

## THEORIES OF LEADERSHIP

*Mats Alvesson and André Spicer*

## INTRODUCTION

WE ARE OFTEN TOLD THAT leadership is the vital ingredient in any successful organization. It is what distinguishes thriving organizations from languishing ones. The presumed importance of leadership fuels many corporations' obsession with encouraging their employees to become leaders. Many people think that perennial organizational problems such as increasing productivity, ensuring quality, driving innovation, building morale and delivering strategies can all be dealt with through more and better leadership. When things go wrong, one of the first things that a board of directors does is look for new leadership. Even organizations that traditionally downplayed leadership now ascribe more and more significance to it. Today schools, hospitals and universities routinely try to encourage leadership in their ranks.

Given our confidence in leadership, we might assume it would have a clear and distinct meaning. Sadly, this is not the case. A quick look at some of the academic texts on leadership reminds us there is a very broad spectrum of definitions. Yukl (1989: 253) points out that 'the numerous definitions of leadership that have been proposed appear to have little else in common' than involving an influence process. Yukl himself tried to bring a little order to this complicated field by defining leadership as 'influencing task objectives and strategies, influencing commitment and compliance in task behaviour to achieve these objectives, influencing group maintenance and identification, and influencing the culture of an organization' (p. 253). This definition makes sense but it does not say that much. Leadership is about influencing a range of things. It seems that even the best definitions of leadership are often so broad and ambiguous that they are of limited value and sometimes become fairly meaningless. It is difficult to establish cognitive control over concepts like leadership (and many other concepts as well, but leadership may still be one of the trickiest). It works more through the associations it ignites.

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The ambiguity of typical definitions of leadership can be seen if we ask ourselves the following question. Do leaders need to display all the characteristics listed by Yukl, or do they just have to do one or two of these things? If the former is the case then leadership is probably very rare. After all, it is very difficult for even the most super-human corporate warriors to exercise such a broad and far reaching influence. But if the latter is the case, then leadership is very common. Who does not then do it part of the time? We all influence each other at work. 'Leadership' easily becomes everything and nothing. And the use of the term easily oscillates between what everybody does and what only an exceptional group of 'real leaders' do. This means that it is not easy to sort out what leadership is and what it is not.

In this chapter we would like to argue that we must abandon the common assumption of many mainstream studies of leadership that it is possible to develop a universal theory of leadership. There have been many attempts to do such a thing. These universal concepts have come in different forms. Perhaps the most dominant way of thinking about leadership today emphasizes so-called 'transformational' approaches that see leadership as not just a matter of transactions for instrumental purposes, based on the manager rewarding/sanctioning subordinates. Rather, it involves attempts to appeal to followers' sense of a larger whole that they enthusiastically want to contribute to. Through being an inspirational example, having an appealing vision, showing consideration and being intellectually stimulating, the leader is capable of transforming subordinates into willing followers (Yukl 1999). But there has been a lot of criticism levelled at this heroic view of the leader recently. One result is that we have witnessed the rise of what could possibly be a new mainstream view of leadership. This involves advocating post-heroic leadership. According to this approach, leadership happens everywhere: You can lead your subordinates, your boss, your colleagues, even yourself! By drawing attention to the range of unusual and unsuspected ways that leadership occurs, this approach certainly represents an important advance in the study of leadership. However, post-heroic approaches are dangerous because they lead to the generalization of leadership: we begin to see almost anything and everything as 'leadership'.

While seeing leadership everywhere is interesting, we think it is ultimately unhelpful. After all, concepts benefit from some discipline and restriction. For us, studying leadership requires that we do not just see it everywhere, but rather that we recognize its limitations. The variation, incoherence and complexity of leadership need to be taken seriously. To capture this, we argue that we should develop an ambiguity-centred approach to leadership. This involves taking a much more sceptical stance towards ideas of leadership. Instead of seeing leadership as a fairly coherent process which can potentially

happen anywhere, an ambiguity-centred approach sees leadership as a contradictory phenomenon that can be used in different ways by different people. This involves developing an approach to leadership that questions much of the common ideology about great leaders. This approach focuses on how leadership is actually done and interpreted/responded to in the messy real world. In particular, it involves a greater sensitivity to cultural contexts and recognizes the different meanings attributed to leadership. Despite what mainstream leadership authors and many managers claim, leadership is seldom self-evident and clear-cut. Examples of it are open to various interpretations and people often attribute different meanings to what the leader does and the consequences – if any – that may follow (Alvesson 2010a).

An ambiguity-centred approach involves listening to people in organizations and finding out when and why they talk about leadership, what they mean by it, their beliefs, values and feelings around leadership and different versions and expressions of it. One can, for example, probably identify leadership-oriented or 'leadership-free' organizational cultures of different kinds. It might also be possible to identify organizational cultures where there is less interest in heroic leaders or even leadership in other ways. The term may be seen as alien or of marginal relevance in some contexts. For instance, organizations with strong professional ideologies like universities or bureaucratic systems like retail banks could be examples here. We should remember that for some groups, leadership may actually be a fairly negative phenomenon. An emphasis on leadership could be equated with authoritarianism, elitism and non-professionalism. Does 'leadership' refer to different kinds of people and actions in different organizations? Perhaps for various groups it refers to the strong and decisive decision-maker, the superior technician or professional, the team-builder and coach, the educator and developer of people or the result-oriented number-cruncher carefully monitoring and putting pressure on people to perform. How people talk about leadership is indicative of wider cultural patterns in an organization or industry. And if there is such wide variation in what is thought to be good leadership, then it is very difficult to develop a definition of leadership which applies in all times and spaces. Instead sensitivity to people's meanings – held by groups, organizations, professions, industries and societies – become important to understand how people relate to leadership.

In order to capture this variation, we need a range of different ideas that will help us to understand leadership. We think that metaphors are helpful here. This book will develop such a range of metaphors that help us to understand the many aspects of leadership. These metaphors emphasize leadership as setting moral example, developing people, nurturing wellbeing, making firm decisions and providing direction, emphasizing efficiency and delivery, and kicking ass when needed. These are captured in Chapters 4 to 9 using the

metaphors of the leader as a bully. We hope these metaphors and all the ambiguity of leadership management: 'here is a loving leadership (again)'. To develop this ambiguity follows. We begin by looking at leaders – as being in a sense is often very difficult to see from different perspectives on leadership. The currently dominant approach begins to set out an ambiguity with a focus on the ambiguity done. We argue that to understand the interactions between leadership and leadership works. We live in its place.

To repeat, leadership metaphors have tried to do this that managers rely on processes such as planning. Leaders rely on their intuition and mainly on thinking (e.g. Kotter's moods, evoking images and objectives . . . They think about what is put this another way while managers are . . . This split between seems appealing. It is almost mystical pursuit of administrative ideology of what (2010). This involves creating continued

metaphors of the leader as saint, gardener, buddy, commander, cyborg and bully. We hope these metaphors provide a way of understanding leadership and all the ambiguity it entails. Or, to put this in the language of popular management: 'here is all you need to know to stop fearing ambiguity and start loving leadership (again)'.

