

Editorial: Special Issues in *Leadership* - Reflections from previous Guest Editors.

Leadership has been publishing original research and theory-based articles for over twenty years, and, in this time, it has published special issues (SI) on various topics almost every year since 2008 (see Table 1). The journal also has special issues currently under development on the topics of systems leadership (Guest Editors - Nicole Ferry, Eric Guthey and Sverre Spoelstra) and leadership in dialogue (Guest Editors – Donna Ladkin, Joanne Murphy and Scott Taylor). As can be seen, the topics covered by SIs are varied and explore specific theoretical areas, differing sectors, differing countries and continents, languages and particular contexts. One thing common across all SIs is that they meet the remit of the journal, which is to advance leadership thinking in novel, critical ways that matter (see Edwards and Schedlitzki, 2023; Tourish 2022).

Insert Table 1 here

Given the importance of special issues to the journal and its ongoing remit of critical engagement, we felt it timely to reflect on the experiences of guest editors and look towards the future. We hope this piece helps to develop ideas as well as stimulate action in proposing a theme for and managing through the process of working on a special issue for the journal. In doing so, we give advice on how to develop a theme as well as how to build an editorial team and ultimately publish the collected work within the contents of *Leadership*.

In a similar way to previous editorials with Associate Editors (see Edwards et al., 2024; 2025), we invited three Guest Editors from special issues to reflect on their experiences and offer advice to those thinking about proposing a call in the future. We therefore hear from Nicole Ferry (forthcoming special issue on systems leadership), Jonathan Clifton (Clifton et

al., 2020) and Marian Iszatt-White (Iszatt-White et al., 2021), as they respond to the following questions:

How did you develop your Special Issue idea? How did you find the experience of guest editing? What did you see as a critical contribution to leadership studies? How did you ensure the high-quality of papers for the SI? Can you highlight any tips for those looking to develop their own SI for *Leadership*?

Nicole Ferry, Copenhagen Business School, Denmark - Special issues as Relationship Management - Critical leadership, ongoing conversations, and mutual expectations

In my experience, putting together a special issue is less about refining a static collection of papers and more about managing a series of relationships: the relationship between critical and mainstream leadership research, the relationship between editors, authors, and reviewers, and the relationship between special issue editors and the journal itself. To be clear, these levels are not separate nor linear. How we position critical work in relation to the mainstream shapes the kinds of manuscripts we attract and how we work with them, and both are constrained and enabled by what the journal is willing to support. Thinking in relational rather than purely procedural terms changes not only what we imagine special issues are for, but also what we think *Leadership* is for as a journal.

The first relationship is between critical and mainstream leadership research. *Leadership* is sometimes treated as a discrete container for critical work—a space where feminist, decolonial, intersectional, or non-traditional perspectives can be used unabashedly without having to negotiate too heavily with dominant assumptions or sacrifice their anti-establishment convictions. I often feel I need to protect this critical space from “outsiders,” even as I increasingly recognize how porous the boundaries between critical and mainstream research actually are (Bolden, 2024). But if the relationship between them is merely one of

polite co-existence in our scholarship and our journals— “you over there, us over here”—then the center of the field remains undisturbed.

In my view, special issues that fit *Leadership*'s orientation can help cultivate a different relationship here. Themes can create bridges (see Robinson's commentary in Edwards et al., 2025) between critical and mainstream perspectives that encourage engagement over separation. This doesn't mean *Leadership* changes its mandate, but rather that it facilitates broader and reflexive discussions that offer diverse approaches and perspectives on the study of leadership. In the call for papers, a special issue can invite contributions that speak to, unsettle, or reconfigure dominant leadership theories, methods, or practices, asking authors to position themselves in relation to the wider field, not only to a critical sub-community. The goal is not to move critical work to “the center,” but to make visible and productive the relationships between centers, margins, and everything in between. When we do this well, a special issue is not just about “hot topics” but tests and expands what counts as leadership research.

