METAPHORS WE LEAD BY

UNDERSTANDING LEADERSHIP IN THE REAL WORLD

Edited by
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Chapter 1
INTRODUCTION

Mats Alvesson and André Spicer

FOLLOWING THE EPIC FINANCIAL COLLAPSE of 2008, there has been much navel-gazing about what exactly the root causes were and how they might be addressed. Some have looked at problems to do with how the international financial system is organized. Others have blamed the way bankers were rewarded for increasingly risky behaviour. And still others have argued it was caused by mathematical specialists taking over the banking system. However, one of the most intriguing sources of blame has been leadership, or perhaps the lack of it. One Harvard Business School professor, Bill George, told *Business Week* that the collapse of many large financial institutions was due to 'failed leadership'. According to Professor George, many of the large financial institutions and banks were populated by people who were only in it for themselves and were not willing to exercise 'authentic leadership'. The great solution he offers are leaders who are willing to be authentic and build trust among their subordinates as well as contribute to the institution as a whole.

Bill George's claims about the importance of leadership are all too familiar. This is because we hear about the importance of true leadership in nearly every sphere of human endeavour. The leader has become one of the dominant heroes of our time. Of course we obtain information about leaders not only in business magazines and executive education programmes where many middle managers go to develop their 'leadership skills'. But the appetite has grown significantly in recent years. Now, we demand 'political leadership'. We think a captain of a sports team may have some serious insights on leadership. Schoolchildren are now having their lessons in more traditional fields of knowledge such as mathematics and grammar cut back in order to create space for instruction in the mystical arts of leadership. When faced with major crises, demands for better leadership inevitably appear. It seems that many politicians now believe that any serious public problem from a rising crime rate to a collapsed bridge can be confronted through more leadership. Whatever the problem, leadership has become the solution.

It seems that nearly everyone from politicians to priests wants to show their leadership abilities. Certainly many of the hordes of students graduating from business schools are eager to make a career as a leader.

But how many have the ambition to become a good subordinate? It appears that few are satisfied with such a modest goal in life. Instead, the world is thus full of leader-wannabees eager to spend a lot of time in trying to lead other people.

The irony is that despite the increasing numbers of people who see themselves as leaders, organizations still need the great majority of people to be followers. Although some very junior people or individuals with a 'low self-concept' may be interested in following, other people may find such a position less attractive. But for leadership to be carried out, there needs to be followers and a willingness to be led. In fact people refusing to be led will often not last long in most organizations. This reminds us that the idea of leadership requires a considerable element of voluntary, even enthusiastic followers. Compliance alone is not good enough. People accept leadership not just because they are faced with serious penalties. Rather, they desire leadership because it offers them a sense of meaning, morale and a very often a sense of direction. In other words, leadership gives people a sense of purpose in the workplace.

In order to understand leadership, a thriving field of research has sprung up in the last five decades. Leadership researchers seek to offer attractive explanations about how leadership works. These researchers spend their days trying to sort out who are effective leaders and who are not. Part of this endeavour involves developing questionnaires and other tools that help us to identify what kind of leader we might be. But underlying this endeavour is an assumption that frequently goes unchallenged. This is that leadership is generally a positive thing: leaders do good things like improving schools, ensuring health care is delivered well or turning round a failing company. Leaders usually have a whole series of positive and very desirable characteristics attached to them – they are courageous, they have vision, they are excellent communicators, they have self-belief and so on. With such a glowing description, it is no surprise that most people whole-heartedly buy into the idea of leadership. Such a belief in the positive force of leadership is often easily converted into devoted and docile followers. In other words, because we believe in leadership we are willing to be led.

The widespread assumption that leadership is generally a good thing is simplistic and of course highly questionable. The often uncritical celebration of leadership reflects broader social beliefs in the power of the heroic individual to change the course of history (a belief particularly common in North America). But this assumption also reflects an unfortunate preference for avoiding what psychologists call 'cognitive dissonance’ (Festinger 1957). This involves avoiding situations where positive things like leadership are linked with negative things like bullying. Instead we want to believe that good things go hand-in-hand and bad things do the same. If we assume that leadership is a good thing, then we also want to see the outcomes of leadership as good. For example, Hitler, Stalin and Mao are not seen as ‘leaders’ because they did evil things. This is despite the fact that if we applied many theories of leadership to these figures, we would quickly find that they were in fact exemplary leaders in many ways. The recent craze for ‘authentic’ transformational leadership is the other side of the coin. It assumes that a leader is an altogether good person who has noble ambitions and produces fine effects (Bass and Steidlmeier 1999). Others who might have a similar style but more opaque aims are regarded as ‘inauthentic’. By keeping apart the good and the bad, many theories of leadership are able to offer us visions of a rather uncomplicated and generally positive world where people are led by good people to do good things. This may be reassuring for some, but we find it quite worrying that people make such crude categorizations which possibly encourage blind faith in leaders deemed to be authentic. It also pushes us to deny ambiguities, incoherencies and shifts in our great leaders. Such faith may actually be a key driver behind ethically questionable leadership behaviour, as history has shown us repeatedly.

