

Leadership Deep Dive Webinar by:

Prof. Mary Uhl-Bien, BNSF Railway Endowed Professor of Leadership, TCU Neeley School of Business, USA

Title: Complexity Leadership: Enabling People and Organizations for Adaptability

Dr. Mary Uhl-Bien delivered an engaging and timely talk at the ADCLOD webinar hosted by IIM Ahmedabad about complexity leadership, drawing from years of theoretical and applied research in leadership science. Her presentation centred around the urgent need for organizations to adapt their leadership paradigms in response to the increasingly complex and unpredictable environment of the 21st century. The primary message was clear: complexity is no longer a future concern it is the present reality. What matters now is not whether we are in complexity, but how we respond to it through leadership.

She stressed that framing complexity not just as a buzzword, but as a condition shaped by uncertainty, interdependence, and change. Drawing on complexity theory, Dr. Uhl-Bien introduced the audience to the concept of “adaptive space” a dynamic environment within organizations that enables the emergence of new ideas and solutions. Adaptive space is critical in facilitating innovation and allowing adaptive responses to surface. However, innovation alone is not enough. For organizations to transform, these innovations must scale requiring structures, relationships, and leadership support that protect and promote this emergent work.

In this context, Dr. Uhl-Bien emphasized the role of enabling leadership a distinct leadership function that connects administrative leadership (focused on structure and performance) with adaptive leadership (emerging from informal networks and interactions). Enabling leaders are responsible for fostering and protecting adaptive space by removing organizational “brick walls” that stifle emergence. They sponsor ideas, legitimize experimentation, and build coalitions that support scaling. The process of enabling is not linear but iterative, and requires strategic sponsorship at senior levels to ensure that adaptive efforts are not only initiated but also sustained across the organization.

A particularly compelling insight was how organizations can actively cultivate cultures that feed and fuel complexity leadership. This includes fostering psychological safety, aligning adaptive work with strategic intent, and supporting employee wellbeing. Dr. Uhl-Bien illustrated these concepts with real-world examples from healthcare organizations that successfully integrated complexity leadership approaches into their systems, showing improved adaptability and resilience.

The talk concluded with a reflection on the cultural and structural shifts required for leadership in complexity. Traditional hierarchical models, while still important for administrative purposes, must be balanced with systems that nurture bottom-up innovation. Dr. Uhl-Bien urged leaders to think beyond command-and-control, and instead act as facilitators of emergence creating the conditions for their people and systems to self-organize, adapt, and thrive.

Dr. Uhl-Bien's work challenges leaders and researchers alike to rethink the very nature of leadership in today's organizations. Her insights offer a transformative lens for viewing leadership as a distributed, enabling function that activates potential within complexity rather than controlling it. The implications for leadership development, organizational design, and change management are profound and call for continued research and practical application.