



Leadership reflective practices: Adaptive challenges, slow questions and meaningful relations in fluid and accelerated times

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Abstract

In recent times of volatility and acceleration, leaders in organisations at a strategic level are facing increasingly complex adaptive challenges accompanied with a growing body of information, as for example seen with the COVID-19 pandemic. They are increasingly challenged by an uncontrollable dynamic. This review explores what the role is of reflective practices considering these challenges. The background of the study is the observation that likewise business research is accelerated in a tremendous speed, thereby remaining fragmented and interdisciplinary. Therefore, this study analyses the content of literature on leadership and reflectivity in current times. The aim is to investigate the main key-concepts and to create an agenda for further research. This review demonstrates that addressing slow questions and creating meaningful relations could play a critical role for leaders experiencing adaptive challenges and 'shrinking time'. The meta-reflection in this review revealed two dimensions of reflective practices relevant for future investigation: firstly, intrapersonal, intuitive, and embodied reflection on the experiences of leaders; and secondly, dialogical 'sense-making' with others. This review shows that reflective practices have primarily been studied among professionals, and not among leaders. This raises the question: Is the general assumption that professionals 'reflect' and that leaders mainly 'act'?

Key words: Complexity, adaptive challenge, accelerated times, leadership, reflective practice, intuition, embodiment, resonance, dialogue, sense-making

Introduction

This semi-systematic review analysis the content of literature on leadership and reflectivity in current volatile times. The background of the study is the observation that business research is also accelerated in a tremendous speed, thereby remaining fragmented and interdisciplinary (Snyder, 2019). To gain insight in the body of knowledge on leadership and reflectivity in current times we first elaborate on the problem statement and aim of this study.

Problem statement and aim of this review

In current times, technology brings significant changes to global issues such as climate change, population growth, food supply, artificial intelligence, and nanotechnology (Diamandis & Kotler, 2020). These developments enable huge advances and also bring new complexities and paradoxes, such as the paradox that more knowledge does not lead to more control, but to an increase in feelings of uncertainty (Obolensky, 2014). The issues leaders experience in this complexity shows the particular challenges they are facing in this specific time, and how they seek to identify and grasp these changes (Van Dijk, 2016). In a recent study of 13,124 organisation leaders, Bennett and Lemoine (2014) found that complexity is the greatest challenge leaders are currently facing. Their research also showed that 18% of leaders feel capable of leading in this context (in Rimita, 2019). According to Obolensky (2014), leaders have been facing an increase of ambiguous situations and new questions about a fundamental new perspective on leadership. Van Loon and Van Dijk (2015) described the greatest leadership challenges as “being able to cope with complexity, global interconnectedness and continuous change” in their study. Within leadership theory Marion and Uhl-Bien (2008, 2011) called these challenges “adaptive challenges.” They defined these challenges as problems that are too complex to be easily resolved and that they require social engagement and support.

In this review, we focus on leaders dealing with adaptive challenges. At the macrolevel, the challenge is how to approach social or societal problems in a complex field of stakeholders. At the microlevel, the challenges lie in everyday decisions and how to intervene in complex processes. Next to these adaptive challenges, literature illustrates how leaders are overloaded with an increasingly demanding information flow (Rosenberg & Feldman, 2008). A growing number of leaders experience an accelerating force. They experience ‘no time to think’ in the dynamics of their daily work (Raelin, 2002). Leaders are, in their mindset, primarily described as conditioned ‘to do’ and ‘to decide’ instead of to reflecting and to learn (Raelin, 2002, Amulya, 2004). Rosa (2010, 2016, 2019) stated that the acceleration in communication and the possibilities due to technology today are the sources of stress, burnout, and depression. Leaders are thereby confronted with another paradoxical pattern, namely that despite having more time because of technological inventions, they experience ‘shrinking time’—wanting to do more in less time (Rosa, 2010, 2016, 2019). Like Kegan (1994), Rosa emphasised that the mental demands on leaders have increased in this era. Rosa specified the problem explaining that leaders are unable to form a meaningful relationship with this ‘uncontrollable’ world. He described this as a form of alienation.

