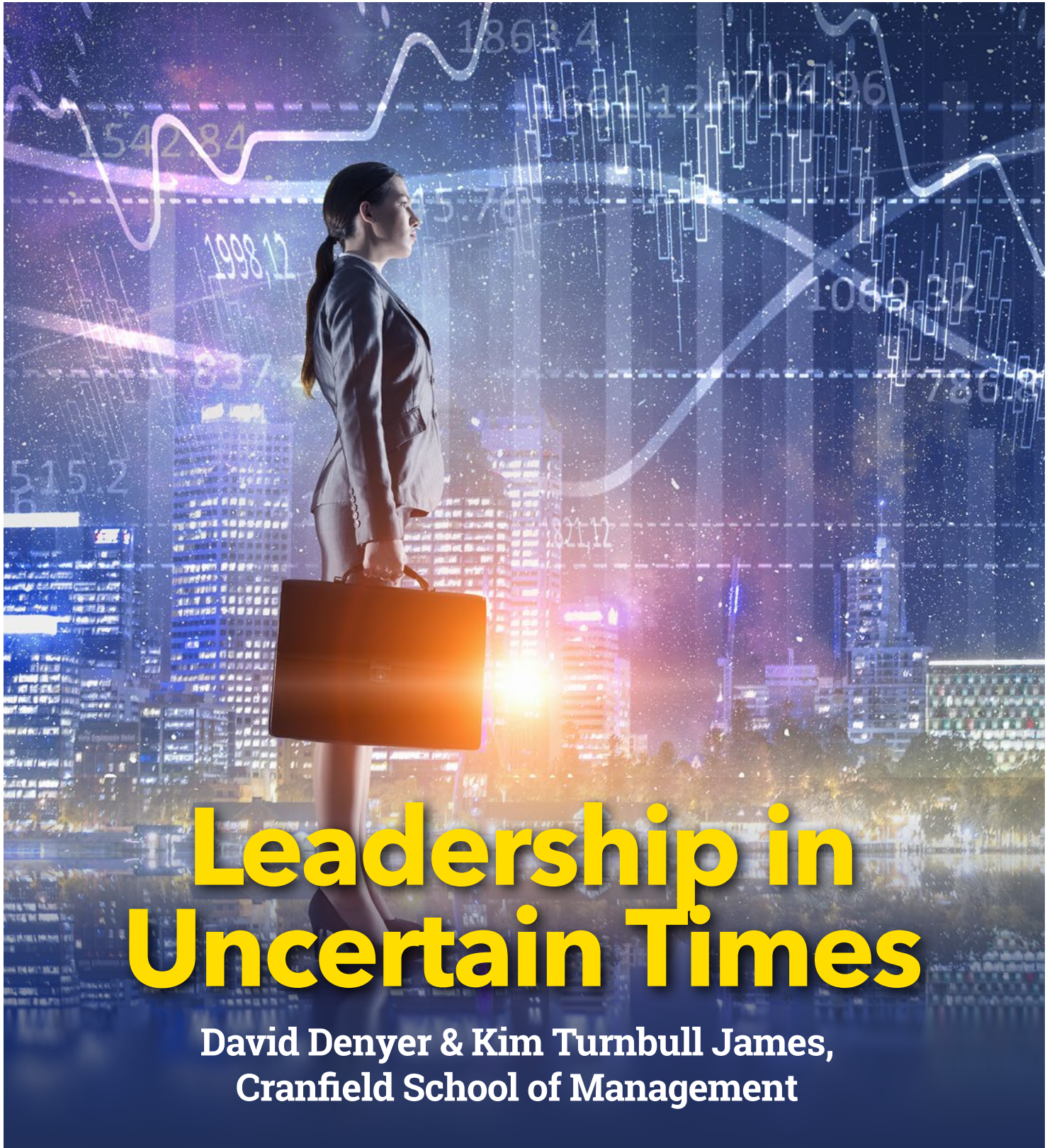


Developing Leaders

Quarterly



Leadership in Uncertain Times

David Denyer & Kim Turnbull James,
Cranfield School of Management



Helping Leaders Do Leadership in an Uncertain World

By David Denyer and
Kim Turnbull James

Business leaders are recovering from a series of recent World-changing events that few saw coming. They are also starting to comprehend the enormity and long-term ramifications of global challenges such as financial crises, terrorism and mass migration. Rapid developments in digital technology and social media are also rendering obsolete former approaches to communicating, organizing and getting work done. These changes are forcing leaders to review, rethink, redesign and reinvent how an organization achieves its purpose. Responding to new challenges and opportunities as they emerge requires rapid change and the collective action of multiple stakeholders working across boundaries and borders. The work of leadership in this new era is thus marked by greater cross-functional collaboration and highly participative environments in which people at all levels take, and feel, personal responsibility for collective output, in which they are deeply committed.

