# Good Visions, Bad Micro-management and Ugly Ambiguity: Contradictions of (Non-)Leadership in a Knowledge-Intensive Organization

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**Abstract**

This article investigates how managers position themselves and their work in terms of leadership in a large knowledge-intensive company. The significance of contemporary discourse on leadership, practical aspects of managerial work, and ambiguity as a central dimension of organization and leadership (particularly in knowledge-intensive settings) are highlighted. We examine the presumed leadership in a company with respect to the three 'moral' and 'aesthetic' positions or aspects of leadership: good, bad and ugly leadership. The article shows how managers incoherently move between different positions on leadership. The study undermines some of the dominant notions of leadership, for example, the leader as a consistent essence, a centred subject with a particular orientation to work. We suggest a less comfortable view of managers aspiring to adopt, but partly failing to secure leadership identities and a coherent view of their work. Value commitments appear as disintegrated and contradictory. The study indicates a need to radically rethink dominant ideas about leadership.

**Keywords:** ambiguity, identity work, knowledge-intensive firms, leadership, management

## Introduction

Not only the management literature, but also modern business life and most organizations are impregnated with fashionable ideas and concepts about what constitutes good, appropriate and effective managerial leadership. We can talk about a leadership discourse constituted by repertoires of terms and a line of reasoning that inform how a manager should talk and act in order to practise modern leadership. One element in this discourse is that managers and their leadership matter, that leaders are central in determining direction and overall guidelines, in setting strategy and creating visions of the future, without which any company, according to leadership scholars, would drift purposeless and eventually lose its competitive edge. A common 'assumption underlying the study of leadership is that leaders affect organizational performance. Leaders, through their actions and personal influence, bring about change' (Dubrin 2001: 6).

Leadership is typically portrayed as something fairly robust, stable and coherent. There is much talk of behaviour style, the charisma or the values

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of managers (Yukl 1989), as well as clear preferences for leadership in various settings (Bryman et al. 1996). The assumption of leadership as an 'essence' cannot, however, be taken for granted, but needs to be investigated and, perhaps, challenged. The ambition of this article is to investigate critically and problematize the discourse(s) on leadership, as expressed by managers, by locating its (their) appearance and meaning. Key ideas in leadership thinking — and to some extent organizational theorizing in general, assuming coherence in terms of style, values and identity — are explored. How do managers talk about and view leadership? Do they have a specific, integrated understanding of their leadership? If so, does it inform their practice in a coherent way?

The article is based on a qualitative study of an international and highly knowledge-intensive R&D company in the life science sector. The article reports interviews with middle and senior managers, which have been targeted for in-depth readings. A knowledge-intensive context constitutes an appropriate arena in which to locate the theory and practice of modern leadership, since it is from that context that many of the ideas of modern leadership emanate, and that context is said to be of greatest significance. The research started by approaching the field of leadership in a fairly open manner, with less strong ideas and expectations of what to research than is common. When asked about their work and workplace experiences, most managers mentioned leadership, and we asked them to elaborate upon this theme, with the ambition of understanding their meanings of leadership.

An unexpected finding was that the managers' talk about leadership indicated diverse and contradictory understandings of their managerial work and leadership. Expressed values around leadership and management frequently diverged, not so much between different managers, but *within* the talk of individuals.

In the interviews, people frequently started their accounts of their work and values by making seemingly robust claims, that is, that they worked on strategies, visions and values, and refrained from focusing on details or directing people. This was seen in positive terms — indicating coherence between values and behaviour. However, when asked to specify, managers ended up talking of administrative activities and also referred to the need to be directive, clearly deviating from what is normally understood as visionary and strategy activities. Their talk of 'leadership' thus seems to be a misplaced description of what they do. Instead, the managers seemed to be caught in what appears to be almost the opposite, what they themselves refer to as 'micro-management', that is, 'bad leadership'. In this article, we examine how managers relate to the seemingly contradictory and confusing discursive and corporate demands on leadership and management.

Arguably, ambiguity is a key dimension in all complex organizations (Jackall 1988; Martin and Meyerson 1988). It may be more or less significant in terms of its consequences for leadership. Many knowledge-intensive firms (KIFs) score high on ambiguity due to difficulties assessing processes dealing with complex problems in which professional knowledge is central and due to complicated authority relationships in which the power of senior managers

may be restricted (Alvesson 2001; Denis et al. 1996). This study takes ambiguity and its significance for leadership seriously.

An emphasis on the ambiguity of leadership and organization calls much of the current talk of leadership as consistent into question, since it suggests that leaders might not have the impact upon organizations that has been taken for granted for so many years. The organizational context (populated by highly trained individuals relying on difficult-to-acquire expert knowledge) thus constitutes a complex setting in which it is difficult to evaluate part of the ongoing research from a managerial point of view. We suggest that this ambiguous muddle constitutes the ugly aspect of leadership — it breaks with the aesthetics of pure ideas and rhetoric. More than bad leadership, the ugly aspect calls the very notion of leadership into question. In contrast to bad leadership, a situation of high ambiguity is not remediable. It is difficult to fix it and transform it into something good because it is not known what to remedy. We present the idea that leadership might turn out to be something primarily related to the identity construction of individual managers, securing a 'sense' of being in charge, 'proactive' and leading the masses through a difficult and unknown terrain.

We have tried to avoid prematurely categorizing the empirical material or looking for an overall meaning or an integrated, 'holistic' point 'behind' surface material. Instead, we look carefully at our findings, bearing in mind the possibility of pattern and unitary meaning as well as fragmentation, contradiction, confusion and the fluidity of meaning. The study is thus less predetermined and caught in taken-for-granted assumptions about the existence of leadership (as a distinct, robust phenomenon). One effect of our interpretative approach, in the present case, is a problematization of common ideas of leadership as a style, an intention or a philosophy (value set). Within this overall ambition, specific research questions can be formulated:

- How do managers view leadership? Do they relate to and produce leadership in a coherent, integrated, distinct way?
- What is the role of the discourse on leadership (emphasizing values, vision, and support) for managers' beliefs and values about their work? How do normative expectations of the ideal manager or leader affect people subjected to this discourse?
- How does this discourse relate to the self-understandings and identities of managers?
- How do managers relate to normative positions around management and leadership? How do people position themselves in relationship to values and preferences?

We approach these questions as follows. We start by briefly commenting upon the theory and methodology of leadership studies. We then briefly discuss the company, Byoteck Inc., where the study was conducted, raising the knowledge-intensive context. Next, we examine leadership in the company with respect to the three aspects, or three moral-aesthetic positions, of leadership elaborated upon above: good, bad and ugly leadership. Our conclusions concern the significance of the leadership discourse for identity

work, the rather loose connection between managers being constituted through this discourse and their value commitments and organizational practices. We suggest a rather disintegrated and uncomfortable view of managers aspiring to leadership identities through rather unstable and contradictory use of leadership and management discourse.