The main concern of this review is to explore literature on the issue of ‘time to reflect and think’ in the context of leadership in an accelerating and increasingly digital era (Van Dijk & Van Loon, 2015). Kunneman and Suransky (2011) pointed out the urgency for leaders to address ‘slow questions’ because of the moral dilemmas and the existential issues involved, concerning adaptive challenges at the strategic level. These questions are called ‘slow’ because they cannot be adequately addressed with ‘fast’ technical remedies as they leave out the existential and moral issues as well as stakeholders’ mutual vulnerability and dependency (Kunneman & Suransky, 2011). In this review, the aim is to explore literature to create an agenda for further research. The study dives into the growing importance of reflective time and space to address slow questions and to create meaningful relationships of leaders with the world, the issues at hand, and others, such as followers and stakeholders. This focus of the study and the observations in our practice during Covid-19 underline the alienating effect of the digital and uncontrollable dynamics. In this review we will illustrate the literature gaps and the urgency of new perspectives to the leadership debate, to help leaders reconsider their assumptions about their roles, mindsets, and attention structures.

Literature review on key-concepts

The review of the literature is organised in a first section on the key-concept of complexity and adaptive challenges for leaders. The second section elaborates on accelerated times, reflective practice and resonance. The body of the review shares two dimensions found in literature on reflective practices as a basis for an agenda for the discussion and conclusions for further research.

Complexity & adaptive challenges for leaders

To elaborate on leaders' changing context, we start with the view of Bauman (2007, 2000), according to whom, we are facing global developments in the Western societies in that people are being confronted with uncertainty. He described liquid modernity as contrasted with the 'solid' modernity that preceded it. According to Bauman, the passage from 'solid' to 'liquid' modernity created a new and unprecedented setting for individual life pursuits, confronting individuals with a series of never-before-encountered challenges (Bauman 2000). He pointed out the significant changes of the past century as five 'departures' simultaneously at work. Firstly, institutions and social forms like the church and other communities are decomposing. Secondly, power and politics are divorcing, as power is held by global business interests in which political organizations are unable to regulate themselves. Thirdly, social safety nets are dissolving at the same time as monopolies are being deregulated. Fourth, long-term planning and thinking about the shape of communities and social patterns have ceded to quick fixes and quick profits. And lastly, the economic and political risks generated by global power are shifting the burden of volatile markets onto individuals' shoulders. He described this tendency towards fluidity as being full of fear. In daily practice, leaders are confronted with paradoxical forces Bauman addressed, in which they experience all actions as bringing new uncertainties.

In the same period of Bauman's publications, the US Army War College, to describe the world, developed the term VUCA, which stands for Volatile, Uncertain, Complex, and Ambiguous with the threat of terrorism (Horney et al., 2010). Volatility stands for the speed, magnitude, and dynamics of change, while uncertainty describes the unpredictability of issues and events. Complexity stands for the chaos that surrounds all organizations, and ambiguity refers to the "haziness of reality and the mixed meanings of conditions" (Kornelsen, 2019, p. 32). The 21st century marked the beginning of NextGen warfare such as 9/11 and the Syrian war, where globalization and technology fuelled a new kind of conflict (Fry, 2016). It marked a new era of change in which armies had to cope with unknown enemies with unknown tactics.

As a result of similar disturbing changes as experienced in the US Army, VUCA entered the business lexicon in the early 2000s primarily through the work of Stiehm and Townsend (2002). They observed a new turbulent dynamic in organizations. Bennett and Lemoine (2014) illustrated how these dynamics cause uncertainty and mental anguish among leaders.

Both the concept of VUCA and Bauman's analysis raise the question: What does this perspective mean for leaders? It shows that a new organizational logic is appearing due to the knowledge- and innovation-driven economies. Since economic value is created by creative processes with clients, in networks, in temporary, informal partnerships, and in free spaces, virtual or otherwise. This knowledge- and innovation-driven economy has a complex logic because cause and effect are not clearly delineated due to their interconnectedness; the line between organisations and their environment is becoming increasingly permeable (Van Dijk, 2016).

