

An Agenda for Understanding Individual Leadership in Corporate Leadership Systems¹

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Abstract

This paper argues that a better bridge is needed between the needs and challenges of individual leaders and the practices of large corporations trying to select, support, measure, motivate and develop very large numbers of leaders around the world. In proposing a theoretic and empirical agenda that takes into account the corporate need to devise leadership *systems*, we draw on observations from a study conducted with corporate partners at the Technical University of Munich (TUM). Our desire is to find ways to understand more about how the ‘art’ required from individual leaders interacts with the ‘science’ offered by the kind of corporate leadership systems observed in this study of large and ‘super-large’ (over 100,000 employees) companies. A key idea for future work is that simplicity is critical for both effective corporate systems and the necessary sensemaking of individual leaders, but that simplicity must facilitate improvisation and other more complex exchanges between individuals and corporate systems if it is to be effective.

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The Changing Face of Leadership Studies

“Leadership is one of the most observed and least understood phenomena on earth”, J.M. Burns wrote in 1978. At about the same time, Ralph Stogdill evaluated more than 3,000 studies of leadership research and came to similar conclusions: “Four decades of research on leadership have produced a bewildering mass of findings ... the endless accumulation of empirical data has not produced an integrated understanding of leadership” (1974, vii).

Thirty years later, we believe the leadership field is in a somewhat similar condition. Empirical studies continue to use a broad range of approaches and yield disparate findings, with perhaps even more white spots in the overall conceptual landscape than in previous decades. However, there appears to be a clearer agenda for moving forward, with recent authors identifying a difficult but more integrated set of issues for research and practice. This agenda includes:

- The challenge of moving from traditional ‘leader research’ to a more organisation orientated ‘*leadership research*’ (e.g. Yukl 1989; Day 2000; Lowe / Gardner 2000);
- The challenge of moving from the traditional focus on ‘leadership in organizations’ towards a research focus that is more orientated towards ‘*leadership of organizations*’ (e.g. Boal / Hooijberg 2000; Yukl 2001; Daft 2002);
- The need to take into account emerging forms of ‘*distributed leadership*’ (delegated leadership, co-leadership, peer-leadership or shared leadership) to assure organisational *innovation and change* (e.g. House / Aditya 1997; Gronn 2002; Hiller 2002).

These challenges for future leadership research respond to the increased demands and capabilities of individuals in organisations (Gratton, 2004); they emphasise a need for leaders to be more flexible and more responsive to local circumstances, and to recognise the importance of micro-processes in achieving organisational outcomes (Johnson / Huff, 1998). Figure 1 summarises the subsequent and significant change in the leadership field in terms of evolving models of leadership over time.

Evolving Models of Leadership				
	Ancient	Traditional	Modern	Future
Idea of Leadership	Domination	Influence	Common goals	Reciprocal relations
Action of Leadership	Commanding followers	Motivating followers	Creating inner commitment	Mutual meaning making
Focus of Leadership Development	Power of the leader	Interpersonal skills of the leader	Self-knowledge of the leader	Interactions of the group

Figure 1 Images of Leadership (Drath 1998, 408)

In our view this is a useful overview of the range of leadership behaviours discussed over the long history of the field. While leaders still adopt older ‘command and control’ techniques, and occasionally these are effective and appropriate, the primary challenges for both research and practice lie to the right of the figure.

But this focus of attention, which seems so appropriate when leadership is seen as a field concerned only with the individual, raises a dilemma that is the point of departure for this chapter. There is another set of shaping factors affecting how leadership must be understood. More specifically, the increasing scale, speed and globalising complexities of organisational life raise additional challenges for leadership research. An extended agenda for research must respond to:

- The need to pay more attention to *communication* in a way that takes in account the increasing scale of coordination required in large organisations, as well as the potentials and pitfalls of modern information and communication technology (e.g. Daft 1999; Lowe / Gardner 2000; Daft 2002);
- The need to include issues of *strategy* (e.g. Cannella / Monroe 1997; House / Aditya 1997; Boal / Hooijberg 2000; Lowe / Gardner 2000);
- The need for research on the *leadership systems* increasingly used by large organisations (Conger 1998; Lowe / Gardner 2000).

