

From Control to Co-Creation: The Rise of the Wheeler Manager in Value-Driven Organizations

Fabrizio Traversa

Department of Business Economics, Health and Social Care (DEASS), University of Applied Sciences and Arts of Southern Switzerland (SUPSI), Manno, Switzerland

Email: fabrizio.traversa@supsi.ch

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Abstract

This article examines the emergence of the Wheeler Manager as a novel managerial archetype enabling value creation through co creation in contemporary organizations. Grounded in Traversa's conceptualization of the Wheeler Manager within flat and circular organizations (Beretta et al., 2024; Traversa, 2024), the study integrates service dominant logic and network theories of resource interaction. A comprehensive literature review maps the shift from hierarchical control to facilitative roles emphasizing transparency, inclusivity, and cross-functional coordination. The Wheeler Manager's function is theorized as a facilitator of continuous feedback loops, fostering collaboration across internal and external stakeholders. The paper presents a theoretical framework situating the Wheeler Manager at the intersection of organizational design, co creation processes, and strategic value generation. It discusses how this role enables dynamic resource recombination, accelerates collaborative episodes, and sustains longitudinal value journeys (Perna et al., 2022). Managerial implications suggest that adopting the Wheeler Manager role supports resilience, adaptability, and sustainable growth in organizations transitioning toward circular or flat structures. Future research avenues include empirical validation across industry contexts and longitudinal case studies to assess the impact of Wheeler Managers on value outcomes and organizational performance.

Keywords

Innovation Management, Wheeler Manager, Circular Governance, Leadership, Organizational Development, Startups, Flat Organizations, Circular Organizations, Resource Optimization, Conflict Resolution

1. Introduction

The rapid evolution of organizational forms (driven by digital transformation, global interconnectivity, and rising expectations of purpose-led governance) has disrupted traditional management paradigms. Hierarchical structures designed for control and predictability are ill-suited to contexts that demand learning, adaptation, and collaborative intelligence (Heckscher & Donnellon, 1994; Laloux, 2014). In response, many firms are experimenting with flat, circular, or holacratic structures that distribute authority and foster innovation (Beretta et al., 2024), and this transition has revealed a coordination void: without traditional middle management, how do organizations sustain coherence, alignment, and learning?

The figure of the Wheeler Manager (WM), originally introduced and theorized in the article *Organiblo: Engaging People in “Circular” Organizations and Enabling Social Sustainability*, and later further developed and studied by Traversa (2024, 2025), offers a compelling answer: the WM is not a controller but a facilitator, an integrative agent who enables co-creation by weaving together diverse perspectives, mediating tensions, and cultivating systemic awareness across organizational boundaries.

This paper contributes to advancing the theoretical foundation and practical understanding of the Wheeler Manager: by synthesizing recent literature on leadership, coordination, facilitation, and organizational design, we explore the WM as a strategic response to post-bureaucratic complexity and argue that this role is central to value creation in modern organizations.

2. Literature Review

The conceptualization of the Wheeler Manager (WM) emerges at the intersection of several key theoretical frameworks in organizational studies, and this literature review outlines five major domains (Complex Adaptive Systems, Dynamic Capabilities, Social Capital Theory, Dialogic Organizational Development, and Experiential Learning) which offers distinct but complementary insights into the foundations and functions of the WM role.

Organizations are increasingly recognized not as mechanistic hierarchies but as complex adaptive systems, as dynamic networks of interdependent agents whose behaviour and outputs emerge from local interactions (Uhl-Bien et al., 2007; Snowden & Boone, 2007). Within CAS, leadership is reframed from top-down control to a process of enabling coherence, learning, and responsiveness across distributed components. The Wheeler Manager aligns with this view by acting as a relational facilitator who helps the organization “make sense of itself while in motion” (Weick, 1995). Rather than exerting directive authority, the WM works through conversation, reflection, and pattern recognition to reduce organizational entropy and amplify productive connectivity between actors and units (Traversa, 2025). In CAS terms, the WM enables “emergent order” by activating feedback loops, boundary-crossing dialogue, and reflective practices.

