

ORGANIZATIONAL STASIS: THE UNDOING OF LEADERSHIP?

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Abstract

The “story” of leadership within organizations is one that emphasizes the extraordinary and not the mundane (Alvesson and Sveningsson, 2003). It is a “story” of shaping, influencing and challenging the status quo and prevailing organizational norms in order to achieve organizational effectiveness; it plays to the contemporary management mantra of freeing employees from command and control (Seddon, 2003). Leadership, if exercised to its full narrative potential, especially at the middle-line and below, has the potential to fundamentally challenge an organization’s holding environment, social architecture and socio-political constructs; to reach into the very core of an organization. But, is this what organizations want from leadership, or do they want an enhanced form of the “mundane” that does not challenge organizational hierarchy and its concomitant power bases, and the “right” to manage based on uncontested expertise? Management at all levels may normalize the extent to which leadership is allowed to be exercised; their narrative of leadership becomes less pure and the fundamental aspects of the socio-political architecture remains, in essence, in stasis.

Meindl, Ehrlich and Dukerich (1985) refer to the “romance” of leadership in relation to organizational performance; perhaps it is the romance of leadership that is sought, but without it affecting the formal and informal organizational order. Therefore, the romantic notion of the word and the way it is used to create the chimera of a new order is safer and easier to control. The paper will challenge the extent to which senior management is prepared to contest command and control oriented organizational holding environments in order to foster leadership in an authentic, non-romanticized form.

Key words: Control, Delusion, Fallacy, Hierarchy, Holding environment, Narrative, Politics, Power, Romanticism.

The Symbolism of Leadership

“Leadership” is still very much in vogue with organizations, academics and management gurus, and is repeatedly called upon by senior management as the means to deliver enhanced performance (Burgoyne, Hirsh and Williams, 2004) in organizations. Herold and Fedor (2008, p. 43) contend that “Without (good) leadership, the success of any mission is deemed far less likely, or, in some situations, even impossible” and that the role of leadership is “to provide direction, to motivate followers to exert the effort necessary to achieve organizational objectives, and to support and enable such efforts”. However, given the amount of research that has been undertaken, the vast amount of literature on the subject and the exhortations of

professional and other bodies to take the “leadership route”, there are two fundamental questions that still need to be addressed.

First, is “leadership” just a symbolic word used in place of management to create the notion of doing things differently (the word is different but the function is the same)? Second, to what extent do organizations fully understand the implications of using the word “leadership”, and are they prepared to reassess organizational control mechanisms to alter the power balance (status quo) in order for “leadership” to be practised in order to enhance organizational performance? Therefore, there is a need to explore the meaning and practice of leadership within organizations, perhaps using managerial realism (Reed, 2005 Ackroyd and Fleetwood, 2004) as a basis for a meaningful critical evaluation of the extent to which leadership, compared to management, is needed, and the degree to which organizations enable leadership to take place. And, as Schein (2004, p. xi) states: “In an age in which leadership is touted over and over again as a critical variable in defining the success or failure of organizations, it becomes all the more important to look at the other side of the coin – how leaders create culture and how culture defines and creates leaders.”

One definition, amongst many, of leadership is that of someone who guides or directs a group. There are, of course, many well-known writers (Zaleznik, 1977; Kotter, 1990a; Mintzberg, 1998; Yukl and Mahsud, 2010) who have defined leadership in similar ways, either with a single sentence approach to try and capture the essence of what it is or by identifying traits, characteristics and skills. For example, Hersey and Blanchard (1988) identify three skills, namely, diagnosing, adapting and communicating. On the other hand, Kouzes and Posner (2007, p. 348) put forward that: “Sometimes we imagine leadership to be something majestic – about grand visions, about world-changing initiatives, about transforming the lives of millions. While all are noble possibilities, real leadership is in the daily moments”. This is one of many definitions of leadership alongside, of course, the way in which it is categorized, such as: Trait, Behavioural, Contingency/Situational, Transactional, Transformational, Action-centred, Heroic and Post-heroic. The issue, therefore, should not be so much about how leadership is defined and its perceived impact within organizations, but to move the debate forward by taking a more critical view of the way in which organizations allow leadership to be practised. Also, if, as Drucker (1989) stated, leadership is so important and there is no substitute for it, especially with regard to organizational efficiency, effectiveness, flexibility and adaptability, then organizations must change the nature of extant organizational hierarchies as practised, and reshape the concomitant power bases and the way in which authority and control is exercised.