Our point is that most leadership research has been “terribly interested in individuals” (Goffee 2003), with most researchers completely neglecting the corporate context. Yet, “Leadership Is More Than One Person!” claims James O’Toole (2000): “We have been wrong for a long time. And I mean all of us in business, academia, consulting, and journalism ... Businesses dependent on a single great leader run a terrible risk”.

While many leadership researchers, who often depend upon psychological theories, are guilty as charged, there is an interesting exception to this observation of neglect. Driven by engineering research and corporate practice, more structured approaches to leadership research are emerging. They focus not to leadership itself, but on *managing leaders*. In the next few pages we summarise this very different way of thinking about leadership, at a different level of analysis, before addressing the question of how the two foci of attention might be brought together.

Leadership with an Engineering Flavour: the move from art to science

When Donald E. Knuth published the first edition of his seminal book *The Art of Computer Programming* in 1968, programming was still a talent understood by few. In 1981, however, when David Gries published his major book *The Science of Programming*, the landscape of the software development profession had already fundamentally changed. Gries summarised how software engineering approaches were able to achieve overwhelming success for large scale programming, with major consequences for corporate life. Subsequently, large corporations have moved from process engineering, through service engineering to knowledge engineering, innovation engineering, community engineering and even trust engineering.

The Capability Maturity Models (CMMs) of Carnegie Mellon’s Software Engineering Institute (SEI) have been particularly influential. Originally developed for the improvement of software development processes, the approach has been translated to many fields of organizational activity and the process oriented improvement of management practices in general. Adopted by many organizations worldwide, CMM frameworks claim to “help organizations increase the maturity of their human

resources, process, and technology assets to improve long-term business performance.”² With ‘People CMM,’ corporate human resource management should follow the same rules and concepts that were originally designed to improve software development processes (Curtis et al. 1995, 2002). ‘Participatory Culture’, for instance, is seen as “a process area at maturity level 3” that is clearly defined and described in the process engineering handbook.

Leadership systems following this engineering mindset are now well established in many large corporations. They provide a broad range of tools, instruments, mechanisms and rules for the management of leaders at a meta-level that has been largely neglected by leadership research. The systems try to bring order to a) the identification of leadership talents, b) the way specific leadership tasks are carried out, c) the assessment of performance, d) the translation of assessment results into system wide implications, and e) the use of the data collected in development programs.

This is the context for understanding leadership at a corporate level. One important implication is that the ‘art of leadership’ often praised by those who study individual leaders is more and more subject to relatively rigid management processes. More and more often leadership takes place in an institutional context of enablers and constraints that are overtly established with the best intent – to more systematically, or scientifically, improve the company’s ‘leadership capital.’

There is, however, an apparent contradiction between many descriptions of effective individual leadership (and its need sometimes to break rules, initiate change and provoke innovations) and descriptions of effective corporate leadership from a systems perspective (and its need to set boundaries, exclude possibilities and provide coherence). We are interested in this intersection as a fascinating field for future research. How does individual and corporate leadership interact? Can corporate leadership systems leverage individual sensemaking or are they more likely to structure, restrict and restrain the individual leader’s efforts? We believe there are more negative than positive answers to these questions, but that there are examples of successful interaction between corporate systems and individual agency that deserve further inquiry. In this brief chapter we offer an example from a recent study of corporate systems, and draw on the literature of sensemaking to outline the beginning of a research agenda.

The TUM Leadership Systems Study

Our observations on corporate leadership systems are drawn from a two-year study of 37 large multinationals in Germany, Great Britain, the U.S. and the Netherlands carried out by the second author and her associates (see Reichwald et al. 2003). Between October 2001 and September 2003 more than 110 executives were included in the investigation. The study consisted of in-depth interviews, review of confidential corporate documents and collection of published information on the leadership systems of the involved corporations. The companies included came from a broad range of industries, including automobile (e.g. BMW, DaimlerChrysler), IT, electronics and software (e.g. Cisco Systems, HP, IBM,

² <http://www.sei.cmu.edu/managing/managing.html>

Philips, SAP), telecommunications services (e.g. BT, Deutsche Telekom), energy (e.g. Chevron Texaco, E.On), risk, insurance and financial services (e.g. Allianz, Deutsche Bank, JP Morgan Chase, Liberty Mutual, Marsh, Munich Re), systems and solutions (e.g. BAE Systems, Siemens) and travel/tourism (e.g. Lufthansa, TUI).