The second relationship is between special issue editors, authors, and reviewers. Editing a special issue is less about issuing instructions and more about facilitating a process involving multiple perspectives, expectations, and frictions. Authors arrive with manuscripts at different stages, reviewers arrive with their own histories of what counts as “good” research, and editors are caught between supporting experimental work and enabling a developmental process, all while ensuring the impact and integrity of the leadership scholarship in play. I am not suggesting that the editor take on a parental role (“caring for” authors) but instead enter an exchange that requires explicit timelines and decision letters that explain how different reviews have been weighed. It also means being intentional about whose voices are brought into the relationship in the first place by resisting the pull of familiar networks and signaling openness to under-represented regions and identities in the

special issue call. Disagreement is inevitable in this process. One of the most generative things a special issue can do is keep those tensions in the open rather than smoothing them away. Sometimes that involves encouraging authors to write these tensions into the article itself, other times it means using the special issue introduction as a place to acknowledge these relational dynamics, rather than erasing them in the name of coherence.

The third and final relationship I want to highlight is between the special issue editors and the journal. Special issues often rely on a tacit understanding of what *Leadership* expects: that editors will move manuscripts along, maintain high standards, and curate an issue that speaks to the journal's critical orientation. But this relationship runs both ways. Special issue editors should also expect certain things from the journal's administration and editorial team, such as access to reviewers who are open to methodological and genre experimentation and enough autonomy to make situated judgments about manuscripts without heavy-handed oversight. From the special issue editor's side, this might mean treating the issue not just as a product that ends at publication, but as infrastructure for ongoing conversation that can feed into future research trajectories, conferences, or teaching practices. From the journal's side, it might mean reaffirming that critical, uncomfortable, and unconventional work is central to its mission, and backing special issue editors when they support such work through contested review processes.

When we recognize the relationships involved in our special issues, their purpose shifts. They become less about producing a neatly themed bundle of articles and more about reconfiguring how people, ideas, and institutions relate to one another in the field of leadership studies. The relationships between all parties will never be entirely symmetrical or free of tensions. But attending to those relationships—rather than treating a special issue as an isolated technical task—opens up more possibilities for critical leadership scholarship to travel, connect, and matter beyond the confines of a single issue.

Jonathan Clifton (Université Polytechnique Hauts-de-France, France) – take the bull by the horns and go for it!

In 2019, together with Magnus Larsson and Stephanie Schnurr, I co-edited a special issue on leadership in interaction (Clifton, Larsson, and Schnurr, 2019). So, how did we go about setting up the SI and why were we motivated to do so? We were motivated to propose a special issue because we felt that interactional approaches to leadership were flying under the radar of leadership research. In other words, though interactional approaches to leadership had been around for some time, and despite the publication of Gail Fairhurst's (2007) influential monograph, *Discursive Leadership: In Conversation with Leadership Psychology*, leadership research taking an interactional approach was still limited and was not receiving the attention that we believed it merited. Further, research taking an interactional approach to leadership was dispersed; some research had appeared in linguistically oriented journals, some of it in management and leadership journals, and some in communication journals. This dispersed nature reflected the fact that researchers adopting an interactional approach to leadership were also spread across different universities, in different countries, and in different disciplines, each ploughing their lonely furrow but neither really communicating with each other nor working in synergy. Consequently, despite an increasing interest in interactional approaches to leadership and a growing body of research, we thought that the approach was not living up to its full potential. It was still below the surface, scattered, and sometimes poorly understood.

We considered that an SI could act as a catalyst to address these issues. This was because we felt that a collection of papers, rather than a series of 'one off' publications in different journals, could make interactional leadership more visible, give it more impact, and demonstrate that it was a coherent and emerging trend. Further, the fact that an SI presents a

collection of papers would allow us to showcase the nuances and variety within a broad approach. This would also be enhanced by our introduction to the SI which would serve to contextualize the papers and compare and contrast them, highlighting key similarities and differences. The introduction, because it sets out the agenda for the theme treated by an SI, might therefore attract more interest, more reads, and ultimately more citations.

