Uncovering the relational dynamics in creative research environments. Promises and pitfalls of leadership perspectives.

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Background.

Many studies on creative research environments make a direct connection between creativity and leadership (Hemlin 2013, Hollingsworth 2002, Isaksen & Ekvall 2010). “Leadership is vital to creativity”, is said, for instance, in the introduction to Creativity and Leadership in Science, Technology and Innovation (Hemlin et al, 2013). Our study starts from the notion that important circumstances in the mini collective of the research team continuously raise questions about control, authority and dominance. Not necessarily is leadership, nor better leadership, the answer.

Creative knowledge development process takes place in a workplace where living people interlace with each other, with scientific knowledge and (sometimes) intricate technical instruments. The qualities of all these connections can be assumed to have a major importance for the results of science, and it rarely gets the attention it deserves. Stefan Svallfors, Swedish sociologist, laments this overlook and says that the most relevant locus where new knowledge is produced is the team – its cognitive, emotional and social relationships:

To build creative and productive research environments is actually a delicate and highly emotional enterprise. It concerns building (physical and virtual) rooms, where people feel safe and remember all they can. Where they display the courage to share pain and joy. (Svallfors, 2012, p 12, our translation)

Ours is a case study of an actual research team in a Medical Faculty at European university. The team started with a pathbreaking discovery within biomedicine in the early 1960’s. From this early source has sprung a highly complex delta of new science through the collaboration of several generations of researchers held together in roughly the same environment at the university. If the delicate process by which the research team microcosmos is built and maintained, that Svallfors refers to, can through this study be envisaged over time and generations there is relevance in these findings, the opportunity to use this understanding to create more sustainable research environments in the future.

There are a number of difficulties appearing when the notion of leadership is introduced either as a research perspective or a HR-practice into these circumstances of research team dynamics.:
1) The concept and idea of leadership is questionable. Alvesson & Spicer (2012) show how results and analysis of research in leadership are based on ontological assumptions. By far the most frequent studies have a ‘functionalist’ approach and assume that leadership is a phenomenon that exists ‘out there’ and can be ‘tracked down with the help of the correct analytical tools’ (p 370). An alternative assumption is instead that there is no such thing as leadership in the world but it is seen and socially constructed as such where actors in certain social interactions conceptualize these interactions in terms of leadership in order to create meaning of them. Alvesson and Spicer recommend a third avenue, the chiseling out of a balanced position between these basic assumptions where they emphasize both how ideas are constructed in social situations to legitimate power wielding and privileged positions in organizations and identifying when, where and how leadership is a necessary and successful method to solve problems and arrive at a road ahead. This sort of third position has emancipatory ambitions striving for minimizing occurrences of dominance and power. The problem with the many angles on leadership, argue Alvesson and Spicer is that a functional understanding of the phenomenon, by insisting on delineation and measurability of leadership, tend to reify the phenomenon and thereby dumbfound the scientist from seeing the living complex social dynamics of which leadership is but one dimension.

2) In a university there are also several competing cultures or logics of leading and influencing (Berquist & Pawlak, 2008, Jonnergård & Sewerin 2013) that makes it difficult to even speak about the phenomenon without adhering to the dominant view of leadership, which often resides in the formal line organization as management, often today referred to as New Public Management (NPM) (Stensaker et al, 2012)

3) The findings of most leadership studies find their way into the growing leadership development market and offer organizations relevance without realizing that from another viewpoint than leadership other dynamics could become talkable in other venues. The discourse on leadership, commonly led at leadership courses and seminars, tend to cloud over so many other interesting dimensions and, as a consequence neglects the conversation about these things at everyday gatherings. To talk about leadership is a valuable entrance into highly personal conversations and reflections about the conditions of a workplace. It is lamentable that so many of these important conversations take place at training sessions to which only leaders have been sent.

4) The recipes emanating from leadership research into creative research environments – f.i. the eight components and three dimensions to stimulate ‘Creative Knowledge Environments (CKE’s)’ of Hemlin et al. (2013), or Hollingsworth’s five factors for developing excellence in major discovery research environments (2002) – often seem cliche’d when they hit the life lived by the professionals in the research laboratory.

In sum, we tend to miss important qualities by the overwhelmingly sticking to leadership as the question and the answer. Connecting leadership with creativity in these environments lead to a relevance crisis in that the results are useful mainly in leadership development contexts. Another set of assumption would open the field of relevance into other and everyday contexts for reflection on the social dynamics of doing science. Talking about leadership is an admission ticket to this field of knowledge and yet, there is so much more, and, paradoxically, the notion of leadership needs to be overthrown in order to make advances within this field.
This case study of work and life lived over long time in a continuously successful research laboratory environment reveals a handful of critical situations where it is difficult to see how an ordinary concept of leadership would provide the answer. For instance,

**Production and Bildung.** A research team at the university differs from other creative collectives in that it is embedded in a public institution that has several purposes. The two most important of these are to continuously produce new knowledge within the different scientific fields and to teach and train a new generation of able scientists. It is reasonable to assume that working with these two purposes each generates tensions and that in the competition and negotiations between these two different goals emerge questions and sometimes paradoxical or ambivalent answers about authority, control, power and leadership. In a way there are two competing and highly different tracks, processes or subsystems with its own experiences, language, values and norms, that are supposed to agree with and yield to each other.

**What is professionalism in building and maintaining work relationships?** In a tight and highly competitive work environment as the research team there are levels of engagement and different orders of behaving towards each other. There is a collegial and friendly atmosphere where reasonable people get along side by side as good colleagues. There is the fact that each individual competes with the others for positions, resources and acknowledgement of the accomplishments like in any other creative work environment. And then there is a third layer based on personality traits displayed as work progresses in the deeply emotional character of tight collaboration and contest – love, friendship, animosity, despair, rivalry and stress. Negotiating these ‘hotbeds of turmoil and transference’ (Martin, 2013) is something that needs be learned and managed.

**The sense of a mission, scientific discovery as a calling.** In this particular group, like in others of a similar kind, there is a sense of a utopian reverie. Scientific work is in one sense ‘world making’ (Goodman, 1978) and is accompanied by the feeling that the group is building something totally new, is changing the world in some sort of fundamental bearing.

**References**