The focus of the study was on the instruments, concepts and strategies used to develop corporate leadership capital. All companies included in the research used a broad range of tools and processes to support the management of their leaders. They differed, however, in the extent to which these practices were implemented and integrated. Almost always the purpose and underlying assumptions of the corporate systems studied could be described in terms of their association with different disciplines. For example:

- *Personnel management*: e.g. leadership-assessment centres, executive surveys and performance reviews, management training
- *Controlling*: e.g. shareholder value management, economic value added (EVA), Balanced Scorecard (BSC)
- *Corporate communication*: e.g. vision and mission statements, corporate culture and value management, open door policies, multimedia and event communication, external marketing
- *Organization*: e.g. differentiated leadership hierarchies, incentive systems, profit centre structures, implementation of trust-based organization structures
- *Strategic management*: e.g. strategic competence planning, strengths-weaknesses-portfolios, business impact initiatives, integrated business planning processes

All of these practices, and many others, were described by interviewees as supporting leaders with their everyday workload, making their performance measurable, promoting good leadership skills, identifying leadership deficiencies and helping eliminate them, creating incentives for good leadership, facilitating and improving the selection of leadership talents, selectively developing leaders, and making the corporate build-up of leadership capital possible.

To proceed, this complex landscape had to be simplified. That was accomplished in discussion with a nucleus of interview partners from six core companies in the study, with further inputs from workshops with experts from research and practice, and a survey of current organization, communication and leadership research. The result of this complex dialogue was the identification of four action fields representing key questions addressed by corporate leadership systems:

- How can leadership talents be identified and promoted to excellency? (*Selection of Leaders & Leadership Development*)
- How can executives be supported by leadership systems that are useful in everyday tasks? (*Leadership as a Day-to-day Interactive Process*)
- How is leadership performance evaluated and measured? (*Leadership Metrics*)
- How are evaluation results used to more broadly develop leadership capacity in the organisation? (*Leadership Deployment*)

These action fields covering processes of selection, support, measurement, capacity expansion and development were described as the logically interacting generic building blocks of leadership systems, as shown in Figure 2.

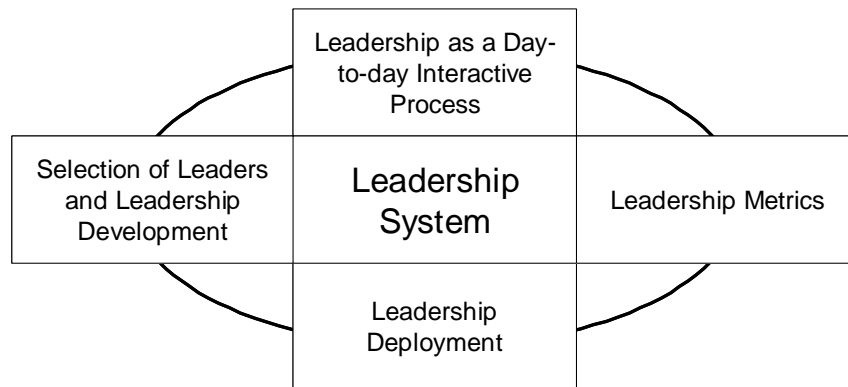


Figure 2: The Generic Leadership System (Reichwald et al. 2003)

An important purpose of the TUM study was to evaluate activities as well as supporting tools and instruments in each area, trying to understand the way they interacted from a systems perspective. A primary outcome of this evaluation was the importance of simplicity. The systems that were judged most effective focused their instrument landscape and linked the results to structure, strategy and culture within the company. They not only integrated applications, but built in communication processes between leaders at all levels of the corporate hierarchy to assure that they were understood and applied in similar ways. In contrast, the systems that were judged less effective included a variety of smaller tools and procedures, operating in relative isolation. Many of these appeared to be useful enough when judged individually, but they were difficult for participants to understand as a group because they were not linked together in any transparent way.