In order to put our ideas into action, we not only reached out to those in our personal networks, but we organized a pre-conference workshop on interactional approaches to leadership at the European Group for Organizational Studies (EGOS) conference in 2017. This generated some interest, on the back of which we were able to extend our network of potential contributors to the SI. Using a conference workshop as a sounding board also allowed us to test the water and drum up support before we went ahead with a full proposal and a call for papers. We particularly sought papers that would leverage interactional approaches to leadership in order to contribute to a better and novel understanding of central theoretical issues in current leadership research. We also privileged submissions that would provoke debate and provide a fresh, innovative, and critical stance to core assumptions of 'mainstream' leadership research.

Having set out briefly why and how my colleagues and I decided to organize a special issue; I close with a call for action. So, if you see yourself in a similar position to the one, I've described above, and if you feel that you're ploughing that lonely furrow in the world of leadership research, then an SI could be a way of getting out of that rut. It could be an opportunity for bringing together an assorted group of researchers who have a common interest and of giving that common interest visibility within the leadership field. So, take the bull by the horns, and go for it!

Marian Iszatt-White – Lancaster University Management School - It won't be what you expected!

When drafting the call for papers for an SI, guest editorial teams obviously do their utmost to develop topics that will encourage a rich and insightful response from authors and produce an SI that will be interesting and valuable to the journal's global and interdisciplinary readership. Inevitably, as guest editors we have a sense of what we think are the key themes and debates that need to be brought out, the gaps and inconsistencies in the domain that need to be addressed, and the overall shape of the arguments we want the SI to make, at the same time as positioning our call to align with *Leadership's* critical stance towards the existing literature and its remit of encouraging debate within the discipline. We need to be prepared, however, for the fact that no matter how carefully we craft the call, people will write what they want to write, and we will need to exercise skill, judgement, patience and tact in shaping what we get into a cohesive whole! As authors, we have played this game ourselves: we have taken a project we are already working on that speaks, in some way, to the call and massaged the two to make them answer each other. We should not be surprised, then, if we are on the receiving end of this same tactic as editors. How we respond will depend on the overall body of material we have available with which to work.

A small number of submissions results in a limited pool of material from which we are able to select. This may mean we have to craft something that feels coherent and cohesive from something that actually isn't – and use the editorial piece to fill in the gaps. Whilst the result may not be what we wanted the SI to be, it can still produce something that is rich and insightful, with the benefit of forcing us beyond our own preconceived ideas at the same time as encouraging wider debate. The trick here is to balance honesty concerning where authors feel the topic is heading with where we want to send it, without resorting to a level of

disingenuous ‘shoehorning’ that does a disservice to both the authors and the editors. At the same time, shortage of submissions may mean we have to provide additional support to authors to develop their ideas to a publishable standard without unduly shaping what they are trying to say, and without compromising the high standards of quality and originality which are intrinsic to the *Leadership* journal.

A larger number of submissions give SI editors more material to choose from but can bring problems of their own. In this situation, it would be easy to pick the papers that align most directly with the original call – and hence with what the editors wanted the SI to be about – to the exclusion of perspectives and directions that are new and challenging or that don’t immediately seem to be a good fit. Keeping an open mind to these more tangential possibilities can benefit the final SI, albeit at the cost of the editors’ personal ‘agenda.’ At the same time, a plethora of submissions can mean that the editorial team have a larger number of manuscripts ongoing – more than can find their way into the final SI – for a period of time before the final selection is made. When this happens, the coherence and ‘shape’ of the SI needs to remain flexible until quite late on in the revise and resubmit process. The final selection process needs to balance what will make for an engaging and insightful SI collection, with recognition of the quality and robustness of the individual contributions. Remembering the journal’s global and interdisciplinary ethos, and its remit of advancing leadership studies at their broadest, can also be useful touchpoints in deciding what to include and not.

When speaking to students and colleagues on the writing and publishing process, I frequently say that once a manuscript has been submitted to a journal, it becomes a collaboration between authors and reviewers, and that authors must avoid being too ‘precious’ about exactly what it is they want to say. I would give the same advice to guest editor teams: of course you need to have a clear idea of how you see the topic, and the

contribution you want the SI to make, but you also have to work with the grain of the material you receive and be open to those perspectives and directions you hadn't anticipated. In my experience, the 'best' SIs are sometimes those which are least like what was anticipated in the call for papers. Whether this is the case for you or not, one thing is certain: the final SI won't be what you expected!