Teece (2007) defines dynamic capabilities as the firm’s ability to integrate,

build, and reconfigure internal and external competences to address rapidly changing environments. Eisenhardt and Martin (2017) further emphasize that these capabilities include sensing opportunities and threats, seizing them through strategic action, and transforming the organization to sustain advantage. The Wheeler Manager plays a critical role in enhancing these capabilities, especially in decentralized or flat structures: acting as a distributed sensing node, the WM captures signals from within and outside the organization, ranging from employee feedback to partner concerns, and helps translate them into coherent action. This relational sensing and integrative reframing directly support the development of dynamic capabilities, particularly when traditional structures lack vertical intelligence mechanisms. Different authors (Beretta et al., 2024; Traversa, 2025) argue that WM increases the “metacognitive capacity” of organizations: rather than being locked into existing routines, the organization can evolve thanks to the WM’s capacity to surface hidden tensions, anticipate friction points, and initiate adaptation before misalignment turns into dysfunction.

Social capital refers to the benefits derived from social networks, like trust, information exchange, cooperation, and is central to understanding how knowledge, alignment, and innovation flow in organizations (Cross & Parker, 2004). Burt’s (2004) notion of “structural holes” suggests that actors who bridge disconnected groups are better positioned to generate novel insights and improve coordination. The Wheeler Manager epitomizes this bridging function! They occupy a structurally peripheral yet relationally central position: not belonging to any one team yet deeply embedded across teams and functions. By brokering information, mediating trust, and surfacing weak signals, the WM enriches both the bonding and bridging dimensions of social capital (Putnam, 2000). In this way, the WM operates as a “boundary spanner” (Tushman, 1977), enhancing the organization’s ability to synthesize diverse cognitive frames and coordinate across otherwise siloed domains, as a key enabler of systemic learning and collaborative innovation.

The Wheeler Manager also aligns with recent developments in Dialogic OD, a branch of organizational development that emphasizes change through generative dialogue, inquiry, and co-creation rather than diagnosis and prescription (Bushe & Marshak, 2009; Schein, 1999).

Dialogic OD posits that change emerges when people shift how they talk about and make sense of their work. Leaders in this paradigm are facilitators of meaning, not enforcers of procedure. The WM fulfils this role by hosting conversations that frame ambiguity as opportunity, failure as signal, and diversity as resource. By holding dialogic space across strategic and operational levels, the WM contributes to a more reflective, adaptive, and psychologically safe environment (Edmondson, 1999). This approach is evident in the “Startup Garage model” (Traversa & Citraro, 2025), where students enact the WM role through real-time facilitation, feedback integration, and iterative planning. The dialogic nature of the WM’s interventions distinguishes them from agile coaches or project leads focused primarily on delivery cadence or task efficiency.

Finally, the WM model draws significantly from experiential learning frameworks, particularly in the context of entrepreneurial education. Kolb's (2014) experiential learning theory emphasizes the iterative cycle of concrete experience, reflective observation, abstract conceptualization, and active experimentation. Sarasvathy's (2001) theory of effectuation similarly frames entrepreneurial action as emergent, flexible, and grounded in available means rather than predictive logic.

In settings like the SUPSI Startup Garage, students learn to manage their ideas from conception to execution, often without formal authority but with high responsibility as a context that mirrors the informal power and relational influence of the WM role (Traversa & Citraro, 2025). This makes students “the first Wheeler Managers of their idea”, as they learn to navigate ambiguity, coordinate without control, and facilitate rather than dictate. The Wheeler Manager therefore represents a translational figure between theory and practice, rooted in systems thinking but forged in lived, entrepreneurial contexts. Their emergence reflects not only a response to organizational complexity but also to pedagogical imperatives: forming leaders who think systemically, act adaptively, and collaborate generatively.

3. Theoretical Framework

The Wheeler Manager (WM) represents a paradigmatic innovation in organizational design: a hybrid, relational, non-hierarchical role that operates across boundaries to foster coherence, adaptability, and value co-creation in decentralized systems. To conceptualize this role with theoretical precision, this section outlines its definitional contours and introduces a six-dimensional capability framework that captures the core functions through which WMs enact value-creating influence.

