Chapter 2
Towards Leading Diverse, Smarter and More Adaptable Organizations that Learn

Eugene G. Kowch
University of Calgary, Canada

ABSTRACT

Leadership is in crisis. Technology has enabled our complex and interconnected world, making it much easier for organizations and entire ecosystems to collaborate—quickly—while older mindsets based on the organization as a machine model are proving to be grossly inadequate. Simultaneously, we have failed to predict and to understand, for example, the cascading financial system failures that threaten lives, institutions, and nations. This chapter takes a complexity thinking perspective to carefully examine specialization, diversity, and organizational change in new ways so that we can extend our leadership thinking about the adaptability of our organizations. Because diversity is a critical condition for complex organizational change, the authors explore diversity from two disciplinary perspectives. First, they take a learning science (education) perspective to find that leaders should consider organizations as emergent collectives that are able to learn and to become capable of “learning ahead” in turbulent contexts. The authors then explore, from an organizational science perspective, how diversity exists as an essential condition for identifying differences and novelties as seeds for innovations (changes) made possible only by collective work attracted to these novelties. Finally, the author presents a framework for understanding and leading and knowing the potentials of diverse, smarter, more adaptive complex organizational ecosystems.

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If change is inevitable but unpredictable, then the best tactic for survival is to act in ways that retain the most diversity; then, when circumstances do change, there will be a chance that a new set of genes, a species, or a society will be able to continue under the new conditions. Diversity confers resilience, adaptability, and the capacity for regeneration (Suzuki & McConnell, 1997, p. 162).

1. A CRISIS IN LEADERSHIP

In 1996 Peter Drucker crystallized his life’s research in The Leader of the Future to predict an emerging “knowledge era” where organization leaders and followers need to be smarter and much more nimble to lead knowledge era work. History is proving Drucker right. By 2011, leaders everywhere are facing pressure to “know better” and to “better guide” our more technologically interconnected and constantly changing organizations in the knowledge era (Fullan, 2002). However, leading smarter (more intelligent) and adaptable organizations well in persistently unsteady-state conditions is a task beyond the grasp of many leader-practitioners and researchers. In 2011, the world witnessed The Arab Spring, civil unrest across Greece, the global ‘Occupy Movement’ and profound new tremors across the European Union (2011). These are macroexamples of both rational and irrational, and yet highly interconnected economic, political, and cultural systems coexisting as an undeniable backdrop for public leadership thought today. It is nearly impossible to reduce such a complex backdrop to merely “leadership” or “management” objects anymore, yet many leaders try to make those pieces “manageable” by attempting to reduce organizations to working “pieces.” That is a serious delimitation for today’s leadership thinkers while the public once again wonders why leaders and scholars cannot avoid all manner of repeating and cascading system failures impacting millions of lives (Marion & Uhl-Bein, 2001; Goldstein, 2010). The day of the Great Lone Leader is gone. In this technological age leaders can no longer simply parse our work to generate organization structure, to set values or to focus on human relations organizations, for example. Leaders need to learn with and across our organizations to generate the very possibility for our organizations to adapt in a new age (Schlechty, 2009).

Leaders struggle to understand the “whole system” perspectives. We also struggled to understand and react to cascading economic system growth from 2001 to 2008 in both the developed and developing world (OECD, 2010). For example, we failed to predict the cascade of North American banking failures and subsequent European sovereign debt crises. History teaches us that these patterns of growth and collapses have happened many times before (Reinhart & Rogoff, 2009), but in the 21st century, we have clearly been unable to develop ways to predict these major events. Our perceptual narrowing occurs when we reduce the concept of leadership into structural functionalism — this is akin to planning this year’s annual picnic just as we did last year but without accessing current weather information, food preference changes or changes in the picnickers themselves. Most academics and public sector and government leaders, particularly education system leaders — have similarly failed rather miserably to predict or to learn in concert with our emerging, unstable, connected worlds of economics, cultures, finances, politics, and ideals since the economic crisis of 2008. We seem overwhelmed. Complexity theorists warn us that prediction may, in fact be impossible when we realize that everything is always in flux — so the ability to adapt and to learn (the subject of this chapter) may be much more important to leaders of technologically engaged, changing organizations (Cilliers, 1998; Capra, 2002). Perhaps our collective ability to adapt and to learn as leaders in unsteady states is too constrained by a proliferation of specializations among us while our individual ideas, approaches, and tactics lack a
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