
RESPONSE TO JEFFREY MCCLELLAN
Invited Contribution

*Relational Leadership*¹

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In his paper “Leadership and complexity: Implications for practice within the advisement leadership bodies at colleges and universities,” Jeffrey McClellan argues that the traditional conceptualization of leadership based on power, authority, force and control is outdated and ineffective within a world that demands more ethical and participatory forms of leadership. He believes insights from chaos and complexity theory offer a revolutionary way of conceiving of leadership and of developing effective leadership practices.

This response juxtaposes McClellan’s ideas, as we understand them, with our notion of “relational leadership.”

McClellan begins by identifying the generally agreed upon principles of complexity theory that are relevant to understanding social systems. Along with other management scholars (e.g., Stacy, Griffin & Shaw, 2000; Griffin, 2002), he is concerned that the insights from chaos and complexity theory may simply build on traditional ways of conceiving of leadership legitimated by power, control, force and authority, rather than fundamentally challenging the foundations of leadership. He references Axelrod and Cohen (1999) as an example of an approach in which leaders can analyze complex

¹ The ideas presented in this response are developed elsewhere in a full paper on the topic of “relational leadership” that will be published by the authors in due course.

adaptive systems to obtain a deeper understanding of the system and actively change it. However he finds it problematic that they assume that leaders can stand outside the system as objective, external observers of a system of which they are a part. From here McClellan begins to offer insights drawn from a number of scholars who employ complexity and systems theory to create a revolutionary conceptualization of organizations and leadership (e.g., Burns, 2002; Fenwick, 2008; Knowles, 2001; Quinn, 2004; Stacey, Griffin, & Shaw, 2000; Wheatley, 1999, 2007). Finally, he uses these insights to illuminate how one might effectively conceptualize and structure advisement leadership bodies at college and universities. Specifically, he explores how to alter the perceptions, internal leadership processes and external relationships of these bodies. McClellan believes that offering insights from complexity theory, along with practical suggestions, are essential in helping leaders address day-to-day challenges and in transforming the practice of leadership.

We agree with McClellan that leadership needs to be conceived of in revolutionary ways to develop effective and ethical leadership practice. However, in contrast to McClellan's use of conceptual frameworks, to develop our understanding of ethical leadership practice, we work from leaders' accounts of what they do, how they talk about their relationships with others, and what they identify as being important in their conversation with others. In our qualitative study of US Federal Security Directors, we draw on Ricoeur's notion of ethical selfhood and Bakhtin's work on dialogism, to abductively build our conceptualization of "relational leadership" through the interplay of conceptual material with leaders' accounts of their lived experience and their meaning-making activities.

We also agree with McClellan that revolutionary ideas of leadership must contribute practical suggestions if we are to help leaders address their day-to-day challenges and explore different and more ethical ways of leading, but differ in what those practical suggestions might look like. We present our understanding not as a leadership theory or analytical model, but as *action guiding anticipatory understandings* (Shotter, 2009), reflective insights that will allow leaders to become aware of the importance of their conversations and interactions with others. We suggest that these practical insights will help leaders become more reflexive and ethical in their everyday relationships with others. Reflexive in the sense of the leader questioning her/his assumptions about people, and how s/he may create opportunities for open dialogue

Along with McClellan, we recognize the inherent complexity and uncertainty in leading and the need for participatory and ethical forms of leadership. But we argue that unless we recognize that leading is an embodied and relational activity, embedded within leaders' everyday interactions and conversations, then the disconnection between abstract theory, analytical tools and everyday activities and practices will remain. In the midst of the current global financial crises, precipitated by unethical leadership practice, we need to reconceptualize leadership as an inherently moral activity based on a sense of personal responsibility and a sense of self: Leaders need to be responsive, responsible and accountable to others in their day-to-day interactions. Our approach therefore

emphasizes and draws upon the idea of effective and ethical leadership involving practical wisdom or *phronesis*.

In summary, although we come to an understanding of leadership in different ways, we would agree with some of McClellan's insights from a complexity theory. For example, he argues that

leaders who wish to effectively engage complexity must do so not by analyzing a system but by engaging with it through a process of social interaction that respects freedom and nurtures novelty. This process involves deep, localized engagement between individuals wherein identity is constantly being constructed and reconstructed... (p. 41).

With this we agree—where we differ is in how we may account for such “deep engagement” in a way that recognizes the embodied and embedded nature of leadership.

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