To develop this ambiguity-centred approach to leadership, we proceed as follows. We begin by looking at one of the most basic ways people seek to define leaders – as being in some ways different from management. We note that it is often very difficult to make such a distinction. Next, we look at five dominant perspectives on leadership. We then focus on the possible short-comings of the currently dominant approach which emphasizes post-heroic leadership. We then begin to set out an ambiguity-centred approach to leadership. For us, this involves a focus on the ambiguity associated with how leadership is used, mobilized and done. We argue that to understand this ambiguity, we must be able to trace out the interactions between leaders, followers and contexts. By doing so, we become able to develop a far more nuanced and sceptical understanding of how leadership works. We hope such an approach allows us to begin to put leadership in its place.

### MANAGERS VS. LEADERS

To repeat, leadership is a very difficult thing to define. One way researchers have tried to do this is by contrasting it with management. They often claim that managers rely on their formal position and work with bureaucratic processes such as planning, budgeting, organization and controlling. In contrast, leaders rely on their personal abilities, work with visions, agendas and coalition building and mainly use non-coercive means which affect people's feelings and thinking (e.g. Kotter 1988; Zaleznik 1977). Leaders influence by 'altering moods, evoking images and expectations, and in establishing specific desires and objectives . . . The net result of this influence is to change the way people think about what is desirable, possible and necessary' (Zaleznik 1977: 71). To put this another way, leaders are heavily involved in symbolic management while managers are more concerned with administrative processes.

This split between symbol-manipulating leaders and administrative managers seems appealing. It makes leadership sound like a glamorous, challenging, almost mystical pursuit. In contrast management appears as a kind of humdrum set of administrative tasks. These two caricatures seem to be heavily loaded with the ideology of what some have begun to call 'leaderism' (O'Reilly and Reed 2010). This involves a celebration of leadership as an essential component in creating continued and radical change. Leadership is viewed as inherently good

and necessary for any dynamic organization. Every definition of management or leadership comes out to the leaders' advantage: it is much more dynamic, important and powerful. Given such an alluring image, people easily identify with leadership and regard themselves as 'leaders, not managers'.

However, this rigid distinction between leaders and managers is questionable. Most people who claim to or are believed to be doing leadership in organizations usually have a formal position, normally as a manager but it might also be as chair of a committee or a union representative. Such formal positions often tap into our deeply held belief that people can legitimately exercise influence over us when they are in formal positions of authority. Indeed, people usually gain access to these formal positions on the basis of what are taken to be 'informal' leadership capabilities. In most cases, people who are promoted to management positions are expected to have some qualities usually associated with 'leadership' like experience, education, intelligence and so on. They are also usually expected to 'look' like a leader, even if this just requires putting on a business suit and looking clean, tidy and reliable.

In practice, managers frequently rely on plans, they coordinate, control, and work with the bureaucracy. But they also try to create commitment or at least acceptance for plans, rules, goals and instructions. Managers working with these more formal mechanisms without any concern for what people think and feel usually accomplish very little. The mechanics of stimulus-response only works in simple and exceptional cases. There are few simple issues that can be communicated directly, resulting in behaviour that is easily monitored and adjusted. However, instructions call for understanding and acceptance. The hard work of helping people to understand the purpose of an instruction, and creating meaning around it, frequently transgresses any clear distinction between management and leadership. Therefore, it would seem to be more helpful to look at management and leadership as discreetly intertwined phenomena. By doing so, we are able to develop a more realistic account of how leadership is actually carried out.

We are not trying to say that all management is leadership, and vice-versa. Rather, we argue that leadership is frequently intertwined with management. However, there are many instances of managerial work that plainly do not involve leadership. Administration, for example, is not leadership. Everything that does not involve interaction or indirect communication with subordinates falls outside leadership, even if these activities could be seen as management. In addition, the strict monitoring of behaviour or output does not seem to be leadership. For us, leadership involves a strong ingredient of management of meaning (Ladkin 2010; Smircich and Morgan 1982), where the shaping of the ideas, values, perceptions and feelings is central, but this can involve also coercive elements (seen as legitimately enacted). To understand this process,

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### MAJOR PERSPECTIVES ON LEADERSHIP

The ongoing struggle to define what leadership is has produced a glut of perspectives, theories, models and typologies. Many people who are new to the field find the sheer amount and variety confusing, frustrating and perhaps even a little depressing. In order to make sense of this confusing mess, there have been varied attempts to carve up the field. One way of dividing up the field involves pointing to five broad approaches: traits of leader, leader behavioural style, contingency approach, transformational leadership, and post-heroic leadership (House and Aditya 1997; Parry and Bryman 2006).

The first approach involves an attempt to locate the personality *traits* that make someone into a leader (for a review, see House and Aditya 1997: 410–419). The central assumption here is that being a leader is caused by innate aspects of one's self. The major concern was to try to identify what the traits were that separate leaders from the led. Early research asked whether a series of personality characteristics like gender, height, physical energy, appearance and personality traits were linked with leadership. Despite deeply ingrained assumptions about these links (for instance men are more likely to be leaders), no defensible links were found. However, more recent work has tried to revive the trait approach by focusing on personality characteristics. Earlier research suggested that leaders would have higher levels of physical energy and higher intelligence than those they lead. Leaders would also seek to dominate others through showing what psychologists euphemistically call 'pro-social influence motivation'. This involves setting one's own goals and then contentiously and doggedly pursuing them. Another important trait for predicting leadership in some contexts is 'power motivation' which involves the desire to acquire positions of status and exercise that status over others for 'positive' (organizational, collective) purposes (e.g. McClelland and Burnham 1976). A third personality trait associated with leadership is high self-confidence. A final trait found in some studies of leadership is flexibility and social sensitivity. While trait based approaches have produced a significant body of findings, they have been roundly criticized by many studying leadership. In particular, many point out that personality traits rarely remain stable over time, the traits people display may change based on the situation they are faced with, and different traits might be valued in leaders in different kinds of organizations. By taking into account all these boundary conditions, many studies of leadership traits have become increasingly complex, confused in their goals, and often more confusing for poor readers.

To avoid the problems usually associated with trait approaches, some researchers turned their attention to examining the *style* of different leaders. The foundational research in this tradition argued that it was possible to distinguish between leaders who had a style which emphasized 'initiating structure' by designing and controlling the carrying out of work, and those who focused on issues of 'consideration' by being concerned about people issues (House and Aditya 1997: 419–421). This quickly congealed into what are seen as two dominant approaches to leadership – task-centred leadership which mainly focuses on getting things done, and people-centred leadership which involves significant concern for subordinates. While this approach certainly helped to divert attention from some presumed underlying list of personality traits that produced leaders, it continued to assume that there is a set of apparently universal behaviours that are associated with good leaders. This of course did not take into account the situational complexities usually associated with leadership. For instance, does one style of leadership work in knowledge intensive firms while another works in more routinized workplaces? Do people change the styles they use? Is there any cross-national variation? In short, behaviour style approaches did not address how context affects and shapes leadership.