The Wheeler Manager is not reducible to existing roles such as project manager, agile coach, HR business partner, or COO. While overlaps exist, the WM distinguishes itself by combining three unique characteristics:

- 1) lack of formal authority: WMs do not typically hold positional power over teams or budgets; their influence is informal and facilitative.
- 2) transversal scope: WMs operate across teams, functions, and organizational layers, integrating perspectives and mediating alignment.
- 3) developmental orientation: WMs do not focus directly on performance outcomes, but rather on creating the cognitive, relational and temporal conditions that allow others to perform and adapt effectively.

As such, the WM emerges as a *pattern of organizational intelligence* rather than a fixed role: a distributed logic of coordination, learning, and system stewardship embedded within the organization (Traversa, 2025).

Drawing on Traversa (2025) and integrating complementary organizational theories, the Wheeler Manager role can be modelled through six interdependent capability clusters, where each capability functions as a lens through which the WM adds systemic value, like:

1) *Cognitive Spanning*

Definition: the ability to move across mental models, time horizons, and disciplinary perspectives, enabling systemic reframing and translation.

Theoretical roots: systems thinking (Meadows, 2008), trans disciplinaryity (Nicolescu, 2002), and boundary-spanning roles in innovation (Tushman, 1977).

Function: WMs synthesize strategic intent with operational realities; they help strategy teams understand frontline constraints and frontline teams appreciate strategic priorities. They also spot interpretive blind spots, when marketing and engineering teams use the same word (“value”) to mean different things.

2) *Dialogic Framing*

Definition: the facilitation of sensemaking conversations that produce alignment, insight, and mutual understanding across differences.

Theoretical roots: dialogic OD (Bushe & Marshak, 2009), sensemaking theory (Weick, 1995), and psychological safety (Edmondson, 1999).

Function: WMs convene spaces where ambiguity can be explored rather than avoided, and where conflict is reframed as a generative tension. They ask catalytic questions, narrate collective challenges, and help teams develop shared language and meaning, an essential function in organizations undergoing transformation.

3) *Resource Choreography*

Definition: the orchestration of organizational attention, capacity, and timing to support strategic flow and avoid overload or misalignment.

Theoretical roots: attention-based theory of the firm (Ocasio, 1997), agile coordination (Rigby et al., 2016), and complexity-informed operations.

Function: WMs map invisible dependencies, flag overcommitted teams, coordinate pacing across initiatives, and enable smarter prioritization. Rather than managing tasks, they manage *focus* as a key determinant of execution quality in high-velocity environments.

4) *Conflict Transmutation*

Definition: the reframing of interpersonal or systemic tensions into opportunities for learning, integration, and adaptive insight.

Theoretical roots: relational coordination (Gittell, 2009), dialogic coaching (Schein, 1999), and learning organization theory (Senge, 1990).

Function: WMs intervene early in escalating conflicts, not to impose solutions but to surface underlying misalignments, such as conflicting metrics, miscommunicated goals, or values tensions. They work upstream of HR, transforming friction into reflective awareness.

5) *Temporal Pacing*

Definition: the shaping of organizational rhythm through thoughtful calibration of reflection and execution cycles.

Theoretical roots: rhythmic leadership (Ancona et al., 2001), agile retrospectives (Denning, 2016), and organizational time theory (Rämö, 1999).

Function: WMs introduce pauses into hyperactive systems, ensure that fast-moving teams don't outrun coherence, and modulate the tempo of decision-making.

ing. They help leaders shift from urgency addiction to strategic cadence, enabling both speed and sustainability.

6) *Ecosystem Navigation*

Definition: the integration of external signals (market, regulatory, stakeholder) into internal decision-making without overwhelming internal coherence.

Theoretical roots: open systems theory (Katz & Kahn, 1978), stakeholder integration (Freeman & McVea, 2001), and platform strategy (Van Alstyne et al., 2016).

Function: WMs translate external pressures (investor feedback, partner needs, or customer insights) into internal conversations: they help organizations remain permeable without becoming fragmented, especially in high-growth phases or complex value networks.

While each of the six capabilities can be individually enacted, they often overlap in practice. For example, a WM facilitating a post-mortem meeting (dialogic framing) may simultaneously identify a timing breakdown (temporal pacing), surface a hidden conflict (conflict transmutation), and realign resourcing priorities (resource choreography). This fluidity reflects the WM's dynamic function as a *coherence generator* in complex systems.

