

# Systemic Leadership and the Emergence of Ethical Responsiveness

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**ABSTRACT.** The author of this paper argues that the responsibility to nurture and encourage a relationally responsive ethical attitude among the members of an organizational system is shared by all who participate in it. In the dynamic environment of a complex adaptive organizational system where it is impossible to anticipate and legislate for every potential circumstantial contingency, creating and sustaining relationships of trust has to be a systemic capacity of the entire organization. Leadership is socially constructed, as the need for it arises within the complex interactions between individuals and groups within organizations, and can therefore not be described as a set of traits or behaviors possessed by only certain individuals who occupy positions of authority. If the sharing of this kind of relational responsiveness to the everyday realities of organizational life is to be properly understood, it is important to consider it in its concrete institutional manifestations. The last section of this paper therefore explores how an organization, in which leadership is understood in relational terms and is shared by all, looks and functions.

**KEY WORDS:** systemic leadership, complexity, ethical leadership

## Introduction

“Tone at the top!”, “Clean the staircase from the top!”, “The fish rots at the head ...” Popular maxims such as these reflect the widely held belief that it is the leaders of an organization who are responsible for instigating and sustaining a corporate culture, which encourages employees to behave ethically. Corporate ethics management initiatives therefore invariably start with an effort to secure the board and executive leadership’s commitment to the proposed program (Hoffman and Driscoll, 1999). It is believed that once its captains are aware of the ethical risks their organization faces, the corporate

ship will retrieve its moral compass. The overhaul of an organizational culture is therefore largely seen as a top-down affair, with leadership setting the tone, implementing ethics management initiatives and leading by example.

That high-level individuals can and do play an important role in articulating priorities and shaping the sensibilities of employees within organizations is not to be disputed. However, if the role of such individuals is not to be denied, it is also not to be overestimated. An analysis of business organizations as complex adaptive systems suggests that the inef-fable sense of normative congruence that develops among those who participate in an organizational system over time may be of a far more complex and relational nature. It is certainly not something that lends itself to abstract design, nor can it be unilaterally imposed or sustained through the exercise of authority. This calls for a fundamental reconsideration of how the habits, beliefs, and expectations that inform the cultural dynamics within organizations culture are shaped and sustained. If the habits and behavior of individual employees are shaped and informed by the corporate culture in which they participate, the definition of “leadership” as such have to be reconsidered. If an organizational culture is not something that formally appointed leaders of an organization can design deliberately, impose unilaterally, or sustain willfully, then it stands to reason that the notion of accountability should also be fundamentally reconceived.

In what is to follow, I will explore the idea that the various iterations of organizational cultures are shaped not only by those in positions of authority, but also by all who participate in it. I will propose that the responsibility to nurture and encourage a relationally responsive ethical attitude among the members of an organizational system is shared by all

who participate in it. From this perspective, accountability is less a question of the leaders of an organization being held accountable *for* the actions and decisions of employees and more a case of all of the members of an organization being accountable *to* one another. Furthermore, I will argue that in the dynamic environment of a complex adaptive organizational system where it is impossible to anticipate and legislate for every potential circumstantial contingency, creating and sustaining relationships of trust has to be a systemic capacity of the entire organization. Focusing on the legal duty of executives to comply with regulation will not create the kind of moral responsiveness needed to navigate turbulent corporate environments. If the sharing of this kind of relational responsiveness to the everyday realities of organizational life is to be properly understood, it is important to consider it in its concrete institutional manifestations. In the last section of this paper, I therefore take a look at how an organization in which systemic leadership exists looks and functions.

### **The limits of current approaches to ethical leadership**

Much of the research on ethical leadership is focused on the characteristics and behaviors of certain individuals who occupy positions of authority. It primarily addresses the normative question: What *ought* an ethical leader to do? Those who believe that the key to ethical leadership lies in the answer to such questions draw on various philosophical paradigms to develop a definitive normative model of a leader's duties and responsibilities. The normative frameworks that are thus developed are typically based on principles, role-responsibilities or virtues. The work of Joanne Cuilla may be regarded as emblematic, in many respects, of this normative approach to leadership in business ethics literature. In response to some leadership theories that equate "good" leadership with effective leadership, Cuilla (2004) suggests that leaders have to be both ethical and effective. Cuilla draws on the literature that exists on servant leadership and transformative leadership to make this point. From within both these paradigms, there is acknowledgment of the fact that the interaction between leaders and their followers are of

paramount importance, yet there is no attempt to go beyond an understanding of leadership as the capacity of individuals.

Social scientists present us with another important exponent of the research on ethical leadership. Because of its focus on what *is*, rather than what *ought* to be, the more social scientific approach that is adopted by some business ethicists may in some respects be better suited to the study of ethical leadership within the context of a situated set of relational dynamics. This is, in a sense, what Brown and Trevino (2006, p. 595) propose in their analysis of leadership. They argue that there is a need for a more systematic and unified social scientific approach to the phenomenon of leadership as it is actually manifested in everyday business practice. Brown and Trevino draw on social learning theory to give an account of the effect that leaders have on the perceptions and actions of those with whom they interact. Social learning theory suggests that individuals tend to pay attention to, and emulate, credible, and attractive role models. From this perspective, they define ethical leadership as: "the demonstration of normatively appropriate conduct through personal actions and interpersonal relationships, and the promotion of such conduct to followers through two-way communication, reinforcement, and decision making."

Brown and Trevino performed a comparative analysis of the various approaches to leadership that share a concern for the moral dimension of leadership, namely transformational leadership, spiritual leadership, and authentic leadership. All these approaches emphasize the importance of concern for others (altruism), integrity, role-modeling, and ethical decision making. The meaningful difference between Brown and Trevino's notion of "ethical leadership" and all three other approaches is the fact that they emphasize the importance of moral management.<sup>1</sup> Brown and Trevino define ethical organizational culture or climate as the extent to which ethical behavior is encouraged or discouraged by organizational conditions, habits, practices, procedures, or infrastructure. One of the strengths of Brown and Trevino's social scientific approach to ethical leadership is the amount of attention that they pay to contextual factors that affect ethical leadership. They also touch on individual factors that may influence ethical leadership, such as personality

traits, the location of a leader's locus of control, Machiavellianism, and moral development. Naturally, there can be no dispute that individual factors such as these influence the behavior of individuals. However, when it comes to the influence of those who occupy formal positions of authority in an organizational system, individual factors like the ones that Brown and Trevino identify are drawn into a wider, more complex interplay of contextual and relational contingencies.

