



# Leadership as micropolitical practice

Dr Majken Askeland and Professor Sue Dopson

*impact from within*

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# About the authors

**Dr Majken Askeland**

Majken is an Associate Fellow at Saïd Business School, University of Oxford, is a tutor and faculty on the Oxford Strategic Leadership Programme and the Norwegian based Solstrand Programme for Senior Executives. She holds a Master of Science and a Doctor of Management in complexity and leadership where she focused on organisational change and the politics of identity.

**Professor Sue Dopson**

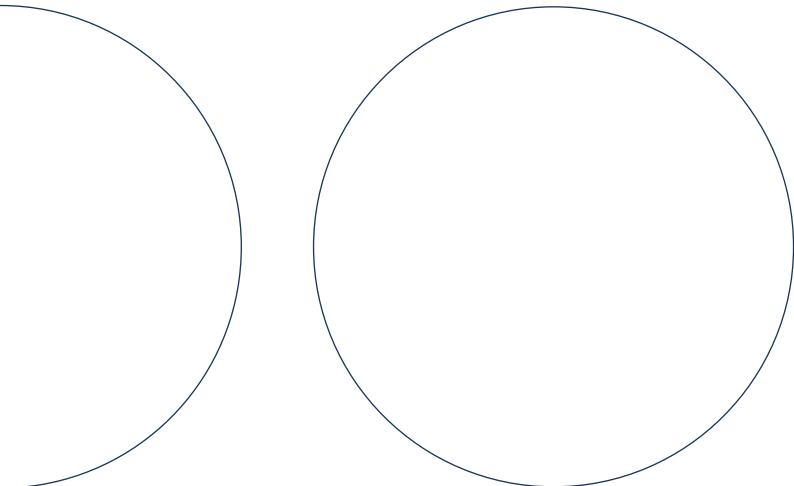
Sue is Deputy Dean for People and Equity, Diversity and Inclusion (EDI) and Professor of Organisational Behaviour at Saïd Business School, University of Oxford. Her research lies in the area of leadership, innovation and change. She is a Fellow of Green Templeton College and conducts research in a range of public and private sector organisations.

# Introduction

It has become common parlance that most change initiatives fail according to plan. What is it about organisational change and transformation that makes it so difficult? What are we not seeing? The short answer to this question is power and interdependencies. The source of both stability and change is hidden in the details of the ordinary. Our argument, based on years of experience from working with senior executives, is that we need to start noticing differently and focus on the impact of the ordinary.

In this whitepaper, we draw on the ideas of Norbert Elias to provide a new language to see with. Elias was a Jewish German living in the 1940s who dedicated his life to explore and explain the link between how we relate to each other in our ordinary everyday lives, and what emerges as societies. His focus on interdependencies, power figurations and relational habits of inclusion and exclusion are perhaps more relevant than ever.

The world is in need of responsible leadership and the majority of the leaders we meet truly want to be of service. The first step, we argue, is to become aware of how power works; to take ownership and be mindful of how we operate in our roles. If we don't, we run the risk of unknowingly making matters worse, with the best of intentions.



# Noticing differently – what is hiding in plain sight?

The influence of details comes to light when actions are displayed in 'slow motion'

*(Shotter, 2016)*



To explore the impact of the ordinary, let us have a closer look at an ordinary habit in business; the habit of 'meeting'. If I say 'I'm in a meeting', I assume that everyone understands what is going on. What happens if we begin to unpack the complexity of the experience we have come to call 'a meeting'?