## Leadership Research and Theory

Much research about leadership takes its existence for granted (Fiedler 1996; Meindl et al. 1985; Wright 1996). The use of standardized questionnaires can, for example, be said to produce and establish 'leadership' rather than to explore it in a more open manner (Alvesson and Deetz 2000). There is a wealth of critique against leadership research for its problematic assumptions, weak theoretical development, incoherent and meagre results, use of methods highly remote from 'the real world' and for being useless for practitioners (Andriessen and Drenth 1984; Barker 1997, 2001; Knights and Willmott 1992; Yukl 1989). One problem is that leadership is defined in a wide variety of different ways, from that part of management that concerns the supervision of people (Fiedler 1996) to the opposite of management, for example, 'altering moods, evoking images and expectations, and ... establishing specific desires and objectives' (Zaleznik 1977: 71). Barker (2001) argues that management is about maintaining stability and leadership aims to create change. Bennis and Nanus claim that 'managers are people who do things right and leaders are people who do the right things' (quoted by Barker 1997: 344). When leadership for some researchers is a part of and for others completely different from management, it follows that we are dealing with entirely different phenomena — or ideas of what 'leadership' is supposed to refer to.

An essential idea of what is understood as good leadership is being 'proactive', although in an indirect and supportive manner (Senge 1996). Leadership takes place primarily through the means of visions, strategies and overall guidelines, rather than traditional command or work based on and using the means of bureaucracy. The latter is often denoted as simply 'management' (Kotter 1990) and typically seen as a rather dry kind of practice, preoccupied with stability rather than change (Barker 1997). Compared to much talk about 'management', leadership ideas are wrapped in a more appealing vocabulary that partly draws on the 'softer' aspects of managerial work. Leadership is normally defined as being about 'voluntary' obedience and there are assumptions of harmony and convergence of interest; leaders seldom use formal authority or reward/punishment in order to accomplish compliance (Barker 2001; Zaleznik 1977). There is sometimes confusion on this point, as leadership is often routinely connected with managers, for example, when researchers send questionnaires to managers asking them to describe their 'leadership' style, behaviour or values. Whatever the managers say they do, it is treated as 'leadership'. Also, laissez-faire or bureaucratic behaviour is sometimes labelled 'leadership' (Trevelyan

2001). Still, leadership is viewed by a large number of authors not as any kind of managerial behaviour toward subordinates, but as an activity on a high moral level, reflecting harmony, voluntarism and shared interest, and involving no or little formal power or coercion. As this notion of leadership comes through in our empirical material in distinct and perhaps unexpected ways, we will comment upon this theme, so central in leadership discourse among academics as well as practitioners.

In order to understand leadership, organizational context must be considered (Alvesson 1995; Bryman et al. 1996). Writings on knowledge-intensive companies often point out the great latitude given employees, emphasizing their freedom and the importance of intellectual skills, at times conceptualized as core competence (Oliver and Montgomery 2000). Managers must allow much space for knowledge workers, partly because managers know less of what goes on than those large groups of employees holding esoteric expertise, partly because professional norms and occupational cultures make such employees less inclined to subordinate themselves to managerial hierarchies (see, for example, McAuley et al. 2000) and to prefer to be directed by superiors (Trevelyan 2001). Recent writings on leadership emphasize indirect and facilitating leadership as particularly important in R&D and other knowledge-intensive companies (Alvesson 1995; Hedberg 1990; Jain and Triandis 1997; Löwendahl 1997; Mintzberg 1998). Such leadership is often characterized by leaders shaping organizational conditions in order to allow the presumed core competence (the professional workers close to the products and services) to develop their creativity so as to perform and innovate successfully. However, while the present article to some extent follows this path, acknowledging the less asymmetrical relationship between managers and knowledge workers, its purpose is to approach the talk of leadership in organizations in a more open and empirically intimate mode, trying to avoid slipping into often rather vague and streamlined categories and broad claims about the distinctiveness of leadership in this kind of organization.

The nuanced examination of leadership calls for consideration of ambiguity of leadership in knowledge-intensive companies. Arguably, ambiguity is not just a feature of a complex organizational reality that the good leader assists subordinates to cope with, but also a key dimension of much leadership talk, thinking and practice. Leadership does not deal with ambiguity as much as it is an example of it or even produces it. Our focus here is on how leadership talk stands in a highly ambiguous relationship to what managers actually do and perhaps even more so to organizational results. The organizational setting as well as the character and impact of leadership may be understood in terms of incoherence, contradiction, confusion and fragmentation as much as, or better than, the favoured, opposite terms: pattern, causal effects and uncertainty reduction (Alvesson 2002a, 2002b; Martin and Meyerson 1988).

As our study concerns managers' views on leadership, it would be unproductive for us to fix a particular definition of 'leadership'. We downplay a researcher-driven viewpoint and instead study what the 'natives' mean by leadership and their position(s) to this discourse. As it is questionable whether leadership, as defined in large parts of the literature, actually is produced in

the studied organization, some caution in pushing a particular theory-driven idea of leadership seems called for.

## Method

The field study was conducted through lengthy interviews and observations of management meetings. The observations took place at various formal and informal managerial and employee gatherings where information about management and leadership issues was provided and sometimes also discussed. In particular, we gained intimacy and came close to many management and leadership discussions by participating for well in excess of a year in a management committee that gathered monthly. In that group, managers talked about and seemingly struggled to make sense of their roles as leaders and managers. The observations facilitated background understanding, improved the possibility of asking good questions and meant that a certain level of trust and familiarity between the researcher and the research subjects was established.

Parallel with the observations a series of interviews with more than 40 senior managers at predominantly middle (senior middle) levels were conducted; some corporate-level managers and a few project-level managers were also interviewed. Several managers were interviewed on more than one occasion, and conversations with many of them deepened as the study progressed during the year, frequently addressing many complex and difficult questions of role expectations. Although the research process was not strictly structured in phases, it can be loosely divided into two rounds. In a first round of interviews, we asked managers to speak about workplace experiences, and they all embarked on issues of leadership and management as being significant. They generally spoke quite confidently of leadership as being related to vision and overall guidelines, while management was more disapprovingly described in terms of operative and administrative concerns. Managers were also asked to specify in more detail how they practised leadership. In doing this, they generally abandoned vision and overall guidelines and turned to issues previously explained by them as being related to management. The themes of good leadership and bad micro-management thus emerged from the interview material. In a second round of interviews with several of the managers, we were able to follow up many of the accounts made in the initial interviews, thus further confronting them with earlier statements on the possible practice of leadership and management. The outcome of these interviews was consistent with the outcomes in the first round, thus strengthening the credibility of the initial accounts and interpretations. These interviews were also particularly important in order to display contradictions and ambiguity in determining what makes research and development successful and whether leadership has any impact on those processes. Most interviews and informal meetings took place at the company, with a few in more relaxed settings in the evenings, perhaps further facilitating open discussion.

Modes of interpretation are vital in qualitative research. Data-processing approaches such as grounded theory have been very popular for a long time. They privilege data and give an impression of rationality through emphasizing procedures, rules and a clear route from empirical reality to theory (Glaser and Strauss 1967; Strauss and Corbin 1994). This article draws upon a different approach, based on two interpretative principles. One is a hermeneutic reading, in which there is a circular movement between part and whole, and the pre-understanding that the researcher brings with her or himself into the research is actively used, qualified, challenged and developed in the research process (Alvesson and Sköldberg 2000). Rather than codifying empirical material, this is looked upon as text in which one tries to go beyond the 'surface' to look for something less obvious, or less easily revealed in a (quick) coding process, and where, also, the text as a totality is borne carefully in mind, which means that variation and contradiction are taken seriously. Meanings expressed in different parts (passages in interviews) are interpreted in depth, but also related to the interview as a whole.