In a sense, Brown and Trevino's research demonstrates both the advantages and limitations of a social scientific approach to ethical leadership. While this approach allows ethicists to base their analysis of ethical leadership on real observations of organizational practice, its logic tends to remain too linear in orientation to adequately account for the complex and unpredictable ways in which members, at every level of an organizational system, shape and inform one another's sensibilities and perceptions. Brown and Trevino clearly subscribe to the view that leadership is the function of specific individuals who occupy positions of authority. They also seem to believe that it is these individuals who are capable of "managing" the sense of normative orientation of employees, whether through formal or informal systems.

Maak and Pless (2006) present an intriguing alternative to individualist models of ethical leadership. In their analysis, Maak and Pless propose a more relational understanding of the concept of leadership. They define responsible leadership as the art of building and sustaining relationships with all relevant stakeholders. This requires socialized, not personalized, leaders. Relational leaders are described as the weavers and facilitators of trusting stakeholder relations. They are said to be capable of balancing the power dynamics that are always at work in such relations by aligning the different values of the various parties in a way that serves everyone's interest alike. Maak and Pless see such leaders as servants, stewards, coaches, architects, storytellers, and change agents. Unlike many other leadership theorists, they are careful to note that the kind of leaders that they have in mind need not be exceptional individuals. Navigating the challenges of a complex and demanding stakeholder environment is a skill that is developed, practiced, and sustained over time by remaining contextually aware and

relationally responsive. This kind of leadership is developed when there is a real concern for sustaining relationships, protecting and nurturing others, and advancing shared goals. Though their approach presents some move away from individualistic leadership, Maak and Pless still seem to believe that leadership involves certain traits and behavior, albeit social in nature and developed in the process of sustaining relationships over time.

The focus that the studies on ethical leadership place on individuals is echoed in much of the broader leadership literature. Many, if not most, scholars who study leadership view it as a quality of particular individuals (Kanji and Moura, 2001, p. 704). This view of the nature of leadership is sometimes referred to as the "great man theory" or the "traits" approach. From this perspective, leadership is the privilege and responsibility of a select group of individuals who possess the requisite set of distinguishing traits. The implication of this view of leadership is clear: the impact of a leader on the beliefs and behavior of his or her subordinates is contingent on his or her possession and actualization of these distinguishing leadership traits. Kanji and Moura observe that there are also scholars who identify leadership, not with an inherent set of qualities or traits, but with the adoption of a specific set of observable behaviors. This view of leadership is also called the "behavioral approach" to leadership. In this view, the leaders of an organization are likely to be effective in their efforts to give shape and direction to their subordinates' activities only to the extent that they adopt and internalize this inspiring and persuasive set of habitual protocols. Finally, there are those who believe that a leader's effectiveness depends on how well his or her leadership style fits into a particular business and/or organizational context, also called the "situational" or "contingency" approach to leadership. Ensuring ethical responsiveness amongst the members of an organization is thus implicitly conceived of as a matter of finding the right kind of individual(s) to lead and inspire a particular organization in an appropriate sort of way (Plowman et al., 2007).<sup>2</sup>

Without denying the important role that these individuals do play within the dynamics that inform the meanings that are circulating within organizational cultures, I will argue that a discussion their role does not fully address the question of leadership

in complex organizational environments. There are a number of leadership theorists who have come to understand the limits of more individualistic approaches to leadership. Uhl-Bien et al. (2007) point out that much of leadership theory remains grounded in outdated assumptions regarding bureaucratic systems, which assume that control has to be rationalized. The belief has been that goals are rationally constructed and that managerial practices could be unilaterally employed to achieve them. In their review of recent leadership literature, Plowman et al. agree that many still believe that leaders make organization transformation happen by directing change. However, they argue that associating the notion of leadership merely with a few talented individuals cannot meet the challenges posed by a knowledge society in which it has become more appropriate to understand organizations as complex adaptive systems. Plowman et al. point out that leaders can no longer be viewed as controllers of organizational trends through their personality traits and leadership style. The “control” model of leadership depends on a view of organizations as mechanistic systems in which predictable forces, basic cause and effect relationships, hierarchical authority structures, and highly prescribed rule-sets are in operation. Organizations can no longer be depicted in this way. Other theorists, such as Kranz (1990, p. 50), for instance, concur that the realities of contemporary organizational life make top-down leadership control impossible. He suggests that the emergence of a post-industrial economic order has brought about dramatic changes in the character of authority relations within business organizations. The way in which individuals view their relationship with the organizations that employ them has also shifted significantly in recent years. Because of this, the exercise of influence and control can no longer be treated as if it is the exclusive privilege and responsibility of formally appointed leaders. Kranz explains that to compete globally, contemporary organizations have to continually respond and adapt to the contingencies and peculiarities of a variety of dynamic local markets. The effectiveness of an organization, within the contemporary business environment, thus increasingly depends on group collaboration and the ability of employees at all levels to exercise informed judgment. Hierarchical, bureaucratic decision-making structures are there-

fore no longer suitable or productive. As a result, obedience to commands and compliance with obligations have to be replaced with a more personal form of involvement with, and commitment to, the activities and goals of an organization.

In order to develop a more sophisticated understanding of the leadership dynamics in complex adaptive systems, it is helpful to distinguish between leaders, i.e., those appointed in positions of authority, and leadership as a broader construct. Uhl-Bien (2006, p. 657) describes two perspectives of what she calls “relational leadership.” These two perspectives are complementary, but each has distinct implications for the study and practice of leadership. The first is an *entity* perspective that maintains a focus on the identification of individual attributes of leaders as they engage in interpersonal relationships. The second is a *relational* perspective that views leadership as a process of social construction through which particular understandings of leadership come about and gain ontological saliency.

