Complexity and COVID-19: Leadership and Followership in a Complex World

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As a complexity leadership scholar, the past year has been witness to what we and complexity theorists in the organizational sciences have been saying since the 1990s: the world is increasing in complexity and if we are to keep up with it, we must apply new ways of thinking (Anderson, 1999; Stacey, 1995; Uhl-Bien et al., 2007). Traditional top-down and ‘hero’ models of leadership help us know what it is like to lead on an individual basis as a manager having to motivate and inspire a subordinate, or a CEO having to position an organizational strategically. They do not, however, capture the lived experience of navigating leadership in a complex world. For this we must better understand how leadership enables people and organizations for adaptability (Uhl-Bien and Arena, 2018).

The good news is that businesses largely get it. The complexity of the past decades has forced business organizations to be lean and agile. As a result, when the pandemic hit, they were able to pivot and rapidly implement adaptive solutions to complex challenges: remote work in business, telehealth in medicine, online education in schools, and expanded takeout and ghost kitchens in the restaurant industry. The bad news is that public-sector and political leadership lag behind. Many still largely operate in outdated governance and political systems mired in bureaucracy and cronyism that work against collaborating for the greater good, resulting in countless unnecessary deaths and a traumatized healthcare workforce – the consequences of which we will be dealing with for years. For all those who argue that leadership doesn’t matter, 2020 proves them wrong: leadership can be, literally, the difference between life and death.

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UNDERSTANDING COMPLEXITY

In a complex world, research and practice must focus on how we can enable leaders and organizations to adapt more quickly in the face of complexity challenges and pressures. The first step is understanding complexity and what it means for how we need to lead differently. Fortunately, we know a lot about this now. Complexity begins in organizations as pressures, often in the form of an adaptive challenge – a problem for which a) there is no known solution, b) people must work together in new partnerships who haven’t worked together before, c) these partnerships are characterized by conflicting views (i.e., high heterogeneity), and d) agents have high interdependence such that, in extreme cases, they must adapt together or they will die (Uhl-Bien and Arena, 2017). When COVID-19 hit we saw these complexity pressures everywhere, in the need to socially distance, pressures on governments to lock down, forced school and restaurant closures, safety concerns driving employees to work from home, and healthcare systems around the world scrambling for limited resources, including testing kits, ventilators and personal protective equipment (PPE).

For leadership research, COVID-19 raises many new questions related to complexity and adaptability. What do we know about how leaders and followers react and cope under complexity pressures? For example, why did some leaders and followers in the same organization react and respond well to COVID-19 while others did not? Research here could build on Ahmadi and colleagues’ (2017) findings regarding the role of promotion and prevention focus on managers’ exploration and exploitation behaviours under conditions of complexity. Studies could explore what type of psychological response is typical under complexity pressures, and why some leaders, followers and organizations turn to adaptive responses while others fall back on an ‘order’ response (Uhl-Bien and Arena, 2017) by denying reality and wishing the challenge away (e.g., Donald Trump’s repeated statements that the virus will ‘magically’ disappear). Other studies could consider how we can better equip leaders, followers and organizations with the resilience needed to sustain significant and extended periods of complexity.

ENABLING ADAPTIVE RESPONSES

The second step is helping leaders and followers know how to enable an adaptive response. In complexity, this is an emergence dynamic. Adaptive responses emerged in COVID-19 when complexity pressures activated ideation processes of entrepreneurial leaders and followers working together to search for adaptive solutions and new ways of doing things, for example, distilleries converting their facilities to producing hand sanitizer; Elon Musk using his network and financial resources to acquire 1200 + ventilators from China; hospitals turning to crowdsourcing and 3D printing to address equipment shortages; an informal trading economy emerging in the face of consumer products shortages (e.g., toilet paper). When emergence is enabled, ideas and adaptive solutions are able to develop and scale into the system to generate new, even if only temporary, adaptive order.

The problem is that adaptive responses in bureaucratic organizing systems are not the norm. Bureaucracy stifles adaptability. It does this by inhibiting efficiencies needed to
generate strong operational responses. Counter to the belief of many that complexity is more free-wheeling and democratized, it actually has strong operational systems – one of the keys to a bee colony is an ‘inventory control’ system that works in coordination with information coming in from the outside to trigger and activate adaptive responses as needed. This may be why more centralized governments actually did better in response to COVID-19 in many cases than democratic ones. They were able to marshal resources to generate strong coordination around operational responses (e.g., testing, masks, quarantines, PPE manufacturing) as well as use new ideas to operationalize large-scale entrepreneurial responses (e.g., China building temporary facilities such as the 1000-bed hospital constructed in Wuhan in just ten days).

