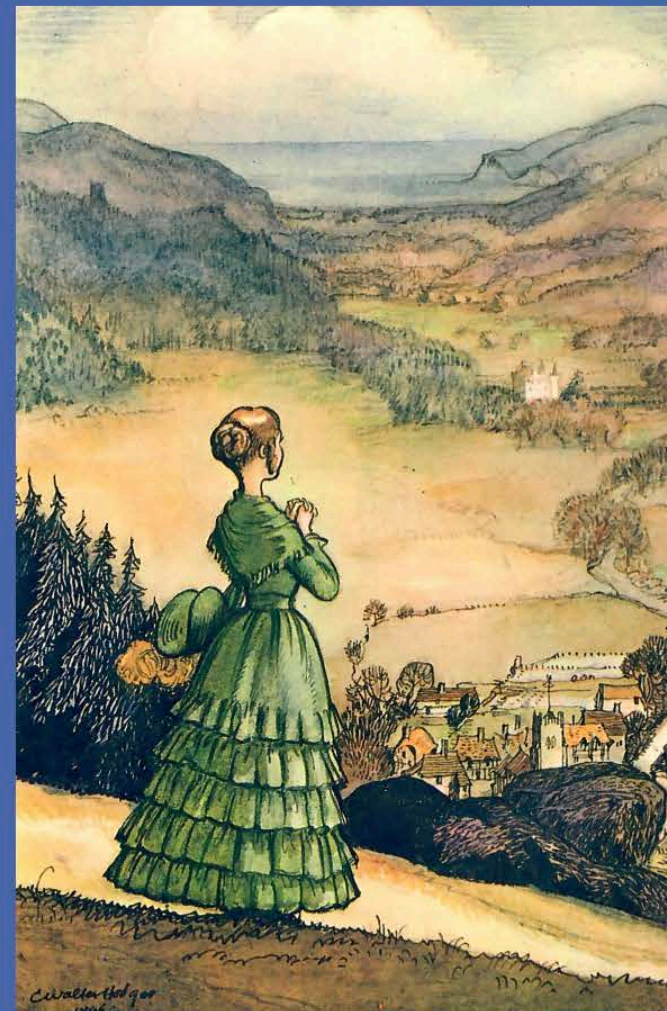


THE ELUSIVE FASCINATION: LEADERSHIP IN PROFESSIONAL ORGANIZATIONS

Laura Empson

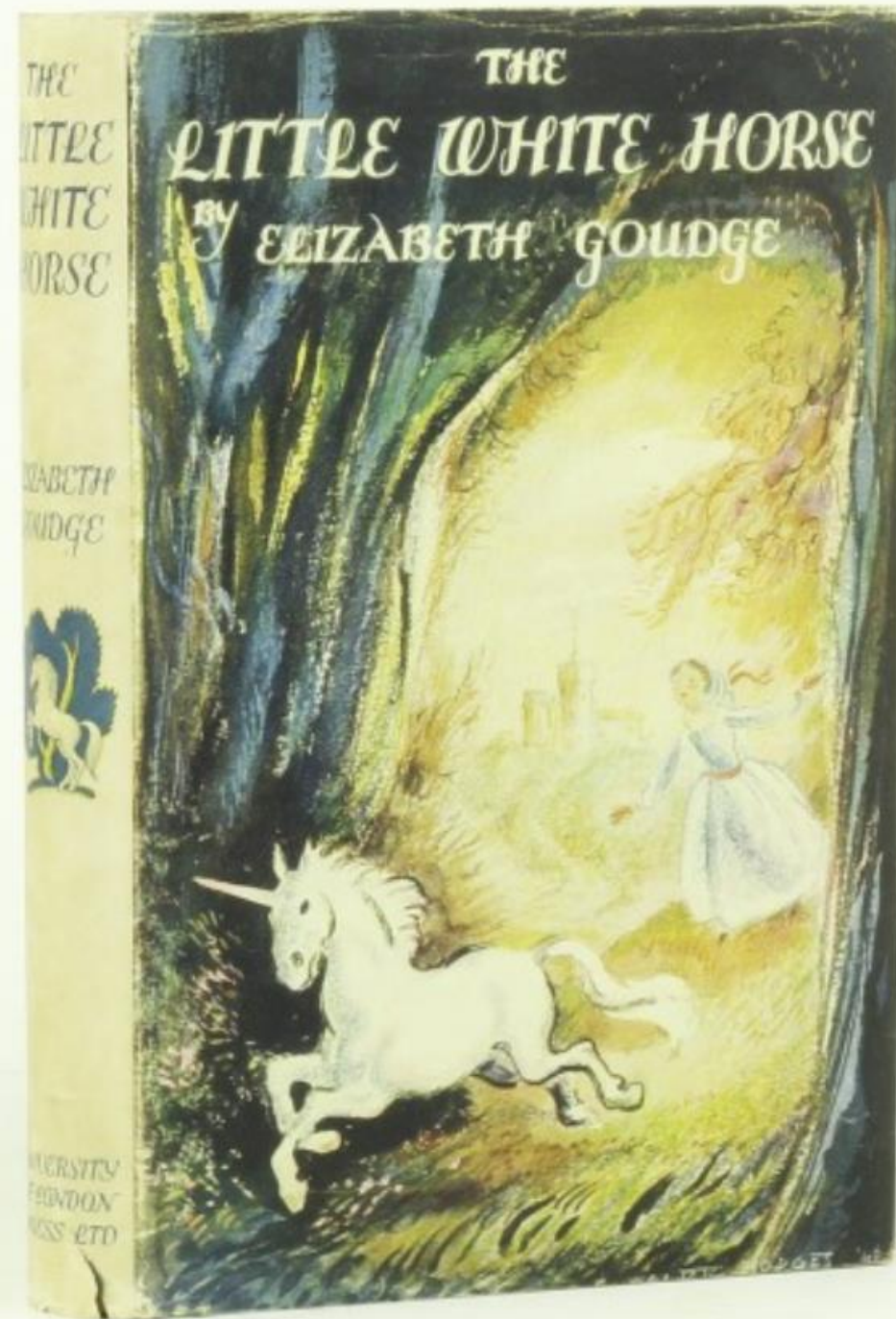
Professor of Leadership and Organization, IOA
Inaugural Lecture, 13 November 2025







