

**Is the future of leadership a  
Mechanical Turk reversed?**

Sverre Spoelstra/Anoush Margaryan

**Extending hope: Exploring the leadership  
practises of promissory technology  
projects**

Frank Meier/ Dan Kärreman

**CBS LEADERSHIP**

*Research Paper Series*

A discussion among peers

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# INTRODUCTION

Welcome to the Research Paper Series – discussions among peers on leadership, and part of the CBS Leadership Initiative

The Leadership Research Paper Series is a part of the CBS Leadership Initiative that aims at making CBS the Nordic center for leadership knowledge, research and education – connecting academia and practitioners from both the private and the public sector.

The Research Paper Series is a forum for junior and senior colleagues, as well as visiting and guest scholars, to present and discuss leadership research in progress from a variety of disciplinary perspectives and theoretical traditions. Presenters will receive constructive feedback from discussants and attendees with the aim of developing their papers and arguments for eventual publication.

The Paper Series will also function to promote discussion and debate across CBS about leadership and leadership development and, finally, it will put attention on how research can be applied on a daily basis by business professionals who carry out leadership on a practical level.

Welcome to the Research Paper Series talks and to the CBS Leadership Initiative!



The Research Papers Series events are connecting colleagues and peers across CBS to discuss on-going research - how to make it even better and how it relates to leadership challenges in practice.

CBS Leadership Research Paper Series

## Questions for Consideration

1. What is the spirit of leadership presented here?
2. How can this work inform CBS' contribution to society or to Denmark's leadership?
3. What can practitioners learn from this work about leadership?

CBS 

# Is the future of leadership a Mechanical Turk reversed?

**Presenter:** Sverre Spoelstra, Ass. Professor, Dept. of Management, Politics and Philosophy

**Discussant:** Anoush Margaryan, Professor, Dept. of Digitalization

**Facilitator:** Nicole Ferry, Dept. of Management, Society and Communication

## What is the spirit of leadership presented here?

The paper addresses what algorithmic leadership might mean, taking inspiration from an old discussion about “the Mechanical Turk”—a chess-playing automaton secretly operated by a human chess player. Artificial intelligence and machine learning are increasingly being used to assist management decisions. Likewise, work tasks within classic professional domains, such as accounting and law, may gradually come to be taken over by digital solutions. To what extent can leadership as a practical discipline also be delegated to algorithms? Sverre Spoelstra discusses the different scenarios and invites the reader to consider and safeguard what are distinct human aspects of leadership. He reflects on the difference between management and leadership. Digital technologies may take over managerial tasks, but most likely not leadership tasks. Leadership is not reducible to “problem solving” or chess playing, but fundamentally about understanding problems and creating meaning.

## How does this inform CBS' contribution to leadership in society?

As society is increasingly augmented and mediated by digital technologies, it is important to reflect upon how to distribute leadership tasks and decisions among humans and machines. What should be delegated to technology and what should still be left to humans? This invites us to reconsider leadership tasks and leadership roles. While there have been critical discussions of the tendency to portray the leader as a heroic figure, the digitalization wave may lead to a reconsideration of the benefits of such a human figure.



Sverre Spoelstra's presentation discussed today's leadership with reference to Mark Zuckerberg as an avatar...

## What are the concrete take-aways for leadership practitioners?

As digital technologies increasingly mediate leadership tasks, leadership practitioners can usefully reflect on how their work changes and how they can arrange their relationships to employees in a way that preserves space for interpersonal exchange and deliberation.

# Extending hope: Exploring the leadership practises of promissory technology projects

**Presenter:** Frank Meier, Postdoc, Dept. of Organization (co-authors: Ursula Plesner & Lise Justesen)

**Discussant:** Dan Kärreman, Professor, Dept. of Management, Society and Communication

**Facilitator:** Nicole Ferry, Dept. of Management, Society and Communication

## What is the spirit of leadership presented here?

The public and private sectors are engaging in the introduction of artificial intelligence (AI) to assist work and decision-making. These projects are often complex and lengthy development processes, which may turn out differently than expected. The authors engaged in the DFF project [Valuing Invisible Work](#) and focus on how leadership of technology projects (e.g., machine learning) includes the ongoing establishment of promises and extension of hope through communicative leadership practices. During the AI project development process, project leadership plays an important role in adjusting these promises while extending hope as the project unfolds and may frustrate initial expectations. An element of leadership is to understand what creates friction in such projects and nevertheless to extend hope. As the philosopher Nietzsche said: “A promise made, is a debt unpaid.” The authors locate AI projects in a regime of hope rather than in a regime of truth. Leadership needs to address this phenomenon and balance between accountability and engagement.

## How does this inform CBS' contribution to leadership in society?

The paper shows how the communication of visions and hope is important for engaging employees in experiments with new technology. This is not just a matter of persuading, but of establishing meaningful visions and adjusting promises. Leadership here is thus about extending hope, even in the midst of frustration.



Frank Meier talks about challenges of leadership when balancing between hope, promises and accountability.

## What are the concrete take-aways for leadership practitioners?

The way leaders communicate their visions of new technology projects is central to making employees engage and have faith in the process. It is a balancing act where leaders must communicate the potential of the new technology at the same time as they must adjust these promises in the light of experience. Broken promises create frustration, which is why an important leadership practice is to turn those frustrations into new and engaging possibilities by extending hope.

## SUGGESTED READING

Spoelstra, S. (2018) *Leadership and Organization: A philosophical Introduction*. London: Routledge.

Spoelstra, S., N. Butler and H. Delaney (2021) 'Measures of faith: Science and belief in leadership studies' *Journal of Management Inquiry* 30(3): 300-311.

Spoelstra, S. (2020) 'The truths and falsehoods of post-truth leaders', *Leadership*, 16(6), 757-764

Mouritsen, J., & Kreiner, K. (2016). Accounting, decisions and promises. *Accounting, Organizations and Society*, 49, 21–31.

Pollock, N., & Williams, R. (2010). The business of expectations: How promissory organizations shape technology and innovation. *Social Studies of Science*, 40(4), 525–548.

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