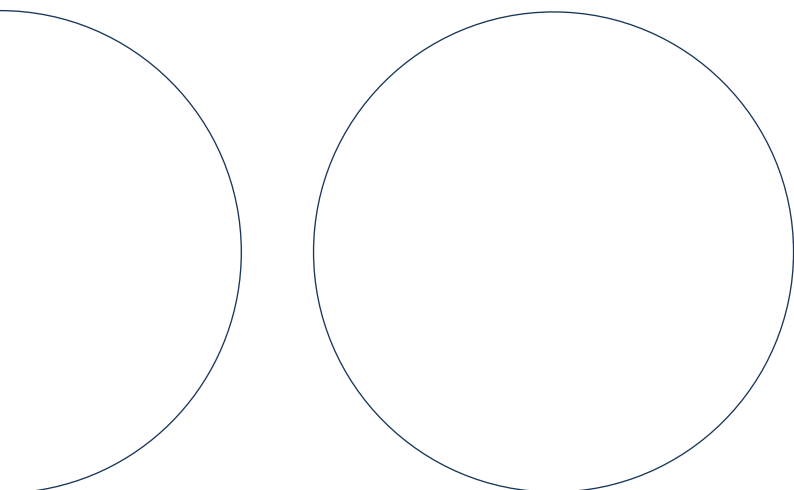
Using the illustration on the previous page, the story is painted of the young man John, who enthusiastically shares an idea of a new product with his colleagues. You can see his enthusiasm in his body language and if you were present, you would hear it in his tone of voice and notice his eager pace of talk. On John's right hand side, sitting on the table, is Lise, who strongly disagrees, with a tone of contempt in her voice. This effectively smashes his bright idea, at least temporarily. What we don't see on the surface is that she is influenced by past experiences with John. They have worked together before and he took all the glory and spotlight, whilst her work went unrecognised. The unfinished business between them is tainting how she responds. This adds a layer to the interaction in the present.

On John's left-hand side, sitting in a chair, is Eva. She is attracted to John. We usually don't talk about attraction and desire in the workplace, but this is a powerful force of influence. She supports John's idea, not because of the idea but because of John.

Then we have Bob in the middle, with the quiet question mark. He is a new employee, he doesn't understand what is going on but does not want this to show, so he smiles. John takes Bob's smile as a support for his idea, and so he continues to talk and elaborate. His idea gets new wind beneath its wings because of this. The experience of being listened to and encouraged affects the ability to think well and elaborate.

Peter in short sleeves has a lot of arguments for why John's idea is rubbish. He spends quite some time detailing why this is. He also approaches Bob after the meeting to explain how things 'really' work in the department and continues to talk John's idea down. Peter and John have applied for the same job. Nobody else knows this.

The idea about the new product that John talked about in this meeting continues to live (and evolve or die) in all the conversations that are had about it; in new meetings, by the watercooler, at home, in the car, influenced by all the complex relations between people involved. How much attention and thought are we paying to it? If all of this plays out in and after a single meeting, what might we see if we zoom out and try to visualise the ongoings in what we have come to call 'an organisation'?



# Understanding organisations as multilevel games

Elias puts forward the notion of game models to better understand the complex interweaving of the actions of large numbers of people, and of planned and unplanned process. The game models are offered as simplified analogies of more complex social processes. Games are, in effect, contests and the game models are based on two or more people measuring their strength against each other. Elias also discusses more complex game models: multi-person games at one level through to multi-person, multi-level games where the number of players increases, and the structure of the game becomes increasingly complex.

Linking this to the example of the ordinary meeting above, we can see our everyday ongoings with each other woven together in complex meshes of competition and collaboration. Within the context of understanding processes of organisation, the game models are useful precisely because they demonstrate that the outcomes of the complex interweaving of the actions of different players in the game. Even when these actions are more or less consciously directed towards the attainment of certain goals, they may include - in the case of complex games, almost certainly will include - outcomes which no single player or group of players intended.

People are affected by the activities of others whom they may never have met, policy makers for example, or top tier management. People all over the world are constantly engaged in activities which affect the lives of other people of whose existence they are often oblivious – these are global networks of impact. There is a pervasive tendency for people, particularly

citizens of western society with their emphasis on individualism, to conceive of relationship in terms of face-to-face contacts. But who has the greatest impact on us? It might be Trump. Or Elon Musk.