The second principle tends to work against hermeneutics and is to some extent inspired by post-structuralism and discourse analysis: here, the evidence that calls for careful consideration and interpretation is not seen as necessarily revealing some underlying meaning, but as possible products of discourse in action (Alvesson and Deetz 2000; Foucault 1980). People's talk, for example, may be an affect of the discourse they are engaged by, rather than an expression of their subjectivity or the cultural community they belong to (Potter and Wetherell 1987; Prior 1997). Talk about leadership may, for example, be less grounded in fixed beliefs, values or cognitions centred in the individuals than emerge from discourses on leadership which enroll and subjectivize people in specific situations, for example, when 'leadership' is targeted explicitly in conversations. We do not favour a privileging of a strong constructivist approach, but try to work with a fairly broad interpretative repertoire, carefully considering the advantages and problems with different assumptions on how to understand and theorize empirical material. The willingness to inscribe patterns, order and coherence must be balanced with a preparedness to consider divergence, contradiction and fluidity (Alvesson 2002b).

In the present study, we thought that the empirical material strongly pointed to interesting incoherencies, something that most of the literature on leadership does not prepare people for. The discrepancy between what one may expect, given extensive readings of the leadership literature, and what one feels that the empirical material is saying, is never a simple result of openness to data leading the researcher in the right way (as implied by grounded theory and other empiricist versions of methodology). It is, rather, an effect of particular kinds of readings — and ours are inspired by familiarity with ideas on ambiguity in the organization literature (for example, Martin and Meyerson 1988) as well as discourse analysis and post-structuralism (for example, Foucault 1980; Potter and Wetherell 1987). As part of our previous and current work has critically reflected on these sources of inspiration, we hope that such theoretical and methodological inspiration has not left too

strong an imprint on the results. We work with the challenge of accomplishing a good trade-off between theoretical inspiration and openness toward empirical material, between reading into data a certain vocabulary and certain preferred results and a naive empiricism in which theory-free data are believed to lead the researcher to the truth.

The three positions on leadership highlighted in the study (the good, the bad and the ugly) mainly emerged from the empirical material, although there is, of course, no 'pure' data abstracted from theories. The researcher's pre-understanding and familiarity with theory always affect how she or he makes sense of a research topic. All data are impregnated by theory and are constructed based on the researcher's pre-understanding and vocabulary (Alvesson and Sköldberg 2000). The synthesis of theory and empirical material is particularly obvious in the field studied here, as the research subjects are familiar with popular and to some extent academic leadership discourse. Theory is thus in a sense a part of the data. The concept of discourse relates to both — an institutionally backed, theoretically informed way of reasoning affecting practice. Managers need to have a theoretical idea of leadership in order to be able to be interviewed or to answer questionnaires about the subject. Nevertheless, our ambition to investigate managers' ideas and talk around leadership was not reliant on a particular pre-structured or literature-based anticipation of these ideas and talk. The three aspects of leadership that we inferred from the study lead to a questioning of some contemporary ideas of the meaning and function of leadership.

## A Knowledge-Intensive Context

Byoteck Inc. can be characterized as a knowledge-intensive company, meaning that a large part of the work in the company (the research) is primarily intellectual, that is, it draws on mental abilities rather than physical strength or manual craft. It is the core competences of those occupied with research that drives product development generally in knowledge-intensive companies. It is often believed that, as Clegg et al. (1996: 205) put it, 'tacit and local knowledge of all members of the organization is the most important factor in success, and creativity creates its own prerogative'. Employees are thus highly qualified people with a mostly academic backgrounds (many having a PhD) and coming from a variety of disciplines. Much of the research in the company is done in alliance with departments and people from academia, and Byoteck has been considered as very academic in the sense of people being independent and self-governing, requiring a low level of managerial intervention. As one project leader explained:

> 'A strongly knowledge intensive work as ours build on independent and active employees who has the ability to take their own initiatives.' (Easter)

The personnel policy issued by the human resource department states that 'freedom and independence' is the first priority with respect to employees. At the same time, it is important to avoid exaggerating the more grandiose

features of the company and this kind of business sector in general. They also exhibit considerable and perhaps increasing features of industrialization and bureaucracy (Kärreman et al. 2003). Nevertheless, it is fair to say that this context frames leadership in several specific aspects, of which one is the difficulty of leading complex projects that to a large extent require specialized skills that senior actors lack; another is the long-term and difficult-to-evaluate character of the research, which makes it hard to provide consistent and unambiguous feedback on potential results. A high level of ambiguity characterizes much of the work, creating specific difficulties for managers to understand it or to use reliable indicators on work progress (Alvesson 2001). The management situation is thus rather difficult, as a lot of the work appears 'black boxed' to managers and it is frequently difficult for the specialists to predict or assess what will work and what will not in product development.

## Good Leadership: Leadership as Vision, Strategies and Guidelines

Vision, strategies and overall guidelines are themes that are readily voiced by managers, seemingly constituting an attractive frame for 'this is me as a leader and this is what I do as a leader'. The themes constitute a discursive material emphasizing the visionary and strategic aspects of managerial work, predisposing managerial talk in the direction of those leading the masses, as Whittington (1993: 43) characterizes the (predominantly American) model of 'strategic leadership': 'a new model for top management, that of the heroic leader, whose inspired visions transcend the desiccated calculations of the humdrum professional'.

Good leadership in Byoteck is articulated as visions, strategies and overall guidelines. The common thread among these is the consistent focus on the contribution of managers to the general direction of the organization while being primarily detached from day-to-day operations. We turn first to some narratives of vision, followed by talk of strategy and, lastly, overall guidelines.

### Visionary Leadership

Leadership as expressing vision and values is a dominant theme in the interviews. A typical comment by senior managers is that since Byoteck is a knowledge-intensive company, it requires particular attention to leadership, as one manager explains:

> 'Leadership in [a] knowledge intensive organization is special, and the bio-tech industry is probably the most special, each and every person has a PhD and we have many adjunct professors, with professor competence. If you look at the electronics industry, you will seldom encounter PhDs, which I think leads to a demand for a different kind of leadership, even if some components always are general, and one component is that, together, you have to be able to create a vision and keep it alive, and see that what you do has a higher value.' (Duke)

This manager suggests that the presence of highly educated people demands extraordinary attention to vision. However, talk of vision is not the

privilege of a few top managers, but also common at less senior managerial levels. A middle manager suggests that leadership is about working with themes such as:

> 'What do we stand for? Values, and trying to elevate values that you see to people and not just the results. For me this concerns ... conveying visions, what objectives there ... [are] from above and trying to convey these to what they mean for us but without directly saying: "we are doing [it] like this." But rather: "What do we commonly think?"' (Harkin)

In this case, the manager leaps between a few popular leadership ideas: values, visions and 'doing things together', the latter emphasizing *Gemeinschaft*. Although tricky to specify, leadership here is about talking to the members of the organization, making them embrace and subject to visionary reasoning. Another manager put an emphasis on working with vision in order to establish a common understanding and purpose:

> 'Well, I think it's important that we have a common understanding, a common vision really and a common purpose ... [That] common purpose is, I believe, that we could provide infrastructure ... whatever is necessary to allow the scientists to produce these great projects.' (Doyle)

The same manager also maintained that leadership is:

> 'Putting people in the same direction, leadership, there's providing common vision, having to decide what you vision, what are your values that you're working to, what's the direction that the group is going in, you personally as a manager have to live that vision.' (Doyle)

The language here is slightly different to the extent that she also encompasses the direction of a function more explicitly. Nevertheless, the narratives remain close to each other: it is about sharing vision, values, understanding, or as it is sometimes phrased, 'purpose'. Another manager, argued for the necessity of all middle managers meeting regularly and displaying vision, as it strengthened the value of the research unit they inhabited. The meetings, he argued:

> 'strengthen the bonds in the organizations and show that we have the vision and the will to continue running this as a strong unit.' (Olsen)

The comments here suggest exploitation of similar discursive resources in leadership 'positioning'. The talk of vision is closely related to leadership as formulating strategy, direction and longer-term guidelines for the future: this also happens on several levels and within several functions of R&D.