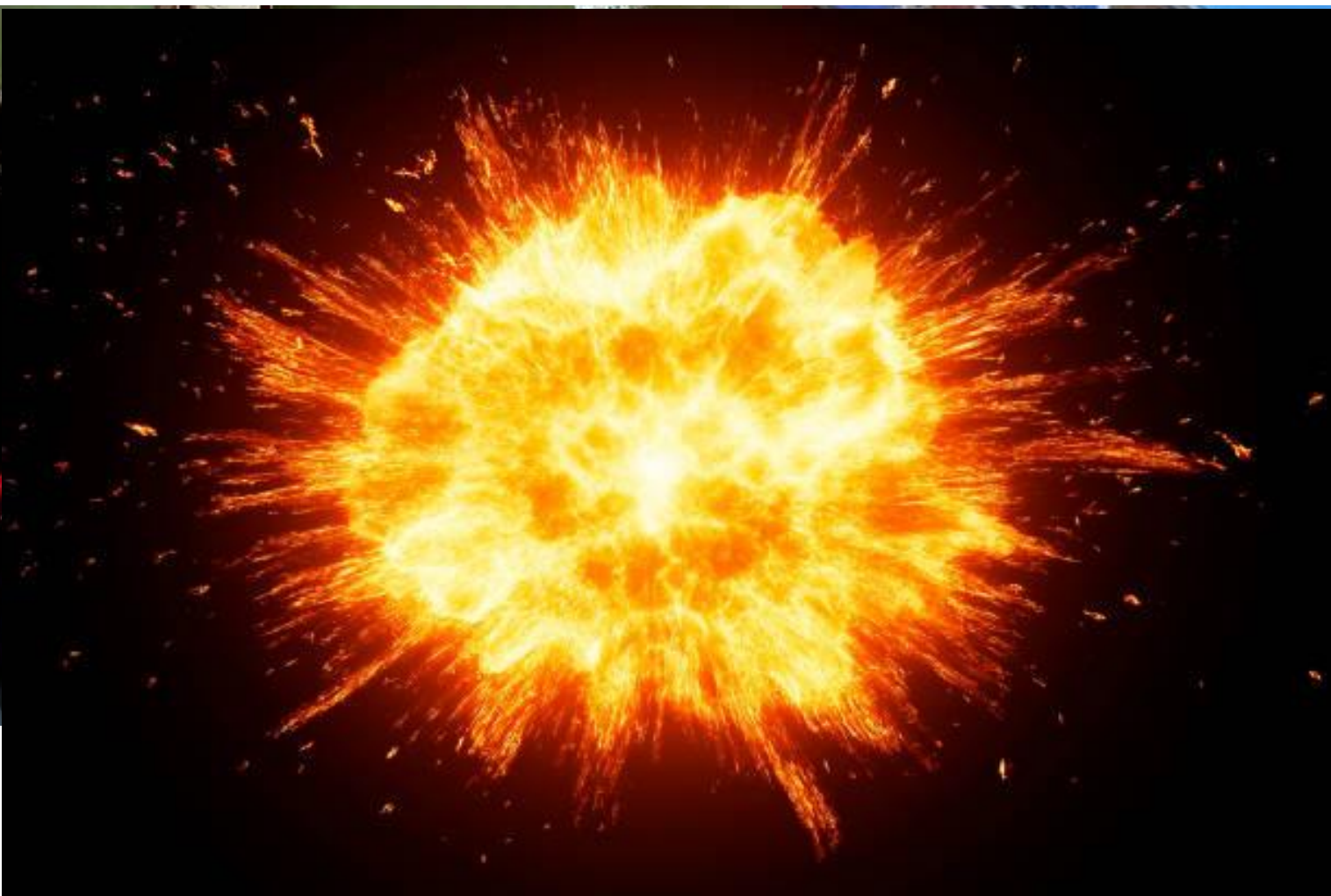




Chapter 1: Becoming a professional







Chapter 2: Becoming an academic



“

On one occasion at the client's office I had to physically restrain one of my team from hitting a consultant from the other firm. We were supposed to be delivering an integrated project but the strategy consultants had systematically denigrated everything that my operations guys were doing . . . They assumed they knew how to do the things that we did. It made us feel as though our skills were cheap and worthless. They said our work was just grease monkey work. (Manager, Operations consulting firm)

I think their consulting practice is awful and their people are just awful. We are one of the leading change management consultants, with an extremely classy, sexy reputation. I just feel tainted by having anything to do with them. In theory there are lots of synergies from knowledge sharing but, in practice, I am ashamed to work with them. (Manager, Change management consulting firm)

”



Human Relations
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Fear of exploitation and fear of contamination: Impediments to knowledge transfer in mergers between professional service firms