An example from the TUM study

A brief summary from one of the ‘super-large’ players in the TUM study that was judged to have an effective leadership system may prove instructive. While leadership systems in many companies are seen as a subset of the overall human resource management system and are given relatively little attention by people outside of HRM, this company’s leadership system manages to reach widespread acknowledgement – comparable to their financial management system – by linking both together. Both adopt equally rigid timetables and strict deadlines. Both are seen as delivering value to the corporation.

The leadership system in our example is described by managers and external observers as web-based and easy to use, transparent, consequential, and integrated across the four generic fields summarised in Figure 2. Tools and instruments falling within each of the four categories of Figure 2 are closely integrated with the overall business processes of the company, and there is a synchronized timeline between the critical activities of leadership selection, support, measurement, expansion, and development on the one hand and the milestones of the company’s financial

processes on the other. Perhaps most important, several observers reported that this company's leadership system has a significant impact on the overall success of the company. As one manager noted: "Leadership and business are interlinked – they challenge each other!"

As with several other highly ranked corporate leadership systems in this study, many of the tools used are based on widely available concepts or even commercial products, but these are tailored to the company's specific needs. Measurement of leadership performance, for example, builds upon company designed peer reviews, partner and customer feedback. These often use but extend concepts from the Balanced Scorecard (Kaplan / Norton 1996). Though observers know some of the limitations of this approach, they tend not to be cynical. As one observer put it – "The Balanced Scorecard is like Harry Potter! Suddenly, everyone talks about the same thing and all have the impression that they understand each other."

Tools and instruments that link leadership performance with the selection of leaders and their development are rare in the companies studied in the TUM project; usually monetary incentives like salary are linked to performance measurement, non-monetary incentives are not. In our example company, however, 360-degree feedback (e.g. Ward 1997; Toegel / Conger 2003) is used to draw strengths-weaknesses-profiles for each individual leader, and these feed into performance evaluation and feedback sessions. The result of the performance evaluation forms a rigid ranking of the 'Top 5%', the 'Best 20%', the 'Majority of 66%' and the 'Bottom 9%'. (One manager noted that "There is a fixed number of the bottom 9% - in that way you can't cheat on the evaluation.") For all those measured, performance evaluation also forms the basis for career and development planning. Again, while aware of the problems that may arise when linking 360-degree feedback to performance evaluation and development plans, the integration of these concepts is widely accepted in this example company. The use of multiple, linked tools is seen as a positive and unifying aspect of the company's leadership systems by executives at different levels in different units of the corporation.

The basis for leadership development in this company is a 'Management Resource Review' that compares and manages the top-leadership talents of the company. A virtual corporate university has been established as a centre of excellence for all forms of leadership (leading markets, innovations, technology and people). The widely understood goal of this corporate university is to establish a joint understanding of leadership and culture for the company as a whole. It is thus basically a communication channel that tries to connect leaders at all levels but also aims to connect with partners outside the company through partnering with research institutions, business schools or selected customers.

Leadership system components as useful inputs to improvisation by individuals

It is commonplace in the strategy literature to observe that success at one point in time, such as we have just described, can lead to later stagnation and decline. We began this chapter with two relatively straightforward ideas that relate to this problem. First, the desirability of simplicity from a systems point of view has an interesting

counterpart in the necessity of simplification from the perspective of individual cognitive processes (Walsh, 1995). We thought the story line of the paper would develop a subsequent idea, something like ‘Simplicity is necessary both for leadership systems and for the sensemaking of individual leaders, but somehow the system has to allow, even encourage, individual improvisation in response to varied local conditions or else simplicity on both sides becomes increasingly risky.’ Improvisation seemed a particularly good metaphor to link to emerging forms of leadership, backed by a small but significant literature (e.g. Mangham and Pye, 1991).

