

# Editorial: What makes a good article for *leadership*? Thoughts and views from our associate editors, part 1

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This issue of *Leadership* marks our first full year as Co-Editors-in-Chief. As we highlighted in our introductory editorial (Edwards and Schedlitzki, 2023) we see our role as striving to develop the community of the journal in its endeavour to be a key, critical and contemporary voice for leadership studies. To continue this journey, and to help contributors frame and develop their work for submission to the journal, we have invited some of our Associate Editors to share their thoughts on the following questions:

1. What do you look for in a strong article, suitable for submission to *Leadership*?
2. What do you see as a critical contribution to leadership studies?
3. Can you highlight and/or explore some past articles published in *Leadership* that exemplify your views?

In this editorial we will hear from three of our associate editors - Brigid Carroll, Magnus Larsson and Owain Smolović Jones. As you will see below, they push us towards key thinking around criticality as an edge, encouragement to engage with the complexity of leadership as a phenomenon and promoting ideas around critical companionship. We hope that you enjoy the read!

## Criticality and edges in leadership

I look for edges in an article. As a noun, 'an edge' is akin to a brink or a verge - the point at which something different comes into view. However, 'edge' can be a verb too in which case it means to sharpen or border as well as move gradually and cautiously. An article needs to do at least one of the three; 1) take us to a point

where the reader/researcher/practitioner can see something different; 2) sharpen the contours of a concept, theory, field, problem or inquiry; 3) set out a possible pathway through the existing conceptual, theoretical and empirical terrain which holds the possibility of movement; the kind of movement that weaves through what has been done to date but finds nonetheless new spaces. What relates all three of course is an article that takes us to somewhere novel, new, alternative, unclaimed but is still in dialogue with what is known, worked, and visible.

The nature of criticality of course has been (and still is) debated across every discipline under the sun and is not the focus of this piece. What makes an edge critical however is and that is its ability to be significant or consequential. In short critical edges matter because of what they do, enable, allow, forge. An edge becomes critical then if it becomes sharp enough to cut through existing thinking like a knife, take the researcher to the limits of the mapped 'conceptual' terrain, uncover and disentangle the underlying assumptions that have gradually become so accepted until they are unthinkingly used, and provide a point where there is no going forward without new inquiry and powerful new questions.

While one could find any number of articles that do the above powerfully in *Leadership*, I've selected two that exemplify the above. One comes off my PhD days and marks an article that opened up a critical space theoretically, methodologically and pedagogically for me. That article was Bolden and Gosling's (2006) 'Leadership Competencies: Time to Change the Tune?' which both opens up significant edges but also pushes readers through the research terrain in a way that is striking, original and provocative. Firstly it tilted at something that seemed ubiquitous (the insistence on competences to define and describe leadership throughout institutional and organisational life), secondly it did so through an unusual metaphor for organisation studies (the notion of a musical refrain) and finally it redefined the competency framework as a 'language game' that could make assumptions visible and then reframed to open up dialogue and meaning as opposed to narrow and prescribe it.

The second article I've selected is David Collinson's (2014) 'Dichotomies, dialectics and dilemmas: New directions for critical leadership studies' in which he defines and articulates the space of critical leadership studies through a critique of dichotomization (the over reliance on binaries, dualisms and oppositions), an exploration of what he refers to as 'the dialectical turn' ( the exploration of 'dilemmas, ambiguities, paradoxes, tensions, and contradictions' (Collinson, 2014: p. 41) and paradoxical thinking and offers a warning about denial (the discomfort leadership practitioners can bring to 'acknowledging ambiguities, doubts, and dilemmas' (Collinson, 2014: p. 48) particularly where those potentially risk accounts of efficacy, strength and success). This article sharpens the terrain of critical leadership studies, which I affiliate to, exposes the consequences of over focusing on edges as separate or conflictual (as opposed to the space in-between them) and spurs me to reflect on my own research edges and practice.

What connects the two articles is their ability to remap conceptual zones (competencies and Leadership Studies respectively) in powerful new ways, offer new language to navigate to the edges of these reframed terrains (refrains and dialectics) and offer theory (language games and dialectics) that pulls the researcher to theoretical edges. As a final comment, their edges are 'visceral' in that I feel them as I read them even now and that felt 'edge-ness' to me signposts a critical pathway that I endeavour to keep walking.

## **Engaging with the complexity of the phenomenon of leadership**

What I look for in manuscripts submitted to this journal, are attempts to engage empirically or theoretically with the complexity of the phenomenon of leadership. While the concept of leadership is highly contested, and at times can be taken to refer to a social process (Yukl, 2013) and at other times to a role (typically, but not always, the role of a formal manager), I am primarily looking for manuscripts that place the social process of leadership at centre stage. I take this social process to be very complex in the sense of for its very existence to depend on human subjectivity, that is, to reside in the realm of social meaning (Blumer, 1954). For leadership to have any relevance in the world of organizations (more or less formal), it needs to be a process that involves more than one individual and that has some form of consequences, such as mobilizing people in a particular direction. A range of recent developments are clearly indicative of this complexity. Papers bring attention to the role of followers (Almeida et al., 2021; Lührmann and Eberl, 2007), to the how roles can be distributed and together contribute to a leadership process (Alvehus, 2018; Hazy and Uhl-Bien, 2013), to the subtleties of the accomplishment of influence in online collaboration (Al-Ani et al., 2011; Arvedsen and Hassert, 2020), as well as to the embodiment and aesthetic aspects of leadership (Ropo and Salovaraa, 2019). Accordingly, I believe that it is very constructive for research to attempt to engage with this complexity, without simplifying it (Larsson and Alvehus, 2023). I believe the Leadership journal is an outlet for precisely this kind of research: that engages with the complexity of the phenomenon. I am not looking for articles that try to define leadership so much as articles that ask "in what sense does it make sense to theorize this as leadership", and try to provide an interesting answer to that question.