Laura Empson



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Accounting, Organizations and Society 29 (2004) 759–781

Accounting,
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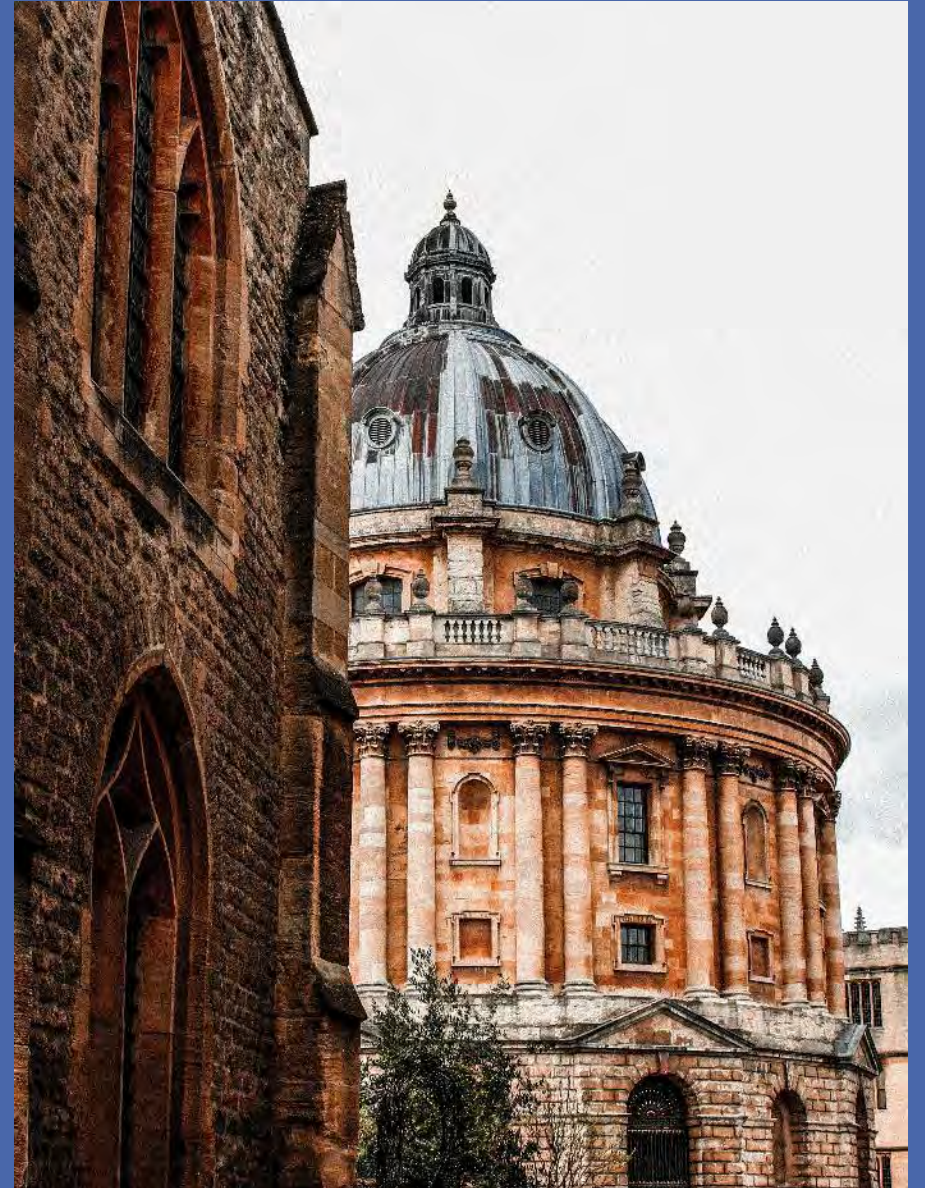
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Organizational identity change: managerial regulation and member identification in an accounting firm acquisition

Laura Empson

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

Chapter 3: Becoming a professions' scholar



“

The special nature of partnership is that you've got a commitment and buy-in that is so special. People over-achieve the whole time, people are not employees, and they feel that being a partner is very special and very empowering. So you have these amazing people who really feel they can sort of take on the world and feel part of a club, part of a very, very, very special club.... That's what partnership means to me. It's quite a personal and emotional thing. (Partner, Law firm)

”



The Professional Partnership: Relic or Exemplary Form of Governance?