To address many of the questions associated with the importance of differing situations on leadership effectiveness, researchers began to turn to contingency approaches to leadership. At the core of this work was the suspicion that different kinds of leaders would operate best in different kinds of contexts and organizational settings. Perhaps the best example of this was Fiedler's (1967) contingency model of leadership effectiveness. He argues that there are basically two types of leaders – task-oriented leaders concerned with getting things done and people-oriented leaders concerned with nurturing relationships. However, each of these different types of leaders will be more effective in particular situations. He argued that task-oriented leaders are suited to situations where there are high amounts of control and low amounts of control while relationship-oriented leaders are most suited to situations where there are moderate amounts of control. Fiedler's findings were highly influential, but they were called into question for a number of reasons. In particular, many of the results over time appeared to be inconsistent and it was difficult to measure some of the key variables. There was also a widespread feeling that how we actually thought about leadership had not significantly moved on from a myopic focus on task and person centred leadership.

More recently, there has been a very strong interest in a set of overlapping approaches called charismatic, transformational and symbolic leadership. We first address the former two which strongly overlap. We then move over to the latter, treating it separately. During the 1980s, the so-called *neo-charismatic* approach to leadership appeared. The central idea was that the leader's vision,

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commitment, strong ability to communicate and impressive personality create an irresistible enthusiasm and willingness to obey amongst followers. The leader is supposed to deeply influence the values and norms of followers and thus create or change organizational cultures. Leader-driven corporate cultures were the recipe for organizational effectiveness in the 1980s and early 1990s (e.g. Peters and Waterman 1982; Schein 1985). Apart from a strong over-emphasis on the leaders' significance and impact, this approach has been criticized for neglecting the negative side of charisma. This includes people becoming over-reliant on the leader and side-stepping critical and independent thinking. As the charisma ideal was downplayed, the partly overlapping but somewhat less heroic ideal of *transformational leadership* appeared. The focus here is how leaders manage meaning for followers. At the centre of this literature is the split between transformational leaders and transactional leaders (Burns 1978; Bass 1985). Transactional leaders have an instrumental relation with their followers and manage through formal means as well as rewards and sanctions. In contrast, transformative leaders create bonds with their subordinates, work with overall values and visions and try to make their subordinates feel committed to the overall purpose. Many popular writers argued that transformational leaders were particularly important for high performing companies because they helped to make employees feel highly committed to the organization and willing and ready to give nearly anything (e.g. Peters and Waterman 1982). The key was providing a vision to followers and communicating it (Bennis and Nanus 1985). Transformational leadership sounds appealing and is very popular, and researchers sending out questionnaires typically get positive correlations between measures of how transformative their leaders are and various good outcomes like reported satisfaction or performance. But in practice, it is often difficult to find pure examples as most managers would find it difficult to give up 'transactional leadership' behaviours such as handing out rewards and sanctions or pointing at bad performances. There are also a lot of contradictions and confusions regarding what precisely is transformational leadership. Often input (act) and output (response) are conflated, for instance being inspirational or intellectual stimulation (Yukl 1999). Transformational leadership also involves exaggerating the role of the great and powerful individual.

The leader is often thought to create high levels of morale, provide an inspiring example for the followers, and facilitate improvements in the organization. Symbolic forms of leadership are thought to involve far-reaching positive influence such as willingness

to transcend self-interests for the sake of the collective (team or organization), to engage in self-sacrifice in the interest of the mission, to



identify with the vision articulated by the leader, to show strong emotional attachment to the leader, to internalize the leader's values and goals, and to demonstrate strong personal or moral (as opposed to calculative) commitment to those values and goals.

(Howell and Shamir 2005: 99)

Despite the rather alluring image associated with such neo-charismatic approaches, there have been many voices of dissent. One major issue is that it tends to focus our attention on a few exceptional cases of highly motivated top managers and ignore much of the fairly mundane day-to-day forms of leadership that occur in organizations. Another issue is that it can present a rather naïve understanding of leadership as creating corporate altruism, alignment, harmony, shared interest and dispelling self-interest, calculations and petty motives like money, status, power and career. Third, studies of transformational leaders often ignore what some have called 'the shadow of charisma' (Howell and Avilio 1992). This involves the narcissistic tendencies associated with transformational leaders that often makes it very difficult to see their own limitations and critically reflect on their actions (Kets de Vries 1994; 2003; Macoby 2000). It also involves the ability of charismatic leaders to induce blind faith and unflinching belief in their followers. Finally, the obsession with transformational leaders has often led companies to focus on appointing top executives who show charismatic traits and claim to have the capacity to radically transform their followers. While this may sound like a good thing, it can have some profoundly negative consequences such as overlooking other suitably qualified candidates and appointing people who engage in over-optimistic change programmes which destroy many of the central competencies of a company (Khurana 2002).

Transformational leadership certainly involves an important dimension of symbolic leadership. But symbolic leadership – or the management of meaning – can be approached in a less grandiose way than transforming subordinates. One such 'low-key' approach involves investigating symbolic leadership and how leaders try to influence frames, cognitions and meanings. This occurs when 'leadership is realized in the process whereby one or more individuals succeed in attempting to frame and define the reality of others' (Smircich and Morgan 1982: 258; see also Fairhurst 2005; Sandberg and Targama 2007). The focus of this more nuanced research has been on the leader and how she affects the meanings, ideas, values, commitments and emotions of the subordinates. Fairhurst (2001) refers to this as a monologic view; the alternative is a dialogic understanding where the interplay between leaders and subordinates is more important than how the leader manages the meaning for subordinates (Uhl-Bien 2006).

