

## Sensuous Leadership for a VUCA World

Elena P Antonacopoulou, *GNOSIS, University of Liverpool*

Regina Bento, *University of Baltimore*

### Abstract

As we approach the third decade of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, struggling to cope with wicked problems and the volatility, uncertainty, complexity and ambiguity (VUCA) of an increasingly turbulent environment (Bennett & Lemoine, 2014), the ensuing leadership crisis (Ashford & DeRue, 2012; O'Reilly et al, 2015a, 2015b) not only undermines the power of 'leadership'; it disempowers leaders from making a difference, because 'leadership' as a concept promises to do so much and delivers, more often than not, so little. 'Leadership' as potentially little more than an empty promise is not only the consequence of inconsistencies in the way leadership is represented, enacted and embodied by a variety of actors in a variety of contexts and in a rich tapestry of practices and circumstances (Raelin, 2016; Scharmer, 2009). Leadership practice is in danger of becoming void of substance by not inviting and inspiring ways of responding to the VUCA conditions.

Johansen (2012) provides a response to this call for addressing the VUCA conditions with a 'VUCA Primer' as a mode of leading through VUCA conditions. For Johansen in order to respond to Volatility there is a need for *Vision*, Uncertainty calls for *Understanding*, Complexity calls for *Clarity* and Ambiguity calls for *Agility*. And yet, valuable as this analysis is, there is no explication on the learning leadership that must necessarily enable developing such VUCA leadership – leadership with vision, understanding, clarity and agility (Antonacopoulou & Bento, 2010). Antonacopoulou (2018b) makes the case for VUCA learning leadership as a response to this gap and shows how supporting ways of leading that enable Volatility to be met with Vision, demand learning to feel safe being *Vulnerable*. In order to respond to Uncertainty, to form an accurate Understanding, calls for courage to remain *Unnerved* by the unknown. To respond to Complexity through Clarity calls for *Candour*. To embrace Ambiguity through Agility calls for *Awakening*. Recognising *Vulnerability*, *Unnerved*, *Candour* and *Awakening* as integral to VUCA learning leadership can become a catalyst for revitalizing leadership as a concept and practice.

This means that we can actively explore the power of leadership afresh by focusing more directly on the ways leading is embedded in everyday life 'practising' a variety of activities, taking initiative and making things happen through VUCA modes of leading. Such practising then shifts our focus not only beyond the context of work and embeds leading in the everyday life; it also removes the need for leader-follower distinctions. It recognizes leadership as it is performed by 'ordinary' people, who find in themselves, and awaken in others, the possibility of doing "extra-ordinary" things. These extensions to our conceptualization of leadership – ontologically and contextually embrace the dynamic, collective and relational process that leading entails as it is situated and socially defined (Cunliffe & Eriksen, 2011). It also calls for fresh ways of representing it symbolically.

We propose the idea of "sensuous leadership" and reinforce it by expanding the readers' experience of the text through the use of examples in "Sensorial Hyperlinks" that involve and engage the senses to go beyond a purely cognitive narrative or emotional connection. A sensuous approach to leading goes beyond the traditional emphasis on cognitive or emotional ways of knowing to explore the powerful insights we can gain

through *sensuousness* (Merleau-Ponty, 1962; 1964). The latter is part of a growing body of work that recognizes aesthetic ways of leading (Hansen et al., 2007; Adler, 2011, 2015; Ladkin and Taylor, 2014). Sensuous leadership however, goes beyond embodiment and involves an *emplaced* mode of leading that implicates the whole person, encompassing intellect and emotion and embracing sensation, values and character (Antonacopoulou, 2018b). The potential to augment the insights from our experiences by also engaging sensoriality, not just our cognition and emotions, will be illustrated throughout the paper by a series of “Sensorial Hyperlinks”. Our approach of using hyperlinked illustrations, as an unconventional way to provide direct access to vivid sensorial stimuli and thus introduce a “sensuous” (as distinguished from “sensual”) approach to leadership offers access to appreciate the power of leading (as opposed to the power to lead). This approach of arresting ‘leadership in the making’ raises methodological, epistemological and ethical issues for researching leadership and its impact. We explore how those issues can be addressed by approaches such as seizing critical moments, promoting more reflexivity, and seeking new expressions of leadership. In this respect, expressions of leadership with ‘character’ and ‘virtue’ (Crossan et al., 2017; Antonacopoulou & Bento, 2018) in practice, explicate how dimensions of leadership reflect the *courage, commitment, confidence* and *curiosity* to persevere when navigating the unknown that VUCA conditions demand.