### Strategies and Long-Term Guidelines

Strategy in Byoteck is said to be a primary issue for managers with marketing functions and at the corporate level. Some explained that strategy work follows the analytical framework of industry analysis (Porter 1980), resulting in the formulation of sustained competitive advantages for various products (Barney 1996; Porter 1985). However, strategy is also used by managers at various levels within R&D to denote future positioning, implying a less rigid

and direct way of considering markets and resources. To put it differently, managers talk of strategy as something beyond the day-to-day operations of the business, akin to future guidelines and a central part of leadership:

'I try not to interfere too much in operations. That would be wrong in every way, no one would benefit from that, but I am available if anyone has an operative question, otherwise it's more me trying to make myself unavoidable in strategic issues but avoidable in operational issues.' (Carter)

Several managers at the local level refer to leadership as essentially setting guidelines beyond the day-to-day activities for their respective function as one local manager says:

'If you look at the project side there are senior people there, so I don't have to give them daily conduct, but I want to give them guidelines.' (Harkin)

Some managers explicitly refer to strategy when elaborating upon future guidelines. One senior manager explains that it is critical:

'And if you provide the big picture, if there is a sense that these [minor decisions] are in the context of the wider strategy and it is not just, bang, bang [shooting with finger from the hip] we shoot this one and now we shoot that one, and now we gallop off in some other direction; if it fits a bigger picture, then I think we can manage. But that is where leadership comes in I think, we need to provide that context and the picture and the overall direction, to say "we are not here in the middle and you cannot [be allowed to] ride off in just any direction".' (Dale)

The manager maintains leadership as formulating guidelines and strategies in order to reach consistency and stability, implying managerial strength and power. To lead is to direct, in line with the 'proactive' ideal implicit in much talk of 'strategic leadership' (Whittington, 1993). Another manager draws on strategy when claiming that:

'As compared to the earlier role I had in one of the departments here [in one function] when I had a significantly larger operational focus, I now have a more strategic focus because you can't be operational with this type of work ... you should be familiar with what is going on but [now] it's about making strategic judgements.' (Olsen)

By 'strategic judgements' the manager refers to long-term evaluations of recruitment issues and competence-mix. Budgeting, investments and organizational structures are referred to as strategic issues. The budget, for example, is referred to as 'a tremendously significant strategic tool'. Another manager elaborates upon having a strategic role and avoiding detail when claiming that:

'Since the scientists are experienced, competent and active they should have self-governing roles, so I don't interfere very much in their project work, but for me it's more a participation so that we work according to certain broad outlines and guidelines and such things so that we get some governance on the business.' (Kellerman)

Yet another manager talks in the same vein when asked to explain about the communication between him and his subordinates; he refers to something large-scale, beyond day-to-day operations:

'I suppose it's more of a, as I say, a bigger picture, the strategic issue, rather than detail.' (Allen)

In the examples given, middle managers elevate what they identify as strategic in contrast to the operative and presumably more detailed level. Their possible subjection to 'strategic leadership' is sustained by higher-level corporate managers who explain that middle managers are required to assume a long-term view of the company, and to avoid being trapped in day-to-day issues. When confronted by a question concerning the middle managers' talk of not being involved on a daily basis in detailed operations, the senior manager responds that they are doing 'strategic work':

> 'We want them to set the long-term directions and strategies for their part of the function... So it's about review, coordination, getting the input from various sources and developing the longer-term strategy.' (Delaware)

Visions, strategies and overall guidelines are thus considered to be good managerial issues. The maintenance and amplification of those issues is commonly understood as being good leadership rather than management (or perhaps a more significant and subsequently independent managerial activity). Management according to the fashionable leadership discourse was interpreted as being too direct and interventionist, requiring detail to a (presumably) absurd extent (Kotter 1990; Senge 1996). Members in the lower organizational strata affirm that the good management — which then becomes leadership — is about visions, strategies and guidelines. A senior manager sums up the issues:

> 'Management to me is more about the day-to-day management of the function in an effective and an efficient way to produce or deliver our objectives, and you can do that well without necessarily being a good leader, it may ultimately give you a problem, but I think the staff have got to feel that there is some leadership and direction and that is to my mind what leadership is all about: the direction; the future, the way we are going. You interpret what you see around you for the staff, as long as they understand that it is your interpretation of the future and you are trying to direct them and lead them towards that.' (Delaware)

The illustrations give an impression of consistency, firmness, and consciousness with respect to leadership. They are also fully in line with the leadership-is-not-management literature (Barker 2001; Nicholls 1987; Zaleznik 1977). We might infer that this 'theory' has got it right and can be verified. Another possible conclusion is that managers are well informed about these leadership ideas and draw upon them in elaborating upon their leadership activities. There are some indications on this to which we will return later. The development at Byoteck would then follow a broader trend of 'transforming' middle managers into visionaries and strategists. That particular kind of leadership identification does not, however, stem only from individual acquaintance with a well-known discourse. It is also sustained and amplified by leadership 'policies' issued within the corporation. The expectations formulated by higher-level senior managers and made explicit by the CEO on various occasions, is that managers should refrain from detailed management, thus reinforcing the discursive demands that the individual managers struggle with.

There is thus a normative pressure not only from broadly popular

discourses on leadership but also more distinctly from the CEO on managers to embrace and practise 'leadership' in particular ways. One may therefore assume that managers behave in accordance with the ideals expressed and supported by educational agencies, mass media as well as the company's top management. This assumption seems to be supported when we take a look at what people in the company identify as 'bad management'.

## Micro-management: The Moral Supplement of Visionary Leadership

Bad management is frequently labelled as 'micro-management', and the CEO used this label pejoratively in a speech to all the employees at a large unit. A senior manager explains:

'Micro-management is about when you take away the decisions from the people that should take the decisions.' (Delaware)

It is also about:

'Requesting detail which is of no value to your personal job or position, and that can be detail about a specific office, budget thing through to really me going down to the project level and saying, "Well, how are we doing on that project and I really want to know", so it is about the ability not to do that, and delegate and trust the people.' (Delaware)

In line with this several managers argue that they try to avoid telling subordinates what to do on a detailed level, partly because the scientists are supposed to be independent, self-governing and proactive. Managers talk of micro-management as taking away decisions and interfering in details supposedly best understood by subordinates down the line. Avoiding this means staying out of the laboratories of the scientists and refraining from detailed interventions in the work of subordinates. Some managers talk of keeping themselves at a distance from the scientists, or at least not distracting them with day-to-day detailed requirements and directives. As a manager says:

'It is not managers who discover products, it is the scientists.' (Nielsen)

Another manager explains that a company in the industry failed on account of too much intervention by managers:

'Their coaches sucked because they told people what to do. If I was to say to people what to do I'd fail, it's not the way I work.' (Wilkes)

The talk of avoidance of micro-management is in line with managers' identification with visions and strategies, and this view is facilitated by the portrayal of micro-management as bad. The antipathy towards micro-management, then, would seem to support the impression that the managerial philosophy of the company is well anchored, broadly shared and ought to put strong imprints on managerial everyday practice. But is this really the case? In the next section we strongly qualify this impression, perhaps even turn it on its head.

