Leadership work – Relevant for research and practice

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Introduction

In this paper we wish to explore the concept of leadership work and its potential for both research and practice. The idea for this concept came from a very practical dilemma: we were trying to find an appropriate concept to include the tasks and responsibilities managers and group leaders were carrying out in our data. Managerial work referred too much to top management, supervisory work felt too narrow, and leadership too abstract. We started experimenting with leadership work; how did it fit in the examples and situations found in the data. We concluded that the concept worked remarkably well. In addition to being useful in our data analysis, we suggest that the notion of leadership work brings many advantages to leadership research as well.

We suggest that the notion of leadership work brings many advantages to leadership research. First, it further lessens the glorified and mystical image of heroic leaders who are engaged in magnificent acts of leadership by pointing out that leadership work is often very mundane by nature (Alvesson & Sveningsson, 2003) and can be carried out by not-so-charismatic ordinary people in organizations. Second, it emphasizes the idea that leadership is an activity carried out by leaders and managers, not an individual characteristic or a position. Third, we state that leadership work is a very close concept to leadership as practice (Hosking, 1988; Crevani, Lindgren & Packendorff, 2010; Iszatt-White, 2009) which underlines the interactive and action-oriented nature of leadership by answering the question of what do these people actually do in everyday life. The interest in practices has taken place in the field of organization studies in the 1990s and recently in the field of strategy research as well. In the paper we will ponder the difference between leadership work and leadership as practice. Fourth, our use of the notion of leadership work is inspired by the seminal article by Barley and Kunda (2001) “Bringing work back in” in which the authors suggest that organization studies has forgotten the essential role of work in organizations. We ponder whether something similar has perhaps taken place in the field of leadership studies as well.

We are particularly keen to emphasize the role of work in leadership work. Work is a tangible matter that can be learned, nurtured and developed. Work is something that people do in organizations. We think leadership work is perhaps easier to approach than the more abstract notion of leadership. Here it is important to evaluate how leadership is different from managerial work and supervisory work, and we will attempt to clarify this in the paper.
Our data stems from a large study about the future challenges in the field of human resources management in Finland. Based on a large survey material, we analyze how managers and human resources professionals make sense of leadership work. The data were collected through Human Resources Barometer survey in Finland, in which practitioners were asked to share their views about the biggest challenges in human resources management in the next five years. The Human Resource Barometer was carried out by a web-based questionnaire, available to respondents for a one month period in October 2010. Invitations to participate in this survey were sent to a large number of people through a variety of channels. Participating organizations represented a wide spectrum of Finnish working life, including public administration and service sector (53%), private sector organizations (industry 14%, trade 4%, finance and insurance sector 3%, information and communications 5%, and in other private services sector 10%), and additionally a category of “other” including the third sector (10%). Participants included people from all organizational levels and departments.

We focus on analyzing the different meanings attached to leadership work and suggest five perspectives by which leadership work is made sense of by managers: classic dilemmas, current conditions, contradictions and paradoxes, contemporary trends and sincere wishes. Most of these perspectives are by far new; on the contrary, they are quite classical while some other perspectives highlight the current trends and sincere hopes for alternative futures. The newness of our analysis comes from the compelling mixture of old and new, from appreciating the circulation of ideas and their current and local rearticulations. In other words, we are interested in what kinds of meanings are presently attached to some classic dilemmas of leadership work. Or how are they made sense of by the managers of today?

The paper is structured as followed. First, we provide a literature review of previous research on leadership work, leadership practices and managerial work. We then turn to presenting the empirical part of the paper by describing the research design and the data analysis. Finally we evaluate the potential of the concept of “leadership work” for theorizing and empirical analysis.
Literature

The use of the concept “leadership work” in earlier research

We explored how the notion of leadership work has been used in earlier research. Our conclusion was that it is fairly seldom used within leadership research. However, there are a few researchers who have used the concept. Some researchers use the concept when referring to the work leaders or managers are doing (Sundgren & Styhre, 2006; Kirton & Healy, 2012; Carroll, Levy & Richmond, 2008; Carroll & Simpson, 2014), without getting into deeper reflections about the meaning of the concept. Some argue very strongly for the importance of focusing on the daily activities of managers and leaders (Kelly, Iszatt-White, Martin & Rouncefield, 2006; Iszatt-White, 2009; Ospina & Su, 2009; Foldy, Goldman & Ospina, 2008) while others emphasize the “leadership as practice” approach (Carrol, Levy & Richmond, 2008). These two approaches are relatively close to one another.