Instead of seeking to avoid these dissonances, we want to tackle them head on in this book. We want to look at the contradictions of leadership. This involves giving up the comforting assumption that clear-cut examples of good leadership will deliver all sorts of good outcomes without costs. We find that leadership is a far more complex and contradictory phenomenon. Good leaders can do bad things; bad leaders can do good things, and frequently people claiming to be leaders do nothing. It might feel good to see oneself as a transformational leader, but subordinates are often not so easy to transform. Therefore for us, studying leadership is not about trying to identify positive examples of leaders and explain why they behave as they do. Rather, we seek to explore the many ambiguities, paradoxes and incoherencies associated with leadership.

OUR APPROACH TO LEADERSHIP

In this book we seek to grapple with the contradictions of leadership. The title of this book, *Metaphors We Lead By: Understanding Leadership in The Real World,* reflects our approach. The title includes four central ideas that orient how we look at leadership. These are understanding, leadership, the real world, and metaphors. Let us briefly explain what each of these ideas mean.

Our first point of orientation is *understanding.* For us leadership is not a physical object like a rock or flower that can be carefully measured using carefully calibrated instruments. Leadership is something that requires human understanding and interpretation. Indeed how we understand and interpret leadership is absolutely central to whether we actually respond to it. Leadership is all about meaning, understanding, performances, and communication. Take typical examples of style like task- or people-oriented. These are treated as if they were objective phenomena and that the leader, the subordinates and the researcher all agreed upon this. But is a certain set of leader behaviour intended to promote good social relationships necessary perceived as such by subordinates? Or is managerial behaviour that involves clearly defining what the follower should do understood as a concern only for production and result and not people? Some people, particularly young, inexperienced and uncertain individuals may see these as expression of consideration and people-orientation on the part of the leader. This suggests the same managerial behaviour may be viewed as being about distrust and control or as support and close contact. And how subordinates respond will vary with their interpretation. In order to capture how managers and subordinates understand leadership, we need to do much more than ask people to fill in questionnaires in a vain attempt to measure leadership (Alvesson 1996). Complex cultural phenomena cannot be measured using some kind of standardized scale. Instead they need to be interpreted. This requires an ambition to go deeper, to acknowledge uncertainty, work with imagination and be quite open about our insights. Understanding leadership involves acknowledging that any insights that we come up with will always be uncertain and preliminary. Eternal and robust truths are almost impossible to come by in a complex, situation-specific and dynamic area like leadership. All we can do is to expand the range of ways we can interpret leadership and hopefully provide some useful and engaging insights that we did not have before.

Our second point of orientation is the study of *leadership*. There are, as we will see in the next chapter, a range of views and definitions. It suffices for the moment to say that leadership is an influencing process involving some degree of voluntary compliance by those being influenced. It involves some work- or task-related purpose, and it is seen to benefit the group or the organization. For us, leadership needs to be considered not only in terms of behaviour and effects, but in terms of meanings, beliefs, identities and use of language. This involves considering how people try to make sense of the world and give labels to our various behaviours in the world. In order to explore this, we want to look at three major aspects of leadership. The first aspect involves understanding leadership as a practice. This involves looking at how leadership is actually done in normal everyday settings. The second aspect involves understanding leadership in terms of meaning (Ladkin 2010). This involves us considering how people doing leadership – both as leaders and followers – attribute meaning and significance to a whole variety of actions and activities in the workplace. It involves thinking about how some activities are labelled 'leadership' while others are not. The third aspect involves looking at leadership as a vocabulary for having conversations about what happens in the workplace. This involves attending to how leadership is used to talk about a whole range of concerns, hopes and distractions that accumulate in today's workplace. We should note that these three aspects may go together at some stages, but they can also diverge. We can try to observe what managers do, what they (and others) think they do and how people talk in terms of leadership. Sometimes people may ascribe different meanings to a specific behaviour or produce varied and incoherent talk. Careful studies often show that clear-cut intentions, styles or acts are not so common – leadership is difficult and people are often caught in ambiguities, confusions and incoherencies (Alvesson and Sveningsson 2003a, Carroll and Levy 2008).

Our third point of orientation is to focus on how leadership is done in *the real world*. Most people studying leadership believe that the real world should be taken seriously. However, doing this has some significant disadvantages. The real world is messy, ambiguous and often falls short of delivering the heroic examples of leadership or clear-cut styles that we like to read about in popular management books and business magazines. Research taking the real world seriously is difficult and time-consuming to carry out. Closer scrutiny of the reality of leadership efforts is thus less popular than polished, dramatized and sanitized examples delivering entertaining and encouraging examples which are often misleadingly taken for the real thing. We probably need these polished examples, but in the current book we have decided to take ‘reality’ quite seriously. In order to do this, we built on a number of in-depth cases that we collected over a number of years of people who claimed they did leadership. We were interested in seeing what such leadership looked like in reality. To do this we have not just asked people to respond to a questionnaire or participate in a single 60-minute interview. Rather we have combined repeat interviews with managers, observed them in action (and inaction) and interviewed subordinates. We also took time to learn about the organizational contexts where they sought to do leadership. By doing this, we were able to get into the often unglamorous and everyday world of leadership. We hope this will offer a corrective image to many of the airbrushed images of leaders which all too frequently stain our collective understandings. Moreover, we hope this will begin to disturb some of the heroic and damaging images of what a leader is and what they might do.