Royston Greenwood and Laura Empson

Organization Studies 24(6): 909–933 Copyright © 2003



2

Your partnership

Surviving and thriving in a changing world:
the special nature of partnership

Laura Empson

Saïd Business School, University of Oxford, Park End St., Oxford

Chapter 4: Becoming myself



“

I want to emphasize how important our work with you has been over the last three years. With your assistance I think we have changed the firm for the better forever and you have been a critical part of that process. I couldn't have done it without you and I will be indebted to you forever for having helped me in the way that you have. We still have very important work to do and I look forward immensely to that challenge. On a personal note, it has been great fun.
(Managing Partner, L.A.W., January 10, 2008)

”



On the phone, Christine said that the business school was harming me. It takes an outsider to point out the obvious. Am I like the frog in that experiment who hasn't realized he is gradually being boiled to death? (Diary note, March 8, 2005)

When I am working with L.A.W. I do not feel anxiety, in spite of the fact that it is the most high-stakes and challenging thing I am doing. In fact I love doing it. It is fun. It is important. It puts everything else in perspective. When I am flying back from a meeting with them, nothing at the business school seems to matter . . . I love the sense of being necessary to and valued by people I respect. (Diary note, May 25, 2006)



My Affair With the “Other”: Identity Journeys Across the Research–Practice Divide

Laura Empson¹

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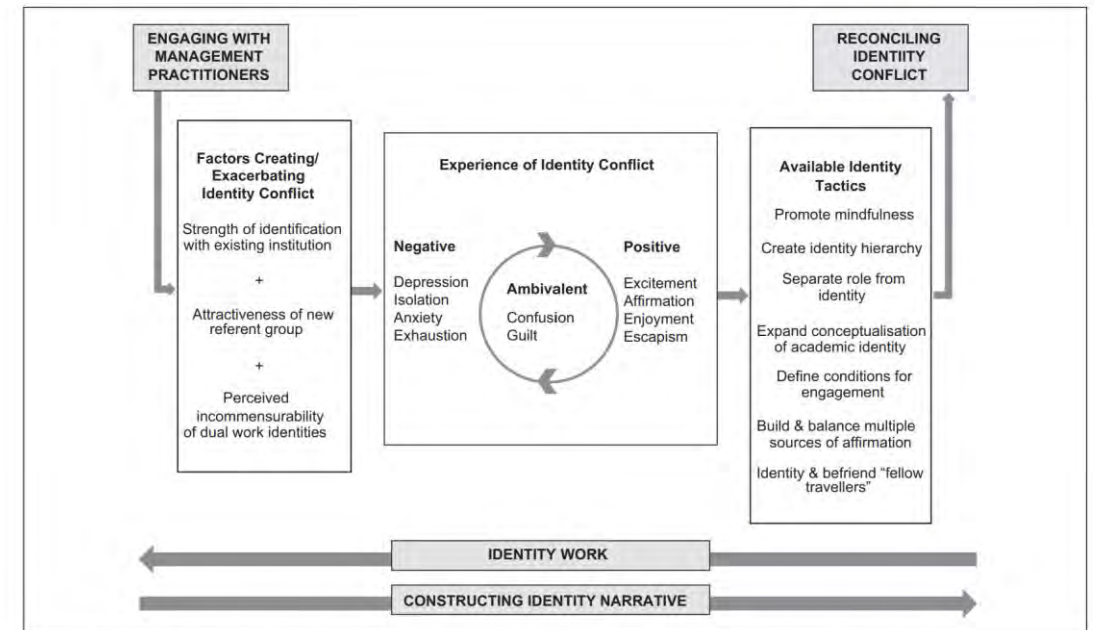