This does not mean that a single article can or should embrace the full complexity of the phenomenon, but possibly contribute with some observations and results that can enrich, deepen, and develop a wider appreciation of the phenomenon, without attempting to overly simplify and reduce it. Studies can also criticize, challenge, and problematize existing theories, approaches, and beliefs, and by doing so, open up for new perspectives and methodological approaches.

Moreover, the complexity of the phenomenon of leadership implies that a range of methodological approaches are useful and indeed needed. Some perspectives might pursue an ideal of pinpointing the essence of leadership, aiming for robust and

reproducible results. However, such an ideal may run the risk of producing highly robust knowledge of a different phenomenon than what we tend to mean by leadership. To avoid such risks, we need a broad range of approaches to also secure that the phenomenological character of what we study is true to the phenomenon of leadership. This also means that I expect manuscripts to be able to clearly argue for why and in what sense the phenomenon under study is reasonably discussed as (an aspect of) leadership. Complexity of a phenomenon can easily lead to a watering down of concepts, such that almost anything can be called leadership. There needs to be a balance between “anything goes” on the one hand, and rigid reductionism on the other. I believe this journal plays an important role in keeping that balance and debate alive.

## **Critical companionship**

*Leadership* has been like a critical companion to me as a leadership scholar. So, at risk of labouring the metaphor, I offer the notion of critical companionship as a way of making sense of what constitutes a good article in this journal. Companions provide intellectual and emotional sustenance, helping us grow by introducing new ways of interpreting the world or giving us resources, we need to thrive. Such companionship translates into an ideal *Leadership* article in three ways.

First, it is important that *Leadership* articles deal with power in organisations and/or societies. It is the centrality of power to our analyses that, mostly, makes them critical. Some of the most important studies published in the journal have explored how power works through uncritical circuits of knowledge and practice, focusing attention on how leadership constructs, practices or rhetorical truisms can conceal the potential for misuse, alienation and marginalisation. For example, Ford and Harding’s (2018) study of followers in leadership theory provided me with a conceptual orientation for better understanding a phenomenon that had long bothered me in practice – how exclusionary, centralising and even violent forms of leadership often come cloaked in the language of empowerment and service. Since reading the article, internal alarm bells ring whenever I hear people say that they are ‘servant leaders’. Similarly, the potency of David Collinson’s (2012) notion of ‘prozac leadership’ is evident in the reaction it generates from students when brought into the classroom – nervous chuckles, uneasy looks. Introducing the idea that entirely ‘positive’ forms of leadership can lead to destruction and even death is so powerful because of its demonstrable truth.

Second, it is important that critical companionship introduces us to leadership from people and structural positions overlooked or marginalised by the corporate and political status quo. Continuously searching for leadership in unusual places is important because it refreshes our field but also because it is needed in the world, marked as it is by armed conflict, climate crises and multiple inequalities. It is therefore more important than ever that we learn about alternative practices of

leadership that hold the possibility of enhancing care, equity and freedom. An exemplar of such an approach is the work of Just and Muhr (2019), who demonstrate the potential for learning about collective forms of leadership from the 'centripetal' and 'centrifugal' practices of the Women's March. Similarly, studies by Henry and Wolfgramm (2018), Jimenez-Luque (2021), Penha Vasconcelos (2023) and Spiller (2021), amongst others, enable sight of alternative, intersectional and relational epistemologies that hold the promise of re-orienting where and how we search for and think about leadership.

The third feature of being a good critical companion is that such authors enrich our understanding of leadership in relation to important global and societal issues. Hence, Liu and Baker (2016) and Ladkin and Patrick (2022) have powerfully applied critical race theory to leadership, vital analyses if the field is going to say something meaningful about racism and other oppressions that plague our societies. The importance of an uncomfortable truth delivered through leadership studies is also evident in relation to climate change. This is an area of study where the urgency and scale of the problem mean that we need to embrace paradoxical demands in our ways of thinking and practicing leadership (Fotaki and Foroughi, 2018; Gosling, 2017).

The above three points constitute what I regard as an *ideal* submission to *Leadership* and in practice it would be difficult, and perhaps undesirable, to attain all three simultaneously. Nevertheless, I do think it is worth keeping in mind whether and how our writing, including our reviews and editorial decisions, in some way enhance the critical companionship of the journal.

## **Concluding thoughts**

We hope these views, thoughts and provocations prove useful for us all in scoping out future articles for the journal. We hope that, for those new to the journal, it sets out some guiding principles in developing papers before submission to give them a greater chance to be reviewed and eventually published in *Leadership*. Please remember that, as an Editorial Board for the journal, we are always happy to discuss work on leadership studies and how it might fit the journal and its community. In addition, and as you will see from the title of this editorial, this is marked out as 'Part 1' and we hope to follow this up with further editorials that explore the views of other associate editors. Finally, we wish you well in your research and writing and look forward to receiving more excellent contributions to the journal and the field of leadership studies.

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