However, when we looked more closely at the various articles and working papers we had on improvisation, we had to admit that we didn’t know as much about the central metaphor of improvisation as we thought. In this short chapter we will draw on a powerful piece by Karl Weick (1998), who has written a number of influential articles on jazz over the years, to develop a more complicated story line that we are eager to develop into a more complete agenda for empirical research.

Weick uses Berliner’s (1994, 241) somewhat complicated but evocative definition: “Improvisation involves reworking precomposed material and designs in relation to unanticipated ideas conceived, shaped, and transformed under the special conditions of performance, thereby adding unique features to every creation.” It is the focus on ‘precomposed material’ that gave us pause. That idea becomes even more interesting as Weick draws on Berliner (1994, 66-71) to suggest ‘degrees of improvisation’ from ‘interpretation’ through ‘embellishment’ and ‘variation’ before reaching what might be more accurately called improvisation itself. As one might expect, “activities toward the ‘interpretation’ end of the continuum are more dependent on the models they start with than are activities toward the improvisation end” (1998, 545). However, subsequent discussion of the source material of different forms of improvisation departed from some of our expectations, and deserves fuller explication:

“as modifications become more like improvisations and less like interpretations, their content is more heavily influenced by past experience, dispositions, and local conditions....Thus, interpretation and embellishment should be initiated more quickly under time pressure than is true for variation and improvisation. Deliberate injunctions to be radically different may falter if they fail to specify precisely what the original model is, in what sense it is to remain a constraint, and which of its properties are constants and which are variables. These questions don’t arise in the three approximations to improvisation represented by interpretation, embellishment, and variation. The point is, deliberate improvisation is much tougher, much more time consuming, and places higher demands on resources, than does deliberate interpretation. If deliberateness is a key requirement for something to qualify as organisational improvisation...then full-scale improvisation should be rare in time-pressured settings. But, if it could be accomplished despite these hurdles, then it should be a substantial, sustainable, competitive advantage. (1998, 545)

Thus we have to add to our original thoughts about leadership systems that they may (and sometimes should) provide the ‘kernel’ around which a useful improvisation works. Weick quotes the musician Charles Mingus, who says “you can’t improvise on nothing; you’ve gotta improvise on something.”

A preliminary agenda for leadership studies

This brief description of a leadership system judged especially effective in the TUM study with the more discursive discussion of improvisation offered by Karl Weick, suggests just one approach to understanding the complex and often contradictory requirements of selecting, supporting, measuring, motivating and developing individual leaders. Other options for further research can be linked to the suggestions reviewed in the introduction of this chapter:

1. Grapple with the language and logic of systems. If leadership research is to have an organisational focus, as recommended in the literature, we believe it must give greater attention to the engineering-tradition of leadership systems. This is the overarching point of our chapter, and is especially important if the context of study is to be the world's largest organisations.

One way to study the adoption, implementation and impact of systems thinking may be to examine the more mature and well-tested systemic efforts in fields like quality management, process management or innovation management. For example, it is hard to over-emphasise the importance and impact of Six Sigma on many large multi-nationals over the last two decades. Pioneered by Motorola in the 1980s, this approach to improving profitability by reducing defects in manufactured components subsequently has been shown to generate significant performance improvements in a number of organisations, of varied sizes, not only in manufacturing but in contexts as varied as healthcare and financial services (Harry / Schroeder 2000). It has also influenced the design and implementation of leadership systems (Tichy / Cardwell 2002).

TQM, in its many guises, is seen as a fad by many academics. Although it certainly has its faddish aspects, we would observe that it both signified and helped embed systems thinking in corporations, including companies without manufacturing or tangible product sales. Our basic point is that leadership research (and training) must directly address and learn from the applications of this distinctive mind-set in order to avoid overly simplistic approaches to leadership in the future. 'Banner fatigue' is evident in many organisations that have been the subject of too many systems quickly replaced by alternatives. The agenda for research and practice is to avoid cynicism by designing systems that genuinely support (and do not hinder) individual leadership efforts.

