



# The architecture of managerial leadership: Stimulation and channeling of organizational emergence<sup>☆</sup>

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## ABSTRACT

This conceptual manuscript emphasizes the indirect influence of senior managers who occupy positions between the strategic apex of the organization and its middle management. It combines a traditional organization behavior/theory perspective with that of a complex adaptive theory approach to examine why and how leaders should and can stimulate “emergence” and channel “emergence.” In technical terms, we emphasize the level VI managerial leadership (ala Elliott Jaques) level just below the level VII strategic apex. We argue that these managerial leaders should use the complexity theory “order for free” notions to traverse the narrow path between order and disorder to simultaneously improve the fitness of the organization and benefit its members. We emphasize alterations in the character of the system, its processes, its procedures and its informal structure to help the organization stimulate bottom up order for free activities and also combine these initiatives into viable adaptations. Thus, it emphasizes the architecture established by these leaders. A number of propositions are also provided.

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## 1. Introduction

The specific purpose of this manuscript is to discuss the architecture of managerial leadership, that is leadership just below the strategic apex. We emphasize the term architecture to place the emphasis on the context of leadership, its collective character, and the knowledge and information management needed for success and potential for analytical study. While the interpersonal dynamics of leaders and their followers, the personality of the individual leader, and the collective idiosyncrasies of followers, have been historically important, these factors have all but driven out a consideration of the indirect leadership mechanisms available to executives. Furthermore, we think the corporate world for upper-level leadership in general, and this level in particular, is dramatically changing—there is a new context confronting many firms. This new context is not only different but calls for a different perspective on leadership. We argue that who should lead how they should lead and which casual mechanisms to use should also change.

## 2. Organization of article

This article is organized as follows: First we briefly focus on the historical development of leadership and our view of the neglected side of leadership emphasizing the different levels of leadership, its context, along with a brief description of complex adaptive systems (CASs). It is here we introduce level VI leaders and leadership (see Jaques, 1976, 1989). Next, we examine the old versus the new roles and expectations for leaders leading to a more expanded discussion of level VI leaders and complexity theory. As a continuation, we discuss a framework for examining managerial leadership<sup>1</sup> in firms at the “edge of chaos” and next focus on

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<sup>1</sup> We believe that the upper level managers treated in this manuscript exert both leadership and management (Bedeian & Hunt, 2006) and we therefore tend to refer to them as “managerial leaders”.

choice and initiative in a CAS. We then focus on two related critical challenges for level VI leaders, the stimulating and challenging emergence which they face in their role in developing the architecture of managerial leadership, using both traditional organization theory and CAS approaches. We then devote much of the remainder of the article to the in-depth revisiting of stimulating and channeling emergence and linking challenges of past, present, and future actions, along with tags. Tags are a mechanism that facilitates the creation of aggregates by permitting agents to distinguish among each other; e.g. trademarks, brands, or uniforms (Boal & Schultz, 2007). As such, they enable managerial leaders to carry out their major challenges. Along the way, with the previously mentioned steps, we generate eight propositions, and briefly discuss the levels of hierarchy and levels of analyses involved in this meso framework. Finally, we have a conclusions and limitations section.

### 2.1. *What's old is new again*

As Porter and McLaughlin (2006) reminded leadership scholars, “Leadership in organizations does not take place in a vacuum. It takes place in organizational contexts” (p. 559). In this article on meso models, it is important to recognize that multiple level approaches to leadership have a long tradition in leadership research. During the late seventies and early eighties of the previous century a small minority of leadership scholars were concerned with macro and systems approaches, (e.g., Hunt & Osborn, 1981b; Hunt, Osborn, & Martin, 1983). Some more recent work in this tradition embeds leadership within the environment, structure, and technology of organizations (e.g., House & Aditya, 1997).

Collectively these contributions provide a rich array of hypotheses dealing with combinations of environment, technology, organizational design and the transactional dimensions of leadership when predicting aspects of organizational performance and employee satisfaction for large scale bureaucratic systems. However, the competitive world of corporations has fundamentally changed and recent work suggests that some new aspects of leadership may be particularly important in this new world. Porter and McLaughlin (2006) call for research that makes context, “a primary object of interest, rather than treating it as almost an afterthought” (p. 573). Consistent with this call for context based research we incorporate elements of the complex adaptive systems literature (Kauffman, 1993, 1995; Osborn & Hunt, 2007; Uhl-Bien, Marion, & McKelvey, 2007) with new dimensions of leadership relying upon casual mechanisms evoked by the setting. The newer complexity based approaches also utilize such new terminology and concepts (e.g., tags, emergence) that leadership researchers may have a problem linking these complex adaptive systems views to more traditional perspectives. Thus, we will devote some space to clarifying definitions. We begin with a brief discussion of the challenges facing our target leaders and then turn to the notion of context.

### 2.2. *Whose leadership are we discussing and what are the challenges?*

So who is our target? It is that group of people between the top management cadre and middle management depending on the type of organization structure, e.g., functional or divisional (cf., Jaques, 1976, 1989). There can be one or many of these people. With all of the attention on the very top of the organizational pyramid and the extensive treatments of the top management team (Hambrick & Mason, 1984; Finkelstein & Hambrick, 1996) as well as the leadership of CEOs (Grove, 1996), we think it is time to discuss a more neglected collection of leaders—those operating between the top management team and middle management, namely, those upper but not top level or strategic apex managerial leaders. As this manuscript suggests, this is a neglected collection of managerial leaders. Yet, for us, complexity theory suggests this level is the collection of people in the best position to provide the impetuous for organizational adaptation.

Drawing from complexity theory (e.g., Kauffman, 1993, 1995) we will suggest that these individuals are in a position to effectively alter (a) the size of the system and the number of sub-units within it ( $N$ ), (b) the interdependence among component units ( $K$ ), (c) the collective schema of members ( $P$ ), and (d) the interdependence of the system on others ( $C$ ). These leaders can also change the allocation of key resources including personnel, technical support, organizational legitimacy, and, of course, budgets. These alterations change the architecture.

What challenges do these target executives face? In the terminology of complexity theory, they need to first stimulate and then channel emergence. In the complexity terminology used here, emergence is some activity occurring that is not induced by the environment, but instead, results from the interdependence of system agents and components (Schneider & Somers, 2006). In more conventional terms these executives need to promote experimentation, change, innovation and invention without specifying what is to be altered and precisely how it will be evaluated. In stimulating this emergence we will stress two dimensions of leadership—patterning of attention and network development (Osborn, Hunt & Jauch, 2002).

Effective adaptation to improve the fitness (performance) of the system also calls for combining, modifying and implementing potentially important changes, innovations and inventions. Here, we will stress that the channeling emergence is enabled by linking the past (who we are), present (what we do), and the future (where do we want to go). That is, in a sea of turbulence, leaders need to provide meaning in a conventional way by interpretations of the past, which articulate the values, beliefs, and identity of the organizational sub-unit consistent with the organization's values, beliefs, and identity. In the present, they need to strike a balance among the sub-units' core competencies to exploit the present while also encouraging continued learning and innovation. Finally, in the future, they make sense of and give meaning to, environmental ambiguity and turbulence. Channeling is more that just selecting among promising alternatives presented by middle managers. It involves combining and crafting the new initiatives with others to foster, develop and enable growth and evolution. In the terminology of Yukl (2006) executives need to lead both directly via interpersonal influence and indirectly via alterations of particular systemic components, such as formal programs, management systems, or aspects of formal structure.

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