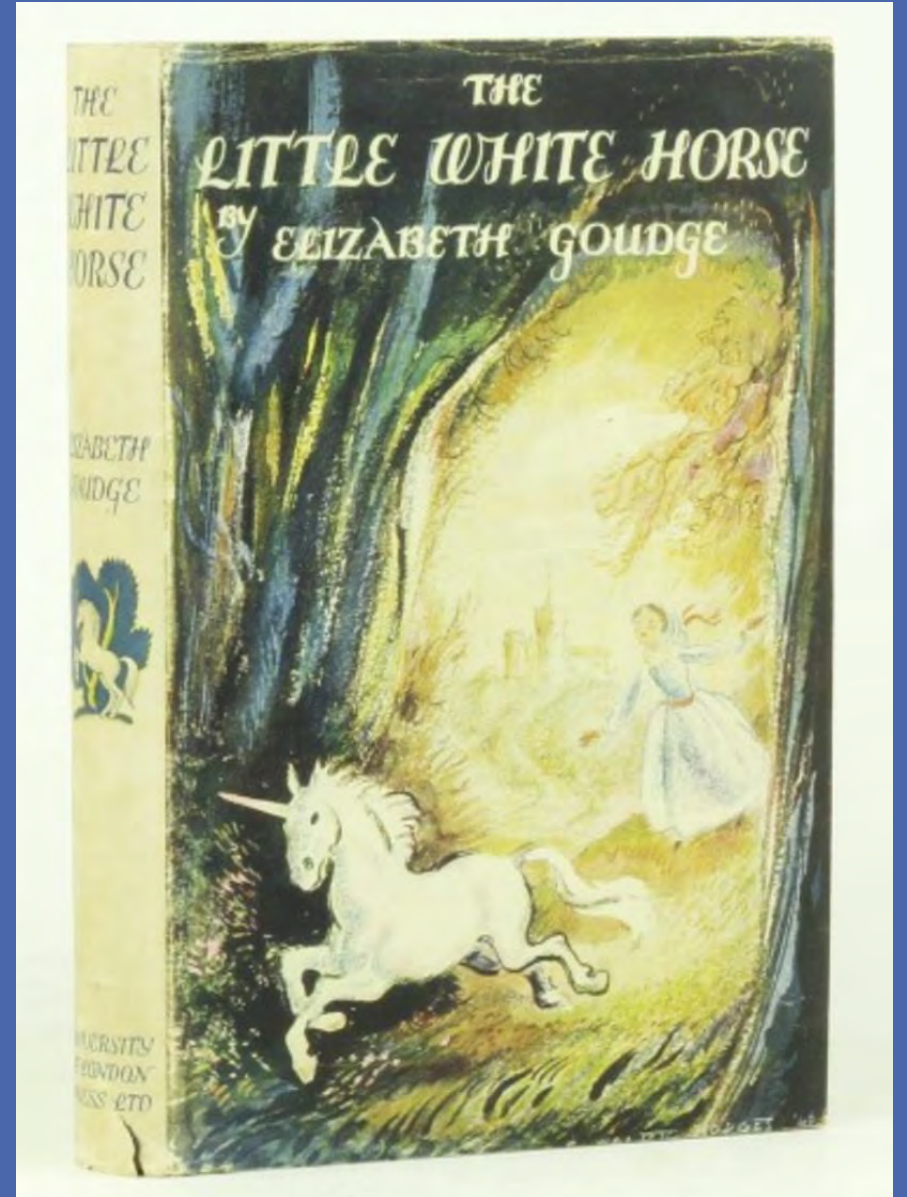
Figure 1. How a management academic's identity is affected by sustained engagement with management practitioners

“

Straddling the research–practice divide and bringing together the worlds of academia and the professions is not easy, but I understand now that this struggle is a part of who I am as an academic. I have rejected the advice of the academic colleague who said, “You can’t do both” but acted on his recommendation that “You have to decide which kind of academic you want to be.” As I asserted so vehemently to the professionals I was advising several years ago, “*I am an academic*” — but my own particular kind of one. (Empson, 2013)

”

Chapter 5: Becoming a leadership scholar





Case A: One evening, after I'd had a few drinks, I told our Managing Director that the firm needed more leadership. I told him, 'We are fed up with all this involving of everyone in the integration decisions. We just want someone to stand up and say, 'This is what is going to happen.' (Manager, Consulting firm)

Case B: I would love our Managing Director to take people by the balls and push change through. (Manager, Consulting firm)

Case C: There is no leadership or overt direction. We have become a festering mass of uncertainty. (Partner, Accounting firm)



“

I am responsible for a large group of partners, all of whom are very bright, at least as bright as I am, all of whom have big egos, all of whom are owners of the business with as much right to vote and draw profits as I have ... it's not easy because most people are attracted to this business because they are independent, they like doing their own thing. Essentially they want to be left alone until it's something that kind of connects them and then it's – ‘why wasn't I consulted?’ (Practice head, Law firm)

”

Who's in charge?

Exploring Leadership Dynamics
in Professional Service Firms

Initial Report for Practitioners by

Laura Empson

Professor in the Management of Professional Service Firms
Cass Business School – June, 2013



“

I do think that ambiguity can perform a very, very useful role because it allows for gaps into which, sort of, pressure can dissipate.... If you make everything too rigid, too formalised, too bureaucratised ... it becomes unworkable and also quite destructive ... And the other advantage of ambiguity is I don't have to decide, and nor does anybody else, who is the real leader of the practice.... As soon as you're forced to decisions – 'Who's the leader? Fred or Harry? Make your mind up' - you're having to sort of stake something which doesn't need to be staked.