Uhl-Bien points out that even from the *entity* perspective, it is possible to redefine the reality of individual leaders from a more relational point of view. She argues that exchange-theory, the study of charisma as a social relationship between leaders and followers, and the notion of collective or relational selves are all examples of the move toward a more relational conception of leaders. Many leaders define themselves in terms of relationships with others and, as such, possess a social self-concept. It is however Uhl-Bien’s insistence on the *relational* perspective to leadership that allows us to redefine leadership in more systemic terms. It represents a move away from exclusively focusing on leaders as individual persons to the recognition of leadership as a process. From her *relational* perspective, Uhl-Bien defines the broader construct of leadership as a social influence process through which emergent coordination (such as social order) and change (new approaches, value, attitudes, and ideologies) are constructed and produced.

The literature on leadership within complex adaptive systems is helpful in exploring what it would mean to perceive leadership as something that is not restricted to those individuals who were appointed to positions of authority. The recent special edition of *Leadership Quarterly* (2007), focusing on Leadership in Complex Adaptive systems,

offers a number of detailed analyses of why the reality of contemporary organizational life demands a radical reconsideration of leadership as such. They point out the fact that within complex adaptive systems, it is impossible to control behavior, pass information to subordinates unilaterally, and reduce complexity. This view of organizations and its concomitant implications for leadership theory are by no means only recent developments. As early as 2000, scholars such as Collier and Esteban (2000) argued that post-industrial organizations can be described as “complex adaptive systems” characterized by multiple interconnecting relationships, unpredictability, and incessant, fast-paced change. They point out that a different kind of leadership emerges under such conditions.

### **Systemic leadership: a brief introduction**

The literature on “systemic leadership” differs from traditional “great man” theories in that it does not perceive leadership functions as something that is restricted to those individuals who were appointed to positions of authority. A number of organizational theorists have come to appreciate the value of the insight that an organization’s direction is influenced by all who participate in it. It is especially in the areas of organizational learning and change that a more systemic view of leadership capacities becomes invaluable.

According to Senge (2006) thinking and acting is not just the task of top managers. It is an ongoing process that must be integrated at all levels. Traditional “great man theories,” i.e., the view that leaders are special people and therefore the only ones who are properly equipped to set direction and make important decisions, are rooted in an individualistic and non-systemic perspective that impedes collective learning and change. Senge and Kaufer point out that leaders may play a variety of roles, such as designer, teacher, and steward, in the process of organizational learning. These roles are systemic in nature and require skills such as the capacity to build a shared vision, the ability to recognize and acknowledge all the various mental models that may be in operation within an organizational system, and the adeptness to draw on these insights to foster systemic patterns of thinking. Senge and Kaufer

(2000) also emphasize the crucial role of systemic leadership in facilitating change within an organization. They argue that when it comes to organizational change, it is a case of “communities of leaders, or no leadership at all.” Their research into the role of leadership in organizational change has brought these authors to redefine leadership as “a capacity of the human community to sustain significant change.” Leadership is viewed as a creative and collective process, distributed among diverse individuals who share the responsibility for creating the organization’s future.

Collier and Esteban argue that it is impossible for any one individual to possess the kind of comprehensive knowledge, determining influence, or unerring decision-making capacities that are required to respond appropriately and effectively to every challenge and opportunity that may present itself in and to an organization. They argue that conventional hierarchical demand-and-control models prove inadequate within the unpredictable and dynamic environment of a complex adaptive organizational system. The kind of priorities and goals that are formulated in boardrooms by individuals at the top of the corporate hierarchy and passed down from on high cannot provide the members of a complex adaptive organizational system with an adequate or meaningful form of orientation. Post-industrial corporate contexts are shaped and moved instead by goals and priorities that emerge from within the organizational system and are thus recognized by all who participate in it. From this perspective, the circulation of influence within an organization is not unidirectional or hierarchically centered on one or more pivotal positions of authority. Instead it involves “an ongoing direction-finding process, which is innovative and continually emergent” and which draws in, and on, all the members of an organizational system. Collier and Esteban have come to describe leadership as “the systemic capability, distributed and nurtured throughout the organization, of finding organizational direction and generating continual renewal by harnessing creativity and innovation.” A balance is continually maintained between the need to remain responsive to the ever-changing challenges and opportunities of the contemporary business environment and the necessity of maintaining a congruent sense of organizational purpose.

There is considerable corroboration for Collier and Esteban's observations in more recent leadership literature. Uhl-Bien et al. (2007) argue that leadership can no longer be described exclusively in terms of position and authority, but that it is in fact an emergent, interactive dynamic. This dynamic creates a complex interplay from which the impetus for change is stimulated through the interactions of heterogeneous agents. The insight that the ability to influence and inform the beliefs and behavior of the members of an organizational system is shared by all who participate in it is echoed by Edgeman and Scherer (1999). They describe systemic leadership as the deployment of leadership responsibilities and privileges across an organization's entire human resource. They argue furthermore that when such privileges and responsibilities are shared by all its members, an organization's ability to anticipate and respond to threats and challenges at a local level is enhanced. Kanji and Moura (2001, p. 704) see the power to influence the life and direction of an organizational system as something that is distributed among all who participate in it. Researchers like Spillane (2006) and Gronn (2002) refer to what they call "distributed leadership." Spillane and Gronn's observations basically amount to recognition of the fact that leadership "is stretched over the practice of actors within organizations."

If leadership has traditionally been associated with the ability to influence and inform the beliefs and activities of those who participate in an organizational system, then Kranz (1990, p. 52) proposes that leadership should be re-conceived as a property of the system as a whole. For him, those priorities and imperatives that give shape and direction to the life of an organization is the result of complex interactions amongst important elements of the system. In the light of their review of the literature, Bennett, Wise, Woods, and Harvey come to the conclusion that the notion of "distributed leadership" highlights leadership as an emergent property of a group of interacting individuals. They suggest an awareness of the openness and fluidity of the boundaries of leadership within a specific organization. In fact, they even go so far as to argue that leadership may be extended or distributed to the other entities that the organization interacts with. It also takes us beyond associating leadership with certain individual "traits." From the perspective of distributed leader-

ship, varieties of expertise are distributed amongst multiple members of the organization.

