The Leadership Quarterly xxx (2015) xxx–xxx

Contents lists available at ScienceDirect

The Leadership Quarterly

journal homepage: www.elsevier.com/locate/leaqua

Breaking mental models as a form of creative destruction: The role of leader cognition in radical social innovations

Richard T. Marcy

The University of Victoria, Canada

ARTICLE INFO

Article history:
Accepted 19 February 2015
Available online xxxx

Editor M. Mumford

Keywords:
Radical social innovation
Sensemaking
Sensebreaking
Creative destruction
Social movements

ABSTRACT

Theory building on the unique cognitions involved in the generation and implementation of social innovation has grown in the past few years and general theoretical models of social innovation have been proposed. Drawing from prior research, this paper proposes to extend these models and related propositions by further accounting for different types of social innovation, as well as the different contexts and goals in which they are created in and meant to address. In doing so, it will also investigate some fundamental differences in the cognitions of socially-innovative leaders – such as mental models, knowledge, and cognitive strategies applied – and their impact on the generation and implementation of social innovation. Using a case study approach and drawing from the historic record provided by Guy Debord, leader of the Situationist International, this study will formulate some initial hypotheses about the cognitions he drew from and employed to generate and implement radical, as opposed to incremental, social innovations.

Introduction

Throughout history, various social innovations have helped change our world. Social innovations – typically defined in the literature as "the generation and implementation of new ideas about how people should organize interpersonal or social interactions to meet common goals" (Marcy & Mumford, 2007; Mumford, 2002) – have led to the development of modern management practices (for example, through the work of Henry Ford and Frederick Taylor), the development of improved educational practices (Henry Chauncey and James Conant), and new forms of societal organization (Karl Marx, Filippo Tommaso Marinetti, and others) (Marcy & Mumford, 2007).

As we live in a world that many of these social innovations have helped bring about, it can be easy to overlook how large a role leadership played in the generation and implementation of these socially innovative ideas, particularly when these social innovations have "gone against the grain" to any large measure. Leaders in the past have not only been responsible for generating socially-innovative ideas, but they and their teams have had to effectively lead people to implement these ideas, often in the face of great opposition from powerful others. It is clear from the historical evidence that, without this effective leadership, many social innovations would not have come to pass. Given their role in this vitally important process, leaders of social innovation appear to merit further investigation.

Some preliminary research has looked at particularly innovative leaders such as Benjamin Franklin to see what steps they might have taken to arrive at and execute their social innovations (Mumford, 2002). Viewing social innovation as a unique form of leader problem identification and creative problem-solving, some consideration has been given to further investigating general cognitive frameworks that might underlie leader thought and behavior vis-à-vis social innovation. This line of research into the cognition of leaders suggests that leaders hold and develop mental schematics (i.e. mental models) that they then in turn use in detecting, understanding, and ultimately solving problems (Marcy & Mumford, 2007) — in the case of social innovation, problems related to how people should organize interpersonal or social interactions to meet common goals. As this mental schematic holds knowledge of

http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.leaqua.2015.02.004
1048-9843/

causal relationships, as well as goal, affect, and other critical information, it often acts as a general filter for perception; as a result, leaders are more likely to be able to perceive, and thus understand and act on, social problems that are congruent with information that is contained within their mental models (Nickerson, 1998).

Leaders appear to be further aided in social problem-solving by their employment of a number of different cognitive tools, such as the use of particular diagnostics in scanning, the use of appropriate heuristics (i.e., mental shortcuts often used in dealing effectively with complexity) and causal analysis (i.e., the active and deliberate analysis of causal information within a problem set), which they use to further leverage information already contained in their mental models (Caughron, Shipman, Beeler, & Mumford, 2009; Johnson-Laird, 1983; Marcy & Mumford, 2007; Mumford, 2002; Mumford & Moertl, 2003). Cumulatively, this prior research suggests that the quality of these components of leader thought likely plays a notable role in the generation and implementation of social innovations.

Radical vs. incremental social innovation

Much of the research on the role of leader cognition in socially innovative efforts has largely examined leaders that were firmly embedded within their particular social system, which is to say that the role of the innovative leader under investigation has typically been one in which the leader is internal to an organization and has a high degree of consensus with the prevailing system at hand, to include acceptance of and respect for organizational goals, values, status and power relationships, etc. The burgeoning work on social entrepreneurship, arguably the bulk of social-innovation related research going on at the present time, similarly reflects this perspective of embeddedness, particularly within a market-economic framework (Cajaiba-Santana, 2013; Jessop, Moulaert, Hulgard, & Hamdouch, 2013). Many of the cognitions that have been theorized to be involved in social innovation, as well as the respective tactics that have been prescribed, have flown from this assumption of a leader generating and implementing socially innovative ideas that further the overall agenda of the organization that they are embedded in.

For example, it has been suggested that a key tactic for social innovators is the enlistment of, and collaboration with, elites in the social system at hand (Mumford, 2002). While this is clearly a logical approach for those leaders embedded within their respective social systems (and, more substantively, in general consensus with their respective social system's goals, values, and status relationships), a review of the historical record provides a good amount of evidence that not all noteworthy social innovations began with collaboration with social system elites, or with a level of general consensus with the prevailing social system (Fox, 2005; Henderson, 1993). A number of leaders of social innovations, such as those found within various social movements of the last two centuries, had at first a more distant, if not contestatory, relationship with system elites. While collaboration often occurred in later phases of the innovation cycle, typically when social status and power began to shift, this took place well after the implementation phase of the innovation had begun.

This difference in tactics used by different social innovators is in part related to important differences in context and goals of the social innovation being proposed. Many of Benjamin Franklin's social innovations, such as the creation of a 'gentleman's club' and police force, primarily involved the rearrangement of human and physical resources (Mumford, 2002), leaving well established status relationships relatively unchanged. As a recognized pragmatic leader, and as one who – along with his powerful colleagues – had vested interests in the existing social system, Franklin's priorities were not involved in changing the status quo to any large degree (this, in fact, was a particular strength in his approaches, and one that he leveraged when getting buy-in from elites for particular initiatives) (Mumford & Van Doorn, 2001).

While the outcomes of Franklin's social innovations were immensely important – particularly from a technical, financial, and physical standpoint – the degree to which his innovations altered existing social relationships within early America were arguably somewhat more modest, especially when compared with more radical social innovations that have followed, like those that occurred as a result of the American civil rights movements in the 1960s and 70s. Bringing together a society's most powerful representatives and asking them to leverage this group influence towards a goal that serves their physical and financial interests was a unique social proposition for Franklin's time in early America, but perhaps not one that would be considered to be as highly *socially* innovative as those that have challenged and/or shifted primary social relationships of status and power before and since.

Specht (1975), in his analysis of agents of social change, has developed a gradient that could be used to determine levels of social change within a socially innovative initiative (see Table 1). This gradient matches elite and challenger perceptions of levels of change with corresponding responses that parties might take as a result of that change, along with categories of tactics that are typically

Table 1
Perceptions of social change, elite/challenger response, and mode of intervention.
Adapted from Specht (1975).

	When change is perceived as	The response is often	The mode of intervention is
1	Rearrangement of resources	Consensus	Collaborative
2	Redistribution of resources	Difference	Campaign
3	Change in status relationships	Dissensus	Contest or disruption
4	Reconstruction of the entire system	Insurrection	Violence

Please cite this article as: Marcy, R.T., Breaking mental models as a form of creative destruction: The role of leader cognition in radical social innovations, *The Leadership Quarterly* (2015), http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.leaqua.2015.02.004