



The nature of leadership

Leadership as Mundane Work

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Research Summaries Notices

Research Summaries

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Introduction

It is a failing in the study of the leadership that the profusion of theories has done more to obscure its true character than to clarify it, with the lack of agreement concerning exactly what leadership is and how it should be defined creating considerable confusion and contradiction. Leadership theories continue to proliferate, drawing upon different social, political and psychological theories but few studies actually venture into the everyday *doing* of leadership. What are ignored are the lay methods and interests that make up the 'what' of situated practices themselves. There is little or no serious mention or description of what leadership work - such as running a meeting, presenting a College's financial position, talking to new students, interviewing and appraising staff etc - actually consists of as a practical endeavour. This research summary aims to use our rich observational data to provide detailed, nuanced, descriptions of mundane leadership work as it occurs in daily college life.

Leadership as Mundane Work

One could select almost any extract from the mass of fieldnotes, interview transcripts and documents gathered during the study as being illustrative of the everyday circumstances, practices and activities that constitute the 'real world', situated character of leadership work. It is their mundane-ness which makes them expressive of order: they are recognisable as things that everybody does in ordinary situations. There is nothing special about the talking, listening, deciding, sending emails, attending meetings, etc that constitute leadership work: these activities are resources we all have at our disposal. It is their situated accomplishment – and as Alvesson and Sveningsson suggest (2003) the fact that it is those perceived as leaders doing them – that make them significant, or indeed, that make them leadership. What follows is a brief selection of some of the skills and activities which may be said to constitute the 'mundane work' of educational leadership.

Mundane Leadership ‘giving a clear message’

The notion of **leadership as ‘giving a clear message’** - ensuring that staff, students and parents had a clear idea of what was expected of them and what they in turn might reasonably demand - was a recurrent theme in both observations and interviews. This was not about the transformational, inspirational communications of the charismatic or visionary leader, but the straightforward communication of objectives, plans, progress and the like which members of the college needed in order to know what was expected of them in the performance of their own roles. So for example, references to the ‘3Rs’ (recruitment, retention and results), ‘quality’ and ‘excellence’ were a commonplace shorthand for the aims college leaders had for their organisations, reiterated frequently in interactions with staff at all levels:

‘[We had] a great inspection report. ... we went up in everything, mainly by focusing in on quality. I mean, I started talking about the three Rs – recruitment, retention and results – as soon as I came ... I think most people out there would say I’ve always given them a clear message.’ (Kate - Principal)

In the competitive environment of the commercially oriented, post-incorporation learning and skills sector, this ‘clear message’ further extends to issues of the college image or ‘brand’, its appearance to the outside world,

*‘During 2003 SMT recognized that, with increased individual use of IT, there was a need for more consistency of style in College documentation. Examples of the range of diversity in practice were evident in papers that went to Governors’ meeting, in letters from different parts of the College to the same external organization (e.g. the Learning and Skills Council) and in memos from different departments. Font sizes varied from 8 to 14 point size and a variety of typefaces were used... this inconsistency potentially ‘dilutes’ the ‘brand value’ of the College. A group of ‘professionals’ was formed to develop documentation standards or ‘house style’ guidelines for use by all College staff. These guidelines should now be followed’
(Staff Bulletin)*

The achievement of clarity requires consistency of purpose in the face of the unexpected. This underlying consistency can be seen across the wide range of activities undertaken by college principals, be it interpreting the edicts of the LSC, monitoring staff in relation to the drawing up of lesson plans or the delivery of the curriculum, or constructing an annual budget. Thus the everyday work of negotiating compromises and devising temporary fixes are an integral part of keeping the organisation on track.

Mundane Leadership - Meetings

Meetings form a central part of organizational work, whether they involve formal gatherings around a table, or more *ad hoc* occasions in which talk, opinions, information, gossip, or jokes are exchanged. And as such, the convening, attending, ordering, and following up on meetings is very much a part of *doing* leadership.

