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## Editorial

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### Stig O. Johannessen

Bodø Graduate School of Business,  
Bodø 8049, Norway  
E-mail: stigjo@bntv.no

**Biographical note:** Stig O. Johannessen, PhD, is an Associate Professor of organisation and management at Bodø Graduate School of Business in Norway. He is also working as a consultant to major businesses and public sector organisations. His main research themes are organisational complexity, leadership and change processes. He has published a number of articles and book contributions on these subjects. Since 2005, he has been an Associate Fellow of the Complexity and Management Centre (CMC) at the University of Hertfordshire, UK. Currently, he is exploring and writing about innovation and technology, identity and difference, globalised coordination, process methodology, and organisational and management development.

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### 1 Purpose of the special issue

This special issue is dedicated to the exploration of the importance of leadership in relation to complexity phenomena and change processes. In particular, we have invited papers exploring the experience of leading as social process. What are leaders doing when they are leading? What do they experience when trying to influence others? What are their responses to events and developments that are not planned and expected? How do they deal with the numbers of paradoxes arising in organisations, for instance the paradoxes of stability and change, control and spontaneity, identity and diversity, the enabling constraints of authority, politics and communication.

In relation to this, we have invited different and original ideas from what has come to be known as complexity research in organisational and leadership studies. This research has in recent years taken two main directions of thought, *the complex responsive processes perspective* and *the complex adaptive systems perspective*. These perspectives have deservedly received increasing attention because of their focus on non-linearity, unpredictability, paradox, emergence, and self-organising interactional dynamics phenomena largely overlooked by mainstream organisational research. We have in this context encouraged qualitative papers which address both theoretical and empirical aspects of complexity, leadership and change processes. In particular, we have wellcomed the use of narrative accounts of own experience, action oriented consultative research and ethnographical approaches.

In collaboration with our reviewers, we have ended up with a selection of seven papers which constitute a collection of contributions to the movement of knowledge in the important new field of complexity, leadership and change processes.

## 2 The articles

In the first article, I outline some aspects of the complexity orientation in organisational and leadership studies and how this departs from more widespread and established ideas. Mainstream theory suggests to leaders and researchers that complex contexts requires new and particular ways of management control, organising and leading which are better adapted to present day realities. However, much of this literature fail to take seriously the interactional and paradoxical nature of leadership and organisational change. Complexity research offers an understanding of human social interactional dynamics which demonstrates that organisations cannot be brought under control for subsequent analysis, manipulation and planned change. In this article, it is argued that a shift from traditional ideas of the visionary leader leading and steering the organisation as a system, towards taking seriously the everyday experience of people in interaction with each other is opening new possibilities for understanding the realities of leadership and organisational actions.

The second article is by James K. Hazy and Joyce Silberstang and presents a good example of research from a complex adaptive systems perspective. They have written a conceptual article exploring what has been referred to in some literature as the complex systems leadership theory. They propose that leadership emerges in communicative acts, and that consequently micro-level interactions among agents within groups need to be examined in terms of the programs of action which they enact. They offer propositions that suggest how these micro-enactments can be assembled into organisational mechanisms that enable change processes. More generally, they propose that organisational change is constructed when specific micro-enactments are assembled to reconfigure an organisation's capabilities and competencies.

The third article is by John Tobin and presents an account of his own practice as CEO of a hospital in the US in process of carrying through a merger with another hospital. It is indeed a rare insight into the experiences of a CEO who questions the widespread idea that leaders are in control and only operate in a rational way with a clear overview of the situations they are part of in everyday activities. Tobin claims that this is partly an illusion that works to uphold executive power and status. By exploring his own experience characterised by misunderstandings, incomplete information, conflicting agendas and power struggles – he argues the real world of executive praxis is one of paradoxically being in control and not in control at the same time. One strategy to cope with the anxieties inherent to the ambiguities of complex processes and to better influence the evolving trajectories of processes one cannot control is to attain a degree of mental distancing through the paradoxical dynamic of what he refers to as detached involvement.

Nol Groot is in the fourth article adding further first hand insight into senior executive practice. He reflects upon how he in a large company has been able to influence constructively a wide change and improvement process throughout the company. All executives, no matter how powerful, are always dependent on others to achieve results. The traditional view is that senior executives design and control the way their organisations function. Following this logic implies that better results depend upon getting the design and the controls 'right'. Based on personal experiences, Groot illustrates how the perspective of complex responsive processes has led him to question this and act differently with surprisingly good results. Taking this perspective seriously,

he claims, would potentially contribute to the impact of leaders on the organisation being successfully different.

In the fifth article, Chris Mowles reflects on how his own practice as consultant can be understood as the negotiation of temporary leadership. When orthodox theories of consultancy address power relations between the consultant and their contractors they suggest that either the consultant should manipulate those they work with ‘for the good’, or they should give up their power ‘for the good’. Mowles offers an ethical critique of these points of view and argues for an alternative understanding of power and the role of the consultant. Drawing on a complexity understanding of the dynamic between the self and other, he argues that consultants could engage with others in processes which privilege the exploration of similarity and difference, continuity and change in a shared discovery of the good. By directing attention to the daily relationships between staff and their own participation, consultants can offer a different opportunity for sense making and a different and temporary form of leadership, where all participants in the process make themselves more accountable to each other.

The sixth article is written by Tone M. Aasen, who from a complexity perspective discusses an interesting case of subsea technology development in the petroleum company StatoilHydro. She argues that there are important problems associated with traditional control oriented innovation thinking. The case shows that most people in the organisation did not consider what they did in their everyday organisational life as innovation, but rather as the provision, testing and use of technology. The dominant view in innovation research is that innovation is a particular activity, which can be planned and implemented into an organisation. In contrast to this, the case demonstrates that the recognition of everyday activity as acts of innovation is an emergent phenomenon, expressed and potentially idealised in retrospect.

Farhad Dalal ends the collection of articles with a critical examination of the ethos of the diversity movement in organisational and leadership literature. The rationale for the diversity agenda is located within a particular turn taken by the philosophies of liberalism and multiculturalism resulting in the extreme idea that one ought not to criticise the ways and views of others – whatever they are. Instead one ought to celebrate and accept them. However, behind this egalitarian ethos, one finds the ethics of the spreadsheet and sustained power differences. The idea that diversity is a necessary condition for change has by some been misinterpreted to mean that diversity is always for the good. Losing sight of the paradoxical and political nature of diversity creates the danger of being trapped in this one-sided idea which easily could mask a conservation of established power relations between labelled groups in society and organisations, as indeed demonstrated by some of the diversity literature. Although not explicitly making the claim for complexity thinking, the arguments of Dalal provides insights highly relevant to the movement of thought in this field.

I want to thank the authors and the reviewers for making this Special Issue of the IJLC possible. Hopefully, the articles will prove interesting and stimulating to both the reader familiar with the field of complexity in organisational and leadership studies as well as the reader less acquainted with this particular orientation.

Stig O. Johannessen

Guest Editor