Change Leadership: Oxymoron and Myths

Rune Todnem By, Mark Hughes & Jeffrey Ford

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EDITORIAL

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Introduction

Welcome to a new year with *Journal of Change Management*. The journey of creating the world's leading Journal on organizational change continues, and 2016 looks to become another exciting year following on from where we left it in 2015. Last year, we published 16 articles over four issues. When including the annual editorial, these articles were written by 37 authors representing nine countries and four continents (see Table 1). Three new contributions to our popular Reflections series were published: Clegg wrote *Why Old Social Theory Might Still Be Useful*, Mitroff et al. contributed with *What's Wrong with Business Schools and Why They Need to Change*, and Waddock presented us with *Intellectual Shamans, Sensemaking, and Memes in Large System Change*. All great reads, and if you have not read them already, then do!

Continuing the positive trend, our mock-up Social Sciences Citation Index Impact Factor keeps increasing as does our SCOPUS score. Furthermore, for the second year running, we sponsored the Organization Development and Change (ODC) Distinguished Speaker award at the Academy of Management conference. Linda Putnam was acknowledged for her contribution to the field and we will be publishing an interview with her later on in the year. Keep your eyes open for what we hope will be the first of many interesting interviews to come.

Moving forward we remind ourselves of *Journal of Change Management*'s purpose: the Journal was established as a community centre for all scholars and practitioners with an interest in the complex and multidisciplinary field of organizational change, and its leadership and management. Together, we are setting out to better understand, facilitate and support organizational change now and in the future. One of the exciting challenges faced is that too many of us are still operating in isolation from each other rather than seeking to participate in wider conversations outside individual silos. Some are still running around with blinkers just like a race horse, preventing ourselves from taking in a fuller view of what is happening around us. By referring to John Godfrey Saxe's poem about the six blind men and the elephant (By, Burnes, & Oswick, 2011), we have previously highlighted the challenge of facilitating conversations across and between subject areas where we often use different languages and base our views on different perceptions and positions. Such cross subject conversations are one of the strengths of this Journal, and we continue this tradition by presenting two special issues focusing on sport and performance psychology in 2016 (issues 1 and 2).

However, we are facing another challenge which is less about ignorance and more about myths. We are still founding many of our conversations on assumptions, or 'accepted truths' the only purpose of which is to reinforce the already thick walls of our own silos. These assumptions are hindering the further development of our field. One example of such an 'accepted truth' is our constant reference to the claim that 70% of all change initiatives fail. We do this despite Hughes (2011) having discredited the claim in his article back in 2011. Other thriving assumptions are: (1) *Leaders and managers are not employees*. Hence, we keep referring to perceived and often created 'conflicts' between management and non-management employees

Table 1. Country of origin of 2015 authors.

Country(Total: 9)	Number of authors (Total: 37)
Australia	2
Denmark	3
Finland	2
France	2
Germany	7
Norway	4
Turkey	2
UK	6
USA	9

and by doing so we are supporting a confrontational 'us and them' stance and culture within organizations; (2) *Leadership is role-specific, and we need a formal management or leadership role in order to perform leadership*. Hence, we tend to refer to formal and individual leaders when we should be focusing on the activity of leadership which is much more of a shared responsibility; (3) *Leaders and managers are change agents, and non-manager employees resist change*. Hence, 'they' (non-management employees) must be managed by managers who they themselves never resist change; and perhaps the two biggest assumptions of them all (4) *There exists only a very limited pool of leaders*. Hence, we accept behaviours and remunerations otherwise not acceptable, and organizations keep appointing failing leaders to leadership roles; and (5) [*Formal*] *Leaders provide leadership*. Hence, we assume [formal] leaders will indeed provide leadership and make decisions, and assume they will make those in the best interest of the organization whilst operating in a political environment where risk-aversion is flourishing and where any decision carries an element of risk.

We are all human beings and most of us are employees – that being in management or non-management roles – and at any one moment in time we may initiate one change, support a second and resist a third. Furthermore, leadership is all about action and influence and not about titles. Many formal leaders do not provide leadership, and many who do perform leadership do not perceive themselves as leaders. Hence, in order to further develop our conversations and understanding of the complex area of organizational change we need to challenge these core assumptions, and we start this journey by exploring the oxymoron and myths of change leadership.