Uhl-Bien and Marion (2008) stated that despite the needs of the current knowledge era, much of leadership theory has remained largely grounded in a bureaucratic framework (Gronn, 2000 in Uhl-Bien & Marion, 2008). They also introduced the concept of 'complexity leadership' to describe the changing environment that requires new mindsets (Uhl-Bien & Marion, 2008).

They distinguished three roles to categorize various activities and paradigms that leaders encounter in the current times: 1) leadership grounded in traditional, bureaucratic notions of hierarchy, alignment, and control; 2) leadership that structures and enables conditions to optimally address creative problem solving, adaptability, and learning; and 3) leadership as a generative dynamic that underlies emergent change activities.

Complexity has been relevant in the past century, but what is specific for leaders in the 21st century? Jakubik & Berazhny (2017) argue that particularly the digital character of these times reinforces the need for a new leadership model. He pleads for an approach where the leader is not positioned in the centre of power and communication. He states that leaders adjusted to the digital era are aware that they cannot be successful alone and that they have to rely on collaboration and teamwork. In his eyes, leaders create and enable high-performing teams and communities, stay in constant connection with stakeholders, and utilize technological opportunities (Jakubik & Berazhny, 2017).

Considering all this, Kilburg and Donohue (2011) searched for an integrative definition of leadership in current times, describing it as: "*a complex multidimensional, emergent process, in which the*

leader(s), follower(s) and other stakeholders (formal and informal) in a human enterprise use their characteristics, capabilities, thoughts, feelings and behaviour to create mutually influencing relationships that enable to co-evolve strategies, tactics, structures, processes, directions and other methods...". This definition encompasses the complexity of the context and the lack of clear universal guidelines and principles, but also emphasizes the essentials of leadership (Van Loon & Van Dijk, 2015). Firstly, this definition addressed that *the process of leadership*, by definition, is related to leaders, followers, and stakeholders. In this light, Haslam et al. (2020) offer a social psychological perspective on leadership exploring this question how leadership emerges. New in their contribution to leadership theory is the concept of leadership as a shared social identity, *a sense of 'us'* that connects leader and followers as a common group (Haslam, 2020) and affects the reflective practices of leaders. Secondly, Kilburg and Donohue underline that leadership is an 'emerging process', creating 'co-evolving' ways using characteristics, capabilities, thoughts, feelings, and behaviour that refer to leadership *in the process of experiencing and struggling*.

Accelerating times; Leadership and reflective time and space

A main theme in this review is the growing number of leaders experiencing an accelerating force and a dominant expectancy of 'doing' rather than of 'thinking', which leaves them with little time to 'reflect'. In this light, Rosa (2010, 2016, 2019) argues that we are confronted with a 'shrinking of time', which consists of three types of accelerating forces: firstly, the technical acceleration that makes it possible to move at a faster speed; secondly, the acceleration of changes in society, which encompasses family structures and professional orientations; and thirdly, the acceleration of the speed of life. Neither of the first two areas have changed over many generations, but now they are changing within one lifetime. Now, people are striving to achieve more and see time as an economic asset.

According to Rosa (2010, 2016, 2019), the current problems come down to the phenomenon that people are unable to form meaningful relationships of mutual understanding and interaction, neither with their material surroundings nor with their fellow human beings. As the root of this disability, he pinpointed the constant striving for modernistic control and predictability (Lijster & Celikates, 2019). As an answer, he introduced the concept of resonance. He defined resonance as "a form of world-relation, in which subject and world meet and transform each other" (Rosa, 2016, p. 289). He pleaded for resonance, offering a basis for experiencing a slower, deeper, meaningful, dynamic, and transformative rapport between, in this case, leaders and their environment.

Raelin (2002) shared the concern that leaders experience 'no time to think.' He illustrates how leaders are socialized to be people of action, not of reflection; 'action is required' and thereby 'doing' as a short-term solution overrules reflecting and learning over the long term. Delaying decisions is seen as a sign of weakness, and leaders look for answers rather than questions.

