

Leadership within, between and beyond organizational conflict lines – informal leadership work in the realization of the green transformation

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Abstract

The tackling of global challenges can have major impacts on social, environmental, and economic sustainability in the affected local communities. The global transformation into a renewable and digital society often leads to conflicts between the need for preserving untouched nature, threatened species, cultural heritage, and local citizen wellbeing on the one hand, and establishing green energy production and transforming the industry and employment structure on the other. Exploring emergent and situated leadership in transformations can reveal aspects of potential consequences of future infrastructure that might otherwise not come to the surface. As a society, we are dependent on this form of leadership to realize major societal transformations, such as the green transformation and the digital transformation in a way that stakeholders and those affected understand to be just processes and solutions.

The purpose of the paper is to provide insight into this situated and emergent aspect of leadership and point out how it significantly differs from what we traditionally understand as leadership. Two empirical situations in Norway of emergent and situated leadership in transformative contexts are presented, namely, 1): the plans and process of establishing two offshore wind parks at the west coast and, 2): the plans for a vast battery factory in a forested area. The research approach can be characterized by abductive inquiries, embedded in American Pragmatism. Preliminary findings indicate that emergent and situated aspects of leadership is evoked by a feeling of urgency and a demand to act upon an emerging situation. The leadership is divided by several individuals, working together towards a shared goal, and where they can have different areas, tasks, and periods where they need to take more responsibilities. Resources, competences, motivation, and interpretation of the situation develops through the situation, where both participants and the situation co-constitute one another. Discussing the findings through the SEIPS model of Carayon et al (2006), and challenging its linearity through a Pragmatist approach, can contribute to better describe leadership as an emergent form of acting upon urgent situations, such as societal transformations in all its complexity.

Context

To realize ecologically, socially, culturally, and economically sustainable and just solutions in the green transformation, contributions from different stakeholders, groups, and interests are needed to highlight the situation from different angles and perspectives. Social and energy justice is dominantly understood as related to distributive and procedural justice as well as recognition (Fraser, 1999; Jenkins et al, 2016). The increasing establishment of onshore wind farms in Norway has led to serious conflicts between various local, industrial, and national interests (Sovacool, et al., 2022) and to some extent also leading to energy nationalism in times of energy crisis (Hansen & Moe, 2022). On paper, these different interests and concerns are typically represented at formal hearings involving organized stakeholders to different extents. Nevertheless, there can be interests that lack representation through formal organizations or only superficially involved (Korsnes et al., 2023). There can also be formal organizations that are less involved in the cross-organizational work of developing the solutions. The attempts to mitigate energy injustice through economic compensation can also lead to recognition injustice, thus upholding and re-producing cultural ethnic injustice (Ravna, 2022; Otte et al., 2018; Fraser, 2020). Thus, forms of leadership that contribute to evoking local needs and perspectives, as well as imagining the possible consequences of different solutions, are imperative for realizing just and sustainable solutions.

Local resistance towards the establishment of new infrastructure often generates spontaneous mobilization and organization of citizens and informal stakeholders that have little or no formal role in the decision-making processes. Hence, the organizing and leadership of local resistance often takes place beyond formal organizations and established networks. It can also challenge formal organizations, such

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as local stakeholder organizations, demanding competence, and resources beyond their ordinary activities. Consequently, realizing the green and digital transformation demands leadership roles, competence, access, and resources beyond what is initially present. To understand how we can organize the cross-boundary leadership efforts of different interests and groups, we need more insight into how this kind of leadership emerges and how it is performed in the local and situational context. This draws attention to how informal leadership emerges in local communities as a response to emerging situations of conflicts, and how the situational and relational aspects of the leadership by far challenge what we usually associate with prescribed and formal leadership roles.

Objectives

Leadership can be studied from many perspectives and angles. We can focus on the leader as a person conducting a professional role and her personal characteristics and competences for doing so. Another approach is to look at leadership tasks; what they are and who does them. In this paper, leadership is understood as a performative process between participants in a situation (Simpson and den Hond, 2022). This implies that we are not focusing on leaders per se, nor on leadership tasks, but rather on how leadership acts are realized through the ongoing process of meaning making in evolving events. As such, this understanding is ontologically embedded in American Pragmatism, seeing reality as consisting of dualities, rather than dualisms (Dewey, 1938; Dewey and Bentley, 1960; Lorino, 2018). This implies that the idea of, for example, being inside or outside of organizations does not make sense. The point of interest is rather on situations where movement in meaning happens and those that are involved in those situations. From this performative process understanding, identity and meaning making is seen as co-constructive dimensions of emerging situations (Mead, 1932; 1934). This implies that what happens in the situation also contributes to defining the social identities of the participants. Likewise, who the participants become in the situation also influences what they see as meaningful to do in the next phase (Follett, 1919).