Paradoxically, the very conditions that put such a premium on the ability to work together to adapt to complex challenges also creates obstacles to achieving this kind of collaboration and learning. During times of disruptive change people crave a 'strong' leader to provide answers, a compelling vision and an unambiguous implementation plan – the underlying belief is that change requires effective individual leaders. It is therefore unsurprising that much leadership development remains leader development - in other words, focused on the traits, styles, actions, and competencies of the individuals who are formally assigned leadership roles. Rather than changing the leaders we argue that organizations should invest in helping leaders do leadership. In the context of complex change, the work of leadership transcends formal hierarchies and involves multiple actors. The belief is that outcomes of leadership, direction, and alignment and commitment, emerge from collective action and the spaces between people, as ideas, routines and practices are reconstructed. A mindset shift from leader-driven change to leadership-enabled change is at the heart of our approach to working with clients on intractable, messy problems.

Leadership practices for resolving messy problems

We have interviewed senior executives in a range of organizations actively involved in dealing with complex and uncertain problems and have explored leadership with thousands of managers on our executive development programs. Our work reveals seven leadership routines that we believe are central to dealing with intractable, messy problems. These routines are not mindless or automatic habits, but rather effortful, repetitive actions that allow an organization to adapt to changes provided by their environment.



Noticing: Building and sharing situational awareness by envisioning possibilities, being attentive, present-centred and open to new information.

Discovering: Digging deep into the problem from multiple viewpoints, listening to diverse and opposing voices. Viewing patterns and connections and zooming in and out between components parts and the whole. Gathering, sharing and interpreting rich information.

Framing: Identifying the problem and articulating a shared need that can be best satisfied by working together. Conveying a purpose that diverse groups can buy into. Recognising that sometimes it is important to disrupt existing patterns by challenging the common (taken for granted) understanding of the problem.

Brokering: Connecting other peoples' interests to the work of solving the problem. Negotiating their involvement in the collective effort so that they are fully identified with the purpose and collaboratively shape change.

Designing: Dreaming of what might be then co-creating possible solutions with customers and consumers. Exploring the contradictory aspects of a confounding problem to create novel solutions by shifting thinking from either/or choices to both/and solutions.

Experimenting: Taking action by producing collective work products in the form of provisional models, methods, prototypes or trials that can assist in dealing with the problem.

Realising: Rolling out and embedding change whilst continually evaluating and refining potential solutions by testing and incorporating user feedback. Monitoring progress to achieve objectives and deadlines.



The seven practices are underpinned by two meta leadership practices:

Collaborative leadership learning: Facilitating the conditions for experiencing, revealing, creating and discovering alternative approaches to collective leadership work. Leaders have to manage the tension between being the strong leader that people want to see during times of change and encouraging leadership at many levels and a capacity to co-create new practices that will sustain the organization in a complex context.

Enabling a holding environment: Enabling safe spaces, authorizing action and maintaining productive tension. Whilst a degree of tension is needed to provoke change, any heightened emotionality needs to be contained within productive ranges. This means creating the capacity for 'not knowing', allowing emergence and reflection, with difficulties explored as learning opportunities rather than denied.

In the section below we focus on how these two meta leadership practices are achieved in customized leadership development programs in which participants work in small groups tasked with shared ownership and responsibility for leading on their designated problem or challenge.

Collaborative leadership learning in practice

Before the program begins, current or impending problems or challenges of relevance and salience are identified. These are not 'projects' but the adaptive challenges, which if left unaddressed will compromise the viability of the organization. The challenges are usually external, internal or paradoxes or some combination of these.



Janossy Gergely / Shutterstock.com

The primary objective of the program is to help participants to learn about the challenges of collaborative and shared leadership

External challenges are issues such as energy supply and depletion of fossil fuels, predicting and responding to disruptive technologies, globalization, financial crisis, inadequate infrastructure services, Brexit or long-term health challenges such as obesity.

Internal challenges are organization specific problems such enhancing diversity, managing talent, a merger or acquisition, or changing organizational culture.

Paradoxes include issues such as creating a product or service that is both better and cheaper, standardizing customer experience across a global business whilst also allowing local variation, or ensuring compliance to standard operating procedures whilst also empowering people to improvise to resolve problems.

The primary objective of the program is to help participants to learn about the challenges of collaborative and shared leadership. Participants on the program work in groups referred to as collaborative leadership learning groups. At a superficial glance they look like action learning sets. However, as the task of these groups is to learn 'how to do leadership differently' the emphasis is on leadership learning outcomes. At the start of the program participants contract with each other on the collaborative group practices that they agree to commit to.

The program also aims to help participants transfer the routines and practices back into their business unit. The 'program', 'event', 'academy' (as different clients have labeled this process) is set up to facilitate collective work but also to mirror many aspects of the participant's home organizations (group dynamics, power relationships, politics etc.). Program tutors help participants reflect on their experiences and connect and embed the learning into their day-to-day practices.



Making progress on the adaptive challenge is an additional benefit. However, groups rarely produce 'answers'. Given that messy problems are often intractable, developing a deeper, shared understanding of the problem is regarded as a laudable outcome. Finally, delegates always take away personal learning but individual learning outcomes are not designed into the process.

Enabling a holding environment in action

Whilst some pressure is required to mobilize collective action, excessive pressure turns into anxiety, which can undermine performance. Whilst often addressed as personal stress, it has long been recognized that whole groups or organizations can be overwhelmed by difficult emotional currents particularly at times of radical change.

Organizations have inbuilt structures that help to contain anxiety. For example, plans and goals provide a clear sense of direction; defined roles, responsibilities and reporting lines allow problems to be passed upward through the hierarchy. The demarcation of work means that particular functions or departments own issues. Organizational silos provide the opportunity for people to blame out-groups (often HR/IT/accounts) for problems that would surely be resolved 'if only they got their act together!' Senior leaders take strategic and financial risks on behalf of the organization. The executive team also holds anxiety on behalf of those who implement their strategy because if it goes wrong it is the senior leadership that will be held to account.

Anxiety is heightened rapidly when groups and organizations face intractable, messy, uncertain problems with no obvious answer or end in sight. The introduction of collective, cross boundary work and the move to dispersed, shared or collaborative leadership dissolves many of the organizational containing structures resulting in heightened group and organization stress. Therefore, a critical success factor for leadership development programs is the creation of a holding environment to keep anxiety within productive ranges.

The role of the top team in support of the program and enabling change cannot be over-stated

Although our approach appears to de-emphasize top-down leadership, we have found that the role of the top team in support of the program and enabling change cannot be over-stated. Program effectiveness is enhanced immeasurably when senior leaders enact and fully engage with new ways of working. Their commitment to the program of change creates a new form of containment as they work alongside participants and share responsibility for collective action. Managing this process requires careful and sensitive consultancy from the provider team from the outset because senior executives are accustomed to sponsoring and financing change processes that are implemented by others. In contrast our process requires them to play an active role and 'walk the talk'.

The entire delivery team has to model collaborative practices and shared leadership to enable participants to feel safe enough to experiment with and enact new practices. This is often made quite explicit with the team sharing and exploring any challenges they face in working to support collaborative leadership learning. Coaches in the delivery team model inquiry and dialogue rather than winner/loser debate.

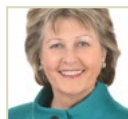
Groups attempting to restore comfortable levels of distress often use displacement activities, which often masquerade as project planning! The delivery team has to guard against participants redefining or redesigning the core task unconsciously into something more controllable. The coaches surface and discuss these anxiety reduction strategies. As the work unfolds, the group dynamics are subject to inquiry and as people outside the group are gradually involved, wider organization politics are attended to.

Summary

In an increasingly uncertain world understanding and addressing intractable, messy problems need to become an essential part of leadership development programs. As an alternative to leader development, which aims to enhance the competencies of the individuals who are formally assigned leadership roles, our approach puts complex organizational problems and challenges in the foreground, specifies the leadership actions that need to be undertaken as a matter of routine and the meta leadership practices that enable collective action. In outlining our approach in this article, we offer a stepping stone, which we hope will motivate many others to venture into this important area of leadership development.



David Denyer is Professor of Leadership and Organizational Change and Director of Research at Cranfield School of Management. He is a Fellow of the Academy of Social Sciences.



Kim Turnbull James is Professor of Leadership and Executive Learning and Director of Faculty Development at Cranfield School of Management. She is a member of the School of Management Executive Team.

A collaborative approach to **Leading Complex Change**



Change, transformation and leadership occur in many ways. At Cranfield School of Management, our approach to help clients resolve their most complex issues is distinct. Our interdisciplinary team leverages research, analytics and industry insights to help design and deliver leadership development and change interventions that focus on the toughest issues affecting businesses today.

We partner with our clients to adopt a 'one team' approach in which we harness the best available research evidence and promising industry practice to co-create innovative solutions to benefit you and your stakeholders.

We work with a range of businesses, across all sectors, helping individuals, teams and organizations reach their fullest potential. We can help you to anticipate change, be more resilient, and more adept at tackling complex issues.

Our innovative Networked Learning Approach also helps organizations and their teams to connect with Cranfield experts and resources, gain knowledge in geographically wide networks, make learning a daily business, and work smarter in a global context.

Whether you have a specific development need now, or would like to talk more generally about how we could support change and development in your organization, please get in touch with our Centre for Customised Executive Development. We would be delighted to talk to you.

Business Development Team

Tel: +44 (0)1234 754509 | **Email:** customised@cranfield.ac.uk

www.cranfieldCCED.info

For more information about our Leading Complex Change group, visit www.cranfield.ac.uk/som/expertise/leading-complex-change

Centre for Customised
Executive Development



Financial Times
Rankings 2017
Customised
Programmes

TOP
10
in Europe

#1
for
International
Reach