The concept of reflective practices they refer to is best understood as the process of learning through and from experience towards gaining new insights (Boud et al. 1998, 1985, in Finlay, 2008). Cattaneo & Motta (2020) contributed to this by exploring how people can learn from their experience. They investigated two types of reflection: reflection-on-action (after-the-event thinking) and reflection-in-action (thinking while doing) and found an effect of explicit reflection followed by an increase of metacognitive prompts to reflect on their practice.

Earlier the relevance of addressing slow questions at a slow pace because of the moral dilemmas and the existential issues involved, concerning complex issues was underlined (Kunneman & Suranski, 2011). In this light, Kahneman (2012) described two systems in our thinking using different processes within the mind. System 1 he described as 'Fast Thinking': automatic, unconscious, and with minimal effort. This seems like passive thinking because it happens beyond one's control (reacting, feeling, sensing). He referred to System 2 as 'Slow thinking': deliberate, conscious, and with obvious effort. Because this conscious way of thinking has the person in control, it seems like a more intelligent way of thinking. He argued that complex issues require System 1 to recognize patterns and System 2 to explain these patterns to others. Therefore, ambiguous and fluid challenges need both systems. Considering this, Tsang (2008) put forward the concepts of time, stating that if the right action has to be taken in the right place in volatile processes, one should also consider the right time—Kairos (Tsang, 2008). He aimed to point out the notion of reflection-in-action as not only figuring out what is the best thing to do, but above all at which particular moment in time (Tsang, 2008).

Reflective practices further explored

The question arises: What is written about leadership and reflective practises in literature? First of all, it's striking that the combination of 'leadership' and 'reflective practise' is rare in empirical research. Examining the diverse studies in a meta-reflection, two dimensions of reflective practices appeared, which, in our view, are growing in relevance for research among leaders in current times. The first dimension is the individual, intrapersonal, intuitive, and spiritual practices, and the second is the interpersonal, dialogical 'sense-making' practices.

Table 1

Two dimensions of reflective practices in literature

Adaptive challenges & accelerated 'shrinking' time	Literature on reflective practices: individually
Fluidity, volatility and acceleration; emerging processes. <i>Leadership in the process: Addressing slow questions; Creating meaningful relations from within concerning the issues.</i>	Intrapersonal Intuitive and spiritual practices; fast and slow thinking. Focusing on emotional and spiritual and physical intelligence, embodied-experiences and processual presence.
Adaptive challenges, wicked issues & accelerated 'shrinking' time	Literature on reflective practices: creating meaning with others
Uncertainty, Ambiguity and Complexity; co-evolving processes. <i>Leadership as process: Addressing slow questions; creating meaningful relations with others concerning the issues.</i>	Interpersonal Dialogical, moral, 'sense-making' practices. Focusing on mental intelligence, constructs, metaphors, and new meaning in a process of 'co-authoring'

Intrapersonal: Intuitive & spiritual practices, practical wisdom, and embodiment

Considering the fluidity, volatility, and acceleration of emerging processes, various scholars have sought for alternative models of intelligence, besides leaders' cognitive intelligence. In this first reflective dimension, leaders' inner experiences are a subject of reflection to address the adaptive challenges or 'slow' questions in relation to the accelerated dynamics and the ambiguity of the issues. Firstly, Küpers & Statler (2008) pointed out the Aristotelian concept of practical wisdom, in Greek, *phronesis* (Küpers & Statler, 2008). This concept focusses on the question of how leaders deal ethically and effectively with fluidity (Küpers & Statler, 2008). For Aristotle, the key distinction between practical wisdom and knowledge was that practical wisdom involved in 'experiential encounters', or experience with particular lived situations (Küpers & Statler, 2008). Practical knowledge and practical wisdom are hereby put above intellectual scientific and rational knowledge (Van Manen, 2006).