The emphasis that is placed on adaptive responsiveness in recent leadership literature can be interpreted as a response to the challenges associated with contemporary organizational systems' perpetual dynamism. Heifetz (2006, pp. 78–80), for instance, describes the process by which people distinguish what is precious and essential to their organizational culture from that which is incidental and insignificant. He portrays it as a process which requires experimentation. Because of this, Heifetz argues that leaders have to balance efficiency with creativity. They have to be able and willing to improvise if they expect to prevail in an environment where a stable point of equilibrium remains elusive. According to Heifetz, the process of adaptation requires the members of an organization to perform an ongoing critical interrogation as to which values will allow them to thrive. In addition, they need to consider the contingencies that may threaten the realization of those values. The deliberate intentionality with which values are created and articulated in Heifetz's view may be questionable, but his observations are nevertheless suggestive of the importance of adaptation in the relational processes of normative re-orientation that play out daily among the members of a complex organizational system. Those who have been formally appointed to positions of authority in an organization can help to create institutional conditions capable of recognizing and supporting the complex processes in and through which the congruity between individual members' sense of normative propriety is relationally established. However, these processes are driven, to no lesser degree, by the willingness and ability of all those who participate in the organizational system to make new proposals, to offer a different point of view, and to contest the status quo. This need not amount to an indianless chieftom. It simply means that he/she who is in the best position, with the right kind of "weapons" and experience, should lead the fight in the battle that wins the war, which secures the cause. Such a willingness to reorganize, re-align, and adapt as necessary is ultimately based on an abiding awareness, among the members of an organization, of their interdependency, and of the interdependency between an organization and those systems in which it participates.

Knights and O'Leary (2005) provide further impetus to the critique of the remnants of post-Enlightenment individualism within leadership paradigms. They argue that the kind of individualism that has emerged after the onset of the Enlightenment in Western society has skewed the relationship between individuals and society by placing too much emphasis on self-interest. In their view, an individual's personal interests cannot be separated from his/her membership of a particular society. "Success" is only meaningful within a community that acknowledges and rewards it in some way.

In order to understand the way in which both individual leaders and broader leadership dynamics operate, it is helpful to draw on the distinction that Uhl-Bien et al. (2007, p. 311) make between *administrative* leadership, *adaptive* leadership, and *enabling* leadership. Administrative leadership refers to the managerial roles and actions of individuals who occupy positions of authority in planning and coordinating organizational activities. Adaptive leadership entails a "collaborative change movement" that allows adaptive outcomes to emerge in a nonlinear fashion as a result of dynamic interactions. Since adaptive leadership refers to a dynamic, rather than to a person's traits or behaviors, it emerges from the interactions of interdependent agents. Enabling leadership is what catalyzes adaptive leadership and hence allows for the emergence of adaptive leadership. As such, it deals with the inevitable entanglement between administrative and adaptive leadership. As enabling leadership requires some authority, but is equally reliant on the dynamic between various agents, middle managers are often in an ideal position to take on this role. The combination of their access to resources and their involvement with the everyday boundary situations that an organization's members confront make them ideal enablers. The roles that enabling leadership play can be described as fostering interaction, supporting and enhancing interdependency, and stimulating adaptive tension in order to allow for interactive emergence of new patterns. It is important to note that Uhl-Bien et al. (2007) argue that all three types of leadership are operative within one organization. What does this mean for our description of leadership in organizations? At the very least, it means that some new perspectives on leadership, and even on individual leadership characteristics, are in order.

### **Leadership dynamics from a more systemic perspective**

A variety of insights from contemporary leadership literature lend support the notion of systemic leadership in a variety of ways. It indicates the importance of fostering relationships and enhancing collaboration. In what follows, I present a brief overview of some trends in recent literature that, in my mind, present additional impetus to the notion of systemic leadership.

#### *Values and passions*

Porras, Emery, and Thompson interviewed 200 people who are considered successful individuals and, in most cases, are leaders of their organizations. These individuals consistently stressed the importance of doing what they love and investing their energies in pursuits that are meaningful to them. The individuals that Porras et al. (2006, p. 24) interviewed primarily experience their work as meaningful because it somehow contributed to, or involved, things that they considered valuable and enjoyable. In most cases however, these individuals also found their work meaningful because it contributed to the creation of lasting relationships with others. What this suggests is that it is an individual's investment in a system of relations at work that ultimately makes his/her efforts seem meaningful or significant. Porras et al. (2006, p. 110) articulate the implications of this point with respect to the dynamics of leadership. They suggest that if leaders serve a cause, the cause also serves them. If an individual does things and acts in ways that serve to nurture and sustain the network of relationships within an organizational system, then its members are more likely to recognize, value, and support his/her contributions. This also accounts for a shift in perceptions with respect to the role of charisma that is detectable in some recent leadership literature. Whereas the possession of personal charisma used to be considered an important prerequisite for effective leadership, the emphases seems now to be shifting toward causes that in and of itself inspire and draw people along. In other words, the goals and priorities of an organizational system is no longer seen as something that is defined by the passions and values

of one or more of its charismatic members, but rather as something, that is continually constituted in, and by, the relational dynamics and contextual contingencies of the system as a whole. Though Porras et al.'s observations are helpful in relating the ideas of systemic leadership to current literature about values-driven leadership, there are some distinct differences between what they propose and how systemic leadership in a complex adaptive system would work. The first difference lies in the fact that "causes" cannot so easily be identified in the manner Porras et al. suggest. Also, their approach seems to underscore leadership as an individual capacity, or a set of traits, rather than as a socially constructed phenomenon that can occur in various individuals throughout the organization.

These differences are also evident in the way that Porras talks about values in an earlier text. In their widely circulated book "Built to Last" Collins and Porras (2002) strongly emphasize the importance of a strong values-driven, or purpose-driven, orientation in successful organizations. Their central message is quite simple: companies that last are built on a central and enduring set of core values. However, the success of such companies also depends on their ability to balance continuity with change. Their core values and identity provides continuity and direction, whilst allowing them to experiment with what Collins and Porras calls "big hairy audacious goals." A strong values-orientation can only be maintained in and through the ongoing interactions between people – it can never remain the concern of one or two individuals. As such, it empowers all members of the organization to participate in where the organization is going and how it views its emergent concerns. Collins and Porras argue that to simultaneously preserve the basic tenets of an organization's orientation and stimulate progress constitute a yin-yang dynamic that must always be held in creative tension. They do not however explore how this actually occurs. In fact, it seems as if they assume that leaders will have the capacity to identify or formulate these values. This kind of suggestion cannot account for the intricate interplay of organizational forces within a complex adaptive system. Instead of being formulated by a single individual, or even a group of individuals, values emerge in and through the daily practices, habits, and interactions of multiple agents.<sup>3</sup>

Some scholars working on leadership in complex adaptive systems offer more concrete proposals on the ways in which various leaders do play a role in the emergence of values within complex environment. They argue, for instance, that through "tagging," i.e., the process by which the creation of aggregates is facilitated, coordination emerges even though there is no "control" in the strict sense of the word. Tagging allows the organization to strike the ever-elusive balance between exploring what has already been learnt and exploiting new territory.