(Senior Partner, Law firm)

”

Article

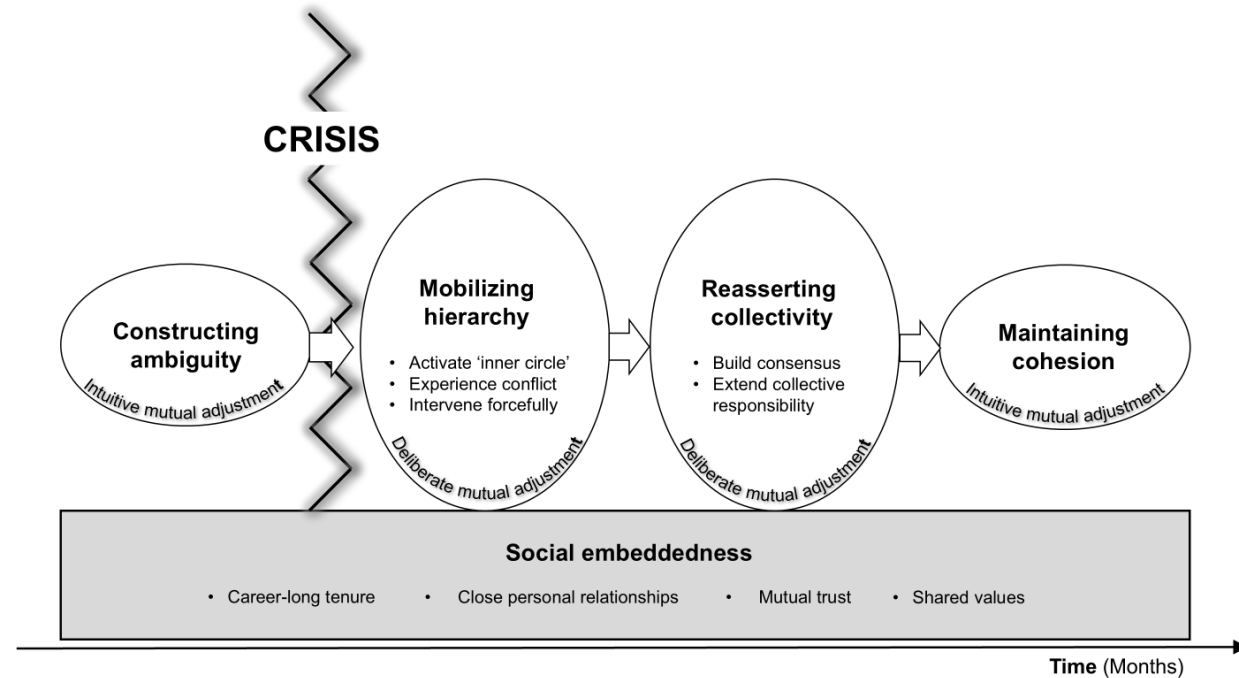
Leadership

Ambiguous authority and hidden hierarchy: Collective leadership in an elite professional service firm

Laura Empson

Cass Business School, University of London, UK

Leadership
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“

Partners say ‘you’re too tight’ and they say ‘get looser’. So you get looser and they say ‘it’s chaotic, get tighter’. If the money is going up, you can do what you like. If the money is going down, you can’t do anything. But the money going up or down isn’t within control of the Senior Partner. (Senior Partner, Accounting firm)

”