The growing awareness of transformational leadership has turned their attention to the foundations of 'distributed' (Gron We here refer to it involves an attempt who propound great leadership engage happen in and a democratized and provision of a sin something distrib range of people learning of how 2003). For 'post- It involves focusi a set of individua acts in the role o that leadership d but it is often n to be. Indeed w is based on a sen 2008). Other eq whereby memb the context an leadership app suggesting lead Sims 1991). F 'upwards leade: (e.g. Useem 20 necessarily nee is something e accounts, leade evenly spread becomes a lea are considered Even thoug may sound a emphasize the everything tu

The growing awareness of the potentially darker side of charismatic and transformational leadership has pushed a range of leadership researchers to turn their attention to more participatory forms of leadership. This formed the foundations for what is known as 'shared' (Pearce and Conger 2003), 'distributed' (Gronn 2002) or 'post transformational' leadership (Storey 2004). We here refer to it as *post-heroic leadership*. Broadly, post-heroic leadership involves an attempt to move away from the study of heroic senior executives who propound grand visions and inspire followers. Instead, these studies of leadership engage with the more humble, everyday forms of leadership that happen in and around organizations. The focus is on how leadership is democratized and frequently shared within organizations, and is rarely the provision of a single great leader. This approach highlights how leadership is something distributed across the organization, collectively achieved through a range of people within the organization, and involves a process of mutual learning of how to work together in a productive way (Fletcher and Käufer 2003). For 'post-heroic' studies, leadership can function in nearly any direction. It involves focusing on shared leadership which 'is broadly distributed among a set of individuals instead of focused in the hands of a single individual who acts in the role of superior' (Pearce and Conger 2003: 1). This view recognizes that leadership does involve downwards influence (a boss leading an employee), but it is often not nearly as important as leadership studies have made it out to be. Indeed when downwards leadership is particularly influential, it often is based on a sense of authenticity on the part of the leader (George and Bennis 2008). Other equally important leadership processes include 'peer leadership' whereby members of a group will share the leadership activities depending on the context and the moment in the group process (Gronn 2002). Shared leadership approaches also emphasize how people can actually lead themselves, suggesting leadership from superiors is not necessary (Manz 1986; Manz and Sims 1991). Furthermore, this research also points towards instances of 'upwards leadership' where people actually lead their superiors in some cases (e.g. Useem 2001). The central theme in these studies is leadership does not necessarily need to come from top-level charismatic leaders. Rather leadership is something everyone can do in organizations. Following such post-heroic accounts, leadership appears to become something that is almost ubiquitous, evenly spread in organizations, and varying with the situation. Everyone becomes a leader. The result has been many activities in organizational life are considered as a kind of leadership.

Even though post-heroic notions such as shared or distributed leadership may sound attractive and open up for lines of thinking that do not over-emphasize the heroic central character, there are problems. One is that almost everything turns into leadership. For instance, Rost (cited in Uhl-Bien 2006)

claims that for proponents of post-heroic approaches there are only leaders, not followers. This makes one wonder how coordination is possible and who is supposed to actually do the work.

### CRITIQUES OF LEADERSHIP THEORY

Apart from the more specific difficulties with various perspectives on leadership there are some broader problems worth highlighting. The first issue is that despite an attempt to include many of the group dynamics associated with leadership, researchers continue to neglect those influenced by 'leadership' (Collinson 2005). Even though many post-heroic studies of leadership are attentive to followers' characteristics, they continue to assume that leadership will affect followers in a one-directional way. By just focusing on leadership (whether it be peer leadership, self-leadership or whatever), they (and many of us more broadly) tend to impose an understanding of leadership on complex and ambiguous organizational events, even when it is highly uncertain whether 'leadership' is the best way to understand it. As some advocates of attribution theory have suggested, there is strong inclination to attribute whatever outcome or effect to the leader being responsible for what is accomplished, irrespective of whether the leader had anything to do with it or not (Meindl 1985). This makes it very difficult, perhaps even impossible, to be aware of almost anything else going on. It can blind us to complex group dynamics, 'followers' taking initiative, and perhaps subtly changing the meaning of input (persuasive talk, instructions) from a seemingly salient key person, as well as more generally significant cultural, social and economic forces influencing organizational processes and outcomes. Assumptions of the significance of leaders mean that far too many organizational processes are attributed to leadership. The concept then becomes so widely used that it captures everything and nothing. The result is that we begin to neglect the ways that leadership may actually not work or play a minor role in some situations. Instead, we continue to celebrate leadership as the dominant way in which work is coordinated. This involves a continued disregard for the missing masses of leadership – that is those people who are actually led. Some versions of post-heroic approaches do away with these people by simply assuming that they are mini-leaders who lead themselves and almost anyone else around them. Everybody is a 'co-producer' of leadership. There are, of course, other concepts for grasping what goes on other than leadership, e.g. group work, shared decision making, organizing processes, mutual adjustment, professionalism, and autonomy. However, the colonializing use of leadership vocabulary has led to insensitivity to aspects that these concepts could draw attention to.

In addition to lacking many studies generally and the meaning we attribute to them, this is because most of the promises of a progressive development and value not delivered the good testing research has produced (House and Aditya 1999) and thin, context-insensitive points out, 'much of what is attributable to the current research scientists attempt to do what is inherently vague in its objectivity and subject matter makes these trends, some have many of these studies they do not explore such leadership (Uhl-Bien 2002) over-reliance on intervention with a broader set of theories in the field is one important (1998). Sometimes one in particular if and objectives based on id

Third, ideas that emphasize authenticity in leadership (Bass *et al.* 1985). They often focus more on what leaders act like than what leaders actually do. Qualities in the all-encompassing leadership (Yukl 1999) of this 'good' leadership purporting to do leadership (Alvesson and Sveni 2000) superficial studies of now post-heroic) ideas means that much of the managerial efforts to

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In addition to lacking an account of the interactional dynamics of leadership, many studies generally lack a deeper investigation of the practice of leadership and the meaning we attribute to it (Bryman 2004; Knights and Willmott 1992). This is because most of the literature has positivist aspirations. This means it promises a progressive accumulation of knowledge about leadership through the development and verification of hypotheses. However, this approach has not delivered the goods. Many practitioners feel the ideas that hypothesis-testing research has produced are abstract, remote and of limited relevance (House and Aditya 1997). It has resulted in a profusion of abstract categories and thin, context-insensitive understandings of leadership. As Meindl (1995) points out, 'much of the trouble with conventional leadership research is attributable to the conceptual difficulties encountered when theorists and research scientists attempt to impose outside, objective, third-party definitions of what is inherently subjective' (p. 339). The combination of a naïve belief in its objectivity and measurability with a profoundly subjective, local and vague subject makes leadership a difficult concept to handle. In order to counter these trends, some have turned to qualitative work (Bryman 2004). However, many of these studies only involve interviews with managers. This means they do not explore subordinates', colleagues' and superiors' constructions of leadership (Uhl-Bien 2006). Nor do they observe practices of leadership. This over-reliance on interviews with managers, and under-reliance on interviews with a broader set of those involved in leadership and a shortage of observations in the field is one important shortcoming in much leadership research (Conger 1998). Sometimes one may wonder what we actually know about leadership, in particular if and how people construct their relationships, means and objectives based on ideas around leadership.

