

**Call for Papers: Special Issue of *Management Learning***

**Improvising as the New Normal during the Covid-19 Pandemic: Organizational learning-by-responding, power and paradox**

**Deadline for submissions: March 01, 2021**

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Improvisation, a recognized source of organizational learning (Miner, Bassof, & Moorman, 2001), has normally been seen as the exception: organizations need to improvise episodically, when routines fail. Understood to be relevant for organizations needing to increase their capacity of response to the unexpected (Weick, 1998), promote organizational agility (Cunha et al., 2020), reconceptualize time (Crossan et al., 2005), cultivate resilience (Coutu, 2002) or learn-by-doing (Rerup, 2001), improvisation has normally been represented as an episodic practice: localized, temporary, in response to some specific threat bounded by time and space (Crossan et al., 2005).

Then came the Covid-19 pandemic where the exception became the rule. The pandemic offers a supreme opportunity to revisit and challenge organizing-as-usual and to explore new ways of understanding management learning through improvisation. In line with the philosophy (critical, reflexive, imaginative, thought-provoking ideas) and the quality standards of *Management Learning*, we encourage submissions that contribute to understanding: learning by fast responding; paradoxes of improvisation; learning impacts of major disruptions; learning impacts of crises on diversity and inequality; learning to respond with compassion.

With the spread of the virus, things have changed quickly, giving rise to many types of improvisation, making the world a massive improvisational experiment. Improvised responses are seen across every sector but have different implications for the people affected within and between sectors:

- **Healthcare:** pop-up hospitals, new test kits, new vaccines and the repurposing of medicines and vaccines, working with or without personal protective equipment (PPE) in health and social care.
- **Education:** new methods of class delivery, collaboration and running exams that maintain social distancing.
- **Supermarkets:** special hours and deliveries for care workers and those who are elderly and vulnerable; as well as added risk for the workforce with high exposure to the virus.
- **Manufacturing:** repurposing production to deliver needed products such as protective equipment and ventilators; managing disruption to supply chains and working arrangements.

- **Government:** virtual press conferences, guarantees for a percentage of worker salaries (UK, Denmark, Norway, New Zealand, Australia etc.), along with a rise in absolutism and paternalism and a decline in democratic process.

Improvised responses are also seen across various aspects of working/phenomena observed in the workplace:

- Working from home - now encompassing larger sections of the workforce (or those still with jobs except essential workers), with many facing the challenges of working in shared home-work spaces with family, including children (disproportionately disadvantaging women).
- Team, group and community learning - in virtual space through increased use of online platforms facilitating improvisation in teams, communities of practice, grassroot innovation and social movements.
- Diversity - rolling back of diversity gains, with individuals affected unequally within organizations, for example by age, gender, race and ethnicity, prior health status and occupation.
- Dangerous work - white collar jobs have been more likely to be retained as working from home; much essential work (in supermarkets, hospitals, care homes, transport, agriculture) has also been retained and expanded but with exposure to greater risk of mortality, further highlighting social inequalities.
- Compassion - “suffering together” has taken on and afforded new meaning to notions of leadership and individual-collective interdependencies.

We assume that the pandemic contains important messages for our understanding of organizational learning through improvisation (Hadida et al., 2015), defined as purposeful action conducted in the absence of a plan using available resources. The pandemic has functioned as an improvisation enabler. Typically improvisation is treated as the epitome of individual agency. Yet the Covid-19 crisis has shown that the capacity to “improvise” in the face of a disruptive challenge depends on structural aspects (including race and gender) and felicitous conditions: resource abundance, existing social networks, individual empowerment, but also pre-existing vulnerabilities and inequalities etc. The pandemic has turned the world upside down (Grint, 2020) – for some more than others – and offered numerous expressions of the roles of leaders and institutions in handling a major crisis. Different leaders have used their power to respond differently, from Jacinda Ardern’s politics of care and compassion (Tomkins, 2020) to Narendra Modi’s escalation of Hindu nationalism (Prasad, 2020). The crisis context has been revelatory of how a leader’s caring approach affects action or the lack of it.