Leadership work as what leaders do. Sundgren & Styhre (2006) have studied new drug development work at pharmaceutical companies and analyze leadership from the point of view of paradoxes. They use the notion of leadership work several times in their article, but they also write about leadership. In their view, leadership work serves as an infrastructure of research work, embedding competencies and resources into meaningful social networks and supporting routines and roles (2006: 47). A central feature in this leadership work is the ability to make complex and ambiguous activities manageable by helping researchers overcome what seems paradoxical. The authors underline the importance of leadership and creativity during new drug development but do not go into any greater details about the qualities of such work. Nevertheless they choose to use the concept of leadership work and refer shortly to the qualities of such work. Kirton & Healy’s (2012) use of the concept of leadership work is even more distant from the work focus. They studied women and leadership in trade unions and occasionally use “leadership work” in their article. Furthermore, Carroll, Levy & Richmond (2008:372) and Carroll & Simpson (2014: 1302) also use “leadership work” once in their articles, although both mostly employ “leadership as practice”.

Ethnographic understanding of leadership work. A much more profound use of the notion of leadership work is carried out by Kelly et al. (2006). They suggest that leadership as a
phenomenon cannot be studied only as a set of personal characteristics or skills but must be understood “as something more complex, as a process of organization, or as a set of patterns” (2006:182). They continue by stating that leadership can be thought of as a form of work that has social, political and technological dimensions. Only a few studies have focused on the everyday doing of leadership, what do people actually do with their days, and suggest that the study of leadership should start by considering what work people occupying leadership roles do in various organizational settings. Furthermore, they discuss what makes good leadership work, how leadership work gets done. In their ethnographic study of college principals’ leadership work in the UK they identified three categories of leadership work. All of the categories demonstrate the mundane nature of leadership work that lacks any mystical qualities but in contrast is very familiar in nature. First, the public face of leadership involves managing and nurturing the public face of their institution – this includes careful front-stage and back-stage performances (p. 187). Second, meetings as the stuff of leadership work describes how meetings are a central part of organizational work, whether formal or informal in nature. Third, playing with figures depict how producing and mobilizing convincing accounts of the organization is a vital part of leadership work.

In a similar fashion, Iszatt-White (2009) used the concept in her ethnographic study of college principals’ leadership work as emotional labor. She is interested in studying the actual work practices of managers which according to her are generally disregarded in management research. Her particular interest is the valuing practices, such as spending time with the staff, being accessible to them, and recognizing their interests as people, as part of leadership work. These valuing practices are inherently communicative in nature and embedded in the daily work of leadership and thus difficult to detect. In her further work (2011), she continues to use “leadership work” to argue for the importance of defining leadership as a contextual practice. She explains how a concept that strongly connects the process of theory development with the experiences of leadership practitioners is needed.

**The meaning of leadership work** is the theoretical take on leadership applied by Ospina & Su (2009). They use the notions of “work of leadership” and “leadership work” interchangeably. The main focus of their article is race, ethnicity and the work of leadership in social change organization. One of their aims is also to redirect the focus from individual leaders and their skills to the socially constructed and collective dimensions of leadership.
They identify three means of understanding race and explore how they help to accomplish the work of leadership.

To sum up, there exist some studies that have used the notion of leadership work. Some have employed the concept fairly loosely to mean the work that managers and leaders do in organizations. Others argue for the importance of understanding the daily routines and tasks the leaders are carrying out in their organizations. Often this involves an emphasis of the mundane nature of these activities to provide an alternative to the great man theories which call attention to heroic acts of extraordinary leaders.

**Leadership practices and leadership-as-practice (LAP)**

In the fields of social theory and organization studies a certain “practice turn” has taken place in the 1990s (Shatzki, Knorr-Cetina & von Savigny, 2001; Gherardi, 2001). The interest there has been to examine the activities in certain situations or contexts to provide information about the behavioral patterns, roles and identities of actors. Typically this has involved focusing on what people actually do in their professions, organizations or other contextual settings. Research designs are in favor of ethnographic or observational accounts, sometimes in combination of interviews, to provide rich material from the field. Such data are considered to reveal tacit knowledge embedded in these practices that interviewees often fail to talk about. Often the empirical descriptions include the recognition of interaction, emotions, embodiment and materiality.

