How to investigate an event-based approach to leadership

Looking at the prevalent corpus of the leadership literature reveals an interesting image. It is reasonable to say that there has been a movement from the leader-centric view to a more relational one. When academics started to empirically look into leadership issues the trait approach was very popular. Leadership was associated with personal characteristics. Hence, attempts were made to identify particular qualities that make someone a leader. However, no consensus could be reached in regards to what kinds of attributes are indispensable for being a leader. Neither is there compelling empirical evidence to speak of. Reducing leadership to an individual has never lost its appeal and keeps reappearing within modern theories such as transformational or charismatic leadership. Arguably, the reason for this is the temptation of following the Cartesian idea of simple cause-effect relationships. With the rise of contingent or situational approaches to leadership, scholars did not only focus on individual attributes, but also on other dimensions that affected the enactment of leadership. The latter was regarded to be dependent on the type of task at hand, or the maturity of the followers. Hence, it was up to the leader to assess the prevalent situation and to choose an appropriate leadership style accordingly. What all those theories have in common is the leader as the driving force of leadership. Differently put, the idea of an exceptional individual who is responsible for the outcomes of the many is sustained. It therefore makes sense to refer to those kinds of theories as heroic-leadership.

It further can be argued that those theories offer an insufficient account of leadership as they suggest leaders as the causation of leadership. Albeit leaders may play an important role within the emergence of leadership, they are certainly not its only cause. Applying a leader-centric view only sheds light on a fraction of leadership. It is important for practitioners and academics alike to understand that more factors influence leadership than just the leader agency. Hence, the next logical step is to look into the entire process by addressing following questions: How is leadership constantly being shaped as a socially embedded process? How are people trying to make sense of it over time? What kind of roles play contextual factors within that sense-making process?

Drawing on insights from other disciplines such as sociology, philosophy or psychology, academics developed a relational approach to leadership. Consequently, leadership is explained in terms of being socially constructed, distributed or processual. By drawing the attention away from the individual, theories in that context can be subsumed under post-heroic leadership. Here, the degree of relatedness can vary strongly between theories. Scholars work with different definitions of processes or social constructions, which in turn leads to different results. Therefore, it is necessary to clearly position oneself within this post-heroic leadership continuum. The leadership
approach that is advocated in this paper is influenced by the thinking of process philosophy. It takes into account the unsuccessful attempts of defining leadership’s nature and seeks to understand how leadership works. Investigating phenomena through the lenses of process philosophy makes it impossible to break observations analytically down to single objects. Process thinking rejects the idea of absolute substances as represented in clear defined objects. Instead a processual worldview is espoused according to which everything is interconnected and liable to constant change. What is regarded as concrete things is rather an interplay of historic antecedents, political, emotional and social factors, rendering a permanent identity impossible. According to Whitehead (1983) connectedness is of the essence of all things of all kinds. In the absence of concrete entities, a way to describe the world is by using the concept of events. In the Whiteheadian sense events do not solely signify something that happens or takes place (Oxford dictionary), they represent much more than that; they are the basic unit of experience and describe the world in the making. But, what does that mean? Basically, it takes into account that everything is interconnected as objects are being shaped by others and shaping them in turn. Thus, objects only appear to have a final and solid identity. What is perceived as static substances are actually abstractions made from ongoing processes. This happens naturally by trying to make sense of the world. But, we have to be aware of the fact that the way how we perceive an object is influenced by our particular understanding of it. The kind of meaning we attribute to it depends on our knowledge we have about it. Furthermore, it can be argued that the process of meaning giving itself, treats objects as entities, or differently put, as fixed representation and is, therefore, neglecting ongoing reciprocal changes.

Using events as the basic unit of analysis, on the contrary, will draw the research focus on the way how leadership as a process emerges through other processes. This would change the perspective on leadership from a leader-follower dichotomy to a web of interactions between agents. There are several reasons why this change of perspective seems to be necessary. Obviously, leadership is more complex than meets the eye. This is evidenced by the manyfold contributions the field has witnessed investigating different aspects. Process thinking would be a perfect way of taking this versatility into account. What concept could be more fitting to shed a light on an ever changing phenomenon as one that is build on the idea that basically everything is in flux. Hence, it will be interesting to see what we can learn about leadership if we do not use it as a synonym for a leader, but acknowledge its fluid and ever-changing character. Another reason is that a process view of leadership assuages the importance of the leader role. Tourish (2014) pointed out that an over-attribution of leader agency has real-world consequences as it reinforces leader power at the expense of others. Concentrating power in the hands of a few can have critical ramifications. Moreover, sustaining leader-centred conceptions supports the emergence of scapegoating (Grint, 2010). Formal leaders enjoy privileges such as power or wealth for securing
their followers’ goals in return. But should they fail in doing so they have to individually answer for their failure. At the same time, this prevents collective responsibility from arising.

Applying an event-based approach, does not aim at finding a final answer to the question what leadership is, since that is impossible from a process perspective. I rather hope to gain valuable insights into how leadership actually works. De Cock and Sharp (2007) underline that the purpose of applying a process perspective should account for the difference between what is actually happening and what appears to be happening. Hence, the goal is to show what actually occurs within a leadership dynamic comprised of mutually influencing and therefore constant changing agents. It will be difficult, however, to exactly show how certain events give rise to other events. Because of events’ interconnectedness it will be virtually impossible to trace back every force that had an impact. The role historicity plays in a process perspective complicates this even more. But, it is inevitable to take the time dimension into account when using events as a unit of analysis. Accordingly, a look into the past becomes as important as a look into the present. Yet the amounts of information that would be necessary to give an adequate account of the interplay of past and present events make an empirical investigation a daunting prospect.

Nonetheless, I am convinced that it is worthwhile to find a way to overcome those obstacles. Because if we do, we might reach a better understanding of leadership by means of applying a concept that is as versatile as the social phenomenon itself. We might come to an understanding how leadership emerges in such multifaceted ways. Achieving this becomes gradually important in view of the increasing complexity we are facing today. Several scholars (Conger, Spreitzer & Lawler, 1999; Senge & Käufer, 2003; Manville & Ober 2003; Uhl-Bien, Marion & McKelvey, 2007; Obolensky, 2010) have already called attention to the need of applying a concept to leadership, which is attuned to the complexity of the current knowledge era. But in order to do so, some questions need to be addressed first: What research methods are suitable for capturing the fluidness of leadership? Is there a good point of departure? Is it still legitimate to work with the idea of entities and show how they are constantly constructed? Since not all events are significant enough to induce transitions, is it possible to show when transitions occur and when they do not?

Maybe, looking into the communication between organisational actors might be a good way of illustrating the becoming of leadership. Crevani (2011) for instance shows in her doctoral thesis how people’s positions are co-constructed in the course of discussions at meetings. Even more important she draws attention to the fragmented, undissolved and uncertain nature of conversations. Those characteristics are in line with an event-based view of the world through which processes give rise to other ones in a fuzzy way. Looking into the communication between actors we might be able to observe how some issues come into being whereas others don’t.
Recurring themes or notions might be indicative of the materialisation of leadership embedded in a unique context. Various other scholars (Collins, 2005; Crevani, 2011; Tourish, 2014) have also advocated the idea of the emergence of leadership through communication as it represents an essential part of organisations and stresses the interaction between agents – and not the individual itself. In doing so a different account of leadership can be given by considering every possible influential factor as opposed to assuming leadership as a causation of a leader.

References:
Tourish, T, (2014). Leadership, more or less? A processual, communication perspective on the role of agency in leadership theory, Leadership 10 (1) 79-98.