For college principals, a significant though mundane requirement of their role is that of making decisions about which meetings to attend:

'...and the relationship thing about who matters in the county – not who invites you, but who matters. That's a different thing, particularly in B----- because there is a sort of, quite a sort of flattering network of the private schools and all that sort of certain type of bits of the County Council and other things, and that's all very flattering to get invitations, but actually that won't take the college anywhere. What I'm much more concerned about is school heads, and the university.' (Adrian - Principal)

In addition to attending meetings, there is the requirement to prepare for them – to review past meetings, familiarize oneself with what is to be discussed, determine strategies or lines of argument to be employed, and so on. This often entails the rehearsing of an agreed 'story' with other members of staff in order to ensure a confident, seamless 'performance' on the day:

'A useful pre-meeting. For a set-piece meeting like this (with the LSC), it's important to be prepared. I feel I know where we are now and we all know what to say. We did this with Ofsted (and got grade 1 for leadership and management).' (Steven - Principal)

Whilst the ostensible reason for holding a meeting may be, for example, to make a decision on a particular issue, the 'sub-text' may be about gaining consensus for a decision already made, surfacing issues or areas of dissent which may make the decision unworkable, recording individual areas of responsibility within the overall decision, and so on. In each case, the 'work' the meeting is intended to do, and the 'leadership work' required to bring this about is markedly different, even though the surface characteristics of talking listening, negotiating, deciding and agreeing may be common to all. The range of 'leadership work' alternatives implicit in the various purposes meetings can accomplish is suggested by the following, although not all principals make this 'sub-text' as explicit to other meeting participants:

'... the way we operate is that if - you know, I want to retain the right to take decisions on some things, some matters. Therefore in terms of the agenda of our Executive we have the sort of classic decision consideration information, and I try to flag up whether I've already got, made the decision by saying - if I say something's for consideration, then that probably means I might reserve the right to not go with the consensus. If it's for decision, that generally means I'll - you know, I will abide by whatever the consensus is and we try very hard for that sort of consensus.' (Adrian - Principal)

Bureaucracy and Mundane Leadership Work

Whilst administrative tasks are a recognised part of almost any managerial role, the burden of bureaucracy in educational leadership in FE was greatly increased by Incorporation, which forced college principals to satisfy external performance indicators. The prevalence of an 'audit culture', involving considerable time and effort - by the leadership and staff alike - being devoted to making the work of the college accountable rather than to the delivery of 'first order', student-focused outcomes, is clear in the fieldwork observations made during the study. The work involved is routine, meticulous and unglamorous - mundane in every sense of the word - but its implications for every aspect of the college's wellbeing (funding, levels of provision, career prospects for staff, to name but a few) make its accomplishment a key role of the college leadership. The following sequence of fieldnote extracts, relating to Lampton's bid for Premium Funding, illustrate both the construction and performance element of the audit process, and the time-consuming nature of the underlying work practices:

Fieldnote extract 1: *SMT meeting reviews funding and planning paper prepared for the LSC - no clear guidelines as to what they want, so huge variety in what each area has provided. Steven (Principal) briefs people on how to use the draft documents at tomorrow's meeting with the LSC: use it as a prompt but don't hand it out. Need to know more about what they want in order to prepare a document for them. Steven coaches people in how to approach the meeting and how to handle questions, so they are all 'telling the same story'.*

Fieldnote extract 2: *Peter (Director of Finance) gives other members of the SMT a clear walk-through of the financial data, and their implications for meeting LSC funding criteria. Steven: "If it's 10 more IT students we need another teacher, if it's 10 more modern languages then its straight profit."*

Fieldnote extract 3: *Steven works through the numbers, checking them on a calculator - likes to be one step ahead in terms of clarity - then rehearses the argument in terms of implications for funding programme. ... as people leave Steven says, "A useful meeting. For a set piece like this, it's important to be prepared. I feel I know where we are now and we all know what to say. We did this with Ofsted."*

Thus the documents produced to meet an external audit requirement, and the accounts which underpin them, represent 'gambits of compliance' (Bittner, 1965) - 'extending to the rule the respect of compliance, while finding in the rule the means for doing whatever needs to be done.' (Bittner, 1965:273) Steven and his colleagues know what provision they want to make for students within the college, and use the audit framework imposed by their funding body as a vehicle for justifying the required resourcing. Getting the funding is not about impassioned, visionary appeals, but about solid preparation for the contingencies of the meeting with the LSC.

Conclusion: Leadership or Management or Both?

Through the analysis of some of the mundane features of leadership work, our study suggests that 'leadership' and leadership work is not necessarily that special or different from other kinds of work carried out in organizations. Whilst many of the tasks accomplished by college principals - obtaining funding for a new college building, dealing with the LSC, setting standards for staff and students - are certainly a part of doing 'good leadership', the way in which this work is done is actually quite ordinary. Meetings are held, proposals are planned, written and re-written, e-mails, letters and phone calls are made, committees are attended and so forth.