Many research fields in business schools suffer from a certain inclination toward normative research that builds idealized models of how to manage organizations or implement strategies. Therefore, the emergence of the “strategy as practice” research has been a welcomed opening towards posing the question of what actually happens in organizations and how managers and others are handling strategic work. Whittington (1996, 2003) and Jarzabkowski (2003) are among the authors advancing this field of research.

Not surprisingly – there are rather many similarities between strategy and leadership research – a similar development has taken place in the field of leadership research. There are at least two ways of conceptualizing leadership as a practice. First, leadership can be defined from a processual perspective (Wood, 2052; Hosking, 1988; Crevani et al., 2010) that emphasizes
the relational practices and the ongoing processual nature of leadership. Second, a discussion around leadership-as-practice (LAP) has emerged as well (Carroll, Levy & Richmond 2008; Raelin 2011; Carroll & Simpson, 2012; Endrissat & von Arx 2013). This interest in leadership practices is very relevant for our paper, since leadership practices described and analyzed in research are very similar to leadership work. In other words, the leadership practices mentioned in these studies are often rich accounts of what managers are doing, and how their work looks like.

The ultimate goal of exploring leadership through practice orientation is to understand how actors get on with the work of leadership. According to Carroll et al. (2008: 372), recent critical work on leadership highlights the “the lack of meaning, conceptual depth and real know-how that leadership practitioners have around the work of leadership”. Many managers engaged in leadership work are able to articulate the vision, inspiration or commitment of leadership very easily, but are at a loss when asked about what they actually do to pursue such matters. There is a clear lack of vocabulary here. Carroll & Simpson (2012: 1284) suggest there is a real need for new concepts and new ways of “languaging” a more collective, collaborative understanding of leadership as the emergent product of relational interactions. To reach these objectives, a change in research ontology is probably needed. Carroll et al. (2008: 366) suggest constructionist research, focusing on relational and collective aspects, and employing discourse, narrative or rhetorical analysis would produce viable results. They also emphasize lived experiences that take into account embodiment and emotions.

One of the existing studies on leadership practices is a study by Larsson & Lundholm (2010, 2013) in a bank environment. They take a discursive perspective on an actual work situation between a superior and a subordinate and state that leadership emerges “as a subtle, identity relevant practice, infused with organizational visions and values” (2010:160). They also suggest that leadership is an integral part of managerial work, rather than completely distinct from it. Crevani et al. (2010) have studied leadership practices in three empirical settings and concur with both Larsson & Lundholm and Alvesson & Sveningsson (2003) about the mundane nature of leadership practices. Crevani et al. (2010:82) provide new vocabulary to leadership research by naming three distinct leadership practices: constructing direction, co-orientation and action-spacing.
Managerial work and leadership work

Leadership work is part of managerial work. (Larsson & Lundholm 2010, 2013) Mintzberg, Vie, Tengblad

Managerial work studies

Research design

This paper addresses a specific aspect of a set of data collected by a survey about the future challenges of human resources management in Finland. We were interested in the perceptions, expectations and aspirations regarding leadership work. The specific question set in the questionnaire was the following: What kinds of development challenges does human resource management face by the 2015?

The Human Resource Barometer was carried out by a web-based questionnaire, available to respondents for a one month period in October 2010. Invitations to participate in this survey were sent to a large number of people through a variety of channels. The technical design of this Internet tool was created by a consulting company which also carried out the survey and prepared the basic statistical analysis of the entire data as well as a grouping of the qualitative data. The Internet tool was designed in such a visual manner to invite participation and inspire respondents to speak up their minds. The survey tool included two sections, or rounds. Each respondent went through them consecutively in one session of approximately 20 minutes. The first round produced altogether 4133 statements about the future challenges in the field of human resource management (figure 1). Leadership-relating matters were suggested by 271 respondents as major challenges for the HR field in the future. In addition, 141 respondents reasoned some other proposals with leadership perspectives. The survey provided a rich and versatile window into the current opinions, aspirations and concerns about HR work, and leadership seemed to play very important role in it.
In the second round the respondents were invited rank the statements by using a picture of a dartboard (figure 2). The data was updated and accumulated real-time, and the most often proposed statements were fed back to each respondent who had to rank the most often proposed ideas. The amount of the rankings were altogether 11 846, and 785 of them were also reasoned by the text. There were three major themes that received a lot of attention in open questions: employee wellbeing, knowledge development and leadership work. In this article we concentrate on the third theme by analyzing the material on leadership and leadership work more closely.