Traversa (2025) cautions against reducing the Wheeler Manager to a checklist of activities. Instead, the role must be understood ontologically as a relational posture, a systems-thinking mindset, and a facilitative presence. The WM embodies a shift from “managing people” to “managing conditions,” from solving problems to enabling systemic learning.

By situating the WM within this theoretical and functional architecture, we prepare the ground for deeper empirical study and practical application, enabling us to grasp how this role signals a fundamental transition in leadership: from control to co-creation!

This paper adopts a theoretical synthesis and conceptual modelling approach, aimed at developing a robust understanding of the Wheeler Manager (WM) as an emergent role in post-bureaucratic organizations. As the WM remains under-defined in mainstream organizational taxonomies, empirical generalizations are currently premature. Instead, our goal is to build a coherent theoretical framework that can guide future empirical work, inform managerial practice, and contribute to the discourse on leadership, coordination, and organizational learning.

This methodological orientation follows Whetten's (1989) call for conceptual contributions that clarify constructs, specify relationships, and articulate boundary conditions. It also aligns with the epistemological stance of engaged scholarship (Van de Ven, 2007), which emphasizes the co-development of theory and practice in response to complex, real-world problems.

The methodology is grounded in the principles of qualitative meta-synthesis (Torraco, 2005; Watson & Webster, 2020), involving an abductive and iterative review of literature across five major domains:

- organizational theory and post-bureaucratic governance;
- facilitative and dialogic leadership;

- innovation management and dynamic capabilities;
- experiential learning and entrepreneurship education;
- social network theory and boundary spanning roles.

The literature corpus included over 90 peer-reviewed journal articles, 12 monographs, and selected grey literature (e.g., organizational playbooks, design frameworks, startup incubation models). Special attention was paid to recent contributions by Traversa (2024, 2025), who first articulated the Wheeler Manager concept in connection with flat and circular organizational models such as the *Organiblò* (Beretta et al., 2024). The review process followed three coding cycles:

- descriptive coding, to identify thematic clusters related to coordination, facilitation, and systemic learning;
- axial coding, to map the interconnections between practices, capabilities, and structural conditions;
- theoretical integration, to develop the six-capability model and distinguish the WM from adjacent roles (e.g., Agile Coach, HR Business Partner).

This approach allows for both conceptual clarity and contextual richness, while acknowledging the emergent nature of the role under study. It positions the WM not as a definitive job description but as a flexible *coordination pattern* whose functions, enablers, and archetypes may vary by context, scale, and organizational philosophy.

Limitations of this method include its non-empirical nature and its reliance on interpretive synthesis rather than statistical validation. However, in the spirit of exploratory theory-building, this model offers a scaffold for subsequent hypothesis development, case study research, and longitudinal observation.

Future empirical studies (especially those using ethnographic, network analytic, or longitudinal design) will be necessary to validate, extend, or challenge the propositions advanced in this framework.

4. The Wheeler Manager: Roles, Capabilities, and Functions

Having established the conceptual and theoretical foundation of the Wheeler Manager (WM), we now examine how this role manifests in practice: in particular, we explore three ideal-type *archetypes* of the WM, analyse their enactment across varying organizational contexts, and contrast the WM with adjacent managerial roles. This section draws heavily from the typology proposed by Traversa (2025) and integrates comparative insights from leadership and organizational design literature.

Traversa (2025) identifies three recurring archetypes of the WM role, which (though not mutually exclusive) reflect different emphases in capability, posture, and strategic contribution:

a) The *Architect* is often a systems thinker, experienced in operational scale-up, with a preference for structural clarity and coordination design. This archetype emerges most frequently in post-product-market fit phases, where cross-functional coherence becomes mission-critical.

- capabilities emphasized: Cognitive Spanning, Resource Choreography, Temporal Pacing;
- risks: Over-formalization; underestimation of relational dynamics;
- theoretical analogue: Institutional designer (Argyris & Schön, 1997).

b) The *Catalyst* emphasizes dialogic framing, psychological safety, and interpersonal alignment. Often with a background in coaching, facilitation, or organizational development, Catalysts thrive in early-stage growth or cultural transformation contexts.