Oxford University Professor Bent Flyvbjerg explores 'power and rationality' when he researches megaprojects. He argues that power and what we accept as 'rational' are two sides of the same coin; an idea he develops from Gramsci. What we take for granted, what has become 'common sense' or shared sense, has become so because of what emerges from micropolitics, because of how people have influenced and been influenced by each other in all kinds of relations. Relations and what grows from them as the ruling ideas and worldviews are never separate.

If we start noticing differently, paying attention to the ordinary everyday ways we affect each other and to the conversational themes that arise from this, then we begin to realise that rather than getting in the way of the real work, these small-p politics *are the work*. To quote a delegate at the Oxford Strategic Leadership Programme: 'the more executive you become, the more your work is 'the game'. Leadership is a micropolitical practise.

The more executive, the stronger the power. As leaders we are obliged to understand how our power works, and how we habitually operate in the everyday, ordinary ongoings with each other.



# Social backpacks – we are significantly shaped

There is no response without history.  
Everything is tainted.





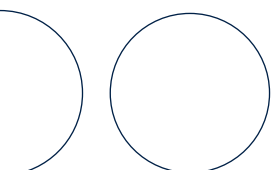
The aim of the next illustrated story is to help visualise what it means to say we are socialised or habituated, that our ways of relating are significantly shaped, and that we carry these habits in our bodies as we enter the micropolitical landscape of organisations. Normative practice might be passed down over hundreds of years, over generations and it is generally very useful to see the complexity of this to make better sense of our experiences with other people.

Again, what we see at a meeting of the eight people illustrated to the left is much more complex than meets the eye. Patrick, who is standing up and leading the meeting, has a history of relating to an authoritarian father. The relational dynamics in the family where he grew up was one of harmony on the surface but with micro aggression hidden in the water. It was not safe to disagree, else there was suppressed anger in the form of disapproval, rejection and a sense of coldness. He carries this in his 'social backpack' and his father's ghost haunts him in meetings if the temperature in the discussions rises. Patrick has become what we might call 'conflict averse' and is doing whatever he

can to make sure there is a 'good atmosphere'. He has a natural talent for smoothing things over if there is tension in the group. He might switch topics, he might say 'let's not make a big issue out of this', or 'you are overreacting' or something similar to close down what he experiences as an uncomfortable conversation.

Kate on the other side of the table grew up with four siblings and politically engaged parents who encouraged a good debate. They talked over each other and practiced disagreeing just for the fun of it. She loves a good argument. Imagine Patrick and Kate in the same executive committee.

Reflecting on your own relational habits is not an easy task, because the social habits we evolve are largely unconscious. Our very bodies are formed through our histories. Exploring the relational dynamics you grew up in and having a conversation about this with others might be a helpful exercise. Also, it might be useful to reflect on the emergence of habitual practices in your team.



Our ways of relating are significantly shaped and we carry these habits in our bodies.

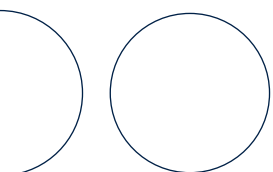
# The social fabric and the individual

Human beings are social beings; they do not exist in a vacuum but are part of networks of social relationships. We are woven together in elastic bands, to use a metaphor of Norbert Elias, to make these relations more visible. And as we have seen above, we are in relations with people absent as well as people present. The figurations of interdependent human beings cannot be explained if one studies human beings singly. We need to pay attention to how we influence and are influenced by each other constantly. One can understand many aspects of the behaviour or actions of individual people only if one sets out from the study of *the pattern of their interdependence*, the structure of their societies, in short from the figurations they form with each other.

The figuration of interdependent players, and of the game which they play together, is the framework for each individual move. Paradoxically then, it is our place in the figurations we belong to, or in the social fabric, that shapes our individuality. Every person is fundamentally related to other people - every human individual is therefore fundamentally a social being and every individual occupies a unique place in space and time.

To understand social processes, it is not sufficient to focus upon individuals or on the subjective perceptions of individuals. We need to focus on the *emerging network of relationships*.

As with the emergent relational fabric amongst the delegates of a leadership programme, the figurations we are a part of are in constant flux. Relationships warm up or cool off, our loyalties change and our trust is sometimes betrayed. Attachments grow, change and sometime wither. Drawing on Bowlby's well-known theory of attachment, this helps us see that some of our strongest emotions arise in the forming and breaking of bonds. This means that belonging to a figuration inevitably involves emotions.



One can understand many aspects of actions of individual people if one studies the figurations they form with each other.

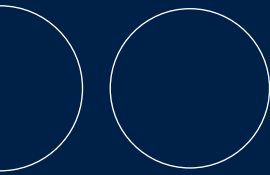
# The emotionality of figurations in flux

Affinity and understanding for new ways of speaking and thinking never develop without conflict with older and more familiar ones.

*(Elias 1991:21)*

We attach to other people, but we also attach to or grow fond of ideas, habits or traditions, ways of making sense of the world or ideologies. The figurations we are woven into influence our thinking. Thinking habits emerge, as previously argued when shedding light on the battle of ideas. Ludvig Fleck, the epidemiologist, called this 'thought collectives' and 'thinking styles'.

In these collectives, or figurations we belong to, we continuously construct a sense of who we are and why we matter, which means that who we think we are, our identity, is socially negotiated and thus political. Conversations with transformative potential inevitably arouse anxiety at a deep existential level (Stacey 2003:80) because of the threat to status quo.



'We are wired for attachment in a world of impermanence'

Bowlby 1979, Neimeyer 2014

We use the painting on the following page, by Robert Thom as a powerful illustration of the emotionality of figurations in flux. In the painting, at the centre of attention, stands Dr Semmelweis. He became famous for discovering another invisible yet powerful force, namely bacteria. In Vienna in the 1850s, he found that if the physicians performing autopsies washed their hands before assisting women in labour, the mortality

rates of women and babies dropped from above 18% to near 1%. You would think that the idea of simply washing your hands would be embraced instantly, yet this is not what happened. Dr Semmelweis was publicly ridiculed (cancel culture is nothing new) and he was finally submitted to a mental hospital as he began to internalise the idea that he was crazy. He died, ironically, by an infection.



Why was it so hard for the physicians to accept his research? The best way to understand the emotionality of figurations in flux is to ask the question 'what is at stake – for whom'?

In this case not only the careers and livelihood of physicians with loyalties to their families was at stake, but their entire identity – their life work of saving lives was at stake. Taking Dr Semmelweis seriously would mean they had to realise they probably had taken far more lives than they had saved, and the reason would be as trivial as not washing their hands. Notice that what counts as 'trivia' is an action that is socially constructed as 'unimportant' and thus not needed to take seriously. What is important or not worthwhile mentioning is also constructed through power relations.

If you introduce a change in your organisation and if you want to understand why there is so much emotion, it might be helpful to ask yourself what is at stake, for whom. During paradigm shifts, when our understanding of the world or what matters in an organisation changes completely - along with our place in it - emotions may erupt at those moments when common sense is turned upside down. Any threat of loss of an attachment to someone or something we value or ideas we navigate by can trigger anger to stand up for what we want to protect. It can also trigger withdrawal. Both are natural human responses to threats. Emotions are important data in navigating complex change. Reading the air in an organisation requires leaders who can tolerate their own emotions and who are capable of engaging with the richness of experience.

It might be helpful to ask yourself what is at stake and for whom.

# Unplanned and unanticipated – but with the best of intentions

Plans and actions, the emotional and rational impulses of individual people, constantly interweave in a friendly or hostile way. This basic tissue resulting from many single plans and actions of people can give rise to changes and patterns that no individual person has planned or created.

*(Elias, 1994/2000:366)*

What emerges from our everyday interactions with each other is dynamic. Social habits have a certain gravitational force as people protect ideas and habits. But at the same time, through conversations with transformative potential, things may change. Norms and values may be renegotiated and ways of making sense or how we see things may change; just consider Dr Semmelweis' desire for doctors to wash their hands. Over time, although this is still an issue, it has become common sense to antibac hands to avoid infections. In the battle of ideas, no single person or group of persons decides the outcome. People may have more or less influence on what emerges as common sense, or is accepted as 'truth', but things may also go pear shaped, even with the best of intentions. Or something good may come out of a 'bad intention'. There is always a complex interweaving of planned and unplanned processes which is involved in all processes of what we call 'managed change'. The very complexity and dynamic character of the interweaving of the actions of large numbers of people continuously give rise to outcomes which no one has chosen, and no one has designed.

It can be helpful to notice differently and take our ordinary everyday experiences more seriously, because this is the source of both stability and change. We can never step outside of our everyday ways of influencing each other. What emerges as common

sense, good ideas or social habits cannot be separated from our relationships and how we affect each other. This includes with people not present and those we don't know personally but are still influenced by. We enter the social landscape with our different habitual and embodied ways of behaving in relations, or what we have called social backpacks, because we are significantly shaped by previous relationships and inherited habits.

Organisations and society are social fabrics, interpersonal interweavings that are in constant flux, never at rest although some patterns may recur for extensive periods of time. There is always bodily experience, or what we call emotions, although we might be cut off from it. And when things are at stake, if we are close to a tipping point where power figurations might shift, emotions intensify. The outcomes of our planned and unplanned actions together can never be predicted, but what we do and don't do has an influence on what emerges.



# Responsible leadership – weaving a web of inclusion

At its core, a responsible leader's task is to weave a web of inclusion where the leader engages him/herself among equals using a combination of emotional, relational and ethical intelligence.

*(Mitra et. al. 2023:265)*

Nobody can step outside of the conversational processes that are society, because life requires relating to other people. We affect each other. There is no objective, external position from which one can 'operate on' society as a whole. There is only participation in relation to others in local interactions.

The work of leaders thus becomes the art of participating as best we can in these local interactions. To navigate wisely, it is helpful to develop our own understanding of the relational practices that have become ordinary and that tend to be hidden in plain sight. Inherited biases might lead us to unconsciously exclude or cause harm through micro aggressions of exclusion and penalizations for behaviours we are unable to tolerate.

For example, we might find ourselves talking negatively about, or devaluing, people 'resisting change' without realising what is at stake for them. Or we might be attracted to 'sameness' and recruit people we like and who are like us because we are uncomfortable with the unfamiliar. We might not be willing to listen to certain people due to unconscious biases or stereotypes, and we might close down important conversations because we feel most at home in an atmosphere of harmony and optimism, thus forcing certain topics underground and into the shadows.

## Rangatira – the one who weaves together

A few years ago, at the Oxford Strategic Leadership Programme, a senior executive from the public sector in New Zealand shared a story with us after a session on complexity and leadership. The metaphor of mindfully weaving a social fabric resonated deeply with her, particularly during times of increased polarisation and fragmentation globally.

She asked us if we knew the name for 'leader' used by the Māori indigenous Polynesian people of mainland New Zealand. We had to admit that we didn't at that point. It turned out that the leader, the Rangatira, is the one who weaves together.

If responsible leadership requires us to enable a diversity of voices be heard and taken seriously, to weave a web of inclusion, we need to acknowledge and work on our own micropolitical practices.



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Saïd Business School  
University of Oxford  
Park End Street  
Oxford, OX1 1HP  
United Kingdom

[www.sbs.oxford.edu](http://www.sbs.oxford.edu)

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