Kotterman (2006) suggested that leadership is usually perceived as being based on charisma, and with the attendant power to extensively influence those around – the idealized perception of a leader. On the other hand, management is one of enforcement; enforcing the need to get things done in-line with organizational purpose. He also cites Zaleznik (1998) and Kotter (1990b) in relation to their views that management and leadership have some similarities, but are also quite distinct in many ways, which creates a dilemma for organizations when trying to have the qualities of both in one person; the ideal managerial leader, perhaps? Are organizations looking for, albeit in the mind’s eye of those at the apex, the ideal person in the Confucian sense – the “junzi”, which translates into “the gentleman”, the “perfect man (person)”, and a moral guide? Such an idealized person becomes mythic in his/her ability to transform and rejuvenate, dare one say, heroic in thought and action. But, are we not supposed to be in a post-heroic leadership world (Crevani, Lindgren and Packendorff, 2007) where it is not the individual person but how an individual can, as a member of a group, motivate others to perform to a higher level.

If the contention is one of organizational culture inhibiting leadership, then the reality of what organizations allow, due to the maintenance of hierarchical positional power and the way it is exercised and or perceived by subordinates, is not one of leadership but management in another guise. Furthermore, the extent to which position within an organization's hierarchy determines the degree to which an individual is allowed to be a leader, that is, the freedom to do things differently in order to get things done also needs to be considered. At the apex there is positional power freedom to do things differently, but at the meso level and below, only actions that are, in reality, accepted as those that conform to management are accepted, and allowed.

The reality, perhaps, is one of organizations requiring, and needing, competent management at the meso level, and in a form that still conforms to the hierarchical nature of work based organizations; in essence, a form of managerial leadership that does not deform the holding environment (Gould, Stapley and Stein, 2006). If this is accepted, then organizations should expend more time and effort in developing managerial skills alongside those aspects of leadership behaviour that can be learned and developed. But, of equal importance, organizations should allow managers and nascent leaders the freedom to do things differently; the holding environment becomes one of freedom to act, whereby the organizational centre – as a representation of the holding environment – becomes a facilitator and not an inhibitor.

Managerial Competency

Brewis (1996) emphasized the need for managers to be competent. It is a greater degree of competency, perhaps, that organizations should recognize as being key to organizational development, efficiency and effectiveness – competency based on skills and attributes that enable more effective people management within the constraints that organizations create through their holding environments. This view may, of course, be debated, that is, whether competent management is good enough in a complex and dynamic world where change (adaptability) is a key component of organizational success. The leadership narrative, delusory prophecy even, comes into play at this point; leaders *will*, in a heroic sense, enable organizations to optimize their potential, moving from a position of sub-optimization, and doing so in a sustainable sense – the ideal!

However, if, as oft claimed, employees are an organization's most valuable asset and are key to achieving optimization, then managers, if they have leadership qualities and are free to lead can, through motivating subordinates, become a driver of organizational change and enhanced performance: organizational, group and individual. Such a change could act as a basis for changing organizational memory (Anand, Manz and Glick, 1998) and aid the development of a learning based organization (Yukl 2009). Oswick and Grant (1996, p. 49) stated that: "Organisational learning can therefore be seen as having both a cognitive (interpretative) and behavioural element. Indeed, one of the defining characteristics of organisational learning is a change in behaviour". Therefore, the freedom to lead and or manage differently, conformance with the leadership narrative in one sense, will set a new tone, create a different climate and have an impact on organizational culture, and an organization's performance.