## (Non-)Leadership in Practice — Bad Management

There are specific problems surrounding the statements on leadership above. When asked to specify and elaborate on how they accomplish the visionary, strategic and guidance work, managers fall back on traditional management such as budgets, employee leave, work roles and similar issues, demanding fairly detailed administrative attention. Harkin, who earlier spoke of the importance of vision, says:

> The guys that now sit as product managers and who have a more coordinating role, well they were local project leaders and that was a [different] role compared to what they now have and they want partly to continue to act in their old role by intervening in details out in the functions and that is a problem. My project leaders are scientists ... and they also want to intervene a bit too much in detail.' (Harkin)

This is supported by what managers discuss in their regular management meetings. Operative issues dominate the agenda. Allen, who in the former section spoke of strategic issues and bigger pictures, explains that in meetings they:

> 'discuss the synergy process, and then we have the budgets, capital budgets, revenue budgets, projects budgets, educational leave, lots of different matters, sometimes operational matters rather than strategic matters, for instance if we are going to have a web page ... Sometimes I find some of the subjects very frustrating that we discuss them as long as we do. I find it frustrating that some of the projects matters that are central matters, that we don't discuss those as long as we should do, you know in the senior management group we got a lot of experience there.' (Allen)

This comment displays the struggle between talking about strategic and visionary issues on the one hand, and being entangled in administrative and operational issues on the other hand, resulting in contradictory demands. In this case it creates frustration. It would seem that visions and strategy are displaced by urgent and pressing administrative questions requiring managerial attention.

Olsen, one of the managers in the former section, talked about how work has changed from being operational to strategic. When asked to further explain his leadership as strategic he ends up talking of a rather directive governing:

> 'There are many different ways of working. I think that as a manager here one has to implement significantly more directive ways of handling people, that is, that you say to people that you will spend the next month occupying yourself with this development, I want you to learn about this. I think that you have to have a much much more directive way of handling of people in these operations.' (Olsen)

Doyle explained in the former section that leadership mainly concerns visions. In elaborating upon that she explains that:

> 'I do get involved from a technical viewpoint, I expect, obviously my knowledge is still developing here, but I expect to understand quite consciously what the group is doing.' (Doyle)

Delaware, who like the others in the former section spoke of long-term

strategic issues, was asked during the interview to elaborate upon the most important leadership tools. He explains that they are:

> 'Usually organizational, by organizational ones I mean the whole range of things, budgets, recruitments, anything like that. I think it is certainly true that managers in the old organization perhaps feel that the organization has become too bureaucratic, too focused on detail. In my opinion if you do have [bureaucracy], it should be a positive thing, it's considered a very negative word but you need some bureaucracy to manage. So I think it is true that the people feel that we got a little bit too bureaucratic. You have got to be very careful that you do not discuss information for the sake of having that information just because you want to know, you have got to decide what you want to do with that information, what decision you are going to make on that basis, and that is where the boundary is I think between detail, or bureaucracy.' (Delaware)

In this explanation of leadership, the manager winds up in rather traditional managerial activities. He thus moves from 'strategies' to 'details' in terms of closing in on issues of management.

It seems that the managers above, when asked to elaborate on their leadership and managerial work, are tied to administrative and operative tasks. This coexists with a strongly expressed celebration of and identification with the exercise of leadership, understood as something beyond administrative concerns. While the more sweeping and rhetorical themes of visions and strategy indicate otherwise, it is clear that these managers do quite a lot of traditional administrative management. Harkin intervenes in detail together with his project leaders, Allen is tied to operational issues and frustrated, Olsen is seeing the necessity of being directive and decisive, telling people what do to, Doyle is oriented towards technical issues as well as other operational details, and Delaware, finally, is working with ordinary managerial tools. Being involved in discussions of budgets, leave, recruitment, salaries, web pages or technical aspects of the work usually means governing and being involved on a rather detailed level in a variety of administrative and operational issues. It is important to bear in mind that we did not ask the managers questions about administrative issues, but framed the interviews as about their leadership. Still the responses brought forth these aspects of managerial activities obviously quite far removed from most understandings of leadership in contemporary management literature and also from the more 'grandiose' ideas on the subject that they also claim to believe in and base their work on. Managers therefore talk of themselves as leaders without doing much that clearly and strongly refers to 'leadership activities'. The case study exhibits the contrary: the activities of managers are more closely related to what in Byoteck is understood as micro-management — bad management. This impression — that managers at several levels actually exercise something that shows more resemblance to what they in unison pejoratively describe as micro-management — is sustained when managers talk about superiors and colleagues. The work of managers described above is commented upon by a project leader who explains that:

> 'There's very little time to exercise what I would see as strategic leadership, [i.e.] what is important for us to be able to meet requirements now and in the future, what

kind of people we will concentrate on, what are we concentrating on, thoughts about how we would like the organization [to be] within a few years and convey that image to the members of the organization. Perhaps there's a dialogue about that that doesn't really percolate down to those in production and it tends to become reactive. And micro-management, there's a will to know too much in detail, when perhaps they should really be working with empowerment, that people are able to take responsibility, to send responsibility for the budget to me and have faith that I take responsibility for my colleagues, and all the positive talk such as "we are going to be the company of choice", how are we going to realize all that, there's too much administrative detail going through my superior.' (Easter)

This quotation suggests that in spite of passion for visions and strategies, administrative and operative-oriented tasks dominate managerial work. As another manager explains:

'Micro-management is about when you take away the decisions from the people that should take the decisions. John [the manager of the respondent's manager] does that a lot, he makes a decision about something, that's quite different to saying "well, let's discuss it and then you decide".' (Yale)

Since the image of visions and strategies is difficult to reproduce in a consistent and solid manner when elaborating upon managerial practice, it becomes not only vague but also quite fragile. This fragility is exhibited in the case of Allen, who displays frustration over the inability to focus on 'overall issues'. But still, this image frames Allen's, as well as the others', initial descriptions of their work. Many managers thus depart from the strategic and visionary issues when confronted with the task of trying to make their own leadership work more specific. However, they seldom frame their seemingly micro-managerial practice in those terms, thereby trying to save and sustain the identification with the visionary and strategy discourse. The centrality of administrative/operational work creates problems for some of the managers, while others do not seem to view it as a source of frustration or worry, or as negative in other ways.

In sum then, in spite of the 'discursive pressure' from contemporary knowledge on leadership, communicated by educators (such as ourselves), consultants, the business press, etc. and supported by corporate management, to ground the idea of leadership as visionary and strategic, managers are strongly inclined to focus on administrative and operative issues. This seemingly paradoxical and contradictory situation inspires us to draw attention to the ambiguity of leadership — as talk, behavioural style as well as philosophy. Understanding the specific corporate setting also calls for consideration of the highly ambiguous corporate context in which the managers investigated here work. We turn next to the corporate context.