- capabilities emphasized: Dialogic Framing, Conflict Transmutation, Temporal Pacing.
- risks: Insufficient strategic influence; relational overload;
- theoretical analogue: process consultant (Schein, 1999).

c) The *Scout* is typically an internally-grown talent, fluent in organizational nuance, informally connected across domains, and often relied upon to “know how things really work.” Scouts excel at early detection of misalignment and lateral integration.

- capabilities emphasized: Ecosystem Navigation, Cognitive Spanning, Resource Choreography;
- risks: Lack of formal mandate; burnout risk due to over-extension;
- theoretical analogue: Boundary bridger (Burt, 2004).

Each archetype plays a critical role depending on the organization’s developmental stage, cultural maturity, and complexity threshold. Rather than prescribing a “best” archetype, organizations should assess their coordination pain points and strategic context when designing for or empowering Wheeler-like roles.

The WM role often overlaps in function with more established positions such as Agile Coach, HR Business Partner, Project Manager, and COO but important divergences emerge in **Table 1**.

Table 1. Comparative overview of organizational roles.

Role	Formal Authority	Primary Focus	Orientation	Scope
Agile Coach	None	Delivery rhythm and team health	Procedural	Local (team level)
HR Business Partner	Moderate	Talent, policy, compliance	Strategic HR	Departmental
Project Manager	Defined	Task completion, milestones	Executional	Project-specific
COO	High	Operational excellence	Hierarchical	Organization-wide
Wheeler Manager	None	Coordination, sensemaking, learning	Relational/Systemic	Transversal

The WM is best understood not as a replacement for these roles, but as a connective tissue that amplifies their coherence. In organizations without WMs, the

functions they fulfil often fall informally on founders, product leads, or middle managers that are often inefficiently, invisibly, and unsustainably (Traversa, 2025).

5. From Control to Co-Creation: A Paradigm Shift

The rise of the Wheeler Manager signals a deeper transformation in how we understand leadership, structure, and value creation. It reflects a shift from command-centric to coordination-centric organizations, where the unit of performance is no longer the individual or team alone, but the *quality of their interaction*.

Traditional managers supervise tasks, enforce accountability, and optimize performance via top-down levers. By contrast, WMs facilitate conditions for others to perform: clarity, rhythm, reflection, and interdependence. They engage in what Laloux (2014) describes as “holding space”, a non-controlling presence-based form of leadership. This does not imply passivity! The WM actively shapes work through language, routines, dialogue, and interface design. Their power lies in their systemic awareness and cultural fluency, not in decision rights.

Most job roles are tied to function, department, or product. The Wheeler Manager is better understood as a pattern of organizing that may be embodied by individuals or distributed across multiple actors. In this sense, the WM is akin to a “cultural vector” or “design principle” (Alvesson & Sveningsson, 2015), and not just a role but a way of thinking and interacting.

Organizations can embed WM functions across roles through rituals (e.g., facilitated retrospectives), peer coaching, and decentralized learning loops, even without formal WM job titles.

The WM does not own outputs. The WMS contribute to *organizational coherence*: the degree to which actions across levels are aligned, informed, and contextually aware. In fragmented or fast-scaling systems, this coherence becomes a key driver of resilience, innovation, and sustainable value creation (Traversa, 2025). In short, the WM represents a paradigm shift: from leadership-as-control to leadership-as-catalysis. Their emergence corresponds to - and enables - the broader movement toward value-driven, participatory, and adaptable organizational forms.

6. Implications and Future Research

The conceptualization of the Wheeler Manager opens promising directions for practice and scholarship alike. As organizations experiment with new forms of coordination and leadership, the WM offers a generative template for enabling coherence without hierarchy.

The concept of the Wheeler Manager holds relevant implications for various organizational actors: for founders and executives, the WM can act as a powerful lever for scaling up, enabling the professionalization of coordination processes without falling into the trap of bureaucratizing the organizational culture. Early

investments in WM-related capabilities may help entrepreneurs avoid the common pitfall of becoming unintentional bottlenecks as their organizations grow.