#### *Eliciting and appreciating contention*

What is more commonly celebrated in recent writing about leadership is the value of what Porras et al. (2006, p. 188) call the "harvesting" of contention. This strategy presents a radical departure from top-down, demand-and-control structures of leadership. Porras et al. point to the many advantages of accommodating dissent within an organization. Not only does it allow ideas to be collected from the best and the brightest members of an organization, it also fosters innovation. An added benefit is the pre-emptive effect that it has with respect to the cynicism that often develops in and among employees in the absence of opportunities for open contention. In organizations where open conversations are a rare, cathartic exception, and the edifying sense of being part of a creative team is denied to employees, creative ideas become "secret assets hoarded by team members rather than a shared resource that makes the team stronger" (Porras et al., 2006, p. 189). Successful organizations are spaces within which contention and challenges to the status quo are not only welcomed, but also made productive. Porras et al. (2006, p. 1991) point to Commerce Bank's practice of challenging employees to regularly come up with at least one stupid rule to kill and iVillage's open strategic meetings, where the best idea prevails, as practical examples of how contention may be harnessed. They also draw attention to leaders such as Paul Galvin, who founded Motorola. Galvin's leadership was distinguished by the way in which he encouraged dissent, discussion, and disagreement among his employees. According to Porras et al. (2006, p. 38), Galvin gave individuals immense responsibility to grow and learn on their own, even if this required working through failures



and mistakes. What the studies of leadership in complex adaptive systems point out is that the way in which leaders enable emergence of certain value orientations within organizations is quite different from unilaterally “directing” the behaviors of others. Instead, “enabling” leadership entails disrupting existing patterns, encouraging novelty, and then making sense of whatever unfolds (Plowman et al., 2007, p. 342). Leaders in complex adaptive systems enable new perspectives on the future by utilizing conflict and embracing uncertainty. In fact, by injecting tension judiciously, spaces may open up as a result of struggles over diverse ideas. It is from within these spaces that new responses emerge. Uhl-Bien et al. (2007, p. 307) describe the process by which leaders introduce new ideas, new people, and new resources as “dropping seeds of emergence.” It is important to remember that the impact of these “seeds” will remain unpredictable.

#### *Fostering collaboration*

According to Porras et al. (2006, p. 199), many of the successful leaders that they interviewed reiterated and confirmed the validity of truisms such as: “You’re only as good as your people.” Since many organizations face complex challenges that require people to work collaboratively across functions, researchers at the Center for Creative Leadership (CCL) have come to view leadership as part of a process that happens throughout the organization and involves interdependent decision-making. Alexander (2006, pp. 90–91) explains that the CCL’s researchers define leadership as something which functions more inclusively, across functions and organizations, and from the middle out. As a result of what Helgesen (1995) calls “the diffusion of knowledge,” a leader has to draw on specialized and embedded knowledge scattered throughout the organization. In a very real sense, the decision-making pool in the organization has expanded, and leaders have to manage by inclusion, bringing as many people to the table as is necessary to gain a proper understanding of the challenges and opportunities that present themselves in, and to, their organizations. As such, the question as to who matters strategically within an organization has to be completely rethought. Rigidly hierarchical decision-making channels and the centralization of power in

formally constituted positions of power are unlikely to allow an organizational system enough flexibility to deal effectively with the complexity of the contemporary business environment. An example of an emerging leadership strategy that involves collaboration is the notion of “virtuous teaching cycles” (VTC). VTC stands in stark contrast to traditional top-down strategies for knowledge dissemination within an organization. Tichy and DeRose (2006, pp. 200–201) argue that since some of the knowledge that are most important for the sustained success of an organization is generated at the customer interface, a top-down knowledge dissemination strategy increases the likelihood that important insights will be obliterated before its value has been harvested. VTCs create highly interactive learning opportunities, where the teacher can become the learner, and the learner the teacher. Companies like Best Buy and Intuit are reported to have had great success with this approach. They have succeeded in empowering their frontline managers to become teachers and, by implication, leaders within their organizations.

#### *Building relationships of trust*

The internal processes that continually shape and inform the life of an organization have an important bearing on its members’ capacity for trust. These processes occasionally require subtle, but significant, interpersonal adjustments and personal recalibrations on the part of employees. Since accommodations and adaptations of this nature also have a normative dimension, they often impact those things that people value and hold dear. Because of this, some people’s sense of security may be undermined. This can sometimes lead to resistance. Most people experience difficulty during long periods of sustained tension and experimentation. This can lead to two common forms of avoidance, namely, the displacement of responsibility and the diversion of attention. According to Senge (2006), scapegoating, blaming problems on authority, externalizing the enemy, and shooting the messenger are all examples of how responsibility may be displaced by employees in the absence of a sense of security. It is in relation to such problems that the importance of fostering trust among colleagues is often stressed in leadership

literature. Trust is often regarded as the solution to a particular type of risk. Typically, it is required in contexts where flexibility is required or when the members of an organization face many uncertainties. The renowned sociologist Giddens (1990) points out that trust is always accompanied by an awareness of risk and incomplete information. As such, trust emerges in a situation of vulnerability, where there is some possibility for error. The complexity of contemporary business life makes it ever more likely that agents will have to act in the absence of complete information. In these situations, individuals or groups of individuals would like to be able to expect that the word, promise, or written intentions of another individual or group can be relied upon. Trust can also be defined as the mutual confidence that no party to a relationship will exploit the vulnerability of the other (Andersen, 2005, p. 393). In her research, Klenke (2005, p. 51) found that trust has many dimensions. She identified at least four moral values that contribute to the emergence of trust, namely, consistency, loyalty, openness, and integrity.

#### *Wisdom and humility*

Weick (2001) defined wisdom as the balance between knowing and doubting, or behaviorally, as the balance between too much confidence and too much caution. Wisdom enables individuals to simultaneously draw on what they know and embrace that which they might not know as opportunities for creative sense-making. Successful organizational learning and knowledge creation is based on what Weick (2001, p. 167) calls “heedful interrelating” and “acting thoughtfully.” According to Weick, it is this kind of openness and readiness to exploit whatever opportunities may present itself to learn new things that facilitate the capacity for ongoing adaptations within an organization. Wise leaders are paradoxically capable of embracing both what they know and what they do not know. According to Porras et al. (2006, p. 169), many of the successful people that they spoke to had come to the conclusion that “planning works, though the plan itself rarely does.” Individuals’ ability to acknowledge their own weaknesses and to draw on other people’s insights allows them to address their

own “blind spots.” Humility is therefore essential. Senge and Kaufer (2000, p. 25) cite an interview with Phil Caroll, the recently retired CEO of Shell Oil, to underscore the importance of humility and a leader’s ability to acknowledge his/her own vulnerability: “You need a healthy dose of humility .... The truth is everyone can see your flaws ... if you try to hide them, they wonder what else you are hiding.”

#### *Celebrating diversity*

There is a close correlation between leaders’ ability to draw out the best that the various members of their team have to offer and their capacity to productively harness diversity. According to Thomas (2006, pp. 47–50), the concept of “diversity” has changed significantly in recent years. He argues that it is important to distinguish between the issue of representation, which relates to the presence of a variety of races and genders in the workplace, and the issue of diversity, which he associated with “the differences, similarities, and tensions that can and do exist between the elements of ... different mixtures of people.” In his conception, diversity management is a special kind of skill that is characterized by the ability to sense what role differences and similarities in areas such as personal style, thought processes, and personality play in shaping the behavioral patterns within an organizational system. Thomas thus specifically identifies diversity management with the ability to make “quality decisions in the midst of differences, similarities and related tensions.” Differences based on race and gender are not the only factors that contribute to the complexity of an organization’s internal system of relations. Mergers and acquisitions, changing customer bases, geographic relocations, product innovations, and the development of new functions also have a complicating effect on the relational dynamics within an organization. Because every employee represents a singular mix of traits and capacities, it is important to create an environment in which various unique individual contributions are not only recognized, but drawn into the rich tapestry of organizational values dynamics. Helgesen (1995) points out that the rich and challenging diversity of opinion within contemporary organizations mirror the diversity of

opinion in society at large. Organizations that allow its priorities and activities to be shaped and informed by the full spectrum of individual human differences within its ranks are therefore much more likely to establish and sustain meaningful relationships with its external stakeholders.

#### *Redefining authenticity*

Building lasting relationships that are capable of accommodating change requires recognition of the fact that individuals do not always have to fulfill the same role. According to Porras et al., the best leaders realize that their relation to other people may change over time and that this is likely to necessitate occasional role adjustments. One day, they point out, a person might work for you; the next day you might work for them. It is even conceivable that he/she might become your customer or a vendor at some future juncture. Porras et al. (2006, p. 198) argue that, in a sense, such a person remains part of one's "virtual team" and that it is therefore important to sustain the relationship despite the role changes that may occasionally occur over time. Cognitive psychologists confirm that individuals have various "selves" that may be operationalized in fulfillment of various role responsibilities. From this perspective, authenticity requires judgment as to what is appropriate within the context of a specific set of role responsibilities.

#### *Insight into interdependence*

The interdependency between an organization and the environment within which it functions is a theme that has received considerable attention in recent leadership literature. The business community's growing appreciation of the extent to which an organization's fate and fortunes are intertwined with that of its environment has underscored, for many, the importance of serving a broad stakeholder community. On various levels, business organizations are discovering that they cannot go it alone. An awareness of the interdependency between business and the systems within which it functions requires a special kind of capacity. Senge (2006) calls this "systems intelligence," i.e., the ability to see systems

and patterns of interdependency within, and surrounding, an organization.

### **Implications of rethinking leadership and accountability within complex organizational systems**

The emphasis that is placed on interdependency, integration, and adaptation in recent leadership literature suggests that the role and responsibilities that have typically been attributed exclusively to those who were formally appointed to positions of authority within an organization should be reconceived in more systemic terms. The dynamics of so-called complex adaptive systems provides an apt descriptive model to account for the irregular, nonlinear patterns of stakeholder interactions within an organizational system. It allows all members of the organization to assume various leadership roles, within the context of a given business episode, in response to the unpredictable iterations of an organization's complex system of relations. In some instances, this may involve a pragmatic reversal of roles between those who occupy positions of authority and those who answer to them in the formal hierarchy of an organization.

Studying the dynamics of complex adaptive systems also allows one to gain insight into the ability of a complex organizational system to accommodate uncertainty and unpredictability in its internal dynamics without disintegrating as a functional unit. This is especially significant in relation to the tacit sense of normative propriety that the members of an organization develop over time as they interact with one another and observe each other's behavior. The fact that the individual's sense of normative propriety is continually shaped and informed by interactions with, and observations of, his/her colleagues and superiors makes it relational through and through. It is precisely because of the relational way in which it is continually constituted that an employee's tacit sense of propriety begins to display, over time, a certain congruence with that of his/her colleagues and superiors. From the perspective of a complex adaptive systems model, the relation between the value orientations of individual members of an organization is therefore one of *congruence*, not *consensus*. It is to this relationally constituted normative

congruence that a complex adaptive organizational system owes its ability to accommodate difference and dissensus, without losing its functional unity of purpose or sense of identity. What makes this normative congruence so powerful is the fact that it emerges out of ongoing experimentation and contention and therefore allows the organization to draw on the full range of talents, skills, and perspectives that its diverse members have to offer. Congruence among the different normative orientations of its individual members also facilitates a similar sort of alignment with respect to goals and priorities that move and motivate an organizational system. As such, it contributes to a tacit sense of purpose(s) and cause(s) among its members that empowers rather than compels. Leaders can contribute to the emergence of certain value orientations through what Boal and Schultz call sense-making, sense-giving, and sense-taking. This informs and influences the process by which individual cognitive structures evolve and schemas shared with others develop. In this way, strategic leaders may enhance the emergence of what they call “cognitive consensuality.” This form of consensuality is replicated by what Boal and Schultz named “memes,” i.e., units of cultural knowledge transmission that operate as carriers of mental representations. However, an important caveat that should be kept in mind is that the influences that strategic leaders could have in this process are never unilateral, nor are the stories they tell unequivocal accounts of reality. In fact, storytelling within organizations could go in unintended directions. The congruity of value, priority, and purpose that is described in the complex adaptive systems model of organizations can never be fully reified in a fixed constellation of deliberately articulated codes and statements. Instead, it is always understood as the emergent properties of a dynamic system.