A Summary of Key Points

The Guest Editors above provide some important insights into developing an SI for publication, we summarize the key points below:

- Identify a *topic/s that are underrepresented* in the field and that need *visibility*.
Look to *unsettle and/or reconfigure* the landscape of leadership studies.
- When you have decided on a topic and developed a call for papers, *use your network* to promote the SI, run workshops and run themes/streams at conferences.
- It is important to exercise your skill, judgement, practice and tact in *shaping a cohesive SI* for the journal. This is what being an editor is all about, making sure that you are willing to offer advice and direction to authors and the wider editorial board where and when needed.
- Be *flexible* in accepting papers into the SI; *experiment* with methodology and genre, an SI is a perfect opportunity to do so.
- An SI needs *balance* but keep *tensions* at the forefront. These tensions may develop deeper engagement with the topic and provide the opportunity for counterpoints to be made within papers. This is important for a critical journal such as *Leadership*.

- When the SI is near completion you will need to *develop an editorial*. Make sure that this editorial provides a storyline for the papers whilst also contrasting and contextualising the papers.

We hope that this helps provide advice and support to those looking to develop SI for the future!

Special Issues in Leadership: The Process

Now that you have heard from some of our previous guest editors, we feel that it is worth just setting out the process for developing a special issue for the journal. Firstly, as highlighted above, once the topic has been identified, you will need to draft a call for papers. Once this is done, please share this with the editors of *Leadership*. The editors will then discuss your draft with the Associate Editor Team, and a decision will be made as to whether we reject, ask for revisions or accept the SI proposal and call for papers. The call for papers will then be advertised through the journal, and the administration processes will be set up via the Sage publishing team. Each SI is supported by an Editor-in Chief (EiC), who will introduce you to and offer guidance on the process for reviewing, revising, rejecting and accepting papers. When the SI is nearing completion the EiC will invite the Guest Editors to complete an editorial to introduce the SI and negotiate an issue in the year in which the SI will be published. Lastly, it has become tradition for the journal to invite special issues from annual conferences that support *Leadership* – the *International Studying Leadership Conference (ISLC)* and the *Developing Leadership Capacity Conference (DLCC)*. We therefore recommend that if you are considering the development of an SI then you should also consider hosting one of these conferences.

Concluding Thoughts

Again, we hope these views, thoughts and provocations are useful for us all in scoping out future special issues for the journal. For those new to the journal, it sets out some guiding principles in developing SI proposals before submission to give them greater critical clarity. 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. Finally, we wish you well in your SI development and look forward to receiving more excellent contributions to the journal and the field of leadership studies.

Gareth, Nicole, Jonathan, Marian, and Doris

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Table 1: Special Issues published in Leadership

- Communication and Leadership (Tourish and Jackson, 2008)
- Leadership in Higher Education (Bolden et al., 2009)
- Leadership as Art (Ladkin and Taylor, 2010)
- Leadership in Crisis (Mabey and Morrell, 2011)
- Italian Leadership (Marturano, 2012), Leadership Ethics in Africa (Ciulla et al., 2012)
- The materiality of leadership (Pullen and Vachhani, 2013), Leading in Healthcare (Fulop and Mark, 2013)
- Leadership in a Crisis Constructing World (O'Reilly et al., 2015)
- Indigenous Leadership (Wolfgramm et al., 2016)
- Ways of Leading in Non-Anglophone Contexts (Schedlitzki et al., 2017)
- Populism and Dissent (Bezio and Goethals, 2018)
- Leadership Narratives in a Post-truth Era (Foroughi et al., 2019)
- Leadership in Interaction (Clifton et al., 2020), Leadership and the Coronavirus Crisis (Tourish 2020), Leadership and Power (Collinson, 2020)
- Do we need Authentic Leadership (Iszatt-White et al., 2021), Race and Leadership (Spiller and Watson, 2021)
- Place Based Leadership (Sutherland et al., 2022)
- Leadership and Resistance (Smolović Jones, et al., 2025)