The paper has two objectives. The first objective is to give empirical insight into aspects of leadership that are underexplored in the dominating management and leadership literature; namely the situated, emergent, often unpaid, and informal leadership that is conducted within, between and beyond any formal organization. Two empirical situations provide illustrations of how these leadership aspects are realized in the developing transformation processes. The first example showcases leadership within a formal, municipal administration where the involved leaders already have formal leadership roles. However, the organization is not positioned for the comprehensive efforts, resources, and tasks that the emerging situation with the offshore wind farm plans demands of the small municipality. The plans affect their “ordinary tasks”, and simultaneously demand comprehensive efforts beyond their normal operations. The second example is from a spontaneously established, informal organization where the leadership work is divided between several participants, and where the mobilization happens through personal engagement. Here, the leadership function is often not consciously sought or wanted by those who take on the task. Understanding motivations for taking leadership in such situations can contribute to a better understanding of how leadership is conducted in conflicts involving and representing voices beyond organizations.

The second objective of this paper is to explore and understand emerging forms of leadership in transformations through American Pragmatism. This lesser used philosophical approach within Management studies can contribute to developing our understanding of leadership and management as a radically dynamic phenomenon. In the discussion, Carayon et al’s (2006) SEIPS model is used for identifying leadership aspects in the illustrative situations described here. Then follows a short discussion on how the SEIPS model could be re-considered for capturing the co-constituting aspects of leadership that we see especially in the emergent and situated forms of leadership.

Methods

The paper builds on ongoing, qualitative research of conflictive situations connected to the planning of the first, larger plans for offshore wind parks in Norway, and the planning of a battery factory in a forested area of a semi-rural local community.

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The research connected to the first ongoing situation¹, is part of a bigger, cross-disciplinary project called Impactwind, where the aim is to explore and develop ways of making the concession process for offshore wind parks shorter and more effective. That is important for planning and realizing offshore wind energy production at scale. Still, emphasis is made to ensure that the concession process is just and sustainable both in the core process and in the results it produces. The case we address in terms of social and spatial justice in the Impactwind project is about how and island community as Norway's smallest municipality, have involved themselves in the planning for two offshore wind farms in what they call their "blue garden". This situation is explored through participative observation, field conversations and qualitative interviews with participants with formal roles in the political leadership, and in municipal administration and management.

The second situation addresses the planning of a battery factory in a forested area. There have been significant protests against the plans in the local area. The local resistance against the battery factory has led to the establishment of a protest group and several activities have been put into practice. The situation is explored through media coverage, participative observations, and field conversations with involved and affected participants. The findings are highly preliminary and will be followed up with both broader and more informal field conversations as well as more in-depth interviews addressing aspects of situated leadership.

These situations are explored through an abductive approach, where the expectations and interpretations of the researcher are continuously re-considered and challenged by the development of events, continuously forming plausible imaginations of possibly could be. Adjalanes et al, (2013, p. 2 of 20), formulated this as "Abduction broadens the scope of experience mobilized in any given situation from habitual to less habitual forms of action, integrating emotional and rational judgments to overcome the classical dichotomy between 'creative thinking' and 'rational thinking'." Thus, the material is continuously explored through the search for movement in meaning.

Additionally, the SEIPS model (Carayon et al, 2006) is used as a tool for exploring and analyzing the material through the lenses of a more conventional understanding of the organizing of work. Discussing the model through American Pragmatism can help pose questions that a broader audience of management studies would relate to. It can also contribute to developing an understanding of how the SEIPS model potentially could be used and re-considered through a Pragmatism approach. However, this will more fully be developed in a different paper.

Main results

We usually understand leadership as something conducted by specific persons, holding formal positions as leaders, where their tasks and areas of responsibility are prescribed. In this paper, I give insight into leadership situations that contribute to stretching this usual understanding of leadership, which appears to be needed in the complex tasks of planning for- and realizing transformations.