Figure 2. Dartboard metaphor used in ranking the statements (texts in Finnish)
Altogether 1890 actors in Finnish working life presented their views about the biggest and most important challenges in human resource management by year 2015 and of them 1138 answered the open-ended question contained within it. The respondents fall into three groups: HR professionals (44 %), team leaders, line managers and managers (29 %) and union representatives (27 %).

Participating organizations represented a wide spectrum of Finnish working life, including public administration and service sector (53%), private sector organizations (industry 14%, trade 4%, finance and insurance sector 3%, information and communications 5%, and in other private services sector 10%), and additionally a category of “other” including the third sector (10%). Participants included people from all organizational levels and departments.

Since the data produced by the HR Barometer contains large amounts of both quantitative and qualitative data, many decisions and choices had to be made in order to have a clear theoretical focus for this paper. Our focus being the leadership work, we chose to analyze the written answers to open questions concerning leadership work. These descriptions, or texts, as we choose to call them, were found in the set of data by a word search function that identified the words “leadership” or “leadership work”. This search resulted in 412 relatively short yet illustrative comments, descriptions and opinions about the current state of leadership work in organizations and the future challenges related to leadership. We selected 60 of them into this analysis to represent the variety of perspectives. We then analyzed this textual material by content analysis to look for various meanings the respondents attached to
leadership work. As a result, we constructed five perspectives of how the respondents made sense of leadership work: Classic dilemmas, Current conditions, Contradictions and paradoxes, Contemporary trends in leadership work, and Sincere wishes. These perspectives are presented and discussed in the next section.

The perspectives are not symmetrical in terms of the level of abstraction, but together they form an intriguing picture of the various, sometimes very contradictory, meanings attached to leadership work. In other words, they demonstrate how the respondents were making sense of leadership work, be it their own leadership work or the one provided by colleagues or superiors. Most of these perspectives are by far not new; on the contrary, they are quite classic while some other perspectives do highlight the current trends and sincere hopes for alternative futures. The “newness” of our analysis comes from the compelling mixture of old and new, from appreciating the circulation of ideas and their current and local rearticulations. In other words, what kinds of meanings are presently attached to some classic leadership dilemmas? Or how are they made sense of by the managers of today?

**Data analysis: Five perspectives on leadership work**

Five perspectives were constructed of how the respondents made sense of leadership work: Classic dilemmas, Current conditions, Contradictions and paradoxes, Contemporary trends in leadership work, and Sincere wishes (Figure 4).

**Figure 4.** Five perspectives on leadership work
According to our data, leadership work still meets many of the classic challenges which have been raised up in literature and practice for decades. Furthermore, surrounding business conditions pose also new challenges for managers. Leadership work includes a lot of pressure stemming from conflicts and paradoxes which are difficult or impossible to solve. Also the contemporary trends and spirit of the times affect the nature of leadership work. Perhaps the most surprising and touching finding was the high number of informants who wrote about their sincere wishes to be better leaders in the future. In the following, we will describe each perspective in more detail and include direct citations from the data to let the respondents’ voice heard.

**Classic dilemmas**

The classic dilemmas of leadership work seem to remain similar from year to year. The objective here is more to manage these dilemmas to a satisfactory extent than to remove them completely. For example, it is a common practice in many organizations to promote
employees to management positions without any education or experience of such tasks. If, however, no training is provided to the newly-appointed manager, s/he is facing too difficult a challenge. Often it is a question of attitude or setting priorities, as well as a lack of knowledge of the importance of basic managerial skills. The following citation illustrates this situation:

"The main area of expertise for many managers is something other than leadership or HR management. Even these managers should be made to understand that taking care of the personnel is their job, as well as encourage them to maintain said expertise."