Third, ideas that emphasize the importance of morality, involvement and authenticity in leadership are typically too romantic (see, for example, Meindl *et al.* 1985). They often speak more clearly to our ideological presuppositions than what leaders actually do. It is common to lump together many superior qualities in the all-embracing and ideological concept of transformational leadership (Yukl 1999). Close-up studies of leadership indicate that examples of this 'good' leadership are hard to find. This is because what most of those purporting to do leadership actually do is more instrumental and mundane (Alvesson and Sveningsson 2003a; 2003b; Bryman 2004). A profusion of superficial studies of senior managers, the persuasive effects of heroic (and now post-heroic) ideas about leadership, and a shortage of in-depth studies, means that much ideological writing ignores the less grandiose realities of managerial efforts to influence people (Bryman *et al.* 1996; Jackall 1988).

To pull together these points, there seems to be neglect or even denial of ambiguity of leadership. This is not surprising as a fear of ambiguity is

something that characterizes much organizational and social research (Alvesson 2002; Martin and Meyerson 1988). Most research on 'post-heroic leadership' is based on a set of assumptions and methods that actually produces 'leadership': respondents are thought to be 'leaders' and asked to report about their leadership. Seldom are they asked to consider whether 'leadership' is a relevant term. Even less frequently are they asked to think critically about leadership. This obscures the fact that 'leadership' is a potentially problematic construction. It also overestimates and romanticizes leaders (Meindl *et al.* 1985; Pfeffer 1977). Perhaps, most importantly for us, it ignores the ambiguities and incoherence involved with leadership (Alvesson and Sveningsson 2003a; Bresnen 1995; Carroll and Levy 2008).

### TOWARDS AN AMBIGUITY-CENTRED APPROACH TO LEADERSHIP

As we saw in a previous section, most studies assume that leadership 'exists' as a fairly coherent phenomenon. There are forms, types or styles of leadership. Keith Grint (2005) points out that the studies of leadership have typically tried to essentialize theories by claiming that leadership is located in a person (trait theories), in a situation (situational theories), and in person/situation combinations (contingency theories). While the expanding post-heroic views of leadership to some extent have challenged this, through seeing leadership as more distributed, much of this work still clings to the idea that it is possible to grasp some kind of 'essence-like' quality of what leaders do and what leadership is about. But dominant assumptions about the coherence and unity associated with these different types of leadership has been seriously called into question. More than 30 years ago, Pfeffer (1977) pointed at the ambiguity in definition and measurement of the concept itself. He questioned whether leadership has discernible effects on organizational outcomes. He also concluded that leadership is primarily 'phenomenological'. By this he meant that people construct or invent a version of leadership through drawing on their assumptions, expectations, selective perceptions, sense-making and imaginations of the subject matter. Others point out that leadership is a hopeless scientific concept, but it remains a particularly strong folk concept which people use everyday to negotiate their understandings of the organizational world (Calder 1977). When using this concept, they attribute leadership to some individuals and situations and not to others. According to this approach leadership '*exists only as a perception . . . not a viable scientific construction*' (p. 202, emphasis in original). More recently, a range of researchers have pointed out that leadership is a socially constructed phenomenon (Bresnen 1995; Fairhurst 2007; Fairhurst and Grant 2010). This

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The book aims to i: to be at the centre of th body of studies that recognized that many negotiating the ambig study found that presi anarchies' (Cohen ar unclear, the central to the organization is vei contexts, and indeed v in Canadian health ca that what leaders cou work through coalitic linear change pattern role of leaders in a theories do not work Eisenberg (2007) poin way by leaders to mar this work suggests t ambiguity makes it v

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means 'what counts as a "situation" and what counts as the "appropriate" way of leading in that situation are interpretive and contestable issues, not issues that can be decided on by objective criteria' (Grint 2000: 9). Attending to the ways in which different people understand and construct leadership opens up significant space for ambiguous interpretations, understandings and experiences of leadership. However, this ambiguity and incoherence are still neglected aspects in the study of leadership. There is a 'comparative lack of recognition given to the possibility that "leadership" can encapsulate a diverse range of meanings or multiple frames of reference' (Bresnen 1995: 496).

The book aims to investigate the ambiguity and fragmentation that seems to be at the centre of the processes of leadership. We hope to build on an emerging body of studies that recognizes such ambiguity. Early work on the topic recognized that many leaders in complex organizations spend a lot of time negotiating the ambiguity of the organization and their role. For instance, one study found that presidents in US colleges were charged with leading 'organized anarchies' (Cohen and March 1986). The goals of these organizations are unclear, the central technologies they rely on uncertain, and participation in the organization is very fluid. This makes it very uncertain what to do in many contexts, and indeed what their role as leader is. Similarly, a study of leadership in Canadian health care found that leadership in ambiguous conditions meant that what leaders could actually do was highly constrained and they needed to work through coalitions (Denis *et al.* 1996). This resulted in chaotic and non-linear change patterns. Still others have pointed out the ambiguity around the role of leaders in a schooling context means that many of the established theories do not work particularly well (Bess and Goldman 2002). Finally, Eric Eisenberg (2007) points out the ambiguity is often deployed in a highly strategic way by leaders to manage communication and change processes. Taken together, this work suggests that leaders need to cope with ambiguity, and often this ambiguity makes it unclear what their own role actually is.

More recent work on ambiguity and leadership has pointed out that it is not just that some leaders in particular organizations like health care and higher education operate under conditions of great ambiguity. Rather, they point out that leadership itself is something that is highly ambiguous. For instance, Tierney (1996) claims that

the assumption about what constitutes good leadership is open for interpretation and redefinition ... (and we can assume that) multiple representations (of leadership) exist within one organization. The struggle becomes first how to develop those multiple interpretations, and then how to portray them.

(p. 374)

This involves a suspicion that leadership itself is no more than a social attribution, a rationalization of perceived good or bad performance. This involves recognizing that at 'an individual level, people have very diverse views of what leadership represents and means to them' (Bresnen 1995: 498). It also involves attending to how 'how managers incoherently move between different positions of leadership' (Alvesson and Sveningsson 2003a: 961). By focusing on this we become aware of how 'the practical constraints and administrative demands . . . often overwhelm more "grandiose" leadership behaviors' (p. 982). It also draws our attention to how managers are very uncertain and indeed ambivalent about how they should relate to leadership (Carroll and Levy 2008). It reminds us that the meaning which we give to leadership, and what we understand as being leadership is essentially contested (Gallie 1955). That is, due to the ambiguities, uncertainties around the idea of leadership and the value which we attribute to it, it remains forever up for grabs. This makes it impossible to arrive at a final, agreed upon definition of what leadership is. It also condemns leadership to being a 'blurred concept' around and through which language games orient themselves and are played out in the practical accomplishment of other kinds of work (Kelly *et al.* 2006: 775).

Leadership is thus difficult to pin down and there are good reasons to see it as a construction that is an ambiguous and contradictory phenomenon. We are tempted to say that leadership does not have a meaning or a set of meanings. Rather it is more of a 'blurred concept' like 'goodness' that could mean almost anything and everything. It is used by different people to accomplish various rhetorical effects that they find desirable. Some examples include attributing responsibility to senior people for various outcomes, boosting identity for managers, selling courses to managers and other leader-wannabees, and creating faith that there is a solution to the miseries encountered in our work.

