Abstract
As challenges facing organizations are becoming more complex, managers are seeking new leadership frameworks for understanding how to mobilize and unleash human capabilities in the face of increasingly unforgiving environments. Complexity approaches to leadership have been developed to address this need. These approaches suggest that a key role of leadership is enabling emergence of innovation and adaptability. Although complexity leadership theory has been well advanced, most of the work is conceptual and very little empirical evidence has been offered. This presentation will report findings from a qualitative research program spanning a decade. The research was designed to examine the foundational premises of complexity leadership approaches: How do complex adaptive dynamics and leadership processes operate within bureaucratic structures and with administrative leadership to generate emergent innovation? Data were collected through interviews, on-site observation, follow-up phone conversations, and archival documents. Findings show that adaptive tension between administrative and entrepreneurial forces was the key dynamic that fostered emergence of innovation. Contrary to assertions in complexity leadership that managers need to “stifle their control preferences,” administrative constraints were integral to the emergence of the idea into innovation. These constraints operate in the context of an adaptive dynamic in which entangled administrative (dampening) and entrepreneurial (amplifying) forces work in tension with one another to refine and enhance the idea. Findings generally supported conceptualizations described in complexity approaches to leadership with some important modifications and discoveries. This study helps illuminate the role of managers and leadership in stifling or enabling organizations to be complex adaptive systems.