Leadership Development – a case of narrative distancing

Doris Schedlitzki, University of the West of England, UK and Sylwia Ciuk, Oxford Brookes University

Summary

This extended abstract draws on findings from an in-depth qualitative study within a Polish subsidiary of a multinational Pharmaceutical company. This company was at the time of the study undergoing a company-wide culture management project that slowly turned into a leadership development project. We explore here a subset of interviews from this qualitative study to explore the narratives connected to the identified need for leadership development within this company. Recognising the predominant focus in discursive leadership studies on empirically exploring leadership as interaction and narrative construction of leader identities, this extended abstract and planned full paper intends to add to our knowledge of leadership through the analysis of persistent implicit narrative distancing from leadership and the connected focus on others’ need to be developed as a leader. This will help to inform critically our understanding of the impact such narrative meaning-making may have on leadership development when driven through a top-down organisational project.

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**Introduction**

Discursive and narrative studies of leadership (e.g. Larsson and Lundholm, 2010, 2013; Fairhurst and Cooren, 2004; Sheep, 2006; Clifton, 2014) are rising both in number and importance in seeking to contribute to the relational study of leadership and instilling rigour into the leadership studies field through their empirical analyses of how leadership is produced in organisational talk. Fairhurst and Uhl-Bien (2012) indeed argue that discursive analyses of leadership may be able to shed detailed light on how leadership is co-created in practice and illuminate processes of power and resistance within this relational process. To date, most of these studies focus on either leadership as interaction and interactional influence between leaders and followers (e.g. Clifton, 2006, 2014; Collinson, 2008; Fairhurst and Cooren, 2004; Larsson and Lundholm, 2010; Sheep, 2006), or alternatively explore discursive and narrative constructions of leader identities (e.g. Clifton, 2014). We seek to contribute to this growing body of empirical research through an analysis of narrative distancing from the personal identification with leadership capacity and need for leadership development. We explore how employees narratively construct a need for greater leadership capacity and how this is simultaneously –always – directed at others.

Our extended abstract and planned full paper draws on findings from an in-depth qualitative study within a Polish subsidiary of a multinational Pharmaceutical company. This company was at the time of the study undergoing a company-wide culture management project that slowly turned into a leadership development project. We explore here a subset of interviews from this qualitative study where organisation members across the company both identify the need for leadership development within this company and simultaneously, implicitly distance themselves from this by talking exclusively about others doing or not doing enough leadership
and hence needing to be developed as leaders. To set the scene, we will briefly introduce below the organisation and its leadership development project as well as the qualitative study and subset of interviews we draw on in our analysis. We will introduce our observations on the empirical findings in this extended abstract and intend to elaborate further on our analysis as well as situate it in the wider leadership literature in the full length paper.

An organisation in need of leadership development

The data used in this paper comes from a bigger qualitative study in which we explored how organisation members work with and relate to a culture change project – an initiative which quickly embraced leadership development as one of its key priorities. In this paper we draw on insights we obtained in 65 interviews carried out at the outset and the end of the change initiative with participants across the organisation.

The company where the research was conducted is a Polish subsidiary of a well-established pharmaceutical multinational with its headquarters in the USA. At the time of data collection the subsidiary was seen to gradually recover from a recent turbulent past associated with its last expatriate General Manager who, after detection of some irregularities in the internal audit, froze all spending, and exponentially increased focus on all-encompassing compliance and bureaucracy. The related unprecedented staff turnover, as well as a sharp drop in sales and market share, were seen to have endangered the sheer existence of the subsidiary. After his departure, the new, this time local General Manager, together with his largely new team of top managers initiated a number of changes in the subsidiary. The culture change initiative, which with time started to drift towards leadership development, was seen to be a crucial aspect of the much needed organisational recovery process.
The change initiative was undertaken with the help of a small local management consulting company which commenced by conducting what they referred to as a ‘culture audit’. It was in their report that they concluded that ‘the state of leadership in the company was very poor’, a finding which, paradoxically was welcomed by the new management team as it reaffirmed their observations and provided justification for a stronger focus on the intended leadership development activity.

