

### Q Research report 9.1 *Collective leadership and strategic change in healthcare organizations*

Denis, J.-L., Lamothe, L. and Langley, A. (2001) The dynamics of collective leadership and strategic change in pluralistic organizations, *Academy of Management Journal*, 44(4): 809–37.

The study was designed to examine leadership from a process perspective, focusing attention on what leaders do to mobilize others in a system of interrelationships. They set out to examine the dynamic construction, deconstruction and reconstruction of leadership roles over time.

#### Method

The study was partly planned and partly opportunistic, and was partly deductive (inspired by theory) and partly inductive (inspired by data). A case study approach was adopted because this enabled the researchers to trace processes in their natural contexts and study the temporal sequence of events.

#### The research process

Five cases were studied over a 10-year period. The first involved a hospital that was negotiating with a medical school to acquire a teaching mission. The data drew the researchers' attention to the importance of collective leadership and the link between leaders' tactics and their capacity to remain in leadership positions. In this case, after an earlier change initiative had failed, a new leader emerged and mobilized the leadership team to pursue the teaching mission. But the united leadership team moved too fast for many others in the hospital and an election led to the team being dissolved and replaced, slowing down the once rapid change process.

The second case, which involved a small hospital developing a new emergency care service, was planned to replicate and test the conceptual model that was emerging from the first study. A new leader replaced the management team, built credibility with the board and achieved internal and external support for the new mission, but a group of physicians put in place to implement the development of the emergency service pushed to develop it more extensively than the CEO and the board felt was possible. Conflict led to the departure of the physicians and a halt to the project.

Building on their emerging model of collective leadership, the third case focused on how a new CEO positioned himself within an existing leadership constellation.

Over the course of these three case studies, four observations emerged as important:

- 1 Periods of substantive change tend to be associated with complementary and united leadership constellations.
- 2 Leadership constellations are fragile because of the possibility of disconnections between members (strategic coupling), between members of the leadership constellation and their organizational bases (organizational coupling), and between the leadership constellation and environmental demands and constraints (environmental coupling).
- 3 Because of this difficulty of maintaining alignment at all three levels, change occurs in a cyclical fashion as opposing forces are reconciled on a sequential, rather than a simultaneous, basis. For example, after a leadership constellation has developed a commitment to change, it may need to seek support from external stakeholders. This may not be easy (problems with environmental coupling) and might require the leadership constellation to make concessions. This may lead to problems within the leadership constellation (strategic coupling). The resolution of these differences may, in turn, require further compromise, creating problems for some members with their organizational constituents (organizational coupling). These problems may have to be resolved before the change can progress.
- 4 Leadership affects political positions. The way others perceive and judge a leader's actions, such as conceding or failing to deliver on promises, affects their credibility and survival in a leadership role.

Denis et al. went on to observe that four factors – slack resources, internal social embeddedness, creative opportunism, and a combination of time, stakeholder inattention and the protection of formal position – could help to create sufficient temporary stability to allow substantive change to become irreversible before political changes made it impossible.

Four years after the start of the project, moves to consolidate the teaching hospital network in Quebec presented a new opportunity to extend the research to

more complex cases. Two further cases were studied, each involving the merger of three hospitals. Denis et al. found that increasing the number of pluralistic dimensions made it much more difficult to establish a unified leadership constellation, achieve anything more than partial coupling, break free from a cycle of shifting alliances, and manage the sequential attention to different goals.

Denis et al. concluded that greater complexity increases the need for counterbalancing sources of stability, such as slack resources, internal social embeddedness, creative opportunism, and time; inattention and the protection of formal position, if substantive change is to be achieved.

Exercises 9.1 and 9.2 draw on many of the points discussed in this chapter. Exercise 9.1 is a three-step process designed to help you improve your approach to leading change. The first step can be completed as a stand-alone exercise.

### Exercise 9.1 Improving your approach to leading change

This exercise is designed to help you improve your approach to leading change. It is divided into three parts. You will be able to complete the first part immediately, but the next two steps may take a little time:

- 1 The first step involves reflecting on how leaders known to you behave when trying to introduce a change. The leaders you think about may be managers at work, members of your family, people who are involved in other aspects of your social life, or those who exercise leadership in a club or religious organization (church, mosque or temple) you are affiliated to.

Use the following checklist as an aide-mémoire:

- 1 *Sense making*: To what extent did they appear to recognize the need or opportunity for change in good time? Did they appear to take account of the views of others at this stage?
- 2 *Visioning*: To what extent did they appear to formulate a vision of a better future based on an in-depth understanding of the situation?
- 3 *Sense giving*: Did they communicate a vision to a wider audience in a way that won their commitment to achieving the vision?
- 4 *Aligning*: To what extent did they communicate a shared sense of direction so that everybody involved in the change – other leaders and change recipients down the line – could work together to achieve the vision?
- 5 *Enabling*: To what extent did they identify and remove obstacles that got in the way of change?
- 6 *Supporting*: To what extent did they recognize and respond to the concerns of those affected by the change?
- 7 *Maintaining momentum and sustaining the change*: Did they demonstrate a continuing commitment to the change and do whatever was necessary to keep others focused on implementing and sustaining the change?

Based on the above, identify what it was they did that helped to secure change and what they might have done better.

- 2 The second step involves monitoring your own behaviour and identifying what you do when trying to influence others to change. Do not change what you normally do. The aim of this step is to increase your awareness of your normal