## Management Control Tendencies: Visions and Bureaucratization

As we have said, the CEO of Byoteck declared that micro-management is bad management, something to avoid, and managers down the line usually amplify this 'policy'. However, there are parallel corporate demands on

managers to employ a variety of operative models in order to streamline and rationalize the R&D processes. There are radical organizational changes going on in Byoteck, partly as a result of the acquisition of another company. There are ambitions to create what some managers framed as a 'lean and mean product development machine'. From being a fairly decentralized and organizationally diversified corporation, the company is now partly framed in new terms, organizational principles and practices. This framing is partly conceptualized in talk of creativity and innovativeness, emphasizing the creativity of employees. But simultaneously, changes involve increasing standardization and centralization, thus forming the ground for an extended bureaucratization. (Watson [1994] also observes the simultaneous emphasis on two contradictory organizational principles — in his case, in a UK company.) To facilitate the bureaucratization, a number of operative and detailed models of routines, descriptions of work roles and clearly defined reporting relationships have been issued. The budget processes have been tightened together with substantial centralization efforts.

This trend is also sustained by senior managers' views of the research units. These have:

> 'received a very clear assignment that shows how, and with what, they are expected to contribute.' (Duke)

Managers at the local research units are supposed to have an execution kind of role. While there are some expectations of strategy formulation, it appears to be mainly administratively oriented. In fact, they are expected to execute and deliver what is formulated somewhere else in the corporation. The same manager puts it quite bluntly when suggesting that the local level is the tactical level, and the strategic level is far removed from them:

> 'We are responsible for trying to find solutions that the company as a whole supports, and then locally, we also have to create an organization that is able to implement it. The RA (central level) is the strategic part, and being responsible for the local unit is what we call the tactical part, the implementation, there is a strategic as well as a tactical role.' (Duke)

These organizational ideas and practices put demands on managers to exercise detailed and tight management control, not least with respect to subordinates demanding that junior managers demonstrate conformity to rules and regulations issued by corporate management. This has resulted in some managerial frustration: it places managers in a situation of on the one hand presenting an appealing image of what they do, an image that they willingly articulate, while on the other hand, they are forced to undertake more mundane and control-oriented activities, far from the creative and 'proactive' leadership to which they presumably subscribe. The 'ideological' discursive demands, reinforced and strengthened by corporate talk, collide with the 'practical' organizational demands also reinforced by corporate talk, creating anxiety and frustration. The consistent, solid image of leaders as visionaries and strategists thus disintegrates and dissolves. Corporate administrative demands force managers into traditional activities, making it difficult for them to follow the dominant discursive regime of leadership. The leadership role

is made good in corporate rhetoric but not sustained in practical organizational arrangements. The managerial role is made bad in the corporate rhetoric but sustained (or enforced) in practical organizational arrangements. Identity work might then be challenged and jeopardized by organizational demands on the managerial role, creating feelings of contradiction and double bind.

Besides highlighting the potentially frustrating and confusing situation of managers, the analysis also directs attention to an inherent ambiguity. Although the talk of visions and strategies could be seen as an important input in sense-making, it remains unclear whether the resulting positioning is related to influencing the work of scientists. The meaning and effects of leadership thus appear to be highly ambiguous. We now turn to this fundamental and in many ways problematic aspect of leadership.

## The Ugly Figure — The Ambiguity of Leadership

Arguably, ambiguity is a key feature of organizational life in general (Jackall 1988; Martin and Meyerson, 1988; Martin 1992). Ambiguity means uncertainty that is persistent and cannot be significantly reduced through more information. Ambiguous phenomena hold or are attributed several incoherent meanings and fragmentation, and it is not possible to decide which one is 'the best'. We suggest that a high degree of ambiguity in organization may undermine the very idea or essence of leadership, at least if leadership is seen as implying consistency and firmness, thus potentially reducing its presumed importance, status and attractiveness. We argue that this is the ugly (messy) aspect of leadership. It risks ruining the purity of ideas about leadership; it creates a mess, disturbing the aesthetics of well-ordered patterns and clear-cut positions. In the leadership literature this quality is seldom acknowledged, still less conceptualized. Perhaps taking it seriously would risk undermining an economically very enduring idea for those who sell leadership books and training, and for those legitimizing their status and income through exercising leadership.

In our sample, several managers emphasize the difficulties in evaluating projects. A manager explains that many people often ask him what brings about success:

> 'You have a tremendously well functioning structure, extremely skilled in mechanizing but where do you get your ideas from, who is it here who gets new ideas? You just stand there with no answer.' (Smith)

Difficulties in determining the significant elements in the work process also indicate that it is very hard to assess whether leaders have any impact. Lack of any distinct answer to what constitutes successful product development leads many to speculate on the issue, drawing on popular management and leadership discourses. For example, some managers argue that the scientists cannot be blamed if no new products are developed: it is always the managers' fault, to the extent that they have been too passive and have not created the right organizational culture or atmosphere. As one manager says while

trying to explain the dearth of successful new products during a particular period:

> 'The values of the different sections, all the way up to top management level, were unclear. And since they are unclear here, and unclear here [another level], then you can't see that this is the path we have to follow, [this is] our strategy. But [instead] each one — on a lower level — starts his own visions, his own strategies and his own values.' (Harkin)

When asked whether his explanation is a common understanding about the failure to develop products, the manager in question maintains that:

> 'I think it *has* been like that. Consequently, there we have *one* thing that could be part of the explanation. The other part is that quite a few products have been developed. There were some products to come, but they didn't pass the clinical tests, or the toxic ones. And then it's a question of: did you have bad luck, or did you use the wrong models?'
>
> 'And you never got the answer to that question?' (Interviewer)
>
> 'No.' (Harkin)

Although several managers expressed a variety of themes in explaining what constitutes successful product development, they all refer vaguely to broad-brush terms like 'culture' without being specific or detailed in how this might work. Typical statements about the importance of values and culture sound like the following:

> 'It is impossible to manage an organization like this tightly enough through formal regulations. You have to make sure that a large part of the organization is managed by powerful values, "this is how we generate good research", a culture that supports them.' (Duke)

The point is probably valid, and it is indeed difficult to be precise about cultural issues — not only practitioners but many researchers on organizational cultures are vague (Alvesson, 2002a) — but this does not reduce the ambiguity involved.

A perhaps even more enduring form of ambiguity in the company is the incoherent expectations and understandings of what managers should actually do. Are they expected to be 'strategists' or mainly fulfil operative roles? A senior manager, quoted above as saying that his subordinate managers were expected 'to set the long-term directions and strategies for their part of the function' also says:

> 'their day-to-day role is to essentially to ensure the people reporting to them, basically run the labs with you know 20–40 people.' (Delaware)

Even though managers must of course do a variety of things (Denison et al. 1995), it seems unclear what their major tasks are and how different elements of their work are related.