Change leadership: an oxymoron

Over 40 articles have been published with an explicit leadership focus since this organizational change orientated Journal was founded by Colin Carnall back in 2000. Highlights include Woodward and Hendry's (2004) account of leading and coping processes within financial institutions, Higgs and Rowland's (2005) identification of leadership behaviours in terms of shaping behaviour, framing change and creating capacity and more recently Van der Voet, Groeneveld, and Kuipers (2014) differentiating leadership activities in planned and emergent processes of change. The publication of leadership articles is illustrative of the wider interest in change leadership within societies and organizations, an interest which appears to have gathered momentum since the Journal was founded. Universities and consultancies have responded to this demand and possibly even cultivated the demand for leaders/leadership with a change orientation. It is telling that the most frequent theme within the leadership articles published in the *Journal of Change Management* has been developing the competence and capability of change leaders.

Over two decades ago, Rost (1993), an education academic fascinated with leadership, high-lighted the existence of a mythical leadership narrative. He was posthumously awarded the life-time achievement award by the *International Leadership Association* in 2008, yet his critical writings have largely been ignored within management and organization studies. In essence, the mythical leadership narrative suggested that leadership scholars had been making good progress, and that their understanding of leadership was becoming increasingly sophisticated and soon we would have the insights into leadership which societies and organizations deserved. This mythical leadership narrative is often at its most tangible within text-book chronologies depicting leadership as advancing decade by decade. Rost (1993) was not persuaded by the mythical leadership narrative and instead attempted to encourage a paradigm shift in leadership, specifically through an emphasis upon influence relationships, real intended change and mutual purpose. Rost was unsuccessful in these attempts to encourage our thinking of leadership, and the leadership orthodoxy which so troubled him remains largely intact. However, in the context of this editorial and in the critical spirit of Rost we wish to challenge today's mythical narrative of change leadership and the reassuring comfort of ortho-doxy it encourages, in the real hope that change leadership as currently configured might be receptive to change.

Lewin (1947) gave impetus to planned change through *Frontiers in Group Dynamics*. In a similar manner, Burns (1978) in *Leadership* gave impetus to a moral form of transforming lea-dership which emphasized followers, in the belief that such a leadership would transform our institutions and societies. Rost was a student of Burns and whilst both scholars were primarily interested in leadership, Rost through his concept of 'real intended change' and Burns through his concept of 'transforming leadership' speak to our theme of change leadership. Neither the moral leadership with an emphasis upon followers envisaged by Burns nor the paradigm shift which Rost encouraged occurred, begging the question how did change leadership develop over the 35 years since Burns was writing?

Citations offer one indication of what has been most influential in our field, although influ-ence does not necessarily equate to quality. If we look to the most cited publications referring to change/transformation and leadership between 1 January 1978 and 31 December 2014 the following were the most cited (Hughes, 2015):

6,638 Citations – *Leading Change* (Kotter, 1996)
4,340 Citations – John Kotter on *Leading Change: Why transformation efforts fail* (Kotter, 1995)
3,539 Citations - *Transformational leadership* (Bass & Riggio, 2006)

If gauged by citations it is the writings of John Kotter on leading change and Bernard Bass on transformational leadership which have framed the debate over recent decades. The common-ality between both authors is their acknowledgement of Burns (1978) and his differentiation between transformational and transactional leadership (see Bass, 1985; Kotter, 1990).

In reviewing back issues of the *Journal of Change Management*, transformational leadership does not feature prominently. This omission is appropriate given that transformational leader-ship focuses upon the transformation of subordinates, rather than the organizational change focus of this Journal. Haslam, Reicher, and Platlow (2011) warned that the idea that good leaders have to subject organizations to radical transformation is a negative legacy of the common misunderstanding of transformational leadership as being about organizational trans-formation. The other negative legacy is perceiving today's transformational leadership as the realization of the moral form of transforming leadership emphasizing followers, which Burns (1978) envisaged (see Yukl, 1999; Tourish, 2013 for further critique).

Our very assumption of change is culture-bound … stability and conservation, not change, have been the rule in mankind today. (Burns, 1978, p. 416)

Transformational leadership as conceptualized by Bass (1985) spoke directly to culture-bound assumptions of changing, yet simultaneously managed to maintain the status quo, in this sense, we would argue it is an oxymoron.