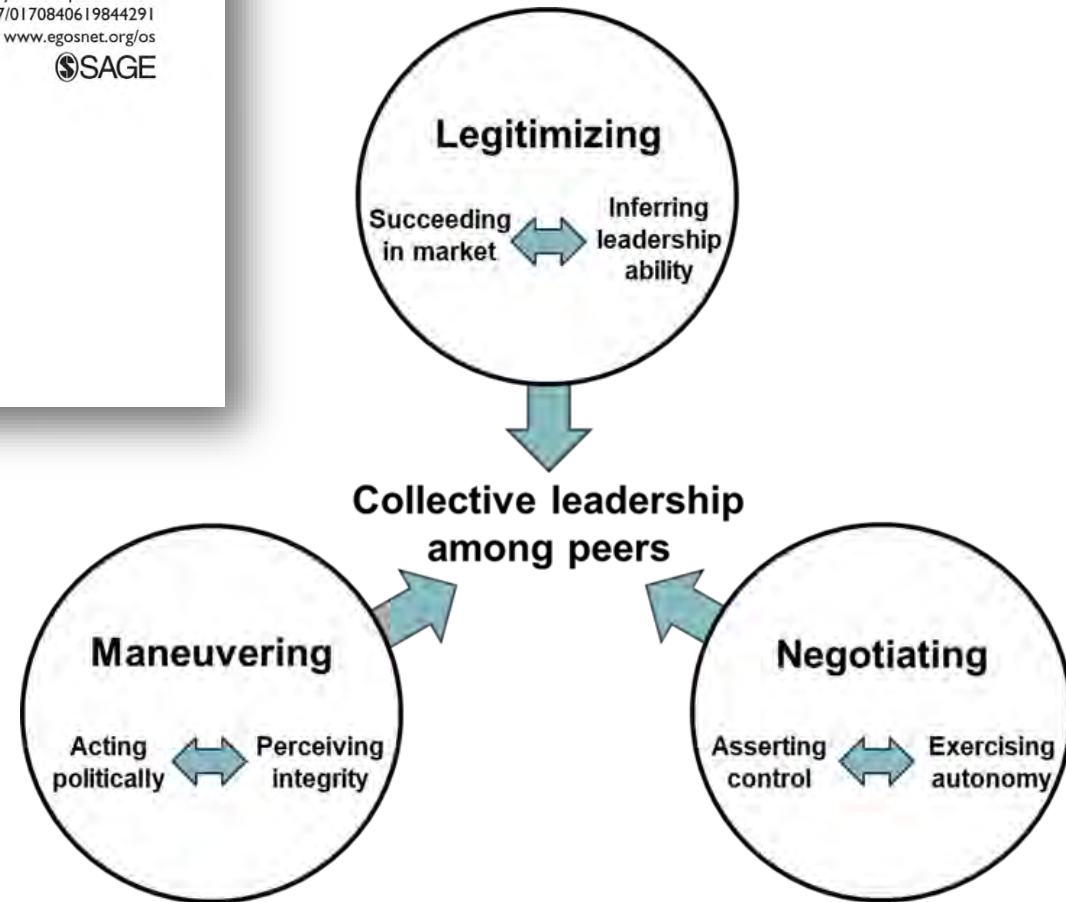


Collective Leadership Dynamics among Professional Peers: Co-constructing an unstable equilibrium

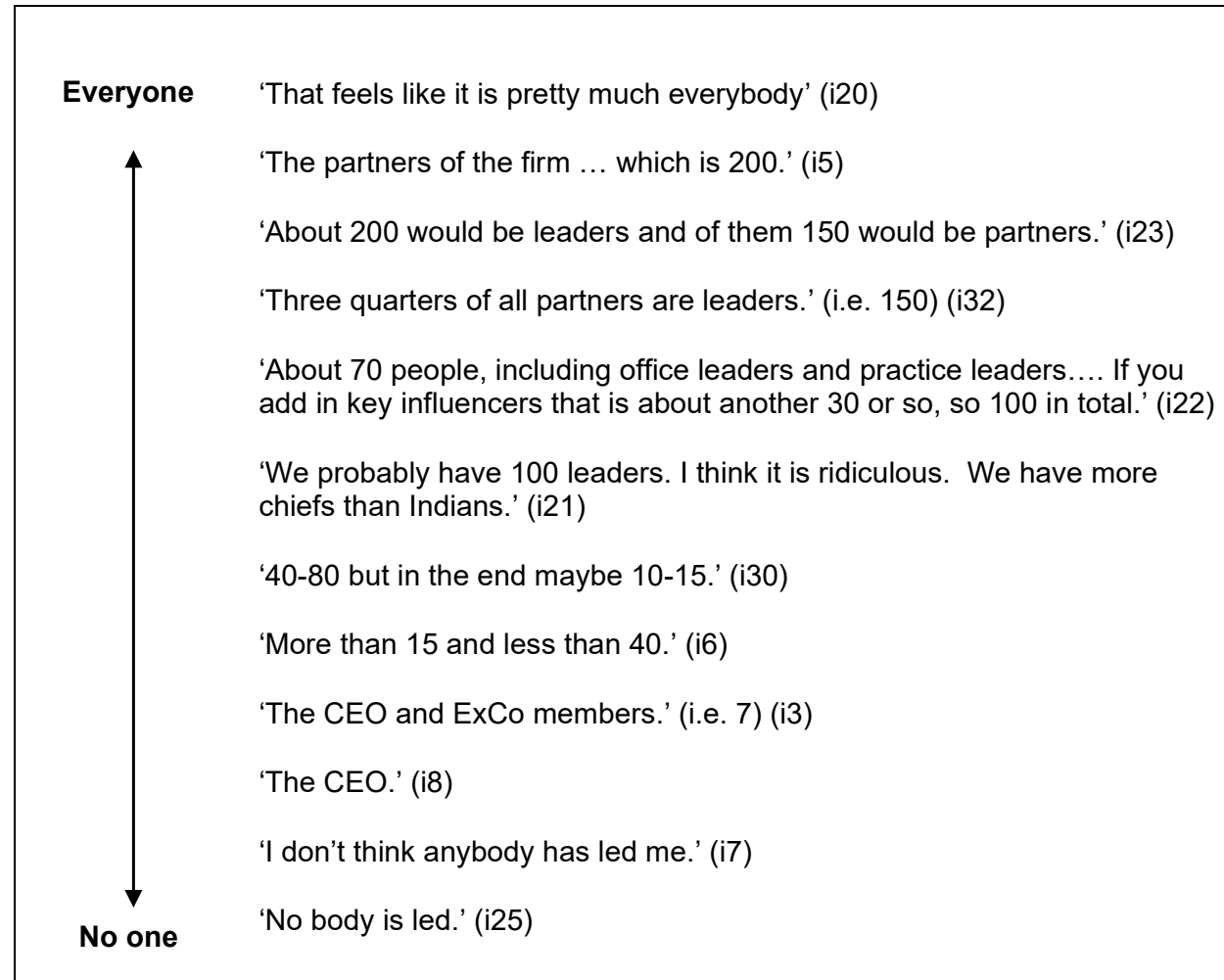
Laura Empson 
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Johan Alvehus 
Lund University, Helsingborg, Sweden