2. Explore the philosophical disconnects between different leadership functions. If we are to study the leadership of organisations, as recommended (e.g. Boal / Hooijberg 2000), one obvious agenda is to consider the impediments to coordination that arise from the different disciplinary homes of leadership systems in organisations, with their accompanying philosophical differences (e.g. Bass 1990). Most notably, there is a significant difference in monitoring, evaluation, and other governance efforts, often rooted in an agency

perspective, and development and support efforts that depend on assumptions from more positive views of human behaviour.

3. Focus on the interface between systems requirements and the demands of distributed leadership. One of the largest challenges for leadership systems would appear to be accommodating the requirements of innovation and change in many, varied settings. While variety and flexibility are essential to distributed leadership (e.g. House / Aditya 1997), systems thinking tends to seek integration and routinisation. We have explored some ideas about improvisation in this brief chapter; many more avenues to improving innovation are available.
4. Understand the impact of changing communication technologies and new organisational forms. Communication has always been seen as part - and perhaps even the core (see Mintzberg 1973) - of the leadership picture, but significant changes in information and communication technology, along with increasing demands of a globalising economy, suggest new items on the research agenda (e.g. Avolio et al. 2000). The advent of new ICT does not seem to have changed the key role of personal face-to-face communication in the daily work of leaders, but the overall workload of each individual leader has risen, tasks have further fragmented and travel has increased (Pribilla et al. 1997). More systemic support for meeting these challenges is needed.
5. Study content to improve understanding of process. Content issues need to be put to the forefront of leadership research, if it is to connect with the primary, strategic concerns of organisations (e.g. Cannella / Monroe 1997; Lowe / Gardner 2000). As one example, we have a particular interest in the effective leadership of international teams. The subject of individual and cultural difference has always been on the leadership agenda, often with the observation that 'requisite variety' is needed to match complex environments (Beer 1967). Several of the corporations studied at TUM see this issue as a major agenda item, and leadership studies needs to provide additional insight.
6. Explore the strengths and weaknesses of specific leadership systems. If leadership research is to grapple with issues of leadership systems, as has been recommended (e.g. Conger 1998; Lowe / Gardner 2000), they must be investigated in detail. Popular management tools and practices like Balanced Scorecard deserve greater attention because of their pervasive use and influence. A particularly interesting outcome of the TUM study was the large number of such tools and practices in simultaneous use within the same company, despite some apparent contradictions. In many instances they were significantly modified in use. One of our agenda items for the future is to look at local adaptation of leadership practices and central response to such adaptations. Ideally, as briefly outlined above, modification can become a strength of the leadership system in use, but this certainly is not easy to accommodate at scale.

Conclusion

Perhaps readers will wonder if we are saying anything new in this chapter. Indeed this is a question we have asked and will continue to ask ourselves, because management and leadership have long been described as requiring a balance between inspiration and control, and between creative interpretation and simplifying rationality. We have drawn attention to scale in this chapter, but major military and religious efforts have acted at astonishing scale for many centuries.

The most obvious changes in today's conditions are not just the significant increase in the number of such macro efforts, but the technologies available to support them. Indeed, the empirical study we have briefly described is built on ten-year research cooperation between Peter Pribilla, member of the Corporate Executive Committee of Siemens AG until his untimely death in 2003, and Ralf Reichwald, dean of the TUM Business School. Their collaboration focused on the nature of leadership, leadership communication, and institutional support structures in large multinationals. As briefly cited above, their first joint study, in 1993/1994, was a twenty-year follow-up of Henry Mintzberg's study of the *Nature of Managerial Work*. Modern information and communication technology (facsimile, email, voice mail, video conferencing, and so on) were not available in the world Mintzberg studied in the early 1970s. The special focus of the Pribilla & Reichwald study was the impact of these forms of media on leadership communication and the daily work of leaders and their followers (Pribilla et al. 1997). Their early observations lead to an increasing interest in the shaping influence of leadership systems, and the study described above.

In the past, the options for operating at scale have been largely confined to messianic vision and/or command and control. One question in this chapter is whether the newer, much more distributed forms of leadership outlined by Drath (1998) in Figure 1 can operate at similar scale. That seems new to us.

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