One of the central findings of the study is that one of many skills involved in being a college principal is the accumulation of what Bittner (1965) has termed 'organizational acumen' - the ability and entitlement to interpret rules and procedures in a way that suits a particular purpose. Good leaders, the data suggests, are competent and skilled in Bittner's gambits of compliance. They know what stories to tell at the right times, they know what figures to produce, how and when. They are skilled in managing performances, images and interpretations.

The esoteric preserve of 'leadership'. These are skills potentially available to anyone working in an organization and utilised by managers and staff at all levels. As Alvesson and Sveningsson (2003) have recently observed, much of what passes for leadership in organizations has first to be abbreviated and translated from the ordinary and the mundane. As they argue, 'what managers ('leaders') do may not be that special, but because they are managers doing 'leadership', fairly mundane acts may be given an extraordinary meaning, at least by the managers themselves' (2003: 1436).

Hence, none of the above examples are dramatic instances of the exercise of leadership. Indeed, the whole body of study data supports the claim that leadership is an everyday phenomenon, appearing in various mundane disguises. In consequence the examples are themselves mundane and very ordinary (and far more prolific than is reported here). Leadership acts as an appropriate description for what is 'going on' because the words, the tone with which they are said and, most importantly the setting, the courses of action, the relationships, within which they occur all serve to act as documentary evidences of the mundane exercise of 'leadership'. But there is no special or arcane skill here.

References

Alvesson, Mats and Sveningsson, Stefan (2003) Managers doing leadership: The extra-ordinarization of the mundane. *Human Relations*, 56, 12, 1435-1459.

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List of Research Summaries

A central theme in our research has been the role of storytelling in daily leadership work. Leaders tell stories to followers, and followers tell stories to and about leaders. Such stories communicate ideas, share knowledge, vent frustrations and deal with conflict. In a sector where learning from experience is more common than formal training, the documenting and analysis of storytelling is an important way for us to better understand the daily challenges facing educational leaders. We therefore decided to present the initial findings from our research in the format of short stories. Listed below are the other titles in this series:

SHORT STORIES OF LEADERSHIP FROM THE FE SECTOR

- 1 Explicating Leadership
- 2 Storytelling and Leadership
- 3 Leadership as Mundane Work
- 4 Technologies of Leadership
- 5 Meetings and Leadership
- 6 Leadership and Emotional Labour
- 7 Bureaucracy and Leadership
- 8 Leadership and Audit Cultures
- 9 Patterns of Leadership
- 10 Game Playing and Leadership Development
- 11 Understanding the Success and Failure of Leadership
- 12 The Language of Leadership

If you have found this short paper interesting, please have a look at the longer version, or other papers on our project website:

<http://www.comp.lancs.ac.uk/computing/research/cseg/projects/explicating>

Further information and contact details

This project is investigating the nature of leadership and the everyday challenges of leading. Our project focuses on what it is that educational leaders really do, and document in detail the everyday practices of leadership in the learning and skills sector. Our understanding of the practical accomplishment of leadership is achieved through shadowing and studying educational leaders from various institutions over long periods. The research is central to revealing the nature of leadership, relations between leaders and the led, risk-taking and entrepreneurship. Our research began in November 2003 and a significant amount of fieldwork has been carried out in colleges from different geographical areas. Four colleges were chosen for more detailed long-term study.

Our findings show that leadership in the learning and skills sector is less about the work of a few talented individuals and more about the successful organization of a complex network of distributed leadership practices involving staff from across the organization. Our research clearly shows that leadership is neither mystical nor heroic, but consists of relentless attention to relatively mundane tasks and much of leadership is management. Leadership depends on doing the 'grunt work' before any form of vision kicks in. In turn, improving the experience and culture of a college comes through attention to everyday mundane details. Our research evidence also shows the importance of technology (including management information systems and email) in their work, for example, in providing new ways of presenting data about colleges. The importance of the 'audit culture' on everyday leadership work is also evident in our research. This raises issues of how a concentration on external audits can lead to a neglect of more broad educational matters. We will be reporting the final results of the research to the DfES in March 2006. In the meantime we would be very pleased to receive any comments or suggestions in relation to these initial findings or any aspect you think is relevant to the research. All responses will be treated in the strictest confidence.

If you would like more information about the 'Explicating Leadership' research project please contact:

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