p. 5). The *source* of integration shifts from goals to values as people come together and share mutually agreed purposes so that they can "achieve consensus, assume responsibility, work for the common good and build community" (Rost, 1991, p. 124). Generative

organizations become "agencies of community" (SeIznick, 1992, p. 231) in a way which reaches beyond the boundaries of the organization to customers and suppliers, local communities, consultants, academia, and others touched by the activities of the company (Brown and Duguid, 1991).

Systemic leadership thus nurtures community. In this it is deeply ethical because it is the process of belonging to a community which is constitutive of identity (Wenger, 1998, p. 191). Participants in processes of shared leadership will realise identification within the organizational community in three ways. Firstly they will identify through engagement; they will invest themselves in what they do and in their relations with others. Secondly they will identify through imagination. They will see themselves as part of the organizational drive for excellence and efficiency in the turbulent environmental context (although it also has to be said that stress or overload may generate a sense of dissociation or detachment). Thirdly, and perhaps most significantly, they will identify through alignment of purposes, allegiance to the organizational ethos, and compliance to group or organizational norms (Wenger, 1998, pp. 192–193). Within the context of the routines and procedures, habits and rules by which the organization is maintained, the generative organization functions as a "community-of-communities" (Brown and Duguid, 1991). We focus on three aspects of these communities, each of which has its archetype in ethical theory.

Communities of Commitment

Organizational members share commitment in communities of commitment. Research suggests that we can think of the focus of commitment in terms of compliance, identification and internalisation (Becker, 1993). People commit to the project, and in chaotic organizations where there is unpredictability this commitment can be defined in very wide terms. On the other hand, people have to be confident that their compliance will not be abused, that the human and ethical face of systemic leadership will ensure that they are not sent to Hong Kong for 6 months at 2 days notice! People also commit to the relationships and associations they have with others and with the group; they adopt attitudes and behaviours which identify them with their colleagues. Real deep commitment enhances shared meanings and understandings, and hence underpins reciprocity (Kelly and Allison, 1998, p. 75). And finally, commitment allows people to internalise the goals and values of the organization so that they become congruent with their own value systems.

However, the commitment demanded is not only to the good of the organization or of its members. The commitment is also to achieve the purpose of the organization as a means to the achievement of the common good. "The nature of the commitment required to build learning organizations goes beyond people's typical commitment to their organizations. It encompasses commitment to the changes needed in the larger world and to seeing our organizations as vehicles for bringing about such changes" (Kofnan and Senge, 1993, p. 6). This gives a deeply ethical slant to the way in which we understand the generative organization. Learning in

generative organizations is needed not simply to ensure survival, but also because such organizations have a responsibility to cultivate their ability to bring about the kind of change which makes the world a better place to live in.

Communities of Discernment

Shared leadership develops a vision of the "good" but in its efforts to realize that vision it is continually called upon to make judgements and decisions which are morally "right". These communities represent a unique demonstration of a Habermasian "discourse ethics" communication framework within which moral argumentation can take place. Although composed of separate and different people, as a community of selves with shared purposes and commitments leadership communities have that sense of solidarity which is a precondition for rational collective moral choice, and a communicative openness which predisposes to effective moral discourse. They are used to working in a situation where all participate fully, all can speak openly, all are listened to, and all have sufficient trust to assent to the general consensus and to the consequences and side effects that the consensus may have for the welfare of individual participants (Habermas, 1993). The argument here is not that shared leadership communities necessarily always make right moral choices, it is rather that their constitution makes it more likely and more possible that they function as communities of discernment.

   The background to discernment is constituted by a context of generative conversations in which decisions are examined in the light of the organization's history and traditions, its "text" (Sonenschein and Collier, 1999). Reading this text is an interpretative process: participants in this "community of inquiry" connect with each other in a spirit of dialogue, they appeal to what they consider to be shared understandings to defend their own particular interpretations as to whether a given decision can be justified. It is in these ongoing conversations that organizational moralities develop, as people enquire into the systemic consequences of their actions rather than simply their local effects (Kofnan and Senge, 1993, p. 16). The subject matter of these conversations is always the stories told to illustrate the moral principles embedded in the "text", framed as "context" for the particular issue under discussion. Conversations are continuous, and moralities are never cast in concrete: the search for "the right" is hermeneutic in that meanings and interpretations change in the ongoing conversational process.