The Covid-19 pandemic thus also provides an opportunity to highlight a hereto underexplored aspect of improvisation, power, where the need to improvise is seen to afford greater legitimacy to managerialism, eroding democratic deliberation, autonomy and individual freedoms. Unexpected events must be responded to, yet improvised responses offer no guarantee of success. At a time when organizations do not have the luxury of waiting to respond until a plan is composed, improvisations are forced through and more frequently imposed by managerial decree. These visibly mandated improvisations have invisible consequences.

Attending to these requirements makes it possible to highlight how management might legitimize improvisation in a manner that suppresses (but is unable to destroy) learning without giving rise to pragmatic paradoxes, where a managerial order must be disobeyed to be obeyed (Berti & Simpson,

2020) and learning is valid only when mandated from the top. Yet, disruption creates fissures and opens up space for bottom up approaches as well. Nature abhors a vacuum and where there is a dearth of compassionate leadership and resources are scarce, people will learn to improvise and take initiatives into their own hands. It is in moments when individuals or society are unable to cope, or request support, that pandemics can give rise to heroic responders who risk their own wellbeing to address the suffering of others. These can manifest as bottom-up/alternative approaches to improvisation, e.g. compassionate improvisation/improvisation as compassion; including as community/non-community/non-hierarchical initiatives (e.g. anti-racist organizing) even within hierarchically controlled managerial structures. On the other hand, some of these heroic responders have no choice – for example healthcare workers are obliged to turn up to work even if they do not have adequate PPE, drawing attention to the need to examine how improvisation acts on existing inequalities.

Learning-through-improvisation during a pandemic is the theme of this SI proposal: *in the face of a major improvisation enabler, how do power circuits respond and with what consequences? How can learning occur in context of extremity, risk and urgency?* This major question might be approached from a variety of angles:

- Who in an organizational hierarchy is officially allowed to improvise?
- What is the effect of the tone at the top in initiating improvisation?
- Who decides who has the right to improvise?
- Is it appropriate for an organization to derive significant profits from improvisations during a pandemic?
- In whose interests (shareholders; stakeholders or society) should organizational improvisations be directed?
- How have agents improvised modes of providing compassion to mitigate suffering brought on by the pandemic?
- What learnings evanesce once organization resumes normal activity?
- What kind of pragmatic paradoxes are activated during a massive crisis (of the “Be creative!” type)?
- What happens when managerially approved improvised solutions fail?
- Who decides what learnings are retained?
- How does memory contribute to explain the learning of improvised responses?
- How do some situations function as enablers of improvisation?
- How does improvisation reshape power circuitry?
- How is improvisation enacted as non-hierarchical grassroots initiatives?
- How is improvisation undertaken among communities of practice and social movements?
- How can leaders be decisive and compassionate while imposing improvised forms of change?

In summary, we are interested in exploring and questioning the conditions of managerially sanctioned and non-sanctioned learning, unlearning, retention and forgetfulness associated with improvisation during the extraordinary times of the Covid-19 pandemic. This global process offers an extreme environment conducive to all sorts of experiments that we wish to learn from, namely how novel disruptive circumstances interact with organizational memory in terms of learning and improvisation (Moorman & Miner, 1998b).

This special issue will continue previous explorations of improvisation that have taken place in *Management Learning*. The special issue will benefit from the New Normal (Ahlstrom, Arregle, Hitt, Qian, Ma & Faems, 2020) instilled by the pandemic. For a while, improvisation was not a strange occurrence but part of daily life. Improvisation became part of the quotidian and exploring this reversal of figure and ground will certainly offer interesting opportunities for learning about learnings from fast organizational responses.

This call is open and competitive; manuscripts will be double-blind reviewed and a limited number of papers will be selected by the guest editors for publication in the special issue. Submissions should be original, not submitted to or published in any other outlets, and must fit with the aims and scope of *Management Learning*: <https://us.sagepub.com/en-us/nam/journal/management-learning#description> as well as with this special issue call. All submissions should be made online: [http://mc.manuscriptcentral.com/management\\_learning](http://mc.manuscriptcentral.com/management_learning) in accordance with the journal submission guidelines.

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