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# Leadership as a organizational narrative

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## **Introduction**

What is leadership, really?

As I do not, yet, have a dissertation project of my own in progress I will in this paper investigate the construct of “leadership” in an organizational context. I will attempt to relate it to both the organization itself but also to the people that make up, or *are*, the organization. To do this, I will make use of a cultural or narrative perspective of leadership (Salzer-Mörling, 1998; 2003), and highlight social processes as vital aspects of organizational life (Ekman, 2003; Schutz, 1995; Wheelan, 1999). In doing so, I will explore possible paths to connect one of my own interests and upcoming research projects in leadership and organizational research, namely, organizational narratives and the view that organizations can be seen to actually *be* narratives, narratives that are “told” and shaped by their leaders but not only by their leaders. I will also speculate that the using and shaping of organizations by their leaders is not a unidirectional process, but that the leaders themselves are also used and shaped by the organization to reach goals.

## **Leadership and organizations**

As is often pointed out, there seems to be many definitions of leadership, almost as many as there are researchers and writers (Yukl, 2005: 3). Historically, in leadership research, there seems to have been a focus on the lone (often male and described in heroic terms) leader and both the organizational context and the followers have largely been ignored (Gronn, 2002). It was the leaders abilities, traits, personality etc that was important to research and the context and the leaders interaction with his followers was taken for granted or considered to be of lesser importance (Larsson et al., 2005).

It was easy to get the impression that there in organizations were, in earlier times, those (leaders) that *had* leadership abilities and did nothing but lead and those (followers) that *did not have* leadership abilities and thus did nothing but follow. In other words: you either were a leader with influence, or, rather, power, or you were not a leader without influence/power – there were no *degrees* of leadership and the influence resulting from (vertical and horizontal) two-way interaction between people in the organization was of little interest (Ekman, 2003; Larsson et al., 2005; Zaccaro et al., 2003). A very rational and, in my opinion, a largely unrealistic view of organizational – and human – life.

A basic assumption in leadership research seems to be that organizations are better off with (good) leaders than without any leaders at all, and worse off with bad leaders than with no or good leaders (Larsson, lecture April 19; Wheelan, 1999). A lot of research have been done to investigate how a good leader should (and shouldn't) behave, and what effects a change in leaders can have in times of crisis (Tyrstrup, 2006). Other research have focused on less dramatic, but, I think, not less important aspects of leadership, i.e, how leaders have been able to keep an organization together, and developing (Salzer-Mörling, 1998; 2003, Ekman, 2003). I will argue that leadership indeed is necessary for any organization (or group) to be able to function and work efficiently (Wheelan, 1999). What primarily interests me is how and by whom this leadership is exercised.

Today, with larger organizations and with faster and more complex interactions with competitors and demands from the clients it seems necessary for the organization to be able to respond to changes in its environment with greater speed, greater precision, service and creativity than before. For that reason, the management of the organizations will rely more on the employees of the organization to sense what is required of the organization and, if and

when necessary, to implement the changes that is decided upon. (Wheelan, 1999; Ekman, 2003; Salzer-Mörling, 2003)

However, how is the management, the leaders of the organization, to ensure that the employees of the organization have the good of the company as their goal and understands the orders for changes etc.?

In a large organization it is neither possible nor effective for the management to, in detail, instruct or observe the everyday doings of every employee. Most of this work is handled through intermediaries, or “links”, as Larsson et al. (2005) puts it, and the influence is thus effective through indirect, or distributed, (Gronn, 2002: 429ff) leadership. It is of course possible to explore and analyze the processes of influence that goes on at different levels of an organization (Yammarino et al., 2005). However, the level that I am going to focus on is the interpersonal processes on the group level. I believe that leadership, “influence” (Yukl, 2005: 8; Gronn, 2002: 428) can – and probably should – be exercised in multiple ways and through various communicative channels to be truly effective. I think, however, that one of the most effective and cost efficient ways to influence other people in an organizational framework is the everyday, one-to-one personal conversations (Ekman, 2003; Salzer-Mörling, 2003).

I think that the narratives (about the company, about a leader/founder of the company or about a particular product or organizational change etc.) that are exchanged in the casual everyday meetings between colleagues or between employees and client are, in some ways, more important than, for example, a big public presentation made by the CEO once per year. It is possible that it is these everyday and personal narratives that establishes the “shared mental models” and creates the trust and confidence in the organization, its products and services and the implementation of the goals and decisions of the top

management (Ekman, 2003; Salzer-Mörling, 2003). Of course, the interpretations of public appearances and statements of the top management are also important and, in a way, can be said to form the/a basis for the everyday conversations and help or tarnish the narrative – public and/or internal – image of the organization (Gilbreath et al. 2004; Tyrstrup, 2006).

Thus, both impersonal, rare and public, statements and orders on an organizational level as well as personal, everyday conversations on the group/interpersonal level are necessary to keep the organization going. Depending on the size, type etc. of the organization the ratio between the two kinds of communications will probably differ – it is likely that in a small workgroup or, for example, a small company of less than 10 employees, there are little need and no arena for large and impersonal statements and all the more need for everyday and personal communications (Ekman, 2003; Schutz, 1995; Wheelan, 1999). Conversely, in a large organization, like Ericsson for example, there are is a larger need for impersonal “big statements” that affects, and talks to, the entire organization – and the surroundings of the organization: its clients and its investors etc. These statements can be (interpreted to be) handled expertly or not so expertly (Tyrstrup, 2006). It is also likely, in a large organization, especially if the organization is an international one, that the overarching organizational narrative will be interpreted somewhat differently on a local or group level and thus become diversified into local variants (Salzer-Mörling, 1998).

