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## Reframing Leadership and Organizational Change: 25 Years of Inquiry at JCM

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### MAD statement

This leading article seeks to Make a Difference (MAD) by examining five key trajectories in *Journal of Change Management: Reframing Leadership and Organizational Practice* (JCM), focusing on transformation, emotions in organizational change, resistance and readiness, identity, and leadership. It interprets how these themes have influenced our understanding of organizational change and leadership over the past 25 years.

## Introduction

How do we lead when traditional sources of certainty and stability have dissolved? How do we navigate change that is continuous rather than episodic, contested rather than consensual? As organizations face overlapping technological, social, and environmental transformations alongside geopolitical instability, questions that were once confined to change management scholarship have become matters of collective priority. This leading article opens the 25th-anniversary special issue of the *Journal of Change Management: Reframing Leadership and Organizational Practice* (JCM). The issue reflects on how key strands of research on change and leadership have developed within the JCM over time and considers the implications of these developments for future research. It also explores how these developments collectively reshape the study of leadership and organizational change today. At earlier moments in the JCM's history, editors have used leading articles and anniversary reflections to pause and reflect on JCM's intellectual direction, evolving concerns, and role within the broader field of leadership and change scholarship

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(By, 2010; By et al., 2024; Crevani et al., 2021). This anniversary issue continues that tradition, building on recent editorial efforts to consolidate and reinterpret JCM's contribution (Gjerald et al., 2025; Lupina-Wegener et al., 2025; Meglio et al., 2025). Rather than offering a comprehensive retrospective, this special issue takes stock of key trajectories and orientations in JCM research and considers their impact on current and future conversations on leadership and change.

Over the past 25 years, JCM has provided a forum for scholarship that questions linear, instrumental, and managerially centred accounts of change, and increasingly approaches change as a complex, relational, and contested process. At the same time, leadership has become a more debated object of inquiry, both conceptually and empirically, as its role in shaping change processes has become more evident in organizational and societal contexts. For this special issue, distinguished scholars have been commissioned to engage with five themes that have been central to JCM's theoretical and empirical contributions over the past 25 years, and are likely to continue shaping future research on change and leadership (Lupina-Wegener et al., 2025):

- (1) Navigating transformation
- (2) Organizational change and the challenges of managing change
- (3) Change readiness, resistance, and employee engagement
- (4) Identity and change
- (5) Leadership

These five themes trace a shift in how change has been understood: from something leaders do 'to' organizations, to something that emerges 'through' organizing, often contested, emotional, and identity-laden. The contributions in this special issue show how this reorientation raises questions about agency, power, and responsibility in change processes. What does leadership become when change is no longer treated as controllable from the top? How do we theorize resistance when readiness itself is understood as contextual and relational? How can identity work be examined as a potentially generative source for navigating transformation rather than merely a threat to be managed? By engaging with these questions across diverse empirical and theoretical traditions, the special issue contributes to ongoing efforts to develop conceptually rigorous and practice-relevant understandings of organizational change.

### **Foundational Themes in the Study of Change and Leadership**

The first two contributions to the special issue establish the context of organizational change. Boonstra's (2026) *Navigating Transformation: Review and Research agenda* draws on the VOLCANIC world characterized by volatile, ongoing, liquid, complex, ambiguous, nested, interactive and chaotic environments, to highlight the growing limitations of leader-centred change management approaches. The review calls for stronger context-sensitive theorizing by integrating the VOLCANIC perspective into change and by conceptualizing change as an emergent and often uncertain process unfolding across organizational and institutional boundaries, a domain that remains underexplored and undertheorized. The article sets the ontological scene for the issue by emphasizing complexity, interdependence, and the limits of managerial

control, particularly in the context of technological and digital transformation. Kroon et al. (2026) *The role of emotions during organizational change: A review and research agenda*, extend this critique through the lens of emotion, tracing how emotions are fundamental across all stages of change, shaping how evolving situations are interpreted, influencing willingness to participate, and structuring patterns of interaction and sense-making over time. The authors highlight how emotions have been theorized as dynamic, relational, and multi-level phenomena rather than episodic reactions. This contribution calls for future research that advances the theorization of collective emotions across hierarchical levels and examines the politics of affect in organizational change.