### UNDERSTANDING AMBIGUITY IN LEADERSHIP

In order to understand the ambiguity around leadership, we need to consider the way ambiguity is created. To do this, it is necessary for us to move away from a view that focuses on the leader acting and a group of followers responding. Rather, leadership needs to be treated as a complex social construction where meanings and interpretations of what is said and done sit at centre stage (Fairhurst and Grant 2010). These attributed meanings are important sources of ambiguity. In what follows, we will argue these sources of ambiguous meaning are leaders themselves (who are often unsure about what it means to do leadership, and whether what they are doing is actually leadership), their followers (who tend to interpret different acts as

leadership), and the context of different understandings of sources of ambiguity created through thought of, practised and

Leaders have always been. Much of the literature about leaders who can be identified as people-oriented or task-oriented or transactional leaders (I see we actually talk to leaders or claiming to exercise leadership or see such clear-cut instances of kinds of leadership practice oriented, and at others one actually leads seem considered to be successful! addicted to a particular leader we followed because (Wenglén and Alvesson called for a far more hands-on 'coaching' style. This reaction of disdain on the part of addicted to a certain ambiguity that seems through a tricky and complex ambiguity seems to an

In addition to not being unsure about what kind of interviews with leaders conflicting understandings of what it takes to lead, research, we frequently when they had shown scratching and a despair of leadership. The result little resemblance to with strategic issues,

leadership), and the context in which they operate (which tends to promote different understandings and ideas of what it means to lead). These three sources of ambiguity create tensions and strains between how leadership is thought of, practised and engaged with.

### LEADERS

Leaders have always been the central focus in the literature on leadership. Much of the literature assumes that there are distinct, integrated 'types' of leaders who can be identified in a clear-cut way. There are transformational or transactional leaders (Bass 1985), level 1, 2, 3, 4 or 5 leaders (Collins 2001a), people-oriented or task-oriented leaders (Fiedler 1993) and so on. However, if we actually talk to leaders (which for us mainly means managers supposed to or claiming to exercise leadership), and observe them in action, we very rarely see such clear-cut instances of leadership. Often leaders move between different kinds of leadership processes. For instance, sometimes they will be task oriented, and at others times more people oriented. This fluidity about how one actually leads seems to be an important facet for many people who are considered to be successful leaders. Some leaders who become attached or even addicted to a particular approach seem to run into problems. For instance, one leader we followed became highly attached to the image of himself as a 'coach' (Wenglén and Alvesson 2008). Even when he was faced with situations that called for a far more hands-on approach, he was unwilling to relinquish his 'coaching' style. This resulted in things not getting done and a growing sense of disdain on the part of his 'followers'. In other words, because he became addicted to a certain image of himself as a leader, he denied the kind of ambiguity that seems to be necessary for a leader to negotiate their way through a tricky and complex organizational world. The knack of living with ambiguity seems to be an important characteristic of many leaders.

In addition to not neatly falling into a single 'type', many leaders remain unsure about what kind of leadership they might in fact be engaged in. Our interviews with leaders suggest that they often have contradictory and conflicting understandings of when exactly they are engaging in leadership, what it takes to lead, and how they might go about doing this. During our research, we frequently asked people who identified themselves as being leaders when they had shown leadership. Usually this prompted a moment of head-scratching and a desperate search through their memory for a grand moment of leadership. The results were often quite ambiguous situations that showed little resemblance to the ideal. Many managers started to talk about working with strategic issues, the broader and long-term picture, visions, corporate



culture and values. But then, when asked about what they do in practice, these 'leaders' mainly talked about taking part in a routine administrative task. The impression we were left with is that managers often swing between seeing leadership as something which involves heroic pronouncements and declarations and engaging in much more mundane and everyday behaviour such as small-talk, listening, and being friendly, in a rather disintegrated way. People often seem to be seduced by grandiose ideas about leadership, but cannot really integrate this into their daily tasks. There are exceptions, of course, but our experience is that many managers' interpretation of their own activities suggest it is far from clear when and how they are actually exercising leadership (Alvesson and Sveningsson 2003a, c; Sveningsson and Larsson 2006).

A final source of ambiguity within which people expected to exercise leadership themselves was their uncertainty about whether they were actually leaders at all. Usually, there is a widespread image of the leader as one who is very certain and adopts the mantle of leadership with ease. Indeed, some have argued that the problem may be that people become too sure of their capacity as leaders. Such certainty becomes a potent wellspring of self-delusion, narcissism and other highly destructive outcomes (Kets de Vries 1994). However, it is sometimes the case that people who we would assume see themselves as leaders in fact do not also see themselves in this way. Instead, they prefer to see themselves as professionals, as members of an occupation such as 'carpenter' or part of a social group. For some, identifying as a leader is not an attractive prospect: it appears pretentious, and diminishes the autonomy and value of other people who are supposed to follow them. It involves buying into a language that would actually destroy a lot of creditability among peers. This is particularly true in fairly egalitarian organizations which emphasize collaboration. Others have noticed that because the notion of leadership is so unclear and uncertain, many people feel very uncertain about the term and frequently retreat to a term which they understand a lot better – namely management (Carroll and Levy 2008).

In sum, leaders themselves can be an important source of ambiguity in the leadership process. This is largely because they rarely fit into the tight categories that are frequently used to describe leaders in most of the mainstream literature. Furthermore, leaders sometimes remain very uncertain about whether they have demonstrated leadership and exactly when this happened. In many ways they remain unclear about what exactly they do when they lead. In the end, some people who are designated as leaders (through their formal role as managers and constructed as leaders by the advocates of the leadership industry, like popular management authors, educators and consultants) remain very uncertain about whether they actually are able or want to be leaders. For a few, the concept of leadership is unattractive (French

and Simpson 2006). This sorts of behaviour that (another of the term) but with than the perhaps ra

In addition to leaders be: can create a sense of un: source of ambiguity ha: because the strong fo: assumption that leader: take into account follow: cannot be led in the sa: very well. But followe: leader has to consider : of active influence that: They only need to c: circumstances, includir

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and Simpson 2006). This does not necessarily mean that they retreat from all sorts of behaviour that can be associated with leadership (in one sense or another of the term) but they rest with identities they feel more comfortable with than the perhaps rather pretentious one of being a 'leader'.

### FOLLOWERS

In addition to leaders being an important source of ambiguity, their followers can create a sense of uncertainty around leadership. However, this important source of ambiguity has often been ignored in studies of leadership. This is because the strong focus on the leaders has reinforced the deeply held assumption that leaders act and followers follow. There are many theories that take into account follower characteristics: inexperienced and unqualified people cannot be led in the same way as experienced people who know their trade very well. But follower characteristics are still seen as something that the leader has to consider and adjust to, and then work on, rather than a source of active influence that shapes leadership. Leaders are still thought to be agents. They only need to consider how to exercise their influence in light of circumstances, including the characteristics of their subordinates.