From the perspective of Human Resources and People Operations, the emergence of the WM suggests the need for a new competency model. This model is rooted in systemic facilitation, meta-reflection, and dialogic leadership, and it may require the design of new training formats, the creation of peer-support networks, and the development of dedicated career pathways tailored to this novel role. For those leading strategic and transformational initiatives, the WM can serve as a crucial mediator between high-level vision and day-to-day organizational practice. By anchoring transformation efforts within lived experiences, WMs contribute to the coherent integration of cultural, structural, and operational changes. Finally, startup incubators and accelerators may find in the WM an opportunity to strengthen the long-term effectiveness of entrepreneurial education. As demonstrated by initiatives such as the SUPSI Startup Garage, cultivating a WM mindset among students and early-stage entrepreneurs can significantly enhance both their resilience and their capacity for collaborative coordination from the earliest stages of venture development (Traversa & Citraro, 2025).

Given the emergent nature of the Wheeler Manager, future research should aim to deepen our empirical and theoretical understanding of this role. A first area of inquiry concerns empirical validation: longitudinal case studies, ethnographic approaches, and organizational network analysis could all contribute to assessing the effectiveness of the WM across diverse sectors and contexts.

A second line of investigation involves the cultural dimensions of the WM. It remains to be seen how this role operates in environments characterized by varying degrees of power distance, as described in Hofstede's (2001) cultural dimensions theory, as well as in collectivist versus individualist organizational systems. Such comparative studies could illuminate how context shapes the enactment of the WM function.

Further research is also needed to explore the evolution of the role itself: questions remain open about the career trajectories of WMs, the potential risks of burnout they may face, and how they transition into - or emerge from - other roles within organizations. Understanding these dynamics could inform more sustainable talent development strategies.

Another promising avenue lies in examining the potential for technological augmentation: AI-enabled tools such as conversation analytics and knowledge graphs may play a key role in enhancing WM capabilities, particularly in supporting complex tasks like pattern recognition and feedback synthesis (Rodgers et al., 2023). These technologies may amplify the WM's ability to operate as a real-time sense maker and facilitator in dynamic environments.

Lastly, theoretical deepening is essential. Comparative analyses with related roles (such as systems conveners, internal facilitators, agile transformation leads, and proponents of distributed leadership) could help clarify what makes the WM distinctive, and under which conditions it is most valuable.

The WM represents not simply a new job title, but a new logic of organizing. It is a boundary-spanning role (liminal, hybrid, and adaptive) uniquely positioned to support organizations in learning within complexity, acting with coherence, and evolving with integrity. In a world increasingly defined by transition, the WM offers a mode of leadership that is not only timely, but necessary.

7. Conclusion

The emergence of the Wheeler Manager (WM) marks a significant evolution in organizational theory and leadership practice. Positioned at the confluence of structural decentralization, value co-creation, and systemic complexity, the WM is not simply a new job title, but it is a new way of *being* in organizations. Unlike traditional roles defined by authority, hierarchy, and functional specialization, the WM operates through presence, pattern recognition, and facilitation. As organizations seek to transition from control-based governance to more dialogic, agile, and adaptive modes of coordination, the WM offers a compelling and actionable archetype.

By articulating a six-capability framework, this paper provides a first conceptual toolkit to recognize, enable, and cultivate the WM role across varied contexts, showing how this role, while often informal and invisible, is central to sustaining coherence, learning, and innovation in post-bureaucratic systems.

The Wheeler Manager functions even not just as an organizational facilitator, but as a cultural vector: embodying the principles of autonomy, transparency, shared responsibility, and developmental feedback. In a world increasingly characterized by volatility and interdependence, these principles are no longer optional but existential!

Future work must now engage with the empirical, normative, and technological dimensions of the WM. Scholars, educators, and practitioners alike are called to deepen our collective understanding of this role not as a fixed identity, but as a fluid, dynamic response to the demands of organizational life in the 21st century: the Wheeler Manager is a reminder that leadership is less about knowing what to do and more about *creating the conditions* in which the right things can emerge, together.

Conflicts of Interest

The author declares no conflicts of interest regarding the publication of this paper.

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