Another classic dilemma is the division of labor between line managers and the HR department. Who is responsible for such tasks to which the HR personnel have the best substance knowledge and the line manager is an expert of the work process itself? This dilemma is unlikely to be settled in the near future. According to our study, the HR professionals express a wish not to be called in to constant fire-fighting; the line managers should have a more active role in daily managerial work.

"All HR related ad hocs should not fall on the shoulders of the HR team in the future. Instead, people in managerial positions should be trained and supported in taking care of HR issues proactively (e.g. Law- and TES decisions.)"

In the middle of the ever-increasing demands for results and efficiency it is quite understandable that line managers are pressured to concentrate more on business tasks than on leadership work. Nevertheless it is vital to keep emphasizing the importance of leadership work – it will pay back in the long term. The following citation describes the third classic dilemma:

"Managers struggle in the midst of various demands. HR work may at times be left on the backburner in the presence of business challenges. Sometimes, it can be challenging to motivate them to emphasize – in quality as well as quantity – on HR work."
Although many organizations have ensured their managers’ high level of leadership skills, there are still a great many work places whose managers lack even the basic leadership skills. In those organizations, traditional management tasks are handled with reasonable skill but the leadership skills are modest or even poor. This is explained partly by the lack of knowledge but also the attitude towards leadership work can sometimes be belittling. Management is considered “real and important” while leadership is “pep-talk and motivation seminars” and thus less important. This attitude is illustrated in the citation:

"Leadership skills are still pitiful, even though the topic is widely discussed. Managing things is seen as the use of power, the real thing, and all HR related stuff is considered more or less mumbo jumbo.”

"Management they can do, but leadership skills need improving.”

Current conditions

Current business culture is hard to change and clearly affects the managerial work in organizations. Our analysis reveals four features of the current business culture that strongly influence managerial work: time pressure, cost efficiency, outsourcing and malfunctioning IT-systems. Time pressure seems to be a permanent condition, especially for those people whose time management highly depends of other people. Time pressure prevents creativity and learning, pushes people to stick to old routines and practices, thus inhibiting collective learning in the work place. In terms of leadership work, time pressure diminishes the vital one-to-one communication between managers and subordinates and forces the manager to cut corners in time-consuming personal communication, as the following citations reveal:

"Managers are still often experts in their own field. Also, the busy nature of the work and the shortage of resources require focusing on managerial work. At the same time, specifically leadership is needed. The challenge is finding the time for leadership work without jeopardizing profits.”

"When productivity is continuously increased, the manager does not have enough time for discussions with personnel. Official meetings are held but other
kind of listening to personnel is not arranged”.

Cost efficiency, budget cuts and scarce resources are commonplace in many organizations. The simultaneous requirement to cut costs and increase productivity gives constant headaches to managers. The next citation captures the current efficiency and outsourcing trend and its consequences:

"You can already see that secretaries and assistants are things of the past, marketing and financial administration will be dealt with elsewhere, cheaply and systematically, managers are given more responsibilities and they must cope with HR work with programmes by reading instructions. Everything involves a prepared process and after that, you don't even need HR people – or have very little need for them."

Secretaries and personal assistants who used to carry out plenty of “invisible work” are long gone in many organizations. Many administrative tasks are outsourced to subcontractors or if still performed in-house, centralized in service centers of various kinds. At the same time, IT-systems have been built to run as many work processes as possible. These actions may save costs in the short run, but often further increase the work load of managers. A modern plague in organizations is the blind faith in IT-systems which are often launched together when “reorganizing” or introducing “a process organization model”. These IT-systems often turn out to be badly-designed, user-unfriendly and unfit for their original purpose, thus further complicating the work, increasing time pressure and eventually, costs as well. IT-systems have a tendency to create work practices around them while they should support the work that needs to be carried out.

**Contradictions and paradoxes**

Leadership work includes several inherent contradictions and paradoxes. According to Handy (1994), a paradox needs to be lived through since it cannot be solved. Enduring such contradictions and blurred principles can use a lot of manager’s energy. In particular such managers whose world-view is based on rationality and predictability can suffer from chaos and uncertainty. In such situations it is very useful to acknowledge and understand the paradoxical nature and contradictory demands of leadership work.
One of the contradictions is the position of middle managers between top management and subordinates – it is like being between a rock and a hard place. Middle managers have to execute and explain top management’s decisions to subordinates.