Today, most people understand that leadership is a relationship and that followers are usually much more important and active than traditional ideas about leadership suggest (e.g. Kelley 1992). As Howell and Shamir (2005) argue, followers are actively engaged 'in constructing the leadership relationship, empowering the leader and influencing his or her behaviour, and ultimately determining the consequences of the leadership relationship' (p. 97). However, even those who criticize others for just paying lip service to the role of followers do not do much beyond stating that followers have different self-concepts that influence what the charismatic relationship with the leader will look like (e.g. Haslam and Platow 2001). So even if there is an expansion of the interest in the leadership relationship to include followers into the equation 'we know surprisingly little about how relationships form and develop in the workplace. Moreover, investigation into the relational dynamics of leadership as a process of organizing has been severely overlooked in leadership research' (Uhl-Bien 2006: 672), although there are studies on the conversational dynamics between managers and subordinates (Fairhurst 2007).

Attribution theorists have brought the followers to the centre of attention and downplayed the significance of the leader and his or her acts (Meindl 1995). It is the followers that 'attribute' leadership to something a leader might do. This leads attribution theorists to suggest that it is followers, not leaders, who are the 'active' ingredients in the leadership process. In the messy, uncertain

and ambiguous world of work, followers are the key players in relating possible outcomes to people by labelling them 'leaders'. Expectations, reputations, sense-making and communication around what the leader is understood to do, mean or want are crucial in the process. Attribution theory is an important corrective to the excessive leader-focus of many accounts. But just focusing on the follower is not enough. It is vital that we seriously consider the interactions between leaders and followers (Collinson 2005). For us, meanings, intentions, interpretations are crucial elements in this dynamic. By thinking through this dynamic, we begin to recognize that there may be explicit clashes between the meaning attributed to a situation by leaders and followers. For example, in a change project in a large high-tech firm, top managers started the project and assumed that others should work on it. They appeared to see themselves as architects behind the change project that was to be carried out by junior managers taking local initiatives within the overall framework and vague and broad guiding values ('visible leadership', 'customer orientation'). However, junior managers expected top managers to be change agents driving change and saw themselves as following instructions. This clash of interpretations – where senior and junior people expected the others to do 'leadership' – meant that nothing really happened and the junior people in the firm saw the project as an indication that senior people were 'hypocrites'. Most participants felt that there was a lot of talk and promise, but no action or substance (Alvesson and Sveningsson 2008).

These kinds of clashes between how senior and junior people interpret a situation and role relations often create additional ambiguity. It can be produced by a clash between what leaders think it means to lead and what their followers think leadership looks like. For instance, in our own research we often found a mismatch between what managers and their subordinates thought of the relation in terms of leadership (Alvesson 2010a). This mismatch is a key aspect of the ambiguity of leadership. Is leadership what the leader thinks is happening in terms of influencing process, or how the follower may read and respond to it? Or may it be what the researcher 'objectively' determines, based on questionnaires or tests or observation protocols? But this may indicate another picture than the one experienced by the person exercising the leadership and those targeted by it. Ambiguity means that there is no alignment between various views. Indeed, there are frequently occasions when there is an outright clash between what followers think leadership is, and what leaders think leadership is. For instance, in a case we mentioned earlier, we found that one leader thought that adopting a 'coaching' style was the best way to lead. However, his subordinates did not regard this style as involving leadership at all – rather it was thought to denote indecisiveness, inability to act upwards and weakness (Wenglén and Alvesson 2008). Similarly, some groups seek to

present themselves as being subordinates. Physicians for example, are seen as 'leaders', but prefer to be seen as subordinates. Understandings around leadership are often contested. This of course is a leader's word that leaders are not. That there is a whole range of understandings of leadership, if, when and how leadership may regard leadership or leadership also within the group of followers, is a source of ambiguity. It is very common – as in most leadership studies – to assume that leadership is

Alongside leaders and followers, there is ambiguity about leadership and how leaders act, how they operate. This tension around leadership. This is largely because leaders are able to shape the culture the other way around. But perhaps leaders especially persuade others in ways that shape and business culture set. For instance, in some countries and participative leadership (such as the US), this approach oriented leader would be common. In other countries often seen as differences in views on leadership. Sweden, highly soft and expressive – in some ways contrasted with the more formal in Denmark. This can be seen in Sweden industrial legislation it is easy and common modes of superior-subordinate relations in industries can be significant.

present themselves as being leaders, but are not thought of as leaders by their subordinates. Physicians for example seldom refer to senior hospital managers as 'leaders', but prefer to think of them as 'administrators' (Parker 2000).

Understandings around leadership do not then just diverge but often are contested. This of course means that it becomes very difficult to simply take a leader's word that leadership is actually happening. Instead, it is very likely that there is a whole range of different understandings in an organization about if, when and how leadership happens and what exactly it looks like. Followers may regard leadership or lack of it quite differently from the leader. Of course, also within the group of followers, there may be quite varied views that add to this ambiguity. It is very important to acknowledge this ambiguity and not – as in most leadership theory – simply deny or marginalize it through assuming that leadership normally leads to clarity and consensus.

### CONTEXT

Alongside leaders and followers, the broad social context is an important source of ambiguity about leadership. This is because there is frequently tension between how leaders act, how they see themselves and the contexts in which they operate. This tension is often denied in much of the mainstream literature on leadership. This is largely due to the deeply held assumption that top leaders are able to shape the culture. Arguably, culture forms leadership rather than the other way around. Biggart and Hamilton (1987: 435) argue that 'all actors, but perhaps leaders especially, must embody the norms of their positions and persuade others in ways consistent with their normative obligations'. Societal and business culture set limits for the kind of leadership that might be accepted. For instance, in some countries (such as Sweden) a more relationship-oriented and participative leader is seen as acceptable and necessary. In other countries (such as the US), this approach would be seen as weak and a tougher results-oriented leader would be called for (Den Hertog and Dickson 2004). Even in countries often seen as culturally similar there may be more or less subtle differences in views on leadership and followers. Within Scandinavia, in Sweden, highly soft and participatory styles of leadership (if that is the right expression – in some other countries it may not count as leadership) can be contrasted with the more direct and authoritative leadership more common in Denmark. This can be understood partly due to institutional circumstances: in Sweden industrial legislation makes firing people very difficult; in Denmark it is easy and common – contributing to a different basis of authority and modes of superior-subordinate relations. Similarly, the culture of different industries can significantly shape the kinds of leaders who are thought to be

appropriate. For instance, creative and hi-tech industries that celebrate freedom and autonomy will often encourage highly democratic leadership styles. In contrast, industries that are built on cultures of efficiency such as manufacturing or routine service work will often create more task-oriented, hands-on leaders.