To sum up: we can talk about a kind of double ambiguity of leadership in the organization focused upon here. One ambiguity concerns the organizational situation. This kind of highly ambiguous industry provides an uncertain space within which managers exercise influence. It is difficult to

know what is important for the accomplishment of results; uncertainty and coincidence are crucial. Managers have difficulties in making firm assessments of work results. Peer reviewing is in a sense more significant than the judgement and options of autocratic decision-making by managers. The other ambiguity concerns the meaning and role of leadership — this is generally difficult to nail down, to understand, to assess its potential effects. That thousands of studies of leadership have failed to provide insightful theory and empirically robust results strongly indicates that this is the case (Andriessen and Drenthl 1984; Yukl 1989). But in this organization, considering the somewhat confused and contradictory understandings of leadership that come through in talk, a stronger ambiguity may characterize leadership than in other settings — although we do not rule out the possibility of leadership generally being much more ambiguous than indicated by popular and academic understandings. Still, the double-bind messages from corporate management and the confusing accounts of how they perceive their leadership and what they actually do in administrative terms, suggest that ambiguity here is perhaps even more profound than in many other settings.

One interpretation is that it is precisely the high level of complexity and ambiguity in this kind of work — where managers may have problems in understanding what their subordinates are doing as well as getting indicators of the results produced — that may fuel abstract leadership talk. Vague ideas of contributing within the overall picture, strategy and vision become more appealing in this kind of managerial situation than if one bases one's superior position on intimate knowledge of what subordinates are doing or on clearly visible results.

## The Contradictory Work of Managers

We have indicated the contradictions of the situation of managers in this company. Contradictory work situations are familiar from other in-depth studies of managerial work (Jackall 1988; Watson 1994). Some leadership research discusses the paradox of leadership, but this refers to the wide spectrum of behaviour that effective managers must master (Denison et al. 1995) and does not really address ambiguity and contradictions. Denis et al. (1996) draw attention to the ambiguity of hospital organizations in terms of unclear goals, complicated hierarchy relations and difficulties in assessing results, and the resulting need for top managers to build coalitions not easy to maintain. For several years, the work of managers in Byoteck has been acknowledged as critical in management talk, especially in terms of setting directions and formulating overall vision, strategies, etc. In Byoteck this means that managers should occupy themselves with visions and strategies, interpreted as 'good leadership'. Managers — frequently then labelled as leaders — are those who give guidance through visions without hampering the creativity of those below by being oriented towards too much detail. This also indicates some freedom from the endless work of tedious detail, primarily described as micro-management. Popular management and leadership

writing, as well as many accounts by managers on what is happening 'out there', in practice, usually sustain this picture.

Our study, however, reveals a complex and contradictory situation for those managers trying to manage the variety of demands that they are caught in, some of these also being internalized, e.g. popular ideas that one should be a 'leader' and not a 'manager' and work with visions and values and avoid bureaucratic means of operations.

The encouragement of managers to view themselves as leaders — as visionaries and strategists — *and* to do managerial-administrative work more akin to the micro-management uniformly declared to be bad, potentially puts people in a double bind. This might not be a surprise since a majority of managers are situated in some kind of middle-manager or senior middle-manager role, somewhat distant from the corporate management strategy and corporate visionary work. In Byoteck, the situation is awkward since there is a wide range of negative signals against 'micro-management'; even corporate management declares that micro-management is, if not forbidden, at least bad. The underlying message is that managers should stick to and identify with overall work tasks but still practise what is almost outlawed, 'bad' management.

Many forces are operating at Byoteck, encouraging contradictory logics and responses. The individuals targeted are those supposed to handle the double bind of being forced to exercise both, one (the good) at a symbolic level but not in 'substantive practice' (daily work), the other (the bad) in practice but not too obviously so. Underneath all this lies the suspicion that it might not mean anything anyway — it is very difficult to know what leads to good results and hard to tell whether managerial interventions matter. This can eventually lead to a variety of negative consequences: uncertain managerial identities and fluctuating self-esteem, and confusion and cynicism among employees, in particular those in non-managerial positions. It can also reinforce organizational fragmentation as project managers and scientists feel detached from senior ranks (and possible the company as a whole), instead identifying themselves with their own projects, function or the scientific community.

## Conclusion

The results of this study may appear as surprising and provocative. It is, of course, up to the reader to assess whether the empirical material is convincing and our conclusions are credible. A few words about the broader relevance of this study are called for. The study investigates leadership and managerial work in a particular kind of industrial setting: R&D intensive knowledge work. More broadly we address the meaning and significance of contemporary ideas on visionary and value-focusing leadership. One can, of course, argue that the specific empirical domain covered in this article does not allow us to say that much about this kind of leadership on a general level. But no in-depth study can do that, and the results of this study point to the importance

of understanding specific settings in some depth. The organization here addressed belongs to those in which modern ideas of leadership are normally said to be particularly relevant: a knowledge-intensive company, where direct supervision, rules and output control are at odds with the very nature of the uncertain, long-term, ambiguous and complex work processes at the core of this business. The company here focused is large and internationally well-known. The empirically grounded ideas and our general points of view therefore seem to have more than marginal relevance; viewing the case as a deviation from the norm may be a premature conclusion. As argued below, being a science-intensive company in a highly ambiguous industry may create more distinct empirical phenomena of the type here highlighted than may be the case in non-KIFs and in some other types of KIFs (e.g. smaller ones, with more easily measurable results). Broader tendencies also detectable in other organizations may come through more sharply here.

We arrive at four related conclusions:

1 The ideas of managers around leadership appear to be vague, disconnected and of uncertain relevance for their work. Managers in large companies are to some extent caught between two forces: discourses on leadership celebrating visions, values and strategies; and practical constraints and administrative demands, which often overwhelm more 'grandiose' leadership behaviours.
2 Contemporary ideas of leadership seem to have limited impact on organizational practice, but play other roles, e.g. offering material for identity work and legitimation.
3 Managers making sense of themselves and their work situation do so partly by formulating different moral positions, partly guided by leadership discourse. Self-location in the 'good' position (leadership) does not prevent people from practising something more like the 'bad' position (micro-management), throwing further doubt on the significance and meaning of 'leadership' in organizational practice.
4 Although seemingly contradictory, managers separate the positions of good leadership from bad management to the extent that they sustain the image of being leaders. The good leadership can be seen as an image with a comforting language drawn upon occasionally, having implications for the identity work of its subjects. But as this image is at odds with a great deal of managerial work and the perceived contingencies of bureaucracy, it leads to temporary, fragmented identity constructions with weak implications for behaviour.

We will elaborate on each of these four points.

(1) The article indicates variety and contradiction in managers' meanings and self-understandings, and their actions around the notion of leadership. The managers seem to be caught in a variety of discourses and practical constraints contingent upon the operation of large, international business. One vital ingredient is related to the discursive 'demand' of being 'proactive', visionary and strategic and taking charge while being detached from the morally inferior management of detail. Another is the strongly practical, less

'discursive' demand for managers to deal with administrative and structural matters, which inevitably sometimes comes close to what is occasionally referred to as micro-management. The bad image of micro-management partly constitutes the idea of a good leader: if going into detail and being directive is bad, then turning to visions, strategies and overall guidelines is good. The leadership discourse and practical constraints hence frame managers' work in at least two partly inconsistent directions, increasing managerial dilemmas and struggles at the individual level. Here the more fashionable and ideologically appealing leadership talk falls short in the face of bureaucratic practices, perhaps difficult to avoid in large international companies. The bad image of micro-management is probably partly due to the nature of the company — characterized by knowledge-intensive work. In police organizations, Bryman et al. (1996), for example, found a strong preference for 'instrumental leadership', which is detailed and directive and probably reflects police officers' feelings of needing to be in control and getting specific support from superiors.