"Middle management is in a cross fire between HR and management. If the cooperation between the administration and managers does not work, managerial work cannot be successful and I would venture to claim that as a result, profits suffer as well. So the issue is largely about interplay, where the administration and middle management are able to share an understanding about what is important, where the problems lie and how to solve them.”

The paradoxical needs for leadership are another reoccurring theme in our data. For instance, a manager should increase subordinate participation but make fast and independent decisions. S/he should be analytical yet intuitive, have everything under control and delegate, be self-confident yet sensitive or be an emotionally mature rational thinker. The data includes a following example:

"The need to connect humanity and sternness is a challenge.”

The public sector respondents reported on the paradox of a simultaneous demand for efficiency and good customer service. When a manager spends the morning planning budget cuts for the future and the afternoon designing a strategy for customer service, it is surely confusing. The following citation reveals the wide range of skills demanded from public sector managers. According to our experience, these demands are stressful since they are inherently paradoxical and thus insolvable.

"Managers are required to have various skills in public administration. Producing services requires substance competencies and meeting the client. Public administration requires HR-, financial as well as leadership skills.”

Contemporary trends in leadership work
The data indicates that there are at least three current topics affecting the leadership work of managers. The work-life balance and employee wellbeing, coaching and participative leadership are all both internationally and nationally popular topics. We were positively surprised to see how strongly employee well-being was connected to leadership skills in our data and how significant the respondents considered this topic. We consider this result an important step towards such work organizations in which employees enjoy a healthy work-life balance and have sufficient energy to perform well in their tasks. It has been demonstrated that there is a clear connection between leadership work that supports change and learning and the experienced well-being at work (Mäkelä, Viitala & Hölsö 2011). A manager can influence knowledge development and wellbeing at the work community in positive or negative ways. Due to the managerial role, his/her influence is larger than other members of the work community. The following citations deal with this topic:

"Being a good boss has a huge impact on wellbeing at work, productivity etc. Finding motivated and people fitting managerial positions will also be a challenge in the future. Many don't necessarily want to be in managerial positions but we still need managers."

"Leadership affects the flow of so many things in a work community. Work wellbeing, work performance and the codes of conduct of working, productivity and efficiency. A capable and skillful manager is worth their weight in gold to the organization."

The data of the Human Resource Barometer demonstrates a certain change in the role of the manager towards a more coaching approach. A manager as a coach approach believes in the potential for growth of every employee (Rogers 2000:15), a pedagogical way of thinking in leadership work (Evered & Selman 1989) and an ability to recognize the needs of employees and the situation as well as an ability to choose among different alternatives in coaching (Viitala, 2007).

"A manager’s role changes from "leader and commander” to consultant and supporter. A manager does not govern the work of their employees nowadays and even less in the future."
"As expertise increases, managerial work must also change from commanding to coordinating, such that identifies and utilizes strengths and hidden capacities."

Participative approach to leadership and listening were also considered important in the study. Participation and listening take time, require presence and the ability to receive the message from the subordinates. The manager should be tolerant and have the patience to listen to the entire message of her/his dialogue partner. The data informs that legally-bound official meetings to hear employees are held but other kind of interaction is not always possible.

"Official meetings are held but other kind of listening to personnel is not arranged”.

Sincere wishes

The data includes two sincere wishes for the future regards leadership work: the manager has time for leadership work and reasonable level of performance. The fact that such a large amount of managers expresses their wish to be able to allocate enough time for their leadership work reveals that such a basic requirement is not yet in place. The managers in question have a simple wish to have time for their work requirements, after all most people do want to do well in their work. Many respondents suggest that leadership work should be a work description as such, not an extra task allocated to someone on top of other responsibilities. Time, knowledge and other resources are naturally needed to make this happen in organizations.

"Leadership work should finally be accepted as its own task. It must be given enough time and improve managers’ abilities both in terms of knowledge as well as social abilities."

We also identified expressions for an alternative future in which a reasonably good performance would be enough and the pressure for excellence in everything would diminish. An ever-increasing level of performance and the rhetoric of excellence are a global curse that is beyond the reach of one manager. Managers can and should, however, take a stand on this
tendency and talk against it and its negative consequences. Managers could become the messengers of a reasonably good performance. Such a message on reasonably good provides an alternative to the hegemonic discourse of excellence. Many subordinates suffer from the feeling of inadequacy, something that managers can help with professional leadership work.

"Working life is taxing nowadays. Individuals are feeling inadequate on all levels of the organization. Focusing, a clear strategy and a successful interplay and realistic plans as well as professional management and leadership could bring about solutions."

Discussion

In this article we are interested in exploring the notion of leadership work and its potential to theory and practice. The article offers three contributions. First, we analyzed how the concept of leadership work has been used in the earlier literature. Second, we provide an empirical analysis of leadership work in our data. Third, we present some ideas how the concept may be useful for practitioners.

In the earlier literature we searched for “leadership work” or other approaches similar to it. The concept itself has been used in few articles. We were able to find several articles on leadership that applied leadership work as a general description for the work that managers and leaders are involved in (Sundgren & Styhre 2006; Kirton & Healy 2012; Carroll et al. 2008). In other articles leadership work was employed in an ethnographic sense of the word (Kelly et al. 2006; Iszatt-White 2009). These articles focused on the everyday doing of leadership by having observed leaders in their work. The third approach to leadership work is what we called “the meaning of leadership work” (Ospina & Su 2009) in which the authors analyze meanings given to the work the managers are involved in. In addition to these examples, the body of research on leadership practices or leadership-as-practice (Carroll et al. 2008; Raelin 2011; Crevani et al. 2010) offers relevant examples of how practice approach can benefit the study of leadership. All in all, there exists a promising amount of research on leadership work that encourages us to use it also in our research.
Although many of the earlier studies on leadership work had utilized ethnographic data, our data are not based on such field work. Our data come from a large survey and our approach is mostly inclined toward the meaning of leadership work. We analyzed how managers and human resources professionals make sense of leadership work. We identified five meanings of leadership work: Classic dilemmas, Current conditions, Contradictions and paradoxes, Contemporary trends and Sincere wishes. Most of these perspectives are by far not new, but it is interesting to observe what meanings are presently attached to the classic dilemmas for example. Together these five perspectives provide an intriguing picture of the wide variety of meanings attached to leadership work by the respondents.

Related to the content of the data, we were enthusiastic to find out whether the practitioners had adopted some, if any, of the recent views about leadership as suggested by research that define leadership as a shared, social phenomenon created by leaders and followers together. Sadly the comments and texts about leadership and leadership work were fairly traditional and leader-centred. This may be partially explained by the factor described by Carroll & Simpson (2012): there is need for new vocabulary of more collective and shared forms of leadership. The respondents are likely to use traditional language that is based on individual leaders and followers since they are not familiar with alternative concepts.

First, most comments about leadership still focused mainly on the leader: leader’s role, tasks and skills. The views were, in general, relatively traditional. In line with the traditional leadership literature that emphasizes strong individual leaders, the data demonstrated a strong need for trustworthy and caring leaders in increasingly unpredictable and chaotic organizational life. Some of the comments portrayed very emotional needs: a need to be seen, heard, cared about and appreciated at the workplace. In general, the attitudes towards leaders were at the same time demanding and understanding. Respondents realized the pressures in demanding leadership work, but at the same time they expected much from those in leadership positions. Secondly, the data revealed that people see the surrounding conditions of leadership work very much as a hindrance for good leadership work. Time pressure, hardening business demands and a lack of clarity of a leader’s role are often mentioned in the texts. The question raised in the analysis is that even if leaders did have all the necessary skills, would they have possibilities to use them properly?
For practitioners the concept of leadership work makes the ambitious and ambiguous notion of leadership more accessible. Leadership research and popular books on leadership are dominated by the image of powerful individual leaders who have supernatural qualities. If leadership is no longer perceived as a personal characteristic or mystical possession, it is easier for people to relate to it and create an understanding of it. Furthermore, research focusing on the actual work practices of managers and leaders also reveals the mundane nature of such work and further lessens the mystical image of leadership. If leadership is work that can be taught, learned and developed, it becomes more concrete and accessible. Furthermore, if leadership is considered part of managerial work, as Larsson & Lundholm (2010, 2013) argue, it is therefore a responsibility of every manager to create space for such leadership work. The attitude: “Since I don’t possess any leader qualities, I will therefore only conduct my managerial duties”, becomes more difficult to hold. Consequently, leadership work can be a beneficial concept for practitioners too.
References:


