

Draft version of Editorial, pre-publication

# Change Leadership: Oxymoron and Myths

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## Introduction

Welcome to a new year with *Journal of Change Management*. The journey of creating the world's leading journal on organizational change continues, and 2016 looks to become another exciting year following on from where we left it in 2015. Last year we published 16 articles over four issues. When including the annual editorial, these articles were written by 37 authors representing nine countries and four continents (see Table 1). Three new contributions to our popular Reflections series were published: Clegg wrote *Why Old Social Theory Might Still be Useful*, Mitroff et al contributed with *What's Wrong with Business Schools and Why they Need to Change*, and Waddock presented us with *Intellectual Shamans, Sensemaking, and Memes in Large System Change*. All great reads, and if you haven't read them already, then do!

Country(Total: 9)	Number of authors (Total: 37)
Australia	2
Denmark	3
Finland	2
France	2
Germany	7
Norway	4
Turkey	2
UK	6
USA	9

Table 1: Country of origin of 2015 authors

Continuing the positive trend our mock-up SSCI Impact Factor keeps increasing as does our SCOPUS score. Also, for the second year running we sponsored the Organization Development and Change (ODC) Distinguished Speaker award at the Academy of Management conference. Linda Putnam was acknowledged for her contributing to the field and we will be publishing an interview with her later on in the year. Keep your eyes open for what we hope will be the first of many interesting interviews to come.

Moving forward we remind ourselves of *Journal of Change Management's* purpose: the Journal was established as a community centre for all scholars and practitioners with an interest in the complex and multidisciplinary field of organizational change, and its leadership and management. Together, we are setting out to better understand, facilitate and support organizational change now and in the future. One of the exciting challenges faced is that too many of us are still operating in isolation from each other rather than

seeking to participate in wider conversations outside individual silos. Many of us are still running around with blinkers just like a race horse, preventing ourselves from taking in a fuller view of what is happening around us. By referring to John Godfrey Saxe's poem about the six blind men and the elephant (By et al, 2011) we have previously highlighted the challenge of facilitating conversations across and between subject areas where we often use different languages and base our views on different perceptions and positions. Such cross subject conversations are one of the strengths of this Journal, and we continue this tradition by presenting two special issues focusing on sport and performance psychology in 2016 (issues 1 and 2).

However, we are facing another challenge which is less about ignorance and more about myths. We are still founding many of our conversations on assumptions, or 'accepted truths' which only purpose is to reinforce the already thick walls of our own silos, assumptions hindering the further development of our field. One example of such an 'accepted truth' is our constant reference to the claim that 70 per cent of all change initiatives fail. We do this even after Hughes discredited the claim in his article back in 2011. Other thriving assumptions are: 1) *Leaders and managers are not employees*. Hence, we keep referring to perceived and often created 'conflicts' between management and non-management employees and by doing so we are supporting an unsustainable 'us and them' stance and culture within organizations; 2) *Leadership is role-specific, and we need a formal management or leadership role in order to perform leadership*. Hence, we tend to refer to formal and individual leaders when we should be focusing on the activity of leadership which is much more of a shared responsibility; 3) *Leaders and managers are change agents, and non-manager employees resist change*. Hence, 'they' (non-management employees) must be managed by managers who they themselves never resist change; and perhaps the two biggest assumptions of them all: 4) *There exists only a very limited pool of leaders*. Hence, we accept behaviours and remunerations otherwise not acceptable, and organizations keep appointing failing leaders to leadership roles; and 5) *[Formal] Leaders provide leadership*. Hence, we assume [formal] leaders will indeed provide leadership and make decisions, and assume they will make those in the best interest of the organization whilst operating in a political environment where risk-aversion is flourishing and where any decision carries an element of risk.

We are all human beings and most of us are employees – that being in management or non-management roles - and at any one moment in time we may initiate one change, support a second, and resist a third. Furthermore, leadership is all about action and influence and not about titles. Many formal leaders don't provide leadership, and many who do perform leadership don't perceive themselves as leaders. Hence, in order to further develop our conversations and understanding of the complex area of organizational change we need to challenge these core assumptions, and we start this journey by exploring the oxymoron and myths of change leadership.

### **Change leadership: an oxymoron**

Over forty articles have been published with an explicit leadership focus since this organizational change orientated Journal was founded by Colin Carnall back in 2000.

Highlights include Woodward and Hendry's (2004) account of leading and coping processes within financial institutions, Higgs and Rowland's (2005) identification of leadership behaviours in terms of shaping behaviour, framing change and creating capacity, and more recently van der Voet et al (2014) differentiating leadership activities in planned and emergent processes of change. The publication of leadership articles is illustrative of the wider interest in change leadership within societies and organizations, an interest which appears to have gathered momentum since the Journal was founded. Universities and consultancies have responded to this demand and possibly even cultivated the demand for leaders/leadership with a change orientation. It is telling that the most frequent theme within the leadership articles published in the *Journal of Change Management* has been developing the competence and capability of change leaders.

Over two decades ago, J.C. Rost (1993), an education academic fascinated with leadership, highlighted the existence of a mythical leadership narrative. He was posthumously awarded the lifetime achievement award by the *International Leadership Association* in 2008, yet his critical writings have largely been ignored within management and organization studies. In essence the mythical leadership narrative suggested that leadership scholars had been making good progress, and that their understanding of leadership was becoming increasingly sophisticated and soon we would have the insights into leadership which societies and organizations deserved. This mythical leadership narrative is often at its most tangible within textbook chronologies depicting leadership as advancing decade by decade. Rost (1993) was not persuaded by the mythical leadership narrative and instead attempted to encourage a paradigm shift in leadership, specifically through an emphasis upon influence relationships, real intended change and mutual purpose. Rost was unsuccessful in these attempts to encourage our thinking of leadership, and the leadership orthodoxy which so troubled him remains largely intact. However, in the context of this editorial and in the critical spirit of Rost we wish to challenge today's mythical narrative of change leadership and the reassuring comfort of orthodoxy it encourages, in the real hope that change leadership as currently configured might be receptive to change.

Kurt Lewin (1947) gave impetus to planned change through *Frontiers in Group Dynamics*. In a similar manner, James MacGregor Burns (1978) in *Leadership* gave impetus to a moral form of transforming leadership which emphasised followers, in the belief that such leadership would transform our institutions and societies. Rost was a student of Burns and whilst both scholars were primarily interested in leadership, Rost through his concept of 'real intended change' and Burns through his concept of 'transforming leadership' speak to our theme of change leadership. Neither the moral leadership with an emphasis upon followers envisaged by Burns nor the paradigm shift which Rost encouraged occurred, begging the question how did change leadership develop over the thirty five years since Burns was writing?

Citations offer one indication of what has been most influential in our field, although influence does not necessarily equate to quality. If we look to the most cited publications referring to change/transformation and leadership between 1<sup>st</sup> January 1978 and 31<sup>st</sup> December 2014 the following were the most cited (Hughes, 2015):

6,638 Citations – *Leading Change* (Kotter, 1996)

4,340 Citations – *Leading change: Why transformation efforts fail* (Kotter, 1995)

3,539 Citations - *Transformational Leadership* (Bass & Riggio, 2006)

If gauged by citations it is the writings of John Kotter on leading change and Bernard Bass on transformational leadership which have framed the debate over recent decades. The commonality between both authors is their acknowledgement of Burns (1978) and his differentiation between transformational and transactional leadership (see Bass, 1985 and Kotter, 1990).

In reviewing back issues of the *Journal of Change Management*, transformational leadership does not feature prominently. This omission is appropriate given that transformational leadership focuses upon the transformation of subordinates, rather than the organizational change focus of this Journal. Haslam et al (2011) warned that the idea that good leaders have to subject organizations to radical transformation is a negative legacy of the common misunderstanding of transformational leadership as being about organizational transformation. The other negative legacy is perceiving today's transformational leadership as the realization of the moral form of transforming leadership emphasising followers, which Burns (1978) envisaged (see Yukl, 1999 & Tourish, 2013 for further critique).

Our very assumption of change is culture-bound...stability and conservation, not change, have been the rule in mankind today (Burns, 1978: 416).

Transformational leadership as conceptualized by Bass (1985) spoke directly to culture-bound assumptions of changing, yet simultaneously managed to maintain the status quo in this sense we would argue it is an oxymoron.

If we shift the focus to John Kotter, when gauged by citation counts he has been by far the most cited author within the organizational change field focus of this Journal and more generally he has made a substantial and valued contribution to leadership studies. In terms of critically taking stock, Kotter's (1996) eight steps appear to have become the orthodoxy for change leadership. A revised edition of *Leading Change* appeared in 2012, substantially the same book, but with new Penguin imagery and a new preface. In the new preface to *Leading Change*, Kotter (2012: vii) wrote 'the material in this book is not only still relevant now, sixteen years after it was published, but I believe it is more relevant, and for one reason the speed of change continues to increase.' The title might be *Leading Change*, but this book doesn't change, another illustration of change leadership as an oxymoron.

More substantively, whilst Kotter (1995) gave impetus to questioning why transformation efforts failed and offering an influential prescription for how to lead change (Kotter, 1996), today his contribution may be critically questioned. Weaknesses in Kotter's (1996) account of leading change include; employees being depicted as resistors, ethics, power and politics being underplayed, an overemphasis upon taking a sequence of linear steps, disparaging history limiting the potential for learning, a lack of appreciation of incremental change, leader communications being overemphasised, an under emphasis of unique cultural contexts and the rhetorical treatment of organizational success/failure (Hughes, 2016). The

scale of the citation counts suggests that for the foreseeable future Kotter's (1996) account of change leadership will prove influential, but if we are again to avoid the accusation of change leadership being an oxymoron, we need to be open to new accounts of change leadership.

In the context of a research orientated Journal we look to research studies either to confirm or disconfirm popular and prevalent discourses of leaders successfully leading organizational change. However, in empirically engaging with change leadership research design challenges quickly become apparent in terms of; the ambiguity of leadership and change, the diversity of contexts, the dynamism of leading and changing and the contested terrain of evaluating such activities (Hughes, 2015). Also, there is a territorial challenge in terms of is it leadership studies scholars who are leading this quest or organizational change scholars or are scholars from different fields in a dialogue or working in parallel in order to focus upon a sub-field of leadership and organizational change. Accepting that change leadership has a tendency not to change and that there are reasons to question the most cited contributions and that there are research design challenges inherent in researching change leadership, what have previous overviews of change leadership found.

Again if you look to the academic handbooks offering overviews of both the fields of organizational change studies and leadership studies, scholars in neither field appear to be leading the debate on change leadership and how it changes (Hughes, 2015). It is telling that in *The SAGE Handbook of Leadership* (Bryman et al, 2011) leadership and organizational change did not merit its own chapter. Parry (2011:57) in the *SAGE Handbook* in his chapter on leadership and organization theory included a sub-section on leadership and organizational change, in which he took critical stock of the state of scholarship in this area:

Leadership and organizational change are inextricably intertwined. However, 'organizational change' has become an interest for organizational consultants more so than for empirical researchers. There are many more books and articles on practitioner or conceptual scholarship than on theoretical or empirical scholarship. Much of the practitioner work is case study-based, and anecdotal and not rigorous in its conduct (Parry, 2011: 57).

Whilst this is a sad indictment of the state of knowledge, it is a reasonable assessment. In Kotter (1996) terminology in order to 'create the sense of urgency', perhaps we do need to acknowledge such limitations, however uncomfortable in order to enable how we research, theorise and teach change leadership to change. Alternatively, there may still be some wriggle room in Parry's (2011) troubling overview in that whilst we acknowledge an excess of practitioner orientated literature, we can take reassurance by looking to our refereed journals for the empirically informed insights into leadership and organizational change.

In *The Leadership of Organization Change: A View from Recent Empirical Evidence*, Ford and Ford (2012) undertook such a review. They focused exclusively upon literature published in peer-reviewed journals between 1990 and 2010, intentionally not reviewing practitioner magazines such as *Harvard Business Review*. They reviewed all academic peer-reviewed

papers identifying twenty seven papers between 1990 and 2010 but subsequently excluding certain papers resulting in a final tally of fourteen papers:

There is simply too little empirical research that specifically addresses the leadership of change to warrant a prescription for what works...we find, the available research equivocal and incomplete regarding both what constitutes effective leadership and the impact of change leaders approaches, behaviors, and activities on change outcomes of any type (Ford & Ford, 2012:22).

The weaknesses they encountered within the literature included; an over-emphasis on the role of the individual leader, the use of subjective assessments of change implementation and leadership, single-point data collection of many studies and a vocabulary which added to the confusion and vagueness. The final sentence of their review of the empirical evidence was a sad epitaph to the state of leadership of organizational change knowledge that they encountered at the time of their review:

With regard to Burke's assumption that leaders have a significant influence on organization change, we're willing to agree but unfortunately can't say what that influence is, what leader actions and interactions are responsible for it, or whether the influence is only on the subjective perceptions of people affected by the change or also impacts the objective outcomes of change (Ford & Ford, 2012: 33):

The elephant in the room has been an overused cliché of recent decades, but in terms of our understanding of change leadership it has never been so apt. It is not just that we do not understand how leaders influence organizational change. We seem to be trapped inside a mythical change leadership narrative which in suggesting that we are almost there, taking away any chance of changing what we know (don't know) about change leadership. Thirty five years ago, Burns (1978) highlighted how through moral transforming leadership which emphasised followers, societies and institutions could be transformed. In advancing this agenda he was critical of academics suggesting that 'the fundamental crisis underlying mediocrity is intellectual. If we know too much about our leaders, we know far too little about leadership' (Burns, 1978:1). Today we seem to be awash with heroic leaders, yet know far too little about change leadership and until we once again acknowledge this crisis nothing is going to change.

### **Myths of Change Leadership**

To paraphrase Winston Churchill, "Never has so much been said by so many about so little." Although much is being said about change leadership (e.g., Kotter, 1995), the reality is that empirical evidence about it is rare, inconsistent, and virtually impossible to integrate into a coherent set of conclusions and recommendations (Ford & Ford 2012). As a result, much that is said about change leadership borders on the mythology and romance of hero worship (Meindl, 1995; Meindl & Ehrlich, 1987; Meindl et al, 1985). If we are to make the kind of difference in theory and practice that we seek, it behoves us to look more rigorously

at both our thinking and our research on change leadership. Toward that end, here are three well-entrenched myths we will want to address:

*Myth 1: It's the Individual Leader that Counts.*

The overwhelming majority of change leadership research focuses on the individual leader as the source of change outcomes (Ford & Ford, 2012). This perspective mirrors a traditional leadership research assumption that leadership is a personal possession of the leader and that leadership is bestowed upon followers who are recipients of that bestowal rather than partners in the co-creation of change outcomes. The effectiveness of the individual leader is seen as the key to change success.

This perspective, dominant in traditional leadership literature, fails to consider that leaders enact multiple functions (Fleishman et al., 1991; Gibb, 1954; House & Aditya, 1997; Morgeson et al., 2010) that are likely to be distributed among multiple people based on their knowledge and expertise rather than concentrated in a single individual or position (Gronn, 2002). Distributed or shared leadership is evident in leadership partners (e.g., Gronn, 1999), teams (e.g., Ensley et al., 2006; Mehra et al., 2006; Pearce & Sims, 2002) and role constellations (e.g., Denis et al., 2001; Hodgson et al., 1965) and has been shown to be a complement to and, in some cases, a more powerful predictor of change outcomes than individual leadership (e.g., Gioia & Chittipeddi, 1991; Heller & Firestone, 1995; Pearce & Sims, 2002). Even where leadership functions are highly concentrated, e.g., dictators, distributed leadership may still occur (Gronn, 2000).

The idea that change outcomes are the product of an individual leader is especially questionable in large-scale complex changes (Kotter, 1995). It is much more likely that effective change leadership requires what Locke (2003) refers to as integrated leadership, essentially a form of distributed leadership. A shift in our research from a focus on individual to distributed forms of change leadership is warranted.

*Myth 2: Leadership Is Enough.*

A popular assumption is that effective change leadership is sufficient to produce successful change independent of change management (e.g., Herold et al. 2008). In part, this stems from our failure to clearly distinguish leadership and management as distinct phenomena. As a result, there is an increasing call for more change leadership (Kotter, 2012) and an increasing absorption of management functions into our understanding of leadership functions (e.g., Fleishman et al., 1991), implying that effective leadership is all that is needed for success.

Leadership and management, like transactional and transformational leaders, are complementary (Bass & Riggio, 2006; Buchanan, 2016; Caldwell, 2003), but we tend to focus on leadership over management. This is confounded by locating leadership in the people who occupy positions of authority, i.e., those who are also managers. Collapsing leadership and management makes it impossible to differentiate their distinct contributions to change outcomes and increases the likelihood of overstating the role of leadership while understating that of management.



It is doubtful that change outcomes are the sole, or even the primary, result of leadership. To have a full appreciation for the role and contribution of leadership in successful change, we will want to take into account the role and contribution of management. Rather than perceiving them as competitors, we may be better served by treating them as complements and learning how they work together.

*Myth 3: One Size Fits All.*

Change is a heterogeneous phenomenon, yet we talk about change leadership as if an effective change leader will be effective with any change independent of its type, size, and complexity. Change has pace (e.g., Amis et al., 2004), momentum (e.g., Jansen, 2004; Jansen & Hofmann, 2011), and phases (Prochaska et al., 2002). These variations call for, and have an impact on, different forms and types of leadership (Van de Ven & Poole, 1995; Weick & Quinn, 1999), which suggests that different leadership behaviors will be required over the life of the change and challenges the assumption that an individual change leader will be effective throughout (Morgeson et al., 2010); there are no universal leaders (Yukl, 1994).

Further, without longitudinal assessments of the toll that change leadership takes on the leaders and managers involved, we cannot say that they are somehow unaffected by the nature and demands of the change, nor assume that they can be consistently effective over a sustained period of time. Leading change does impact both individual and distributed leaders (Boyatzis, Smith, & Blaize, 2006; Denis et al., 2001; Eriksen, 2008; Gioia & Chittipeddi, 1991). Further, an individual leader, including one who is part of a distributed team of leaders, cannot replace another without an impact on the group dynamics and on the change itself. Leaders are not interchangeable parts. It takes considerable time and effort to develop a sufficient level of behavioral integration for a leadership team to be effective leading change (Denis et al., 2001; Denis et al., 1996).

Research on change leadership is needed, but its value and contribution will depend on whether it goes beyond the cross-sectional, non-dynamic, retrospective research on change and traditional leadership and begins to consider a more complete and integrated view. Change can range from relatively simple short-term alterations to highly complex long-term transformations and is likely to involve many kinds of leadership and management behaviors on the part of many different individuals and groups. It seems reasonable to assume, therefore, that change leadership can and should take different forms – individual and distributed – and have recognized roles for management over the life of the many different types of change. The agenda for research on change leadership, therefore, may borrow from traditional leadership research, but should not be bound by or mirror it.

**Conclusion**

We have an obligation to challenge assumptions and myths rather than be taken in by them and treating them as accepted truths. In this respect, we might gain from Mark Twain's observation that "It ain't what you don't know that gets you into trouble. It's what you know for sure that just ain't so." There is no doubt that it is easier to conduct research on change leadership when we focus on those in positions of authority as 'leaders' and treat change as an event that can accurately be assessed by perceptions taken at one point in time. But

those of us who teach and consult on change know that is not the way it really is. Change, particularly large scale change, is complex and messy and if we really want to make a difference in the leadership and management of change, then we would be well advised to change the nature of our research. Of course, doing so will require leadership and a recognition that maybe what we know for sure just ain't so.

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