This raises additional questions for research. What do we do with the heavily bureaucratic systems of many governments that impede their ability to respond to complexity? Businesses have had to become more agile due to ‘adapt or die’ complexity pressure but many governments are largely insulated from these forces – politicians may lose elections (i.e., ‘die’) but the governance system lives on. How can we adapt entrenched government and administrative systems? Is it possible for leaders and followers to enable government bureaucracies to change, for example, by harnessing complexity pressures? Can they do this by being better equipped in complexity leadership mindsets, principles and practices?

OPENING UP ADAPTIVE SPACE

Leadership researchers also need to get a better grasp on the concept of adaptive space in the complexity leadership model. Adaptive space is conditions that enable the adaptive process to occur. The adaptive process happens when individuals and systems engage tensions between pressures for change (e.g., innovation, novelty, learning, growth) and pressures for stability (e.g., current performance, short-term results, status quo) through conflicting and connecting to generate adaptive outcomes (Uhl-Bien and Arena, 2018). In complexity, adaptive space is what allows individuals and systems to develop and advance new ways of thinking and operating.

In COVID-19 we saw myriad examples of adaptive space naturally opening up in response to the pandemic: healthcare leaders accepting and enabling the move to telehealth; university and educational leaders working with faculty, students and parents to agree upon how to teach online; executives approving and supporting remote work. In these cases, innovation was already present in the form of tech solutions – adaptive space occurred mostly on the operational side to loosen up formal systems and administration to accommodate the change. Adaptive space also opened up on the entrepreneurial side to address problems for which known solutions were not available or not working, for example, seamstresses sewing cloth face masks; schools setting up drive-through food lines for those who lost jobs; doctors and nurses coming up with ventilator sharing when it became clear that ‘the other option is death’ (Rosenthal et al., 2020).

For leadership researchers, adaptive space offers a ripe opportunity for providing the academic evidence underlying Winston Churchill’s mantra to ‘never let a good crisis go to waste’. What Churchill intuitively knew was that in crisis adaptive space opens up,
loosening the system for change. This window lasts only as long as complexity pressures are present; therefore, leaders and followers need to jump when the opportunity arises. Having an adaptive and emergence mindset enables leaders to rapidly recognize and capitalize on adaptive space while it is open to inject much-needed change into otherwise rigid systems.

**FAILED LEADERSHIP IS ALSO FAILED FOLLOWERSHIP**

Finally, we would be remiss if we did not also mention the role of followership in the failed leadership response to COVID-19. Without followers there are no leaders (Uhl-Bien et al., 2014). We can extend this to say that, to a large extent, the failed leadership surrounding COVID-19 was also a case of failed followership. This can be seen in followers who granted leader identities to incompetent leaders by being willing to claim a subordinate role (DeRue and Ashford, 2010), or in the propping up of incompetent leaders by sycophant followers who turned a blind eye to leaders’ lies and misdirection. It is reflected by a populace not willing to act on leaders’ directives to protect the greater good (i.e., non-followership), or conversely, followers who eagerly rose up to support a leader’s call for insurrection. And it can be seen in the selfishness of followers who pressured leaders to prioritize their group’s needs at the expense – and even the deaths – of others.

What all of this shows, and what leadership researchers have to acknowledge, is that leadership is a co-creation. Without examining the relational dynamic of leaders/leading and followers/following as it occurs in particular time and space (i.e., context), we will never have a complete picture of leadership. Leaders alone are not the problem. We can’t label it narcissistic or toxic leadership and be satisfied with examining the ‘leader’. We must also look at narcissistic and toxic followership and explore the causes and forces that give rise to their destructive co-constructions. Failure to understand why followers behave as they do in serving their own interests by elevating and empowering dysfunctional and dangerous leaders means we will never be able to prevent destructive leadership from occurring. If there is any one lesson we can take away from COVID-19 and the complexity of 2020, it is that we must do better in understanding that leadership and followership are a complex social phenomenon of leaders and followers relating together in ways that co-produce leadership and its outcomes…for better and for worse.

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