Our final point of orientation involves looking at *metaphors*. We are particularly interested in how different metaphors can and are indeed used to understand leadership. This involves leaders and the led seeing leadership though the prism of some other phenomenon. For instance they might understand leadership as creating growth, as moral goodness, or as bullying. During our studies of people exercising leadership as well as our reading of the infinite number of books and articles written on leadership, we noticed that metaphors were frequently used. It seemed to us that metaphors were an important way that people used to engage with leadership for a number of reasons. Because leadership as a day-to-day activity is so ambiguous and difficult to capture, people often compare the leader with more familiar figures like fathers or commanders. We are inspired by these metaphors used in organizations, but do, however, mainly use metaphors giving some perspective on the vocabularies, meanings and practices of the people studied. By using a set of metaphors, we are able to expand the range of ways we interpret leadership. While some metaphors may be well known and over-used, there are others that suggest new and potentially novel ways for understanding leadership. We think by exploring unusual metaphors of leadership, it is possible to begin to reveal interesting and perhaps useful aspects of leadership that are frequently missed. Our major purpose behind the selection of metaphors is to provide a range of viewpoints on leadership, considering both the lighter and darker aspects.

STRUCTURE OF THE BOOK

In this book, we seek to provide the reader with an understanding of leadership in the real world. To do this we will work through ten chapters. In this first introductory chapter we have tried to give the reader a sense of how we understand leadership and how we will look at it. In particular, we have sought to emphasize the need to examine leadership as a contradictory phenomenon. Doing this involves rejecting many of the common images of the leader as a good person who does good things. Instead, we have argued that leadership needs to be approached as a complex process to be understood through engaging with detailed analysis of real world processes and the creative use of metaphors.

In the next two chapters we look at two of the central concepts in the book – leadership and metaphors. The second chapter provides a brief introduction to existing thought about leadership. We begin by broadly defining leadership as attempts to give meaning to different activities using a vocabulary of leadership. We then go on to explore some of the more established theories of leadership, and look at the relationship between leaders and managers. After this we look at how leadership involves a close connection between context, leaders and followers. The chapter concludes with the call to understand leadership as an essentially ambiguous phenomenon. In the next chapter we look at metaphors. This chapter argues that because leadership is such an ambiguous and complex phenomenon, it is possible to use metaphors to understand it. We begin the chapter by outlining how metaphors are generally thought about and how they work. Next we go on to consider how metaphors have been used in the social sciences and the kind of insights that they have yielded. We then outline some of the benefits that come from metaphorical thinking as well as some of the critiques and questions associated with this approach. We conclude by briefly outlining how metaphors might be used to study leadership.

The following six chapters (four to nine) each look at one metaphor of leadership that emerged from our own studies of leadership. Chapter 4 looks at the leader as a saint. This explores how leaders are frequently understood as figures who encourage moral peak-performance and provide guidance to their followers through being very good people. The kind of leadership associated with this figure is one based on high levels of trust and authenticity. Chapter 5 looks at the leader as gardener. This is a figure who leads people through providing followers with opportunities for personal growth. This metaphor emphasizes how leaders seek to improve people by encouraging them to develop their self-esteem, and enhancement of competencies. Chapter 6 examines the leader as a buddy. This involves the leader seeing themselves as a friend in the workplace who makes people ‘feel at home’ by creating a ‘cosy’ environment. This often involves seeking to encourage the led to feel good about themselves and others around them. Chapter 7 examines the leader as a commander. This emphasizes leaders who try to set a strong direction by taking command, creating clear demands, using punishments and often embodying a powerful example of what should and should not be done in the workplace. Chapter 8 examines the leader as a cyborg. This involves emphasizing rationality and efficiency in the workplace. The cyborg leader is one who stands for machine-like efficiency and places great emphasis on delivering the results. Chapter 9 looks at the leader as a bully. This chapter examines how leaders often brutally sanction those who follow. This approach highlights how leadership involves underscoring norms and keeping up standards through bullying those not (perceived to be) contributing enough.

In the last two chapters we seek to draw the book together. In Chapter 10 we reconsider the idea of looking at leadership using metaphors. We seek to set this approach in the context of other ideas around leadership, in particular the idea of looking at leadership as a language game. We then consider some novel ways that the different metaphors that are included in the book can be combined and drawn together. We also suggest some unique and interesting combinations of metaphors that could be explored in future work. The final chapter recaps the central argument of the book, highlights how metaphors might be used in education and leadership more broadly, and calls for the exploration of new metaphors of leadership.

Chapter **2**
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 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 to 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.

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.

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 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 leader ship. 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, it is important that we consider not just what the manager does, but how this is shaped by the entire context in which they seek to lead.

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 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 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 co-ordinated. 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 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).

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.