

Followers as leaders: exploring the follower-leader dynamics in a business project with students co-investigators

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The aim of this paper is to find the most reality-congruent theoretical perspective as we make sense of our experience of a client project. We begin the paper with a critical review of the mainstream leadership theories. Traditionally, the mainstream leadership studies approached the phenomenon of leadership from a positivist perspective, using methods derived from natural sciences. The orthodox view of leadership adopts a rational or a formative causality that suggests leaders are autonomous individuals who are acting as objective observers. Following this approach leaders are often seen as individuals with special abilities, with followers presented as a homogenous group that is largely mentioned only as passive recipients of the leader's manipulations.

We develop this paper by reflecting on our own experience of participating in a project for a client from an educational charity. When the client, Susan, walked into our office in autumn of 2016 we had been working on several projects with her for a couple of years. The educational charity of which she was a CEO had realised that in order to survive they must stop relying solely on donations. With an aim to become financially sustainable, they turned to us to conduct a scoping investigation to explore potential business opportunities. They had one stipulation – the study must involve students as investigators. In this paper, we critically reflect on the project, paying particular attention to dynamic power relating during the course of the investigation.

We focus on the emergence of power relations between us, as supervisors on the project, the client comprising of the CEO and the board of trustees, and our co-investigators, the students. The experience of conducting this investigation was exciting and enlightening. From the initial stage of recruiting the students, experiencing the emergent design and implementation, to the delivery of the final report to the charity, we encountered unexpected drawbacks and unanticipated rewards. As researchers working with a complexity approach (Stacey, 2001), we worked responsively, recognising that unpredictability is inevitable and no one can be in total control, which served to ease our anxieties.

We took an approach where students often took lead on the next step of working with the client, enabling our relationship with the students to be quite informal. To make sense of this, we look to the more recent developments in leadership studies. The work of Bolden and colleagues (Bolden, 2011, Bolden et al., 2009) resonated with us to a certain degree. They acknowledge the limitation of confining leadership studies to formal organisational settings, which reflected our project's ad-hoc nature, with little formal management structure. Co-production (Schlappa and Imani, 2018), as a process of collaboration between professional and citizens, and relational leadership (Hosking et al., 2012) focusing on actions and power-dynamics, provided another useful lens to explore the evolution of the project. However, these more recent approaches to leadership could not fully explain our experience. They reflect a tendency to focus on what leaders do, rather than exploring a relational approach where leading and following arises in the ongoing social interactions of working together.

In order to make sense of experience we turn to complexity sciences. We recognise that the label 'complexity sciences' is an umbrella term for various theories in natural sciences that have been developed since the second half of the last century (Waldrop, 1992). Complexity scientists from many disciplines suggest that nature can be understood as a system, emphasising the importance of

the interaction of its parts, and not just the parts themselves. On this thinking, in order to understand the system one cannot concentrate on researching just one part of it. From this perspective, natural systems are non-linear (there is no efficient, 'if X... then Y', causality between cause and effect), non-deterministic (the outcomes of interaction are not prescribed), and are not reductionist (simple systems may give rise to immense and unpredictable consequences) (Holland, 2014).

The most common model for the purposes of thinking about human behaviour relates to Complex Adaptive Systems (CAS) (Mowles, 2015). CAS draws on models of large populations of bit-strings of code – 'agents' - which interact with each other according to a set of rules initially specified by a programmer (Stacey and Mowles, 2016). Yet there are limitations to understanding human organisations as complex adaptive systems (see Andrews, 2018, Filosof, 2017), particularly as these CAS are based on computer simulations. Complex responsive processes of relating (Stacey, 2001) offers an alternative perspective that explores insights from complexity sciences in relation to human interaction. In doing so, this literature (Stacey et al., 2000, Griffin and Stacey, 2005, Mowles et al., 2008, Norman et al., 2015) turns to complexity, but also to social sciences – sociology, psychology, anthropology, philosophy, politics – to make sense of our working together. In our paper we make sense of the project conducted with the students, critically reflecting on the main tenets of complex responsive processes: understanding our work from the perspective of interdependent dynamic interaction, emergence, and mutual recognition (Stacey and Mowles, 2016).

In taking an approach informed by complexity theories, we have come to understand 'leadership' in a more practical sense of leading the conversation, and a contribution to knowledge arises in how this project offered a way 'holding space' for reflection and for new learning, which can serve as a space for containing anxieties related to uncertainty. We summarise our insights into our experience recognising that we did not start with a blueprint for the project, and our understanding of the project emerged in our interactions with students and other participants.

This paper provides several contributions to the study of leadership. Firstly, it addresses the gap in the literature, studying leadership outside of a traditional organisational setting. Secondly, as a way of understanding leadership as congruent with our practice, emerging in our interaction and interrelatedness with others, which inevitably involves power relations. Further to this, the paper contributes to the growing body of reflexive narrative methodology where we believe that our reflection may resonate with other practitioners and from which others can reflect on their own leadership experience.

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