Interestingly, in the consultants’ recommendations after the ‘culture audit’, cultural issues seemed to have been outweighed by the alleged acute need to invest profusely in building leadership potential and competencies in the organisation. In their recommendations, the consultants emphasised the need to promote corporate values to become tools of everyday leadership activities and to build a leadership model that would encompass business and ethical issues. In their view, leadership should become the fifth corporate value. After the consultants’ report, leadership indeed became the subject of training sessions and a topic of a newly created Forum and Academy of Leadership, which was hoped would raise the employees’ awareness of leadership and encourage them to display leadership behaviours throughout the company.

In our full paper, we explore the leadership narratives of different organisation members before and after the leadership development intervention. We illustrate that leadership was surrounded by different fantasies, yet that these were always the fantasies of others. Below, we briefly introduce these key findings.

**Leadership Development – narratives of others**

The company’s focus on leadership as a core value of the business and the corresponding need for and aim to develop greater leadership skills amongst managers through the values and
leadership development project was mirrored in the interviews with employees. A key theme across these interviews was the lack of adequate leadership taken up across positions and hierarchical levels in the organisation. Employees with and without managerial position equally talked about how others needed to develop as leaders and how leadership was clearly missing throughout the company.

These narratives of both current lack of leadership as well as consequently the need for leadership development were always focussed on others and never on the self. As such, the interviews represent similar to Clifton’s (2014) narrative analyses an insight into how speakers position the self and others in narrative and as such ‘manage meaning of who they are in relation to other stakeholders’ (Clifton, 2014: 103). Yet, unlike Clifton (2014) who posits that ‘through managing the meaning of the organization in the story world, they (the speakers) talk themselves into being a leader as a situated professional identity’ (103), our narratives revealed an implicit distancing from such leader identities and consequently the need to develop one’s own leadership capacity. Before and after the leadership development programme, narratives consistently focussed on leadership as associated with others, typically the General Manager, rather than themselves, despite the official focus of the leadership development project on promoting n-level, so distributed, leadership. Interestingly, even staff in leadership positions looked for leadership elsewhere – in their accounts, leadership was supposed to come from the top of the company, but also be displayed by their staff. The narratives of the self as developing leaders were the exception rather than the norm.

We argue – and explore further in the full paper – that this narrative distancing has implications for the success of the leadership development project implemented within this company. The implicit positioning of the self outside the role of the developing leader within
these narratives may reflect individual’s attitudes towards the leadership development project and ultimately influence their openness to ‘being changed’. It may further be a sign of the pervasiveness of the heroic leader myth that has been argued to dominate the leadership literature (Alvesson and Spicer, 2010; Ford et al., 2008) and both allow employees to engage in the fantasy of being ‘rescued’ by a strong leader as well as make it impossible to become this saviour. Those interviews captured after the conclusion of the leadership development work in this company reveal a mixed success of the leadership development project in creating the ‘needed’ leadership capacity as some continued to call for more leadership. Those employees (mainly sales staff) also continued to blame others for not having what it takes to be a leader. The otherness of leadership is therefore still prevalent in these later interviews, suggesting – we argue – that alongside the organisation’s fantasy of distributed leadership, as expressed by top and middle managers, there may be other, counter-fantasies present such as that of the strong leader. These possibly competing fantasies and the distancing of oneself in relation to leadership seem to outlive and possibly counteract the impact of leadership development work within this company.

**Concluding remark and further developments**

We have started to explore the narrative distancing we encountered in this company in relation to leadership development. In the full paper, we intend to investigate in further detail these narratives and situate our findings in detail in the wider leadership literature and particularly with a view to discursive and identity studies on leadership (e.g. Clifton, 2014; Collinson, 2008; Ford et al., 2008; Fairhurst and Cooren, 2004; Sheep, 2006; Sveningsson and Larsson, 2006). This will then allow us to contribute to this emerging field of leadership studies.
and our understanding of the complexities of leadership development in relation to individual identities at work.

References