Communities of Practice

Communities of practice are the working fellowships bound by shared interests and tasks, where overt and tacit work practices and procedures form the structures which allow people to give meaning to what they do (Lave and Wenger, 1991; Wenger, 1998).[3] Participation in shared enterprises and the continual articulation of

experience serve to cement the community structures within which people interpret and reinterpret, and in the process "create their own personal histories of becoming" (Wenger, 1998, p. 5). It is in communities of practice that people learn on the job, so that as well as generating the knowledge which renews the organization these communities support and enrich the development of each member of that community (Liedtka, 1999, p. 7). Communities of practice are the backbone of the entrepreneurial and innovative side of organizational life: they generate the continual newness and difference necessary for organizational renewal. Creativity begins with the person, but its translation into learning happens in the context of everyday practice, as new ways of doing and responding are found. Systemic leadership supports the creativity and the knowledge ability of practice (Wenger, 1998, p. 243) and sustains the interconnectedness of communities of practice so that what is created and learnt in the context of practice becomes institutionalized and legitimated.[4]

Communities of practice not only foster excellence, but also sustain virtue. Alasdair MacIntyre identifies "practice" as the context within which virtue gains meaning in every historical understanding of virtue. By practice he means... any coherent and complex form of socially established co-operative human activity through which goods internal to that form of activity are realised in the course of trying to achieve those standards of excellence which are appropriate to, and partly definitive of, that form of activity, with the result that human powers to achieve excellence, and human conceptions of the ends and goods involved, are systematically extended (MacIntyre, 1985, p. 187).

Virtues are the qualities necessary to sustain and "make excellent" the relationships necessary to collaboration in practice (Collier, 1998, p. 630).[5] MacIntyre distinguishes the "goods" associated with shared practice as "goods of excellence" and "goods of effectiveness" (MacIntyre, 1988). Goods of excellence, those internal to the practice, are to be attained only in the context of a specific practice, whereas goods of effectiveness external to the practice are material and instrumental goods which can be achieved in other ways. Although MacIntyre does not distinguish between practices which are worth doing for their own sake and those which are purposive, as are corporate practices, it is clear that the virtues necessary to sustain purposive practices must include those which sustain the achievement of those purposes as well as those which sustain the doing of practice (Miller, 1994). The prime virtue here is that of justice both in its procedural and in its substantive sense. Procedural justice sustains practice, substantive justice provides the criteria by which practice may be assessed. Systemic leadership sustains communities of practice so that goods internal and external to organizational practice can contribute to the survival and growth of human and organizational capabilities.

Paradoxes of Systemic Leadership

Systemic leadership is characterised not only by community, but also by paradox, since the very nature of generative organizations is paradoxical (Cameron, 1986).

By paradox we mean:... an idea involving two opposing thoughts or propositions which, however contradictory, are equally necessary to convey a more imposing, illuminating, life-related or provocative insight into truth than either factor can muster in its own right. What the mind seemingly cannot think it must think: what reason is reluctant to express it must express (Slaate, 1968, p. 4). The important thing about paradox is that although it is inherently contradictory it is not resolved by abandoning one aspect in favour of another. In other words, paradoxes should not generate "either-or" outcomes, they must be managed by the emergence of a "both-and" mode of existence. In generative organizations, for instance, we find the simultaneous existence of loose and tight coupling (Orton and Weick, 1990), specialization and generalization (Lawrence and Lorsch, 1967), continuity and change of personnel, adherence to past strategies and search for new directions, conflict and harmony, and other similar paradoxical configurations (Cameron, 1986, p. 545). The ultimate paradox is that it is the acceptance and management of these tensions and contradictions which ensures effectiveness in these organizations (Peters and Waterman, 1982, p. 100). Paradox also characterises human interactions in these organizations. There is research evidence that workgroups face multiple inherent paradoxes, and that they must accept, confront and manage them if they are to be successful (Smith and Berg, 1987). The less able are groups to internalise and live with their paradoxes, the more likely they are to become entangled in stalemate and paralysis. The success of systemic leadership is contingent on the way its inherent paradoxes are managed. We identify the most significant of these as follows: "trading forms" (switching between leading and supporting) is initiated (Hatch, 1999). In both of these examples synergy in systemic leadership is achieved not by compromise, not by the resolution of conflict, but by working with the paradox and keeping both aspects in play rather than opting for one or other of the alternatives.

Unity-Diversity

Systemic leadership works with unity of purpose, but with a diversity of ideas and interests, so that conflict is inevitable. Although the dynamics of systemic leadership need to take account of the emotions and apprehensions that conflict triggers (Seiznick, 1992, p. 237), and although conflict disrupts and may cause injury, it may play an essential role in the emergence of creative solutions and group solidarity. Its suppression may lead to frustration and to the perpetuation of disagreement. The avoidance of conflict by means of confrontation or compromise blocks the potential gains to be achieved by means of conflict-management strategies which focus on the common task rather than on individual differences, thus allowing congruence to emerge. It is only in the process of playing that a string quartet develops the synergy associated with congruence, and each performance demonstrates a new variant of that (Murnighan and Conlon, 1991).

Asymmetry-Mutuality

The process of systemic leadership relies on the principle of mutuality, on the existence of a level playing field where every member has equal opportunity to exercise influence, enjoys equal regard, and feels able to express ideas and to use initiative. On the other hand, it is also clear that the process is asymmetric in that the weight of influence will be shifting and unequal as different people assume different roles with different responsibilities at different times (Barker, 1997). Asymmetries of influence, however temporary, are unavoidable. So also are asymmetries of competence. Systemic leadership must confront the implications of these inequalities while at the same time making it possible for all the members to act out their commitment to the purpose and the project, because generating emergence requires the ongoing responsible participation of all involved.

Discipline-Creativity

Ideas are the lifeblood of generative organizations, but they cannot all be implemented. There has to be a system for collecting and appraising ideas, for choosing the most promising and seeing that their development is resourced. This has to be managed in a disciplined way which does not discourage or suppress enthusiasm and inventiveness (Amabile, 1998). Organizations which do this most successfully have systems whereby people with ideas are helped to formalise them, champion them through committees, and bring them to the status of full research project (Fairtlough, 1999). If systemic leadership ensures that this is done in a way which is fully competent, manifestly just and openly fair then organizational effectiveness is enhanced.

Creation-Destruction

Developing new perspectives means shattering old paradigms and changing old processes and practices. Existing work patterns, organizational structures and power positions may have to be destroyed. The simultaneous existence of creation and destruction in the generative organization is analogous to a chrysalis process of continual disintegration and regeneration. This is not only a messy process, it is also painful in human terms. It produces anxiety and fear and creates tensions between the participants. Emotional attachments to the known and the familiar are strong, and people feel deeply hurt when existing certainties and expectations are shattered by corporate change and renewal. If trust is to flourish anxieties must be managed so that people feel safe enough to collaborate. One way of doing this is to introduce empathetic processes of dialogue in disparate groups of people, so that in communication with others fears are gradually calmed and trust can grow. Once trust prevails creativity can begin to grow in a "climate of generativity" which accepts that destruction and creation form one synergistic process (Kets de Vries, 1996, p. 36).

Conclusion: Systemic Leadership Is Ethical and Effective

Systemic leadership is good leadership in the ethical sense; it creates community, encourages autonomy and creativity and intends the common good in its purposes and practices. It is also good leadership in that it fosters emergence and organizational renewal, thus ensuring the success and the effectiveness of generative organizations. Each of these "goods" of systemic leadership is implicate in the other. Organizations in turbulent environments, whether they be business or not-for-profit, will not survive unless the commitment and the dedication of all those involved is enabled by the processes of what we have called systemic leadership. People will not flourish unless they are freed to realise their potential, and are supported and affirmed by those around them in a stimulating and challenging work environment. However, each of these goods, the moral good and the technical good (Ciulla, 1998, p. 13) has to be pursued in the context of the other; in other words, each constrains as well as enables the other. Organizational effectiveness has to be pursued in the context of a wider concern and care for the good of all those affected by organizational operations, and this concern may suggest limits to what can be achieved. On the other hand, organizational objectives and available resources provide boundaries to the degree to which the organization can achieve the common good. The challenge is to optimize effectiveness in the context of the ethical constraints, and simultaneously to optimize the common good in the context of efficiency constraints. The response to this challenge is expressed in the idea of stewardship (Block, 1993), the most basic of the functions of leadership (Senge, 1990, pp. 345–352). Systemic leadership shares this stewardship, and by implication accountability for outcomes, among all the members of the organization. In doing this it allows the organization to lead the community to a better future, and hence ultimately to serve the good of that community and the wider world.

Notes

1. "Post-industrial" refers to the shift from Fordist to post-Fordist models of production. Aspects of this shift include the end of the division of labour associated with the introduction of micro-electronics, the restoration of human control over work processes, job flexibility and worker responsibility, the growth of networks both within and between firms, large and small, and increasing flexibility in organizational structures (Ruigrok and van Tulder, 1995).
    "Redescription" using a new metaphor allows the engagement not merely of the analytical range of imagination, but also calls on emotional and aesthetic capacities (Hatch, 1999, p. 76).
2. The notion of systemic leadership does not require the abandonment of the distinction between leaders and followers. Leadership and followership may be fixed or varying in terms of the persons in whom they are embodied. However, the notion of systemic leadership is deeply relational, and it "places followership and leader-follower relationships squarely at the centre of systemic leadership capacity" (Krantz, 1990, p. 52).
3. The insight which forms the basis of the "community of practice" literature is that learning is always contextual. People learn together and they learn "on the job". Wenger (1998, p. 245) makes the distinction between the "designed" structure of an organization and the "emergent" structure of practice: "the point of design for learning is to make organizations ready for the

emergent by serving the inventiveness of practice and the potential for innovation inherent in its emergent structure. Institution and practice cannot merge because they are different entities".

4. A template for this process, as it happens in the context of organizational renewal, is outlined in Crossan et al., 1999. The authors suggest a framework which gives details of the differing "levels" which constitute the move from individual creativity to organizational learning, and of the way in which the "process" moves from individual intuition and interpretation to group interpretation and integration, and ultimately to organizational integration and institutionalization of knowledge.

5. These virtues are those we have already identified as sustaining systemic leadership openness, trust, respect, supportiveness, commitment, cooperation and judgement.

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