Even though an individual employee’s sense of normative propriety develops in interactions with his/her colleagues and associates at work, it is important that this not become his/her exclusive frame of reference in matters of morality. This would amount to determinism and undermine the critical freedom that lies at the heart of moral responsiveness. Since normative expectations emerge within the context of a particular “internal” system of organizational relationships, there is always the risk that

employees will become insulated against those interests that do not fall within the ambit of their own immediate concerns. The phenomenon of “groupthink” is a specific manifestation of such an insular mindset. In the process, the members of an organization run the risk of becoming inured against discourses that utilize a logic contrary to their own. What safeguards the members of an organizational system against the potentially harmful effects of such insularity is the fact that complex adaptive systems are organized as open networks of relations. As such, they cannot function in isolation from one another. They are therefore unlikely to devolve into deterministic environments that undermine the possibility of dissent and criticism.

Building relationships requires a certain amount of accommodation and inclusion. Because of this, the normative orientations of organizations remain open to challenge, reform, and development. However, the tacit sense of moral propriety that informs the behavior of an organization’s individual employees does not develop overnight. It develops gradually over time and it is never entirely reified. As such, it is always susceptible to the shaping influence of those who participate in the organizational system. An organization’s agents and employees always have an opportunity to contribute to the processes of value formation that play out daily among them. While it may not be possible to deliberately impose a set of pre-formulated values on employees, the everyday decisions and actions of individuals, as well as the way in which an organization is structured, can, over time, have a decisive influence on what is valued by those who participate in the organizational system.

Systemic leadership cannot flourish under any circumstances. The organizational conditions that foster systemic leadership and a relationally responsive understanding of accountability therefore require careful consideration. We turn now to the organizational implications of this relational, responsive understanding of accountability. The notion of “systemic leadership” reflects an awareness that many of the functions that had traditionally been associated exclusively with formal leadership are now shared by all the members of an organizational system. Any individual who participates in the organizational system can assume responsibility or take the lead in its various operations when, where, and for as long as it is necessary to do so. This should

however not be construed to mean that all the members of an organization lead at the same time, or that every decision is made collectively. Collier and Esteban (2000, p. 209) point out, in this regard, that people have different capabilities and that roles and responsibilities may occasionally be exchanged between individuals. Because of this, they conclude, the dynamics of leadership in an organization is asymmetric. The co-existence of and interdependence between various forms of leadership is therefore important. The fact that adaptive leadership emerges amongst a variety of organizational members does not render “administrative” leadership, with its more bureaucratic nature, useless or less important. All the members of an organization have to be empowered in a way that allows them to assume responsibility in circumstances where it is required, and draw on the full array of diverse perspectives that are available in the system. A fundamental reconsideration of organizational systems, processes, and procedures is required.

This has to start with the recognition of the fact that the goals and priorities of complex contemporary organizations are continually shaped and informed by all who participate in it. From a systemic leadership perspective, influence is exerted, in an organization’s internal system of relations, along shifting, multidirectional channels. This does not mean that any one of its members can entirely redefine the identity of an organization through his/her decisions, actions, and attitudes. Nor does it represent an organizational dispensation where “anything goes.” Instead, the actions and attitudes of individual members are taken up into, and circulated within, the organizational system in a way that allows it to influence, though not determine, the course of things. One might say that it is “taken together” with the actions and attitudes of others by members of an organization as they plot their daily course forward. Through their participation in an organization’s internal system of relations, members’ priorities and expectations are gradually shaped until a certain ineffable congruence begins to emerge among their various individual sensibilities. Though often unarticulated and inexpressible, this congruity of purpose and priority among the members of an organization has a powerful effect on their sense of common cause and normative propriety. As such, it serves as a safeguard against inappropriate behavior.

The discussion on trust earlier in this paper drew attention to its importance in the emergence of an open organizational environment where candid, though respectful, communication can take place freely. If influence is to flow freely along the multidirectional channels that crisscross the system of relations within an organization, its members must feel that they are trusted and they have to believe that they can trust others with important information. Because mastery and control of all the various specialized operations of today’s complex business organizations is mostly beyond the capacities of one person, it is crucial that information be shared throughout an organization. Collier and Esteban argue that sharing information generates the kind of dialogue and questioning that makes learning possible. Hoarding information within distinct organizational functions, or what is often referred to as the “silo-effect,” can have an extremely harmful effect on an organization’s ability to remain responsive to the complex realities and unforeseeable contingencies of contemporary business environments. As a result of organizational silos, people privatize their successes, are unwilling to admit mistakes, and tend to steer clear of conversations that challenge the way they do things. This avoidance of conflict has an inhibiting effect on the multidirectional diffusion of influence within an organization’s system of relations. According to Collier and Esteban, reciprocal interaction will always involve “constructive conflict.” As we saw in our analysis of the leadership dynamics in successful organizations, the willingness to allow all its members to critically challenge and re-evaluate what is being done in and by an organization contributes to a sense of ownership. Actions, decisions, attitudes, or behavior that proves somehow detrimental to the intentions of those who participate in the organizational system must be challenged and changed. Senge and Kaufer (2000, p. 26) argue that organizational life mirrors natural systems in its reliance on the interaction between self-reinforcing (positive) and balancing (negative) feedback. Within organizations, new insights and innovations must always be balanced with a historic sense of identity and continuity. To the extent that this is achieved, “creative conflict” is unlikely to drastically alter those aspects of the organizational system that are considered crucially significant by its members. It is more likely to facilitate a process of

critical reconsideration in which the purposes and priorities of an organization is creatively reinterpreted in relation to new contingencies and opportunities. This process is crucial in the emergence and perpetuation of an attitude of relational responsiveness among the members of an organization. Occasional miscalculations and misconstruals are an inevitable feature of organizational systems where responsibility is shared and discretion encouraged. That someone's powers of discretion and discernment should fail him/her during some unfortunate and unforeseeable intersection of events should be taken as a matter of course and should not dissuade an organization from empowering or trusting its people. If such incidents are aired openly in an environment of trust, they can be turned into learning and growing opportunities, not only for the individual(s) involved but also for all who participate in the organizational system. However, where there is no trusting belief in the value of open communication, this becomes impossible.