If organizations are, in reality, just looking for effective management then they may be looking for someone who demonstrates an ability for ensuring their team achieves what needs to be done in exchange for reward, recognition, or common goal achievement; a path-goal approach, which is not necessarily leadership, but is a form of management. These aspects

are part of the everyday interaction, almost routine, between those that represent organizational hierarchy (management) within organizations and subordinates; activities that are key relationship elements that play a part in determining levels of efficiency and effectiveness. Alvesson and Sveningsson (2003, p. 1436) make the point that: "Little attention is paid in the leadership literature to the more mundane aspects of managerial work and leadership . . . it makes sense to consider the possibility that what managers and leaders do is not always that remarkable or different from what other people do in work organizations." This goes against the leadership grain of thinking; leadership is about the extraordinary and not the mundane, it is about exercising power to do the right thing, even if it goes against the organizational norms and associated politics of conforming to the norm.

Such power in the hands of management would challenge the socio-political constructs, possibly radically, which may create a dynamic that becomes uncontrollable and contests the power balance status quo. Is this something that organizations really want from their leaders? Such a challenge to organizational status quo may be seen as dysfunctional with regard to organizational performance; challenging the set ways in which things are done and the existing order may be viewed as a path leading to chaos, confusion and therefore bringing about ineffectiveness, if not organizational ruin. All of which does not sit comfortably with the notion that leadership adds value to organizations. The idea of deforming the hierarchy in order for leadership, at all levels, to flourish is not an argument in favour of chaos or for dismantling prevailing organizational structures, but it is one of recognizing the need for order through structure whilst at the same time organizations are prepared to allow managers and or leaders to do things differently, and in such a way that may not conform to the way things are "done around here". As Daft, Murphy and Willmott (2010, p. 96) state: "Organizations can choose . . . a traditional organization design, which emphasizes vertical communication and control, or toward a contemporary learning organization, which emphasizes horizontal communication and coordination". If organizations maintain the former then leadership, in its full narrative sense, is inhibited; the role of "leaders" is, in reality, one of management.

Challenging Hierarchical Conformance

Meindl and Ehrlich (1987) refer to "the romance" of leadership in relation to organizational performance; perhaps it is the romanticism of leadership that organizations seek, but without it affecting the natural order of things. Therefore, the romantic notion of leadership, as opposed to facilitating its practice, is safer and easier to control. Using an emotive word is seen, perhaps, as enough to bring about a change in attitudes, behaviour and performance throughout the collective, but without deforming the holding environment. It is the holding environment that also defines managerial purpose, maintenance of position and control through the formal side of organizations; a form of panopticon effect (Bentham, 1791). Leadership, it may be argued, is something only allowed to be practised by those at the organizational apex; they have the freedom, in an organizational political conformity (non-conformity) sense to do so; which managers at the middle-line do not have: managers are only permitted to manage. Therefore, in terms of what organizations allow, perhaps "leadership" is just another word used in place of management, that is, the word is different but the function is the same, especially with regard to conformance to prevailing traditional organizational design and norms (Daft, Murphy and Willmott, 2010). Leadership should create vitality and/or revitalize an organization through changing the culture, and individual attitudes and behaviour in line with organizational purpose, but to what extent do

organizations understand the implications of leadership, and are they prepared to relinquish control through changing the nature of organizational holding environments?

In order to create vitality and/or revitalize an organization through changing its culture, and individual attitudes and behaviour in line with organizational purpose, leadership should create and reinforce an organizational culture that emphasizes a greater freedom from control (Seddon, 2003), either directly through loosening hierarchical conformance requirements and or indirectly through shaping the constraining effects of politicized behaviour. Organizations should reduce hierarchy and bureaucracy, have fewer managers and aim to create a polyarchy: leadership of the many by the many (Obolensky, 2007). Leaders, either appointed or self-appointed, should be seen as a force to create a new way of doing things; the constructs of structure and culture (Stapely, 1996) are deformed in order to be reformed through a more participative and empowerment-oriented approach.