If we shift the focus to John Kotter, when gauged by citation counts he has been by far the most cited author within the organizational change field focus of this Journal and more generally he has made a substantial and valued contribution to leadership studies. In terms of critically taking stock, Kotter's (1996) eight steps appear to have become the orthodoxy for change leadership. A revised edition of *Leading Change* appeared in 2012, substantially the same book, but with new Penguin imagery and a new preface. In the new preface to *Leading Change,* Kotter (2012, p. vii) wrote 'the material in this book is not only still relevant now, sixteen years after it was published, but I believe it is more relevant, and for one reason the speed of change continues to increase.' The title might be *Leading Change*, but this book does not change, another illustration of change leadership as an oxymoron.

More substantively, whilst Kotter (1995) gave impetus to questioning why transformation efforts failed and offering an influential prescription for how to lead change (Kotter, 1996), today his contribution may be critically questioned. Weaknesses in Kotter's (1996) account of *Leading Change* include; employees being depicted as resistors, ethics, power and politics being underplayed, an overemphasis upon taking a sequence of linear steps, disparaging history limiting the potential for learning, a lack of appreciation of incremental change, leader communications being overemphasized, an under emphasis of unique cultural contexts and the rhetorical treatment of organizational success/failure (Hughes, in press). The scale of the citation counts suggests that for the foreseeable future, Kotter's (1996) account of change leadership will prove influential, but if we are again to avoid the accusation of change leadership being an oxymoron, we need to be open to new accounts of change leadership.

In the context of a research orientated Journal, we look to research studies either to confirm or disconfirm popular and prevalent discourses of leaders successfully leading organizational change. However, in empirically engaging with change leadership research design challenges quickly become apparent in terms of; the ambiguity of leadership and change, the diversity of contexts, the dynamism of leading and changing and the contested terrain of evaluating such activities (Hughes, 2015). Also, there is a territorial challenge in terms of is it leadership studies scholars who are leading this quest or organizational change scholars or are scholars from different fields in a dialogue or working in parallel in order to focus upon a sub-field of leadership and organizational change. Accepting that change leadership has a tendency not to change and that there are reasons to question the most cited contributions and that there are research design challenges inherent in researching change leadership, what have previous overviews of change leadership found.

Again if you look to the academic handbooks offering overviews of both the fields of organizational change studies and leadership studies, scholars in neither field appear to be leading the debate on change leadership and how it changes (Hughes, 2015). It is telling that in *The SAGE Handbook of Leadership* (Bryman, Collinson, Grint, Jackson, & Uhl-Bien, 2011) leadership and organizational change did not merit its own chapter. Parry (2011, p. 57) in the *SAGE Handbook* in his chapter on leadership and organization theory included a sub-section on leadership and organizational change, in which he took critical stock of the state of scholarship in this area:

> Leadership and organizational change are inextricably intertwined. However, 'organizational change' has become an interest for organizational consultants more so than for empirical researchers. There are many more books and articles on practitioner or conceptual scholarship than on theoretical or empirical scholarship. Much of the practitioner work is case study-based, and anecdotal and not rigorous in its conduct.

Whilst this is a sad indictment of the state of knowledge, it is a reasonable assessment. Perhaps we need to acknowledge such limitations no matter how uncomfortable they are in order to in Kotter terminology (1996) 'create the sense of urgency' required to change how we research, theorize and teach change leadership. Alternatively, there may still be some wriggle room in Parry's (2011) troubling overview in that whilst we acknowledge an excess of practitioner-orientated literature, we can take reassurance by looking to our refereed journals for the empirically informed insights into leadership and organizational change.

In *The Leadership of Organization Change: A View from Recent Empirical Evidence*, Ford and Ford (2012) undertook such a review. They focused exclusively upon literature published in peer-reviewed journals between 1990 and 2010, intentionally not reviewing practitioner magazines such as *Harvard Business Review*. They reviewed all academic peer-reviewed papers identifying 27 papers between 1990 and 2010 but subsequently excluding certain papers resulting in a final tally of 14 papers:

> There is simply too little empirical research that specifically addresses the leadership of change to warrant a prescription for what works … we find, the available research equivocal and incomplete regarding both what constitutes effective leadership and the impact of change leaders approaches, behaviors, and activities on change outcomes of any type. (Ford & Ford, 2012, p. 22)

The weaknesses they encountered within the literature included; an overemphasis on the role of the individual leader, the use of subjective assessments of change implementation and leadership, single-point data collection of many studies and a vocabulary which added to the confusion and vagueness. The final sentence of their review of the empirical evidence was a sad epitaph to the state of leadership of organizational change knowledge that they encountered at the time of their review:

> With regard to Burke's assumption that leaders have a significant influence on organization change, we're willing to agree but unfortunately can't say what that influence is, what leader actions and interactions are responsible for it, or whether the influence is only on the subjective perceptions of people affected by the change or also impacts the objective outcomes of change. (Ford & Ford, 2012, p. 33)

The elephant in the room has been an overused cliché of recent decades, but in terms of our understanding of change leadership it has never been so apt. It is not just that we do not understand how leaders influence organizational change. We seem to be trapped inside a mythical change leadership narrative which in suggesting that we are almost there, taking away any chance of changing what we know (do not know) about change leadership. Thirty five years ago, Burns (1978) highlighted how through moral transforming leadership which emphasized followers, societies and institutions could be transformed. In advancing this agenda, he was critical of academics suggesting that 'the fundamental crisis underlying mediocrity is intellectual. If we know too much about our leaders, we know far too little about leadership' (Burns, 1978, p. 1). Today we seem to be awash with heroic leaders, yet know far too little about change leadership and until we once again acknowledge this crisis nothing is going to change.

Myths of change leadership

To paraphrase Winston Churchill, 'Never has so much been said by so many about so little.' Although much is being said about change leadership (e.g. Kotter, 1995), the reality is that empirical evidence about it is rare, inconsistent and virtually impossible to integrate into a coherent set of conclusions and recommendations (Ford & Ford, 2012). As a result, much that is said about change leadership borders on the mythology and romance of hero

worship (Meindl, 1995; Meindl & Ehrlich, 1987; Meindl, Ehrlich, & Dukerich, 1985). If we are to make the kind of difference in theory and practice that we seek, it behoves us to look more rigorously at both our thinking and our research on change leadership. Toward that end, here are three well-entrenched myths we will want to address:

Myth 1: it is the individual leader that counts

The overwhelming majority of change leadership research focuses on the individual leader as the source of change outcomes (Ford & Ford, 2012). This perspective mirrors a traditional leadership research assumption that leadership is a personal possession of the leader and that leadership is bestowed upon followers who are recipients of that bestowal rather than partners in the co-creation of change outcomes. The effectiveness of the individual leader is seen as the key to change success.

This perspective, dominant in traditional leadership literature, fails to consider that leaders enact multiple functions (Fleishman et al., 1991; Gibb, 1954; House & Aditya, 1997; Morgeson, DeRue, & Karam, 2010) that are likely to be distributed among multiple people based on their knowledge and expertise rather than concentrated in a single individual or position (Gronn, 2002). Distributed or shared leadership is evident in leadership partners (e.g. Gronn, 1999), teams (e.g. Ensley, Hmieleski, & Pearce, 2006; Mehra, Smith, Dixon, & Robertson, 2006; Pearce & Sims, 2002) and role constellations (e.g. Denis, Lamothe, & Langley, 2001; Hodgson, Levinson, & Zaleznik, 1965) and has been shown to be a complement to and, in some cases, a more powerful predictor of change outcomes than individual leadership (e.g. Gioia & Chittipeddi, 1991; Heller & Firestone, 1995; Pearce & Sims, 2002). Even where leadership functions are highly concentrated, for example in dictatorships, distributed leadership may still occur (Gronn, 2000).

The idea that change outcomes are the product of an individual leader is especially questionable in large-scale complex changes (Kotter, 1995). It is much more likely that effective change leadership requires what Locke (2003) refers to as integrated leadership, essentially a form of distributed leadership. A shift in our research from a focus on individual to distributed forms of change leadership is warranted.

Myth 2: leadership is enough

A popular assumption is that effective change leadership is sufficient to produce successful change independent of change management (e.g. Herold, Fedor, Caldwell, & Liu, 2008). In part, this stems from our failure to clearly distinguish leadership and management as distinct phenomena. As a result, there is an increasing call for more change leadership (Kotter, 2012) and an increasing absorption of management functions into our understanding of leadership functions (e.g. Fleishman et al., 1991), implying that effective leadership is all that is needed for success.

Leadership and management, like transactional and transformational leaders, are complementary (Bass & Riggio, 2006; Buchanan, 2016; Caldwell, 2003), but we tend to focus on leadership over management. This is confounded by locating leadership in the people who occupy positions of authority, that is, those who are also managers. Collapsing leadership and management make it impossible to differentiate their distinct contributions to change outcomes and increases the likelihood of overstating the role of leadership while understating that of management.

It is doubtful that change outcomes are the sole, or even the primary, result of leadership. To have a full appreciation for the role and contribution of leadership in successful change, we will want to take into account the role and contribution of management. Rather than perceiving

them as competitors, we may be better served by treating them as complements and learning how they work together.

Myth 3: one size fits all

Change is a heterogeneous phenomenon, yet we talk about change leadership as if an effective change leader will be effective with any change independent of its type, size and complexity. Change has pace (e.g. Amis, Slack, & Hinings, 2004), momentum (e.g. Jansen, 2004; Jansen & Hofmann, 2011) and phases (Prochaska, Redding, & Evers, 2002). These variations call for, and have an impact on, different forms and types of leadership (Van de Ven & Poole, 1995; Weick & Quinn, 1999), which suggests that different leadership behaviours will be required over the life of the change and challenges the assumption that an individual change leader will be effective throughout (Morgeson et al., 2010); there are no universal leaders (Yukl, 1994).

Further, without longitudinal assessments of the toll that change leadership takes on the leaders and managers involved, we cannot say that they are somehow unaffected by the nature and demands of the change, nor assume that they can be consistently effective over a sustained period of time. *Leading Change* does impact both individual and distributed leaders (Boyatzis, Smith, & Blaize, 2006; Denis et al., 2001; Eriksen, 2008; Gioia & Chittipeddi, 1991). Further, an individual leader, including one who is part of a distributed team of leaders, cannot replace another without an impact on the group dynamics and on the change itself. Leaders are not interchangeable parts. It takes considerable time and effort to develop a sufficient level of behavioural integration for a leadership team to be effective *Leading change* (Denis et al., 2001; Denis, Langley, & Cazale, 1996).

Research on change leadership is needed, but its value and contribution will depend on whether it goes beyond the cross-sectional, non-dynamic, retrospective research on change and traditional leadership and begins to consider a more complete and integrated view. Change can range from relatively simple short-term alterations to highly complex long-term transformations and is likely to involve many kinds of leadership and management behaviours on the part of many different individuals and groups. It seems reasonable to assume, therefore, that change leadership can and should take different forms – individual and distributed – and have recognized roles for management over the life of the many different types of change. The agenda for research on change leadership, therefore, may borrow from traditional leadership research, but should not be bound by or mirror it.

Conclusion

We have an obligation to challenge assumptions and myths rather than be taken in by them and treating them as accepted truths. In this respect, we might gain from Mark Twain's observation that 'It ain't what you don't know that gets you into trouble. It's what you know for sure that just ain't so.' There is no doubt that it is easier to conduct research on change leadership when we focus on those in positions of authority as 'leaders' and treat change as an event that can accurately be assessed by perceptions taken at one point in time. But those of us who teach and consult on change know that is not the way it really is. Change, particularly large-scale change, is complex and messy and if we really want to make a difference in the leadership and management of change, then we would be well advised to change the nature of our research. Of course, doing so will require leadership and a recognition that maybe what we know for sure just ain't so.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

Notes on Contributors

Rune Todnem By is Professor of Organisational Behaviour (Staffordshire University Business School, UK) and Change Leadership (Stavanger University Business School, Norway). He is Editor-in-Chief of Journal of Change Management, and co-founder of the Public Leadership Foundation (http://publicleadership.foundation). Rune is co-author of Managing Change in Organizations (2014) and co-editor of The Psychology of Organizational Change (2013), Organisational Change, Leadership and Ethics (2013) and Managing Organizational Change in Public Services (2009). His research interests are organizational change and leadership, and he is currently involved in action research projects.

Mark Hughes is Reader in Organizational Change in the Centre for Research on Management and Employment at Brighton Business School, the University of Brighton, UK. He is author of Managing Change: A Critical Perspective (2010) and The Leadership of Organizational Change (2015). Mark regularly contributes to academic journals with his current organizational change interests focused upon leadership and historiography.

Jeffrey Ford is Professor Emeritus of Management (Ohio State University, USA) and has published widely in journals including the Academy of Management Review, the Academy of Management Journal, the Journal of Applied Behavioral Science and Harvard Business Review. He is co-author of The Four Conversations: Daily Communication That Gets Results (2009) and Associate Editor of the Journal of Change Management. Jeff's research interests are organization change management and leadership.

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Rune Todnem By
Staffordshire University, UK
✉ *r.t.by@staffs.ac.uk*

Mark Hughes
University of Brighton, UK
✉ *m.a.hughes@brighton.ac.uk*

Jeffrey Ford
Ohio State University, USA
✉ *jeffreyford@columbus.rr.com*