Often people are trapped between different cultures that proscribe vastly different norms of good leadership. They might be caught between the values and norms held by senior managers and those promoted by their subordinates. The former may expect junior managers to implement strategies and policies from above and be sensitive to the wishes of their superiors, while the subordinates want their leaders to identify with the group and promote its interests. Frequently, subordinates are less interested in being led by their managers than by leaders being active in managing boundaries with other units, exercising influence upwards, protecting subordinates from what they see as stupid things harming their work (Alvesson and Blom 2009). Managers can also be caught in a conflict between the 'official' corporate culture and 'functional cultures' associated with production, R&D, personnel or marketing. This frames, influences and constrains also what kind of leadership is possible (or even if leadership is possible). Such conflicts or contradictions between cultures require leaders to negotiate very different kinds of normative frameworks and views on corporate reality. This can be illustrated by the case of a US coast guard who found his men – mainly college graduates whose expectations, interests and motives were at odds with the routines and lack of discretion of military life – bored and negative. Instead of trying to impose military discipline in a traditional way, he made a deal with his men about more discretion and certain liberties in exchange for more positive behaviour (Wilkins, referred to in Trice and Beyer 1993). The case illustrates how the values and orientations of a group of subordinates triggered a change in 'leadership' so that it resonated better with their values and meanings. It also reminds us how clashes between what is encoded into a context as good leadership, what a leader thinks is good leadership and what their subordinates think good leadership is can create significant tensions and uncertainties that need to be jointly negotiated.

### COMBINING LEADERS, FOLLOWERS AND CONTEXT

Relating leaders, followers and context, is of course vital in any understanding of leadership. This is self-evident, but surprisingly rarely done. In the popular management literature as well as most academic studies, the leader's role is grossly overstated. They are treated as the key actor putting his own (or

occasional) stamp on the industry, organizational leadership is viewed as the constructions as the crucible of followers. Work employment contexts (nations, organizational) are a crucial element producing. This marginalizes the actors in very different ways and little of ambiguity to

Our approach emphasizes all the major 'ingredient' traits, styles, types, and – should be taken seriously to and these different from the ambiguities of different multiple ambiguities in we gain a richer and also

Leadership is a tricky concept with many meanings and cannot be defined and only modestly help to clarify the concept (Rost in Barkele). In social science and folk wisdom, there is an overlap between management writers and of clarity about leadership 'leaderism' (O'Reilly and leaders as having a strong self-image of many workers for high wages, prestige of leadership, despite it to suggest a more serious standing or assessment of strong claims about performance also the majority of leaders

Leadership is an ambiguous and less concept. Rather, it is

occasional) stamp on the followers as well as the context. Whatever the country, industry, organizational situation or group of employees a specific type of leadership is viewed as the best one. The follower-centric view sees the followers' constructions as the crucial element and reduces the leader's role to a projection of followers. Work emphasizing different fields or areas draws attention to the contexts (nations, organizations, professions) and sees cultural norms as the crucial element producing standards for leadership that people tend to follow. This marginalizes the actors as such and disregards their possibilities of acting in very different ways within one and the same cultural context. Clear patterns and little of ambiguity typically characterize these studies.

Our approach emphasizes that there are complexities and uncertainties in all the major 'ingredients' of leadership. We think that ambiguity – not clear-cut traits, styles, types, constructions or situations (professions, organizations) – should be taken seriously. What leaders do, if they do anything, is responded to and these different forms of ambiguity are negotiated. Leaders negotiate the ambiguities of different and incoherent meanings. If we combine the multiple ambiguities in different areas (leaders, followers and context), then we gain a richer and also 'more brutal' picture of the realities of leadership.

## CONCLUSION

Leadership is a tricky concept. As we have argued in this chapter, it has multiple meanings and cannot easily be specified. Most academic definitions are vague and only modestly helpful. Indeed, two-thirds of all authors do not define the concept (Rost in Barker 1997). What is more, any simple distinction between social science and folk ideas about leadership is difficult to make. This is due to an overlap between the language used by researchers, educators, popular management writers and practitioners. Despite this uncertainty and lack of clarity about leadership, there still seems to be an increasing culture of 'leaderism' (O'Reilly and Reed 2010). This involves a widespread desire to see leaders as having a strong impact on organizational outcomes. This fits the self-image of many would-be leaders and reinforces their status and claims for high wages, prestige and authority. The result is a strong faith in efficacy of leadership, despite much evidence to the contrary. There are good reasons to suggest a more sceptical view, in which the uncertainties of any understanding or assessment are taken seriously. This is a real deviation from the strong claims about patterns that dominate not only popular management but also the majority of leadership studies.

Leadership is ambiguous and complex, but we do not think that it is a hopeless concept. Rather, we want to recognize that leadership is an increasingly

important language in many organizations. Organizations that traditionally have been seen as being professional and needing little 'leadership' like the church, schools and academic institutions have become targets for improvement through leadership. Increasingly managers seek to 'do' leadership, perhaps even when it is not required. This has made leadership an important empirical phenomenon. There is certainly an enormous amount of talk, writings, thinking, hopes, educational investments and more or less efforts to practise it.

Acknowledging the ambiguity associated with leadership does not make us totally liberal or agnostic in our approach to leadership. We don't think that anything goes approach is helpful. For us leadership involves asymmetrical relationships, influencing processes and situations where people in some kind of formal and institutionalized dependency relationship are targeted.

Studying 'leadership' calls for a combination of a theoretical definition and a consideration of what a particular group means by 'leadership'. Some definition of leadership is needed. But there also needs to be an openness to local meanings. For different groups 'leadership' may have different meanings and values. For instance, in the police and in professional groups, 'leadership' has very different connotations (Bryman *et al.* 1996), but also within one and the same setting, there may be considerable variation. A certain act can be seen by some as leadership and others as just interaction or administration. Contexts can be defined in different ways and there is also the issue of how leadership is understood at different levels of the organization.

Studying leadership means facing up to a dilemma. On the one hand we would expect subjective, multiple, incoherent constructions of leadership in a setting. On the other hand, it does not make sense to talk about leadership without expecting some shared meanings about what a particular manager did (in terms of perceived leadership) and the outcome of this. Put differently, do multiple constructions of leadership in a particular setting converge or relate to each other? If not, what does that mean for the understanding of leadership as a theoretical construct? In the next chapters, we will argue that one way of addressing these questions is to use a set of rich and varied basic images or metaphors. We hope this will allow for a broader and more imaginative set of views of leadership than is common.

## METAF

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IN THE PREVIOUS C about leadership every wracked by ambiguity to get a handle on, it'd idea. Instead, we need t and try to capture the this chapter, we would this ambiguity is thro multidimensional phe acknowledging but al

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