However, to what extent do organizations understand the implications of leadership and do they fully appreciate the impact that either successful and or effective leaders have on shaping/reshaping organizational culture? Organizational culture is a powerful determinant of behaviour, to such an extent that we become, in a control sense, victim to it; as Schein (2004, p. 3) states: “Culture is an abstraction, yet the forces that are created in social and organizational situations that derive from culture are powerful. If we don’t understand the operation of these forces, we become victim to them”. We become subsumed within the culture in terms of how we do things and the freedom that we actually have, or do not have, to affect the way “things are done around here”. Leadership, depending on the strength and courage of the individual, has the potential to reshape the dynamic and thus reduce the degree of subservience to the hierarchy and concomitant power bases by doing things differently (Drucker, 1989).

Organizations may be using the word “leadership” in an emotive and symbolic sense in order to create a catalyst for change and organizational development, but without fully addressing the impact leadership should have on structure, culture and the psychodynamic aspects of organizational life. Do organizations, therefore, in reality, maintain a hierarchy and concomitant social order that continues to constrain individuals, but does so in another guise? Therefore, it may be argued that organizations, by using the word “leadership”, are creating a collective delusion: “This general ‘Mutually Assured Delusion’ principle can give rise to multiple social cognitions of reality, irrespective of any strategic payoff . . . It also implies that in hierarchical organizations realism or denial will trickle down, causing subordinates to take their mindsets and beliefs from the leaders” (Bénabou, 2009 p. 2). The creation of a different form of groupthink (Janis, 1972), which has not created freedom to, for example, be truly innovative, but has simply maintained the hierarchy and its social order which continues to constrain individuals. The way things are done differently around here is nothing more than an illusion, as opposed to, perhaps “suffer a sea-change into something rich and strange” (Shakespeare, *The Tempest*, Act I, Scene II, Lines 564–565). Organizations want the “rich”, insofar as the perceived benefits of leadership are concerned, but not the strange, especially in any form that is seen as subverting hierarchy and systems, both of which are seen as essential to maintaining good order – good order in terms of employees staying within their respective boxes!

The Need for Effective Management

If leadership is not actually allowed to take place then organizations should focus on better management in order to improve organizational effectiveness. For example, poor management, as part of leadership, as identified by the Chartered Management Institute/Penna report, produced with Henley Business School (McBain et al., 2012), has a direct impact on organizational performance; 39 per cent of managers believed their line managers to be ineffective, whereas in high performance organizations 80 per cent of managers deemed their line manager to be effective. Poor management, let alone leadership, clearly needs to be addressed. The Global Workforce Survey conducted by Towers Watson (Towers Watson, 2012), which surveyed over 32,000 employees, highlighted that 65 per cent of employees are not highly engaged in their work, therefore, a significant proportion of could be categorized as adopting a satisficing stance at work; a position that prevents an organization from maximizing, or at least attempting to achieve such a state. The impact of satisficing consequentialism (Slote and Pettit, 1984; Swanton, 1993) or unmotivated sub-maximization (Pettit, 1993) does not only inhibit individual, group and organizational performance, but that of industry and a country's productive capability.

Given the surveys' results, and the amount that has been written and published on the link between good management and organizational effectiveness, is there still a recurrent problem? Hemel (2012) suggests that it could be a combination of three things: ignorance, indifference and impotence. Ignorance, in the sense that managers are simply not aware of the feelings of employees; they lack emotional intelligence (perceiving, reasoning, understanding and managing). Indifference, in that managers just do not care. Impotence, in that the organization does not allow them to change the context, that is, the holding environment (Stapley, 1996) acts as "psychic prison" (Cleary, 1992; Oswick and Jones, 2006).