Collier and Esteban (2000, p. 209) emphasize the responsibility and autonomy of every member of an organization. The notion of systemic leadership does not allow the members of an organization to "pass the buck." It is everybody's duty to continually take responsibility for the proper and efficient conduct of business within the organization. However, it is important to recognize that the various individual members of an organization may interpret the nature and extent of their responsibilities differently. Organizational functions like strategic planning, human resource management, supply chain management, and reporting practices all pose their own special kinds of challenges to those who are charged with their execution. The way in which individual members of an organization interpret these responsibilities and exercise their discretion under various unforeseeable circumstances and in relation to all its different stakeholders ultimately determines the extent to which an organization meets its ethical obligations. In the prosecution of their various duties and responsibilities, individual corporate agents signal to those with whom they interact what can be expected, not only from them but also from all those who identify with the organization that they represent. The need to maintain trust, respect, and goodwill, and to remain dedicated to the goals of a particular business association, all influence how an

organization or its agents interpret the moral challenges that confront them.

The way in which an organization reports its practices is an indication of how morally responsive it is. For instance, if an organization feels compelled to remain relationally responsive to a variety of stakeholder constituencies, it is unlikely to limit the account that it gives of its activities to the accumulation of physical assets and financial gains. Corporate responsiveness requires that an organization explain how it perceives its relationships toward its stakeholders and how it intends to build and sustain these relationships. Suppliers, employees, customers, and the communities within which the organization operate all have different informational needs when it comes to corporate reporting. The Global Reporting Initiative's guidelines provide an example of the various types of information that an organization may include as it gives an account of its activities.<sup>4</sup>

The institutionalization of a more systemic approach to leadership requires the balancing of a number of apparently contradictory imperatives within the organizational system. Collier and Esteban describe these as paradoxes that have to be accommodated within the organization. They identify at least five sets of organizational imperatives that need to be held in a kind of creative tension within the organizational system. The paradox of hierarchy-participation refers to the fact that though leadership is everyone's responsibility, it is exercised by one person at a time. The fact that different people can play a leadership role does not mean that no structure is required for leadership to be exercised. To illustrate this paradox of hierarchy-participation, Collier and Esteban use the example of a jazz band, where certain unspoken conventions dictate who will be "soloing" and "comping" (supporting the lead) and how the switch between leading and supporting is initiated. The unity-diversity paradox refers to the fact that though systemic leadership relies on a diversity of ideas and inputs, the need for congruence and a shared sense of purpose remains. Conflict may exist, but in and through the process of mutual influencing, dissent, and dialogue, an even stronger sense of congruence emerges. Another paradox is that of asymmetry-mutuality. Even though a systemic approach to leadership encourages all the members of an organization to be morally responsive, it cannot be denied that differences in capabilities, roles,

responsibilities, and opportunities affect the way in which this plays out in practice. These asymmetries may be temporary, but they cannot be avoided. The importance of keeping everyone engaged and committed at all times, despite shifts in roles, remains one of the central challenges of systemic leadership. Creating opportunities for everyone to share their ideas and setting up systems that can help formalize, advocate, and implement these ideas play an important part in this. In the process, however, yet another paradox is encountered: discipline–creativity. Not all ideas are good ones, and hence the organization must celebrate and reward creativity, but exercise discipline to select the best ideas and discard those that will not serve the organization’s purposes. When a new idea or response is identified, another paradox comes into play, namely that of creation–destruction. New perspectives typically challenge old ways of doing things. Organizational structures, familiar work patterns, and positions of power are often dismantled. People will resist such changes since it undermines their sense of security and involves temporary discomfort. Collier and Esteban therefore emphasize the need for empathetic dialogue, open communication, and the maintenance of relationships of trust.

The paradoxes are indicative of the kinds of challenges that are likely to be encountered in organizations that adopt a more systemic approach to leadership and a more relational understanding of accountability. A more systemic approach to leadership requires an understanding of systemic complexity at all levels of an organization. At every level of an organization, members face different challenges. On Board level, there has to be an acknowledgment of the interdependent relationships that exist between the organization and the wide network of stakeholders with whom it engages in the prosecution of its purposes. The formal recognition of such relationships of interdependency may, in some cases, precipitate the extension of invitations for official board representation to important stakeholders. If this is not possible, interaction with external stakeholders must be proactively sought by specific board committees. Multidirectional communication is crucial if board members are to gain insight into the nature and extent of an organization’s responsibilities toward its stakeholders. Board members should always remain willing to listen to the concerns of all of the organization’s stakeholders.

## Conclusion

A more systemic approach to leadership does not require that an organization’s formal structures be abolished. What it means instead is that the capacity to take responsibility when and where needed should be nurtured throughout the organizational system and among all of its members, despite the existence of a formal organizational hierarchy and various specialized functional units. The goal is to create organizational environments within which systemic leadership can be utilized to strengthen purposeful values–driven organizational practices.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> The three other paradigms place their focus on other aspects. Authentic leadership insists on self-awareness, spiritual leadership emphasizes visioning, hope/faith, and vocation, and transformational leadership emphasizes the role vision, values, and intellectual stimulus.

<sup>2</sup> For an overview of the limitations of traditional approaches to leadership, such as the traits, behavior and style approaches, see the special edition on Leadership in Complex Adaptive Systems, in *The Leadership Quarterly* (August 2007).

<sup>3</sup> See in this regard Painter–Morland (2008), in which the argument is made that values are emergent, rhetorical, trope–like, and emotional responsive to organizational beliefs and practices.

<sup>4</sup> See the Global Reporting Initiative’s Guidelines on [www.globalreporting.org](http://www.globalreporting.org).

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