(2) The article raises important questions about the significance and meaning of contemporary ideas of leadership, claimed to circulate around management of meaning, ideas, values, visions and strategic orientations (e.g. Beckerus et al. 1988; Smircich and Morgan 1982; Trice and Beyer 1993). This kind of leadership is often seen as crucial in organizational practice and vital for performance, in particular in knowledge-intensive contexts. What is considered visionary and strategic leadership might very well be interpreted as esteem-enhancing identity work for those vulnerable to — or attracted by — the modern leadership discourse. It may have more impact on managers' efforts to define who they are — or would like to be — in ideologically appealing ways than on what they are doing. It may be used as a temporary subject position in which one occasionally places oneself, rather than offering a strong basis for action. It could also be used to legitimate managers in the context of a workforce also celebrating the idea (myth?) of worker discretion and post-bureaucracy — the work community of scientists may be especially prone to want to deny bureaucratic control and formal hierarchy — and not being very tolerant to managerial interference. In many KIFs the authority base of managers is weaker than in many other companies, as professional knowledge and contributions offer an alternative status and power base, and people tend to expect to be listened to and to have a high degree of discretion.

(3) The article highlights that managers' sense-making between seemingly contradictory 'moral' positions is strongly governed by the leadership discourse as well as experienced corporate demands implying more administrative orientations. While the latter demands seem to put strong imprint on managerial practice, managers still hold on to the idea of themselves as being leaders and exercising leadership, which is a morally superior position. The practice of the 'bad' position of doing micro-management — interfering with details — is thus separated from the talk of the 'good' position, i.e. being a leader. This problematizes the common talk and discourse of the significance of leadership in organizations and the assumption that there is a clear value-orientation or a holistic image governing practice. Based on this study it could

be argued that one's claimed value-preferences are weakly connected to the bulk of managerial work. Vision talk may easily be loose and disconnected from a more substantive level (cf. Pfeffer 1981). Managers constitute themselves as strategists and visionaries, although frequently in modest ways, and the effects on others do not seem to come through very strongly. The construction of good leadership, then, is more a gesture, perhaps genuinely believed in and perhaps a serious intention, but still not preventing people from departing from the preferred value-orientation and being located in a position compatible with what is constructed as bad.

(4) The article argues that talk of leadership can be seen as an input in identity work, regulating the interpretations of managers of who they are but to a lesser extent of what they are doing. This identity regulation is facilitated by some elements in corporate policy, but also counteracted by some of the management control tendencies as noted above. The contradictory situation leads to identity struggles at the individual level and to some frustration and sense-making activity of subordinates to sort out what management is about. However, the contradiction between managers' expressed favoured position on leadership and what they actually do may not necessarily be as disastrous as it may appear. The managers may perceive themselves as 'leaders', preferring to do 'leadership' while all the administrative work is not seen as 'really me', but something that is imposed on the managers. Some managers distance themselves from it, reporting their frustrations with meetings addressing details. In addition, as noted above, the connection between the leadership-constituted identity work of managers and its impact on the organization is not self-evident. We have the impression that the discursive material exploited in identity work creates idealized self-images but with a generally vague and undeterminable organizational presence as well as effects. In reality, leadership understood as significant and intended influence over others, through a systematically applied agenda, made of visions, value-ideas and strategies, might not materialize. When reading the talk on leadership the phenomenon seems to vanish — the effort to create a story about leadership is not carried through (Alvesson and Sveningsson 2003). Leadership talk and fantasies seem to leave a thin spray of grandiosity on the 'leaders', perhaps no bad thing for self-esteem.

The fairly strong impact of the leadership discourse putting up a standard for good managerial work and the resulting discrepancy between this and the manager' accounts of what they actually do is probably to some extent a matter of this being a KIF, celebrating knowledge, being progressive in terms of HRM and leadership, links to academia, management education and training. Most managers have PhDs and are used to reading. In this setting, 'new' ideas of leadership expressed in management training and the business press become more salient and are taken more seriously than in companies in less culturally 'sophisticated' sectors. The normative pressure on managers to associate themselves with and do leadership in the progressive, 'good' sense is thus strong and they tend to be more strongly subjugated to its discursive powers. They are, however, not subjugated enough to be more than partially defining themselves through this discourse. They are thus vulnerable to the contradictions and confusions that follow.

This is related to the fact that managers typically undertake different kinds of work contingent upon practical circumstances. The research literature sometimes produces clear distinctions between leadership, management and administration. Based on our findings, we are reluctant to join the voices of those making straightforward divisions, for example between 'leaders' and 'managers'. What managers do, how they perceive themselves and how others read and react to them is probably a complex mix of various acts and interpretations, badly understood through the use of overall, increasingly ideologically loaded labels such as 'leadership' and 'management'. One may, perhaps, follow how different managers are more or less successful in associating themselves (and are associated by co-workers) with the leadership discourse. This may, however, be a matter of better grasp of the discourse (mastery of language and impression management) than avoiding the administrative work that is arguably a major part of managerial work life in large companies.

This is typically ignored by popular leadership talk, but also by academic theory, which has little patience for the more tedious and mundane parts of managerial work and being more committed to grandiose notions about the subject. It seems that it would take a great deal of effort — and a vivid imagination — for the middle manager to sustain the image of the visionary strategist in the context here studied. The ambiguity of leadership and management in this particular context might still sustain the leadership ideal, since it is difficult to evaluate the impact of managers in general, let alone in their ambition to 'do' leadership. The company is not among those (few) organizations in which any possible impact of managers is easily measured in the short run. Claims to have a strong impact on results through co-workers' efforts and skills are rarely exposed to reality tests. It is also possible, however, that leadership may mean very little apart from having impact on the self-esteem of its subjects, and providing an ideology promoting subordination of employees to managers supposed not only to exercise control but also to exhibit 'leadership'. In any case, leadership as intentional and significant influence over others is cast into serious doubt in this case, further strengthening the suspicion noted earlier that leadership might be present to only a very small extent in some organizations. The study then indicates the need for a radical revision of the leadership field, viewing leadership as a much more uncertain, fragmented and incoherent phenomenon.

We will end this article with a brief comment on method. We feel that a part of the striking difference between this study and the majority of literature on leadership can be ascribed to method and its meta-theoretical underpinnings. While several managers in our sample reproduce the notions of good leadership, they never seem to stay on that side of the coin when asked to further explain what leadership really comes down to in practice. If this study had been done according to traditional survey logic, we would probably have reproduced many of the popular notions in this article and confirmed what many already claim to know. By choosing to confront managers with what they are actually referring to when talking about leadership, it has been possible to problematize and critically examine the usual leadership rhetoric.

That critical examination has directed our attention to the fact that many managers seem to exercise their 'leadership', or perhaps 'management', in the very form they claim to dislike, namely micro-management.

Whether the discourse determines or informs managerial actions is uncertain. Leadership may be overestimated as a way of summarizing what managers think about their job, themselves and what they actually do. It seems safer to claim that 'leadership' constitutes a seemingly attractive and possibly useful resource to selectively draw upon in exhibiting a modern managerial style.

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