The issue is, to what extent each of the three elements is the main constraint on managerial performance? Perhaps, as Hemel (2012) suggests, ignorance is not the main reason, but indifference and impotence are. The role of individual managers, and organizational culture as a holding environment, is key to maximizing the potential of employees through better management; it does not necessarily have to involve the use of leadership. We should therefore be realistic about what is needed within the workplace; not exhortations for leadership, but a realization that employees want better management. After all, our closest relationship with those that represent organizational hierarchies in the work setting is with line-management, at least on a day-to-day basis; managers shape how we work and have the opportunity every day to engage, enthuse and invigorate, that is, motivate individuals to do things not only better but also differently. Kouzes and Posner (2007, p 348) state that "real leadership is in the daily moments"; they cite Sergey Nikiforov, vice president at Stack3 Inc., who stated, "Every day I had an opportunity to make a small difference. I could have coached someone better, I could have listened better, I could have been more positive toward people, I could have said 'thank you' more often . . . the list just went on." It is time for organizations to think and act in these terms, not only with regard to the way that individual managers act, but also to allow managers to manage in such a way that "moments" can be built upon through greater freedom of action with regard to how things are done. Without such freedom, the "moments" will dissipate through a form of stasis imposed on individual managers through the organizational culture; the holding environment of many organizations prevents not only leadership but also good people management.

Conclusion

What is needed is a different form of management, one that is based more on emotional intelligence and thus better people management. Emotional intelligence (Goleman, 1996) is not the sole preserve of leaders, but resides within individuals, whether termed “managers” or “leaders”. If organizations want leadership in its narrative sense, as opposed to management, then a fundamental change to traditional formal cultures is required, alongside a reconfiguration of holding environments to one that removes the unseen, unwritten and unspoken aspects of the panopticon effect from the culture. Given that most organizations may not wish to accept the implications of this, especially in relation to giving more control to leaders at all levels within organizations, and not just in terms of the hierarchy, but it will also require a higher level of trust and belief in employees. The degree of empowerment (Spreitzer 1995; Kirkman and Rosen, 1999) required would carry a higher degree of risk, but risk is an inherent aspect of innovation; do not organizations also use the word “innovation” as part of the modern management mantra, yet do not wish to fully accept the implications of this with regard to culture, control and management? Is this not, again, the use of another symbolic word which requires a radical rethink of traditional organizational cultures and the inherent restraining forces within the dynamic on leadership, that is, good management.

It is submitted that it is time for organizations to reassess the value placed on effective line-management and the impact it has on improving employee performance and engagement on a day-to-day basis. Management is not about a grand philosophy, rather, it is about fundamental interactions between managers and subordinates as they occur “in the moment” and on a day-to-day basis. The importance of these interactions is not, as previously stated, the sole preserve of leadership, but relates to the key working manager–employee relationship within the hierarchy; day-to-day interactions set the tone and thus shape attitude and behaviour. If, however, organizations really desire leadership at all levels, as some claim they do, then serious and meaningful consideration needs to be given to releasing management and employees from the psychological prisons (Morgan, 2006; Oswick and Jones 2006) of hierarchical cultures that still predominate within organizations. There is also a need to challenge the extent to which management at the strategic apex of organizations is prepared to change the cultural architecture of organizations in order to foster and encourage leadership.

It is proposed that an illusion of change, emanating from an organization’s strategic apex, is created through the use of a romanticized, emotive and symbolic word; a word that manifests a form of organizational delusion. The consequences of this delusion are complex and multifaceted, and often results in a reality being created which employees below the apex do not accept as representing their everyday experience. This, then, is the fallacy of using the word “leadership”; it is a delusion, albeit inadvertent, in order to create a sense of change and improvement, but one that is, perhaps, treated with scepticism by employees and is therefore likely to have little impact, at least when set against the leadership narrative. There is a case for organizations to be more realistic by what is meant when using the word “leadership”; a meaning that is, in reality, neither about being charismatic nor transformational, but transactional in nature (Avolio, Bass and Jung, 1999; Judge and Piccolo, 2004), which is, alongside emotional intelligence, a key aspect of effective management. Management should be thought of in terms of attributes to the same extent as leadership, along with skills that can be developed in order to enable individuals to perform the complex dance of management, whether it is in the form of leadership or management. Unless organizations consider fundamentally changing the constraints and control mechanisms of their holding

environments, the constructs that maintain hierarchy and concomitant social order will remain in a traditional form, thus working against leadership.

There is a need to determine what organizations mean, beyond the rhetoric, when they use the word “leadership” and extol its virtues. Alongside this, there is a need to examine the degree to which organizations take meaningful action to reframe their holding environments and concomitant control mechanisms in order to allow leadership to take place.

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