The next two contributions turn to the question of agency: whose and how? Teerikanigas et al. (2026) *Resistant, ready or engaged – with what change? A review and transformative research agenda* further extend collective change processes by explicitly focusing on agency within them. The review revisits longstanding concepts in the change literature and challenges binary understandings of readiness and resistance. Instead, it conceptualizes responses to change as dynamic, relational, and contextually situated forms of engagement. The paper introduces new perspectives on participation, power, and ethical considerations in organizational change by reframing how agency is understood. Lupina-Wegener et al. (2026) *From identity threat to identity gain: the role of identity leadership in helping employees negotiate organizational change*, further expand on this by inverting the dominant framing of identity disruption. Rather than treating change as an identity threat to be mitigated, the authors conceptualize it as an opportunity for identity gain through identity leadership practices. They argue that acts of identity leadership, namely leader prototypicality, identity entrepreneurship, identity advancement and identity impresarioship, provide pathways through which leaders and followers can co-produce a shared identity by reframing change as an opportunity to craft a positive sense of 'who we are'.

The special issue concludes with a critical reflection on leadership itself. Svensson (2026) *What's next for leadership after the hero rides off? A critical reflection on collective and processual approaches to leadership*, discusses how leadership has been implicitly and explicitly theorized over 25 years of JCM scholarship on change. Engaging with themes explored in the preceding papers, it considers what leadership becomes when change is understood as emergent, emotional, identity-laden, and contested, and the implications this has for future leadership research and practice. Unlike the preceding papers, which trace a specific theme, this contribution asks a meta-question: if transformation, emotion, resistance, and identity are all reconceptualized as emergent and relational, what are the implications for leadership theorizing?

Taken together, the five articles in this special issue advocate for methodological plurality, demonstrating how mixed-methods, qualitative, quantitative, and conceptual research can jointly advance theory while remaining relevant for practice.

## **The Editorial Team: Addressing Questions About Leadership and Organizational Change**

The shifts traced in the five contributions in this special issue do more than provide retrospective observations; they also inform the editorial team's vision for the future of the

journal. The questions that underpin the special issue also guide the research of the editorial team, who are driven by a shared curiosity about leadership and organizing in complex, dynamic and contested contexts.

One line of inquiry focuses on identity and change, an area of expertise for the Co-Editor-in-Chief Anna Lupina-Wegener. In her research she examines how social identity processes influence leadership, change and cross-cultural interactions in international business, particularly in the context of cross-border mergers and acquisitions as well as dramatic and unplanned changes.

A second line of inquiry reflects Olga Gjerald's, Co-Editor-in-Chief, sustained interest in enduring tensions and paradoxes. Rather than treating recurring tensions (e.g. autonomy and direction, care and performance, or creativity and commercial pressure) as problems to be resolved once and for all, she is curious to explore how leadership operates when such tensions are repeatedly experienced and worked through. From this perspective, change is not about eliminating contradiction, but of sustaining collective work in inherently paradoxical conditions.

A further shared concern within the editorial team relates to moving beyond leader-centric, top-down models of change. Editor for Leadership, Lucia Crevani's work contributes to a shared understanding within the editorial team that reframing change and leadership for the twenty-first century requires relational, multi-level, and interactional perspectives.

Ben Kuipers, Editor of the Reflections series, reframes change and leadership by questioning classical assumptions about leadership as leader-centric and change as a top-down, planned process, assumptions that often produce narrow understandings of 'success'. His work directs attention to how leadership and change unfold through patterns of coordination and interaction across organizational levels, roles and positions, and to the implications this has for research designs, methodologies, and how the outcomes and impact of leadership and change are understood.

