

Leadership in the Emergence Paradigm: a Literature Review on the Medusa Principles

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Abstract : Many quality improvement activities are planned. Leaders are strongly involved in missions, visions and strategic planning. They use, consciously or unconsciously, the PDCA-cycle, also known as the Deming cycle. After the planning, the plans are carried out and the results or effects are measured. If the results show that the goals in the plan have not been achieved, adjustments are made in the next plan or in the execution of the processes. Then, the cycle is run through again. Traditionally, the PDCA-cycle is advocated as a means to an end. However, PDCA is especially fit for planned, ordered, certain contexts. It fits with the empirical and referential quality paradigm. For uncertain, unordered, unplanned processes, something else might be needed instead of Plan-Do-Check-Act. Due to the complexity of our society, the influence of the context, and the uncertainty in our world nowadays, not every activity can be planned anymore. At the same time organisations need to be more innovative than ever. That provides leaders with 'wicked tendencies'. However, that raises the question how one can innovate without being able to plan? Complexity science studies the interactions of a diverse group of agents that bring about change in times of uncertainty, e.g. when radical innovation is co-created. This process is called emergence. This research study explores the role of leadership in the emergence paradigm. Aim of the article is to study the way that leadership can support the emergence of innovation in a complex context. First, clarity is given on the concepts used in the research question: complexity, emergence, innovation and leadership. Thereafter a literature search is conducted to answer the research question. The topics 'emergent leadership' or 'complexity leadership' are chosen for an exploratory search in Google and Google Scholar using the berry picking method. Exclusion criterion is emergence in other disciplines than organizational development or in the meaning of 'arising'. The literature search conducted gave 45 hits. Twenty-seven articles were excluded after reading the title and abstract because they did not research the topic of emergent leadership and complexity. After reading the remaining articles as a whole one more was excluded because the article used emergent in the limited meaning of 'arising' and eight more were excluded because the topic did not match the research question of this article. That brings the total of the search to 17 articles. The useful conclusions from the articles are merged and grouped together under overarching topics, using thematic analysis. The findings are that 5 topics prevail when looking at possibilities for leadership to facilitate innovation: enabling, sharing values, dreaming, interacting, context sensitivity and adaptivity. Together they form In Dutch the acronym Medusa.

Keywords : complexity science, emergence, leadership in the emergence paradigm, innovation, the Medusa principles

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