Prof Margaret F Sloan

Rethinking leadership in complex adaptive systems

Research Objectives
Margaret F Sloan researches the characteristics of effective leadership in complex global systems.

Detail

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Bio
Professor Sloan joined the School of Strategic Leadership Studies in 2012. Before teaching, she worked in the non-profit sector for ten years in a variety of management roles with a focus on youth programmes, the arts, and resource development. Her research centres on non-profit leadership, finance, and governance.

Collaborators
This work has been informed by the scholarship of William Donaldson, author of Simple Complexity, as well as conversations with Terry Fernsler, PhD. The author also gratefully acknowledges the influence of other scholars working in this field.

References

Personal Response
Considering some of the complex intersectional and interdisciplinary systems addressing global, entrenched issues today, where are the examples of the successful kind of leadership you propose?

Global polio eradication is one example of successful leadership in complexity. Seeking a solution to polio has aligned the values of collaborative international actors for a sustained period of time. Beginning in 1988 with the World Health Assembly’s resolution on polio, and extending into the present day with the Global Polio Eradication Initiative (GPEI) which includes numerous global partners, these actors have maintained attention to the issue and taken a long-term view of solving the problem. Such collaborative leadership efforts have actively supported a 99% decline in polio incidence since GPEI’s founding.
The issue of leadership is a cornerstone of business school education and is invariably focused on organisational leadership. It is a given that the larger the organisation, the more complex it is, with the attendant demands of the leadership structure. The complexities facing the CEO of a multinational conglomerate are significantly more than those for a high-street grocery-store manager: they must consider challenges across geographic, legislative, geopolitical, socio-economic, and structural boundaries. But even those responsibilities pale compared to the complexities leaders face when dealing with global issues that further demand the interplay between state, corporate, and non-governmental actors. Consider the demands of trying to address human trafficking.

This is an example presented by Professor Margaret Sloan of the School of Strategic Leadership Studies at James Madison University in Virginia, US. Sloan is a specialist in non-profit organisations, philanthropy, and accountability, and invokes the analogy of trying to manage a tiger by hanging on to its tail while describing the challenges facing leadership in a complex and ever-changing intersectional and interdisciplinary system.

According to Sloan, global, entrenched social issues can be considered systems, and require more than management – they demand a special kind of leadership. She argues that we should consider the purposes of the leadership needed to address the issues, the tactics the leadership can use to meet those purposes, and the leadership styles best suited to oversee those tactics.

POURPOSES OF LEADERSHIP

The purposes of leadership in addressing such complex issues are varied, but Sloan proposes we consider five: understanding and interpreting the goals of the system and their outputs; establishing or encouraging any new stocks and flows to achieve those goals; bringing together collaborative partners; aligning their values to achieve the goals; and ensuring attention is not lost on the system and task at hand. It’s no small ask of any leadership structure.

Imagining the complex global intersectional and interdisciplinary system needed to address human trafficking is little more than a system, so its effectiveness – or output – is as good as its input and how it is managed. Therefore, the leadership needed to ensure its efficacy needs to primarily know what the goals are and be able to identify possible hindrances to achieving them. The key to this is examining the stocks and flows. A stock is a resource within a system that can accumulate or attenuate, and the flow is the movement between stocks. An inter-governmental task team is a stock, but corruption could choke its operational flow. Identifying the stocks and flows is, however, not enough. Leadership must also consider the contextual inputs into the system. In the case of human trafficking, these would include war, rampant poverty, and weak or non-existent human rights legislation.

Hence another purpose of leadership is to work with all those partners to find, and leverage, areas where values overlap or come together. This is one of the biggest challenges for any leadership where shifting blame is easy or cultural differences can clash, risking diverting attention from the main goals. Keeping everyone on track is, therefore, crucial for leadership. But what tactics should such leadership use, and what leadership style would be comfortable using them?

LEADERSHIP TACTICS

If ‘strategy’ is direction, ‘tactics’ are how to get there. Sloan is clear that addressing an issue like human trafficking will take time, so leadership within the systems requires long-term thinking. There will be small victories along the way, but actors should be in it for the long haul. Therefore, constant communication is crucial, keeping all actors aware of the goals, purposes, intents, successes, and failures. Leadership needs to continually evaluate the system’s goals and, if necessary, clarify them or modify them. The system, after all, is constantly changing. It is also essential when keeping everything on track that progress is measurable; goals cannot be achieved if there is nothing to aim for. However, says Sloan, it is critical that in providing such guidance, leaders employ confidence but unassertiveness and build trust with and between various collaborative partners.

Such leadership requires a style that is probably alien to the relentless cut and thrust of the corporate boardroom. Harnessing the inputs of diverse actors across a complex global intersectional and interdisciplinary system, especially with the view to securing necessary change and long-term efficacy, is no place for autocracy. Instead, says Sloan, necessary leadership would ‘emphasise partnerships and multiple perspectives, assume complexity and open systems, value consensus-building and shared vision, stress ethical behaviour, and take a long lens to change’. The leadership would value group decision-making and multiple perspectives, possibly rotating decision-making as and when particular expertise is required.

COLLABORATIVE LEADERSHIP: EFFECTING MEANINGFUL CHANGE

Such a system would probably suit a more ‘servant leadership’ – one first guided by a desire to better the goals being served – or ‘complexity leadership’ – the interplay between a greater awareness of the macro-level dynamics of continually changing and adapting systems.

In all likelihood, says Sloan, the leadership needed to steer a complex adaptive system across overlapping systems requires long-term thinking. Every actor will have their own agenda, and it is naïve to believe those will all align.

Leadership is a cornerstone of business school curricula, but it is usually focused on organisational leadership. But what about the leadership needed to deal with global issues that cross geographic, legislative, geopolitical, socio-economic, and structural boundaries, and demand the interplay between state, corporate, and non-governmental actors? Professor Margaret F Sloan of James Madison University, in Virginia, US, considers such issues as part of complex adaptive systems, and suggests the purposes, tactics and styles of leadership needed to guide them.

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CHANGING STOCKS AND FLOWS

The next purpose of leadership is to change the necessary stocks and flows to achieve the goals. Key to this, says Sloan, is ensuring all actors within the system are aware of the goals. This can require bringing new actors onboard – partners across the multiple sectors and disciplines within the system who will, hopefully, collaborate to achieve the goals. Such a task is challenging in itself if inclusivity and diversity of input are required, but it is made all the more difficult by the fact that every actor will have their own agenda, and it is naïve to believe those will all align.

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