In the situation connected to the offshore wind plans, the emergent and situated form of leadership is conducted by formal leaders in the small municipality. Hence, they are formal leaders, but the leadership functions and tasks they need to perform go beyond their formal "access" to the planning processes, beyond their resources and their inherent capacities. The municipal management and administration consist of a few individuals and is organized to handle the management of a municipality consisting of 206 citizens. For the municipality and island community, their "survival" and sustainability are first and foremost dependent on retaining and increasing the population and younger generations on the island, and thus also need to have possibilities for employment. The offshore wind plans can potentially provide possibilities for both employment and potential tax income. However, it depends on how much of the support infrastructure that will be placed on the island, as it might be easier and more convenient to place it on the mainland. The municipal leaders thus need to position the island in a way that makes it attractive and reasonable for the national authorities to locate support activities on the island. Additionally, the leaders need to make the case of what the island community is sacrificing when the offshore wind park

¹ When I use the term "situation" in this paper, I mean the events which are both situated and emerging, where several participants can be involved in different moments.

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is established. Several informants pointed out that “We sacrifice our sunset” and “It is our blue garden that the wind farms will occupy”. Giving something back to the local community has thus been important to have included in the elements potential industry consortiums have to address in their tenders. As some of several actions the municipal leaders have taken, is to invite industrial and governmental stakeholders to the island to voice their demands and build closer connections to the stakeholders. For the citizens and leaders in the municipality, their position in the development of the green transformation, changes. Thus, who they become through this situation, also changes their expectations to what they can and should demand in the situation, and who they become in the eyes of other stakeholders.

For the situation concerning the plans for a battery factory in the forested area, the leadership addressed here is connected to local protests to the factory plans. A group of local citizens have organized themselves in a structured group to voice the concerns of the local community towards the plans. Their concerns are primarily regarding the loss of wildlife area and recreational space for both children and adults. However, taking part in organizing and moving the protest group forward also comes into conflict with citizens and stakeholders wanting more employment, investments and who can see the value of their land properties increasing. Thus, taking part in the leadership can lead to direct or indirect conflicts with close family, neighbors, and one’s own employer. As one of the informants said: “When I go to the local grocery store, I notice in the parking lot if there are cars who’s owners I do not want to meet in the shop. If so, I do my shopping later on”. Hence, the situation develops from mobilizing locals for an important cause, to re-considering who your friends and allies might be. This of course, influences on what the involved participants can and will do, far beyond rational positions connected to the battery factory plans. Consequently, conducting leadership in the activist groups is quite different to what we usually connect with leadership. First, there are no formal positions that anyone has applied to. The leadership emerged from the developing situation, where those against the plans saw a need for protesting it and for mobilizing those of the same opinion. Hence, those taking on leadership were not chosen by a pre-established group, nor were they chosen due to their formal education or merits. The leadership is conducted by a group mobilizing the resources and competences they already possess or develop among them in their organizing of the tasks. The motivation for taking part in the leadership is the urgency and need they experience for protesting the plans and for providing a good community for their children to grow up in. As such, this leadership relates to personal and ideological commitment as well as conflicting relations and potential personal loss in terms of conflicts with neighbors and family. However, for the sake of exploring the needs, possibilities, and potential pitfalls of stakeholders and those affected by green and digital infrastructure, this kind of leadership is imperative for voicing the needs and the values that often are less represented through formal channels and lesser spelled out.

