Abstract for the International Studying Leadership Conference 2014
14-16 December 2014, Copenhagen, Denmark

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Abstract

EMBODIED LEADERSHIP IN A VIRTUAL AGE – WHAT CAN WE LEARN FROM THEATRES?

Both work and leadership are increasingly developing into digital and virtual space. We live in a digital time where people both in their work and privately spend more and more time in front of a screen. People communicate and relate to each other increasingly in virtual space because it is more efficient, easy and because everybody else does it. Leadership is more and more going on without people touching, feeling and seeing each other face-to-face. These organizational changes are not adequately covered in the leadership literature, but leading leadership researchers are aware that the practice field is far ahead of research. Al-Ani, Horspool and Bligh (2011) are stating that “there are significant gaps in developing new conceptual understanding of leadership of virtual or distributed groups or teams.” (p. 225).

Modern telecommunication and technology have created a new organizational reality with virtual work and virtual leadership being the rule rather than the exception, both within and across organizations and countries (Avolio, Sosik, Kahai and Baker, 2013; DasGupta, 2011). The fast developing and improving technology is a driving force, as well as environmental and productivity arguments, but it seems like everybody is heading in the same direction without questioning if this development is constructive and useful for all kinds of organizations and leadership relations. Paradoxically, while most organizations and businesses have become truly digital praising the new communication technology, there is a part of organizational life that has remained highly physical and material; production processes in theatres creating new live stage performances. Theatre production and leadership is naturally highly physical and emotional (Sauer, 2005) as the staged performance is dependent on the creative interactions of people. Theories are really a special context when talking about leadership as work modes, processes and habits are developed and ingrained throughout many years, also the creative direction of theatre plays. One of the absolute premises is physical presence for everybody when working with a play. The body is present and important in the interplay between the director and actors, so one can truly talk about an embodied and physical leadership. Theatreperformances are in their nature physical and material as the end-result is a staged live-performance by people. The production process is also both material and physical as the first meeting between the theatre directors and actors marks the beginning of the process. At the same time, it is a context downplaying virtual communication, both during and in-between rehearsals. Interestingly, theatre directors and the theatre culture in itself have developed many rules and habits prohibiting or limiting technology when rehearsing; no mobile phones, no computers or any other electronic devices interrupting and ruining the creative process. The theatre is indeed the opposite of most knowledge based work in organizations when it comes to digitalization and therefore we think it is an interesting context to inquire into these issues;
What characterize creative leadership processes in theatre production from an embodied and material perspective?

Why is physical presence so important in theatres and why is digital and virtual communication downplayed?

This paper addresses the importance of the physicality of leadership in a virtual age. We are questioning what happens to embodied leadership when leadership relations in knowledge based businesses today increasingly are going on virtually. Avolio et al. (2014) use the concept e-leadership and indicate that the organizational and societal changes deriving from the new technology are more radical than what we presently realize. They say: “We set out here to examine how leaders lead virtually, as well as how teams interact virtually, but this is in our view only a very small piece of the transformation that is occurring in organizations as a consequence of introducing advanced information technology”. Although there has been a considerable amount of research about what is interchangeably called; virtual leadership, e-leadership, distributed leadership and team leadership, the majority of this research is overlooking the importance of physicality of leadership. While the physical aspect of leadership is an emerging field of research (e.g. Special Issue of Leadership 2013) and the embodiment perspective on leadership is getting stronger footage in leadership research (e.g. Küpers, 2011; Koivunen and Wennes, 2011; Ladkin, 2008; Ladkin & Taylor, 2010; Sinclair, 2005; Ropo, Parviainen and Koivunen, 2002; Ropo, Sauer & Salovaara, 2013), research and theorizing on virtual organizations are devoid of physicality and materiality. Recent research has found that there is physicality in leadership in virtual space, but it takes a different importance as some senses like hearing become more important than others (Caulat, 2012). A chapter in a forthcoming book on physicality of leadership (Ladkin and Taylor, 2015) revealed that aesthetic consciousness of self and others intensifies in virtual communication, especially in relation to the senses of seeing and listening. For instance, the authors (De Paoli, Ropo and Sauer, 2015) describe perception of the self made possible on Skype in a way that you do not experience in face-to-face meetings. Other sensuous cues also become central in virtual communication, so there is a need to sensitize the physicality and to develop skills to perceive and act on it.

However, even if there is some physicality in virtual cooperation, what is there about physical presence and embodied leadership that makes face-to-face meetings important? What can we learn from an environment that is highly physical and embodied, namely the theatre world? We question here the need for physicality in leadership or if ‘virtual physicality’ is as good as ‘face-to-face physicality’ by relating to leadership of theatre arts production; an area that has remained highly physical and embodied in a digitalized world.

By using interviews and observations of theatre directors and actors actively engaged in theatre production, we wish to come up with some new understanding of the benefits of physical appearance and physical and embodied leadership in a virtual age. This research has an inductive and exploratory approach as there is little research about these issues from this leadership perspective. We want to generate insight about the embodied and physical aspect of theatre production and develop some propositions to illustrate what is being lost when working mainly virtually. In this paper we follow up on the quest for practical relevance in leadership research (Tushman et. al., 2007) and also how leadership theory should be developed in line with the needs of the knowledge era (Uhl-Bien, Marion and McKelvey, 2007).
References:


