



# Complex Adaptive Leadership: Embracing Paradox and Uncertainty

By Nick Obolensky

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## Complex Adaptive Leadership: Embracing Paradox and Uncertainty By Nick Obolensky

Complex Adaptive Leadership argues leadership should not be something only exercised by nominated leaders. It is a complex dynamic process involving all those engaged in a particular enterprise. The theoretical background to this lies in complexity science and chaos theory - spoken and written about in the context of leadership for the last 20 years, but still little understood. We all seem intuitively to know leadership 'isn't what it used to be' but we still cling to old assumptions which look anachronistic in changing and challenging times. Organisations and their contexts are increasingly paradoxical and uncertain. A broader approach to leadership is needed. Nick Obolensky has practised leadership in the public, private and voluntary sectors. He has also researched it, and taught it over many years in leading business schools. In this exciting book he brings together his knowledge of theory, his own experience, and the results of 15 years of research involving 1,500 executives in 40 countries around the world. The main conclusion from that research is that the more complex things become, the less traditional directive leadership is needed. Those operating in the real world, nonetheless, need ways of coping. The book is focused on helping practitioners struggling to interpret and react to increasingly complex events. Arranged in four parts, it provides a number of exercises, tools and models that will help the reader to understand: - why the context for leadership has changed, and why complexities in organisations have emerged - what complexity is and what lessons can be drawn from this emergent area of scientific study - how Complex Adaptive Leadership can be exercised in a very practical way at two levels: organisationally and individually, and how to get more for less - the actions that can be taken when Complex Adaptive Leadership is applied. The book will particularly appeal to practitioners wishing to add to their knowledge of leadership theory.

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### Editorial Review

#### Review

'Drawing upon a wide range of wisdom and ideas, from Lao Tzu to Lorenz and modern chaos theory, Obolensky brilliantly argues the case for organisations and their leaders to adapt to the complex, uncertain world of today and tomorrow. He also proffers excellent practical advice on how to do so.' --Philip Sadler CBE, Vice-president, Ashridge Business School, Senior Fellow, Tomorrow's Company

'A true tour de force, in a class of its own from being well-grounded both in the science and in practical experiences.' --Margaret J. Wheatley, author of Leadership and the New Science and other books

'Chaos and order: the perpetual tension that drives and binds any organisation. What should leadership do conserve order or inspire creativity and change? In this wonderfully clear, thorough and provocative book Obolensky describes leadership as a fusion of anarchy and oligarchy, and shows how things really get done through polyarchy. This book is a must-read for anyone seriously interested in understanding what is happening to authority, initiative and influence in contemporary organizations; leaders who value conceptual clarity about their predicament will find it invaluable.' --Professor Jonathan Gosling, Centre for Leadership Studies, Exeter University, UK

Obolensky's (2010) work is a marvelous resource that...also includes detailed and extensive footnotes, meticulous graphs, and practical questionnaires...which can be used by leaders to diagnose their organizations. Obolensky's research on chaos and complexity combined with leadership practice is thorough, detailed, and more than a little persuasive...his arguments are supported by sound research and a strong familiarity with organization dynamics...he manages to bring his research into practical organizational application. --Leadership and Organization Development Journal Vol 32, Issue 3

'Chaos and order: the perpetual tension that drives and binds any organisation. What should leadership do conserve order or inspire creativity and change? In this wonderfully clear, thorough and provocative book Obolensky describes leadership as a fusion of anarchy and oligarchy, and shows how things really get done through polyarchy. This book is a must-read for anyone seriously interested in understanding what is happening to authority, initiative and influence in contemporary organizations; leaders who value conceptual clarity about their predicament will find it invaluable.' --Professor Jonathan Gosling, Centre for Leadership Studies, Exeter University, UK

#### About the Author

Nick Obolensky has enjoyed a successful career in a number of roles, in the military, third sector, academia and in business, including those of Associate Director of a FTSE 100 firm, MBA Professor of the Year more than once, and CEO and Chairman of entrepreneurial start-ups. He is a Chartered Management Consultant and was an Executive Strategy Consultant at Ernst and Young, where he also led the Research Associate Practice. He has been a Fellow at the London Business School and was a Founder Fellow at The Centre for Leadership Studies at the University of Exeter in the UK, Professor of Leadership at Nyenrode University in the Netherlands and a Visiting Professor at INSEAD in France. His work has been published by in several languages around the world as well as under the auspices of the University of Exeter Centre for Leadership Studies and the RSA.

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