Within this view, Goleman (2012) introduced the concept of emotional intelligence (EI) (Goleman 2012). He defined EI with such factors as 'the ability to motivate oneself, persistence, impulse control, mood regulation, empathy and hope' (Goleman 2012, p. 15). In addition, the concept of spiritual intelligence (SI) arose at the beginning of the 21st century (Nullens, 2019). Covey (2014) described the broad spectrum with four intelligences: physical intelligence (PI), mental intelligence (MI), EI, and SI, as relevant for leaders in the current, fluid times. SI is defined as people's drive for meaning and connection with the infinite (Nullens, 2019). It points to their personal ability to create

meaning, based on deep understanding of existential questions, with the awareness of multiple levels of consciousness (Vaughan 2002, p. 30). Both Covey and Nullens stated that SI is the central and most fundamental of all the intelligences because it becomes the source of guidance for the others (Covey 2014, p. 53). Covey emphasized that leaders should not only focus on *how* to act, but above all, with an inner consciousness of *why* they act in a certain way (Covey 2014).

Küpers and Statler (2008) added to this, describing the importance of the body as the mediating link between internal and external experience and between meaning and action. They emphasized that wisdom is not only realized through experiential processes, but that embodied and emotional experiences are always involved in situations where practical wisdom emerges (Küpers & Statler, 2008). Wisdom is not only influenced by what leaders and followers think, but mainly by what they feel and live through (Küpers & Statler, 2008). They followed Merleau-Ponty (1962) and his phenomenological perspective, stating that all those involved in their 'life-world' are first and foremost embodied beings. In summary, these sources in literature open possibilities for leaders to create new meaning in a fluid and accelerating context reflecting through intuitive and spiritual practices. This approach underlines leadership *in process*, acknowledging the experiences leaders face. A point of critique is that this dimension neglects leaders' interpersonal interactions with others.

Interpersonal; Dialogical- 'sense-making' practices; creating meaning with others

The second reflective dimension in literature concentrates on leadership as an interactive process with others, addressing the uncertainties facing adaptive challenges. Rosa (2010, 2016, 2019) referred to this dimension as creating meaningful relationships of mutual understanding and interaction, in this case with fellow human beings—“in which subject and world meet and transform each other.” Frimann and Hersted (2016) pleaded for the 'construction' of meaning in uncertain, ambiguous situations. In their view, meaning appears when leaders involve employees, fellow leaders, and other stakeholders in their reflections and decision-making processes. Leadership in their sense can be seen “as a social construction of meaning between parties to organizational processes.” Gergen (1999) shared a fundamental view on this stating that the creation of meaningful language requires social coordination. “There is nothing we call language that is born within the private mind. Until there is mutual agreement on the meaningful character of words or actions, they fail to constitute language. If this line of argument is carried to its conclusion, we find that it is not the mind of the single individual that provides the sense of certitude, but the process of communal relationship” (Gergen, 1999, p. 221).

He illustrated how in a world in which globalization brings opposing realities into increasingly sharp conflict, new resources for communication become essential. The first resource is self-reflexivity. He described this first form as being beyond the ego, in which one questions one's position and the plurality of meanings (polyvocal). The secondly resource is dialogue with another in which the parties reflect on conflicting meanings. The final resource is self-expression by storytelling. He pointed out that all three resources ask for a curious mindset and the listening to others beyond disputing or blaming (Gergen, 1999). From this view, Frimann and Hersted's (2016) suggestion is that leadership in terms of 'authoring' must be seen as a participatory narrative process of co-authoring. In summary, this reflective dimension opens possibilities to create new meaning in an uncertain and volatile context, underlining leadership as an interactive process and acknowledging the polyphony leaders must cope with in their everyday practice. One point of critique is that this dimension neglects leaders' presence and their personal abilities to reflect and discern.

Methodology

Since this review focusses on a topic that is conceptualized differently and studied by various groups of researchers in various contexts, we choose for the method of a semi-systematic review focussing on the exploration of key-concepts (Snyder, 2019). This method made it possible to detect new themes and to conduct a meta-reflection. According to Snyder, business research has a fragmented character in which it is complicated to define an explicit state-of-the art. In our view, the subject of leadership and reflectivity in current accelerated times is specifically subject to this fragmentation. Therefore, we started with a structured thematic analysis with the search in WorldCat and in Google Scholar using the following keywords: fluid times, VUCA, leadership, complexity, reflective practice. Based on these keywords, a selection was investigated concerning 1) the most influential sources, 2) empirical studies,

3) the most recent publications of the 21st century and 4) the fundamental works of the past century. We analysed in total more than 100 sources for their concepts, methods, and outcomes.¹ This was followed by a qualitative analysis and meta-reflection, identifying several patterns and a theoretical conceptualisation (Ward, House & Hamer, 2009). This resulted in the two described dimensions of reflective practice. These two dimensions offer a meta-reflection on the subject and a basis for further research.

Discussion

We started with the concern that more attention is needed for the specific dynamics and characteristics of current times for leaders and their reflective practices. The starting-point of this review is that ‘time to reflect and think’ is vital in the context of leadership, both for leaders and for followers. The aim of the study is to add perspectives to the leadership-debat and to reconsider leaders’ assumptions about their roles, mindsets, and attention structures. In this review, we want to point out a few underlying assumptions and emerging themes. It seems that one of the assumptions made in the literature is that reflective practices are equivalent to ‘slowing down’ and ‘taking time’. This would be a theme to further explore. Is this assumption about reflective practices an obstacle for leaders to integrate into their practices? Do leaders consider reflection as an extra time-consuming task?

In general, there is a wide range of assumptions on the nature of reflective practices. Several authors have approached reflective time as ‘recovery’ time, choosing words like ‘come to senses’ and ‘become whole’. Other authors have approached reflective practices using words such as ‘time to think’ instead of ‘doing’; ‘learning’ instead of ‘working’; or ‘spiritual’ instead of ‘analytical’. Underlying these approaches there seems to be an ideology about how leaders face adaptive challenges in accelerating times, as reflected in such terms as, e.g., ‘transcending’, ‘embodied’, ‘conscious’, ‘practical wise’, ‘spiritual intelligent’, ‘co-authoring’, and ‘dialogical’. From another angle, these ideologies could also be seen as tension fields leaders have to deal with in current times, addressing relevant themes for further investigation. Throughout the literature we found tension fields in such dichotomies as ‘doing vs. thinking’, ‘rationality vs. emotionality’, ‘analytic vs. intuitive’, ‘controllable vs. uncontrollable’, ‘alienated vs. resonant’, ‘forward-driven vs. reflective’, ‘fast vs. slow thinking’ and ‘individual vs. collective’. All these tension fields seem to be relevant and should be taken into account for future work.

Conclusions

The conclusion of this review is that the complexity of current times and accelerating forces are acknowledged in various studies on leadership. The reviewed literature confirms that more attention is needed for leaders’ reflective practices with adaptive challenges.

This review also shows that reflective practices have primarily been studied among teachers, nurses, social workers, and other professionals. In contrast, studies about leaders are mostly descriptive and prescriptive, addressing an ideology of ‘how to be a good leader’. This raises the question: Is the general assumption that professionals ‘think’ and that leaders mainly ‘act’? Regardless, considering current times, this gap asks for further research.

In general, we found a growing concern that more empirical evidence must be gathered on leaders’ daily struggles and reflective practices, especially, since the current context is still subject to an accelerating transformation due to the global COVID-19 pandemic. For example, since 2020 the centres of sense-making have been increasingly technology based. Leaders around the world have become more and more *Cyborg beings* (in Gergen 1999; Haraway, 1996), constantly in communication with technology.

The aim of these empirical studies must be to provide insights into leaders’ reflective practices; in their struggles and needs, developing new practical approaches that have positive impacts on their roles, mindsets, and attention structures. More understanding of their experiences will also enrich leader coaching and counselling, with an eye for slow questions and the relevance of meaningful relationships with the world and others.

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¹ The full list is available on request.

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