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‘Who are the leaders of the firm?’





When Everyone and No One is a Leader: Constructing individual leadership identities while sustaining an organizational narrative of collective leadership

Organization Studies

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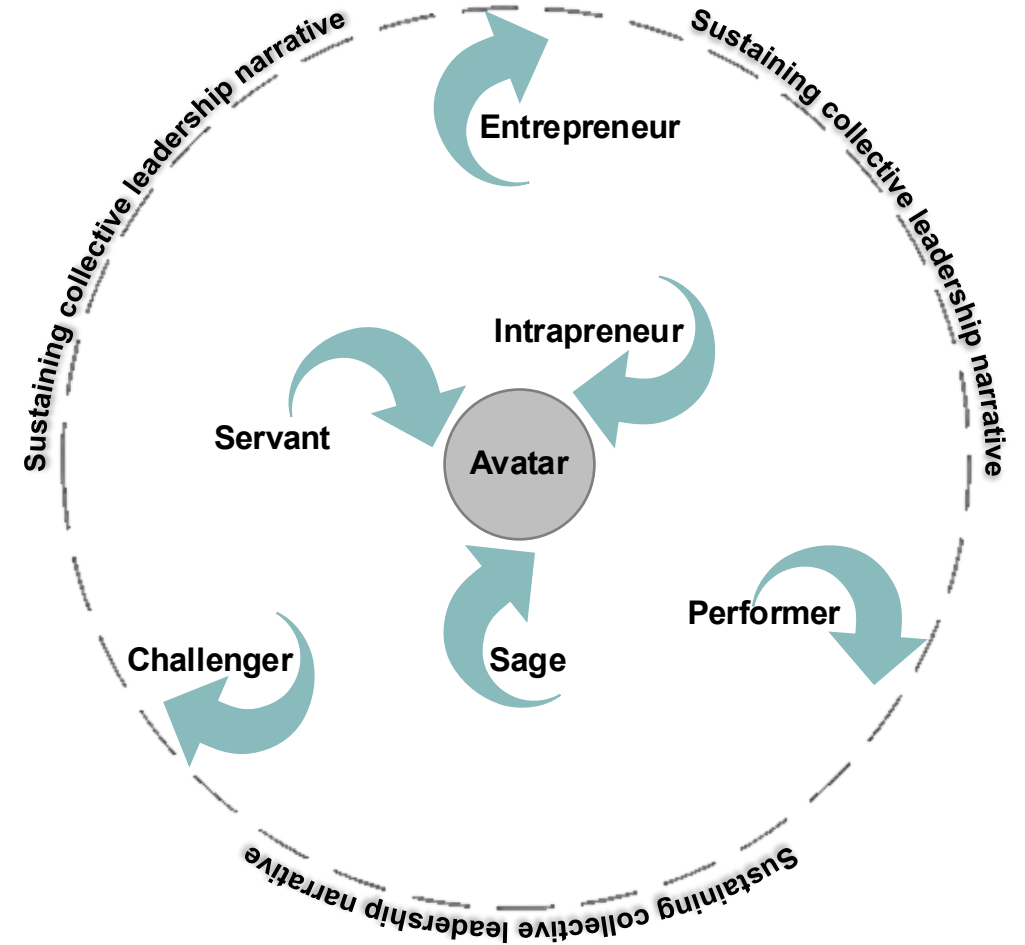
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Ann Langley

HEC, Montréal, Canada

Viviane Sergi

ESG UQAM, Montréal, Canada



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LEADING PROFESSIONALS

Power, Politics, and Prima Donnas

Laura Empson

Chapter 6: Becoming a “leadership guru”



Harvard Business Review



THINKERS
50



Chapter 7: The next chapter





“ I have done all I can to hold this firm together. When I contemplate the scale of the challenges that lie ahead, I feel I have nothing left to give. (CEO, Global consulting firm) ”

Global uncertainty

Elusiveness

Ambiguity

**Personal
uncertainty**

**Organizational
uncertainty**

LIMINALITY

COLLEGIALITY

COLLECTIVE LEADERSHIP



