

# **The Power of Learning Leadership to foster Institutional Reflexivity and High Agility Organising: Lessons from the RNoAFA**

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## **Abstract**

Recent calls in advancing Organisational and Management Learning suggest that new ways of knowing and acting to address the Volatility, Uncertainty, Complexity and Ambiguity (VUCA, Bennett & Lemoine, 2014) as the conditions that mirror the rhythm of the 21st Century become critical. Sensuous Organisational Learning has been presented as a strategic response to the VUCA conditions energizing a VUCA approach to learning leadership (Antonacopoulou, 2018a) to deliver responsible action that serves the common good. The latter can form the foundation of theorising the power of learning leadership explicating Institutional Reflexivity and High Agility Organising as key characteristics of the ‘New Learning Organisation’ (Daly & Overton, 2017).

We explicate the common good as the ‘mission’ of the New Learning Organisation we conceptualise, because we want to illustrate that in attending to the VUCA conditions such a ‘mission’ shapes the ways of knowing and acting of both individuals, communities and the organisation as a whole. We illustrate this ‘mission’ in the way the Royal Norwegian Air Force Academy (thereafter RNoAFA) as an educational institution, has been navigating the VUCA conditions of the recent modernisation reforms in Norwegian Defence with this mission to serve the common good in the way it organises its approach to educating (Military) learning leaders across its faculty, officers and cadets. In doing so, it also demonstrates the leadership of the RNoAFA itself in the Defence sector nationally and internationally (in NATO) in response to the VUCA conditions.

We organise the discussion in three sections. We begin with an overview of what ‘learning leadership’ (Antonacopoulou & Bento, 2016) means to explain how and why the ‘sensuous learning’ (Antonacopoulou, 2018b) it promotes constitutes an essential part of the version of the ‘New Learning Organisation’ advanced in this paper.

In the second section, we illustrate the educational practices of the RNoAFA in developing ‘learning leaders’ among its faculty, officers and cadets. These accounts are presented by the educators that reflexively account for the design principles and strategic priorities underpinning the RNoAFA’s educational strategy and overall learning culture. We elaborate in this section earlier calls in the Defence sector more broadly of the importance of education in cultivating the learning that ensures readiness, resilience and ability to respond to the VUCA conditions that define the nature of Defence internationally. We echo Haugrud, Lehmann & Phillips’ (2001: 66) call for “more innovative methods for employing existing [educational] systems [so] that the military ... become[s] a learning organization able to adapt to changing environments. The catalyst for that transformation must be education”.

We show in this paper, how the RNoAFA as an educational institution has been strengthening its distinctive focus in supporting the growth of (Military) leaders by cultivating not only individual and collective reflection but also ‘Institutional Reflexivity’. The latter focuses on cultivating critique such that self and situational awareness become a precondition to acting responsibly. Integral to fostering critique is also character development (Boe, 2015; Crossan et al., 2017). In other words, it focuses on cultivating the character qualities/virtues that underpin the strength (military) leaders demonstrate when faced with VUCA conditions (Antonacopoulou, 2018c).

In the third section we present a way of reviving the idea of the Learning Organisation (Pedler and Burgoyne, 2017) not only because it matters due to its relevance, pragmatically contingent and contextual orientation as Örtenblad (2013) convincingly argues. Instead, we would also add that it matters, because it is necessary to ensure the commitment to ongoing learning serves the common good, by nurturing responsible action founded on ways of knowing and acting that are robust to engage with the unknown. This is what we propose uniquely places Sensuous Organisational Learning as a

foundation for the New Learning Organisation that the RNoAFA acts as an illustration of.

We clarify at this juncture also that this paper is not presented as a traditional empirical paper nor a self-referential or even auto-ethnographic account. Instead, it is one of a series of research outputs from an innovative research collaboration between the authors all committed to ‘practising knowing’ and dialogical exchange (MacIntosh et al., 2012; Cunliffe, 2002). The collaborative learning partnership that brings together the authors in the varying roles as military officers, academics in the RNoAFA and international scholars is testament to the collective commitment to explore learning differently. We have produced this paper jointly collectively sharpening up in the process our individual and collective learning as we practised what we present as the 8As Sensuous Organisational Learning Framework to demonstrate the power of learning leadership.

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