Selen Kars-Unluoglu, Associate Editor, explores leadership as less the property of individuals in formal roles and more an emergent, collective accomplishment that unfolds through everyday interactions across functions, positions, and organizational boundaries. This orientation also calls for methodological approaches that can capture change as it happens over time, across levels, and in relation to broader societal concerns.

Several reflections extend beyond organizational boundaries altogether. In a context marked by political instability, conflict, and systemic crises, change and leadership are increasingly understood as phenomena that cannot be confined to organizations alone. Joanne Murphy, Associate Editor, explores questions of leadership and change in extreme or contested contexts, drawing attention to ethical responsibility, power, and the challenges of organizing in the presence of wicked problems and adaptive challenges that resist simple solutions.

These reflections extend to research conducted by James Vardaman, Associate Editor, who focuses on people who exist across the permeable boundaries between organizations and the broader societies they inhabit and draws attention to balancing competing pressures exerted across and between societal, organizational, and individual levels. How individuals balance complex and often competing change-related demands remains an enduring concern.

Finally, some perspectives highlight change as an inherent condition of organizing rather than an episodic event. From this perspective, the role of change scholars is not to explain how organizations transition from one stable state to another. Olimpia Meglio, Associate Editor, explores theories and methodologies that acknowledge the continuous, unfinished nature of change and produce rigorous, relevant knowledge.

Ninna Meier, Associate Editor, calls that many of the perspectives and approaches outlined above require more dynamic, more nuanced, and more processual approaches to the concepts of both change and context – theoretically and methodologically – and more exploration into how change processes, practices, and context relate to each other.

Magdalena Zabicka-Wlodarczyk, Social Media Editor, examines change in the digital age, with particular attention to the role of technology and human interactions.

These orientations work together to ensure that JCM remains responsive to the evolving challenges practitioners face, all the while advancing theoretical rigour. This pluralistic engagement will shape the journal's aims and scope moving forward. It builds on JCM's longstanding dedication to pluralism, reflexivity, and responsible engagement with change, as articulated in recent leading articles (By et al., 2024; Crevani et al., 2021; Gjerald et al., 2025; Kuipers & Murphy, 2023; Lupina-Wegener et al., 2025; Meglio et al., 2025).

What distinguishes JCM is its Make a Difference (MAD) commitment, which emphasizes scholarship that makes an impact across three areas: advancing theory, informing professional practice, and guiding policymakers in addressing organizational and societal challenges. This emphasis on making an impact is grounded in a broader dedication to positive change aligned with the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals. The commitment ensures that JCM research contributes to both organizational effectiveness and broader societal well-being. Looking ahead, the journal will encourage contributions that engage with questions of collective, bottom-up agency, leadership, identity, emotion, power, and responsibility in change processes. The five themes we present in this SI will continue to guide research published in JCM. Additionally, there is a growing scholarly focus on ethics and change, justice, inclusion, and social integration. To this end, we promote methodological diversity, including empirical articles presenting applied research that advances theory and broader impact, as well as conceptual papers, review articles, reflective contributions, methodological papers, and short, practitioner-oriented pieces.

## **Continuing the Conversation**

Over the past 25 years, the JCM scholarship has increasingly demonstrated that change is not something to be predicted and managed from above; rather, it is created collectively through the effort of multiple actors. However, if we accept this, a set of pressing questions arises: What meaning do we attribute to change when stability belongs to the past? Where does agency reside when transformation is collective rather than commanded? What does leadership become when outcomes can no longer be controlled? How do we act ethically when interventions may have unintended consequences? These are not questions with final answers. They are questions that are lived by scholars studying change, by practitioners navigating it and by policymakers shaping the










conditions under which it unfolds. Throughout its history, JCM has created a space in which such questions can be explored without demanding premature closure, and where methodological plurality and theoretical rigour are brought into dialogue with practical challenges. This is how the journal aims to make a difference: by advancing scholarship that helps organizations and societies to create a bright future for all involved actors.

We thank the authors of this special issue, as well as the numerous reviewers and editors who have contributed to the development of the journal over the past 25 years.

## Disclosure Statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

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