It is perhaps natural to view a large organization, perhaps a university hospital like Karolinska Institutet or industrial organizations like Volvo or Ericsson as “things” that exist by themselves, independently of what we, as students, employees and/or customers think of and behave towards them. In actuality, though, even these large organizations are not independent of us and they would not exist if we, by our actions, understood and constructed them as

organizations (Salzer-Mörling, 1998). The services and goods that these, and other, organizations can also be viewed as part of their organizational narratives and lets the organizations continue to exist, as reified narratives. And by taking part of a narrative, making use of a product and/or service of an organization or by being employed by it, we also (re-)create and (re-)shape that narrative (Berger and Luckmann, 1966; Salzer-Mörling, 1998). But, as Salzer-Mörling points out, the process of defining, shaping and creating the narrative reality is not a symmetrical process. Not everyone has the same possibility, ability or power to define (and create) this narrative reality for others: “the power of leadership is about the ability to define reality for others” (1998: 136, my translation).

As an organization does not exist independently of the people it can be said to “consist of” it is therefore in a processual state of constant – if minute – change and re-creation. Yukl (2005: 284f) states that one of the “most important and difficult leadership responsibilities”, is leading (intentional) change. However, it would seem that managing (hindering) the organizational tendency to change in unintentional ways is also a one of the “important and difficult responsibilities” of leadership, that is – to maintain competence and cohesion among other things. One way of doing this is by implementing a strategic process of selection and development of its (key-)employees (cf Larsson et al., 2003).

From the perspective of the employees this process of selection and development can be viewed as a kind of socialisation (if not indoctrination) into the organization. In and through this process the employee learns how s/he is expected to behave, what views etc. that are acceptable and appreciated within the organization. As put by Urban Bergsten (lecture on May 6): “[leadership] affects others ways of thinking and perspectives concerning what is desirable, possible and necessary”. For the individual (and

the group) it sometimes requires much hard work to get through the process of workgroup formation but it is also, at the same time described as, ideally, very satisfying and rewarding – both for the individual, the group and the leader/organization (Schutz, 1995; Wheelan, 1999)

### **Implications and research aspects**

Obviously, researching these issues, investigating mechanisms of narrative leadership and organizing seems to require a somewhat different methodological approach than the “standard” quantitative ones (Bryman, 2004). It is likely that qualitative studies, with interviews and textual and discursive analysis as the main tools, will be important aspects of this kind of research. Possible areas of interest could be to investigate the degree of shared mental model of the organizational goals and strategy and how that affects the outcome/productivity of the group or organization (Larsson et al., 2005). Another area could be what kinds of effect(s) a change in leadership would mean to different people within and outside of the organization (Johnsson et al. 2003; Weingarten, 2001).

Examples on organizations that in Sweden, in recent times, has experienced a change of its CEO and should be studied are Ericsson (2003; Carl-Henric Svanberg replacing Kurt Hellström after the economic trouble described in Tyrstrup (2006)) and the moderate party (2003; Fredrik Reinfeldt replacing Bo Lundgren after a disastrous result in the general election in 2002). There are of course many other instances that leaders have been replaced and high hopes have been placed upon them but the cited examples are interesting in the way that the two leaders have almost completely changed the image of their respective organizations. (Under Fredrik Reinfeldts management even the name of his party changed to the *new* moderate party to, as I see it, rewrite the internal (“culture”) as well as external (PR, image) organizational narrative)

A practical implication (and, probably, an advantage) of viewing the organization as a more or less shared narrative is that it allows for a re-interpretation of organizational “culture” as more easily modifiable. Hopefully it also means that organizations become more researchable than the “it’s in the walls”-mindset to culture that usually is prominent in these “softer” approaches to organizational life. Another aspect of the concept of narrative organization and narrative leadership that may be of use is the external, or image, aspect of the organization: by viewing an organization as a narrative construct it becomes even more necessary for the organization to tend to its relations with the “outside world”. And, vice versa, for the outside world (researchers included) it becomes even more possible to study and make assessments of the organization by the narrative material that it produces: its products, its brochures, public statements etc.

## **Conclusion**

The question I asked in the beginning of this paper was: *What is leadership, really?* I think that leadership, in different ways, is about influencing a group or an organization. To influence there has to be some sort of communication, and for leadership to be really effective the communication has to be more or less continuous, i.e. a leadership-organizational interactional narrative. The leader, thus, does not exist apart from the organization that s/he is to lead - and as a result of that, s/he is also influenced by the organization and can even (Tyrstrup, 2006: 153) be seen as somewhat of a tool of the organization, acting out the manuscript and expectations (the narrative) that has been given her or him.

Maybe a naïve conclusion but a leader seems to be nothing (leader-wise) without someone or something to lead, and s/he is also, to some degree, formed by those people. And together they form – and is formed by – the narrative organization.

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