## REFERENCES

- Adler, N.J. 2015. Finding beauty in a fractured world: Art inspires leaders – Leaders change the world. *Academy of Management Review* 40(3): 480-494.
- Adler, N.J. 2011. Leading beautifully: The creative economy and beyond. *Journal of Management Inquiry* 20: 208-221.
- Antonacopoulou, E.P. 2018a. Organisational Learning for and with VUCA: Learning Leadership Revisited. *Teoria e Prática em Administração* (Theory and Practice Management Journal – Leading Brazilian Journal) Special Issue. 8(2): 10-32
- Antonacopoulou, E.P. 2018b. *Sensuous Learning for Practical Judgment in Professional Practice: Volume 2: Arts-based Interventions*. London: Chapter 2. Palgrave Macmillan.
- Antonacopoulou, E.P. and Bento, R. 2010. Learning leadership in practice. In Storey, J. (Ed) *Leadership in Organizations: Current Issues and Key Trends*, 2<sup>nd</sup> Edition, (pp. 81-102). London: Routledge
- Antonacopoulou, E.P. and Bento, R. 2016. Learning leadership: A call to beauty. In Storey, J. (Ed) *Leadership in Organizations: Current Issues and Key Trends*. 3<sup>rd</sup> Edition, (pp. 99-112). London: Routledge.
- Antonacopoulou, E.P. & Bento, R. 2018. From Laurels to Learning: Leadership with Virtue, *Journal of Management Development*, Special Issue. Forthcoming
- Ashford, S & DeRue, D.S. 2012. Developing as a leader: The power of mindful engagement. *Organizational Dynamics* 41(2): 146-154.
- Bennett, N & Lemoine, G.J. 2014. What a difference a word makes: Understanding threats to performance in a VUCA world. *Business Horizons* 57(3): 311-317.

- Crossan, M., Byrne, A., Seijts, G., Reno, M. Monzani, L. and Gandz, J. 2017. Toward a Framework of Leader Character in Organizations. *Journal of Management Studies*. 54(7): 986-1018.
- Cunliffe, A.L. & Eriksen, M. 2011. Relational leadership. *Human Relations*, 64(11): 1425-1449.
- Johansen, B. (2012). *Leaders Make the Future: Te New Leadership Skills*. Berrett-Koehler: SF California
- Hansen, H. Ropo, A. & Sauer, E. 2007. Aesthetic leadership. *The Leadership Quarterly* 18: 544–560.
- Ladkin, D. & Taylor, S.S. 2014. *The physicality of leadership: Gesture, entanglement, taboo, possibilities*. Bingley, UK: Emerald.
- Merleau-Ponty, M. 1962. *Phenomenology of perception*. London: Routledge.
- Merleau-Ponty, M. 1964. *The visible and the invisible*. Evanston, IL: Northwestern University.
- O'Reilly, D., Leitch, C.M., Harrison, R.T. & Lamprou, E. 2015a. Introduction: Leadership in a crisis-constructing world. *Leadership* 11(4): 387-395.
- O'Reilly, D., Leitch, C.M., Harrison, R.T. & Lamprou, E. 2015b. Leadership, authority and crisis: Reflections and future directions. *Leadership* 11(4): 489-499.
- Raelin, J.A. 2016. It's not about the leaders: It's about the practice of leadership. *Organizational Dynamics* 45(2): 124-131.
- Scharmer, C.O. 2009. *Theory U: Leading from the Future as it Emerges. The social Technology of Presencing*. San Francisco: Berrett-Koehler.