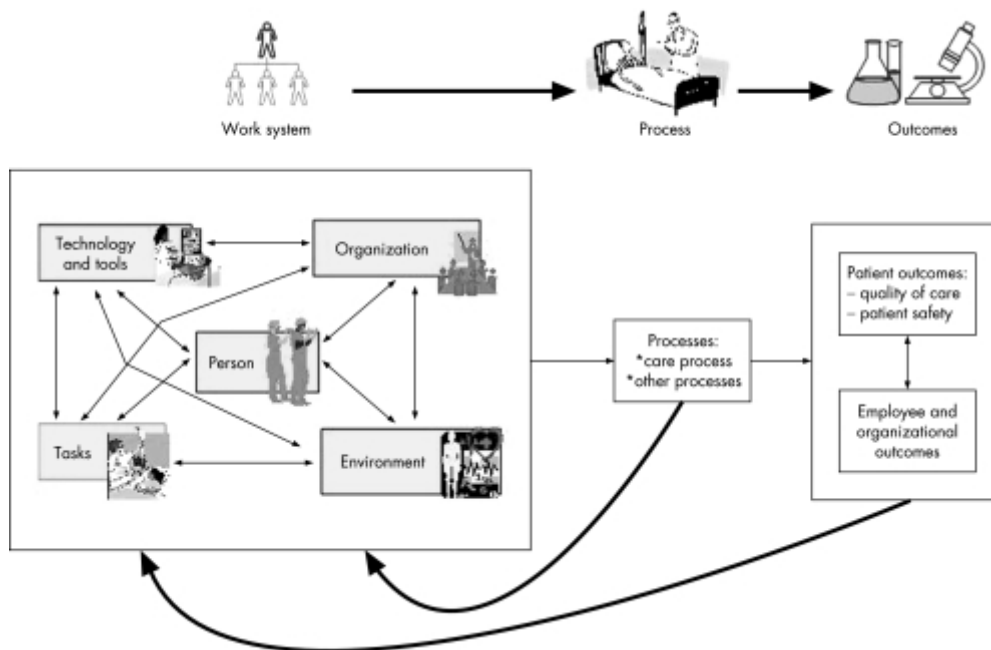
Discussion/perspectives

The SEIPS model was developed for exploring work systems in relation to patient safety in the hospital system. As such, the situation is very different to addressing situational leadership in local conflicts related to solving global needs. In the SEIPS model, the work system is seen as coming before the process itself, and out of the process, creating task outcomes as well as employee and environment outcomes. This is what Cloutier & Langley, (2020) would categorize as a linear and substantive process understanding of reality. I will now discuss how the conduct of leadership in the two situations challenge this linear and substantive understanding, characterizing the SEIPS model and how it can be re-considered through a Pragmatist approach.

Through a Pragmatist approach, we can see leadership as the social act of creating movement in a situation towards a shared goal. If we explore the two empirical situations described in this paper through the framework of the SEIPS model, we put leadership at the center, not confined to a single person, but conducted by several persons through social trans-actions. The conducting of leadership and its tasks, tools, organization, and environment is constantly co-constituting one another. In other words, the work system is not something readily available before the need for leadership emerges as related to the transformations. In both situations it is the development of events that make the participants see the need to act. Or more specifically, based on the development of events, the participants develop expectations about what might happen in future, and they see the need to influence and direct the further

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development of events. In the situation related to offshore wind the participants are situated in a formal organization. However, this organization is not situationally capable to execute the extraordinary tasks that they see as necessary in the situation.



(Figure 1: Carayon et al., 2006)

In the other situation, related to the battery factory, the participants are not situated in a formal organization related to the emergent challenge. They are employees in other organizations and are neighbors and relatives to others living in the same area. It is the situatedness of the small island's municipal management facing the offshore wind plans, and of the forested local community facing the threat of the battery plant, that is both the motivation and point of departure for taking these leadership initiatives, thus influencing the further development of events. And by taking leadership initiatives in the development of events, the work system evolves. Tasks develop, the participants start to organize the work and resources, utilizing their competences, capacities, and networks as sources for resistance leadership.

The development of events is a constant process of interpreting the reality as it happens in the present. Based on the understanding of what happens, the participants respond in ways they expect will evoke a certain response in others. However, it is through acting upon these expectations that the participants can see whether their expectations are realized. Through these gestural conversations, both meaning and participants are co-constituted. This means that the participants experience who others see them becoming in the situation and thus assess their ability to take further action in view of this understanding. To the management of the island municipality, the island's central role in the development of the offshore wind plans influences their imagination about what the future of the island can be and what they can expect to get in return. For the grassroots movement in the local community, the growing conflicts around the plans for the battery factory influences who the local citizens become in relation to one another. This also influences what they see as attractive to do, or even possible to do next, imagining what their prospective acts can evoke in others. As such, the "outcomes", in the terms of the SEIPS model, are not the end results. They are constantly evolving outcomes that foster further gestures, with task outcomes and social outcomes co-constituting one another.

If the SEIPS model is to capture the emergent and co-constituting dynamics of the situations, the work system as a pre-condition for the process needs to be abandoned. Likewise, the idea of seeing outcomes as end results, rather than as gestures evoking responses from others in the situation, makes it difficult to capture contemporary acts and how they influence the ability for and willingness to take further action.

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To conclude, there is a need for more insight in emergent leadership to illuminate the potential needs and demands that the green and digital transformation might imply for different groups and situations. However, this form of leadership might not be sought after by those conducting it but might be something experienced as an emerging demand of the situation. Further, for forms of emerging leadership, there may be a lacking or insufficient work system for conducting the leadership initiatives, where this work system will typically be mobilized and established through the work. Realizing the green and digital transformation in a just and sustainable way through what we could call “guerilla leadership” will probably need to take on much of the responsibility for voicing the needs of those affected and for providing alternative perspectives to the realizations. However, this might also very well come with a price for those involved in it. Further insight in emergent forms of leadership in transformations are needed.

Keywords

Societal transformation, leadership, emergence, social justice, SEIPS model

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