LEADERSHIP AS MANAGEMENT PANACEA?
A FRAMEWORK FOR THE CONSUMPTION OF LEADERSHIP PRACTICES

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Extended abstract

Leadership is increasingly seen as the a key factor needed to address the complexity of current societal challenges (Nohria, 2000). A quest for more robust, and better, leadership is at the core of several research in the management field, claiming for new leadership forms and contents (Boyatzis, Goleman and McKee, 2001, Guthey, Clark and Jackson, 2009). Carriers of management knowledge have been intensely involved in producing and diffusing leadership knowledge and practices in order to give leaders the appropriate tools to effectively exert their social influence (Podolny, Khurana and Hill-Popper, 2010). Business leaders are the object of attention of an increasing amount of media reports (interviews to CEO, lifestyles, etc.). There business leaders are promoted and popularized as role models for managers as well as for successful citizens. Many business leaders are nowadays dealt with by the mass media as true "maitre-a-penser" and "opinion makers", a role previously played by intellectuals and politicians or, more recently, stars from the entertainment industry. As business leaders are climbing all the popularity scale, leadership is becoming a panacea able to cure all management challenges. In this paper, we aim at describing how leadership as a management panacea has emerged and diffused over time. We take a "consumer view" of the phenomenon looking at the diffusion of leadership practices and models from a consumption of management knowledge perspective (Alvarez, Mazza and Strandgaard, 2005; Heusinkveld, Sturdy and Werr, 2011).

Based on a wide array of research adopting a New Institutional perspective, management knowledge, and leadership knowledge within it, has been analyzed from a production and diffusion angle. According to this approach, management knowledge is the output of specialized and institutionalized knowledge producers, diffused by specific channels. Research works have consistently followed suit, focusing on specific contents - like academic knowledge (Furner & Supple, 1989) and fads and fashions (Abrahamson, 1996) - and carriers - like educational institutions (Engwall, 1992; Amdam, 1996; Engwall & Zamagni, 1998) academic journals (Usdiken & Pasadeos, 1995), consulting firms (Kipping & Engwall, 2002) popular management books (Furusten, 1995, Huczynski, 2006) and popular press (Mazza & Alvarez, 2000). By addressing the issue of how producers and diffusers contribute in institutionalizing management knowledge, those studies have shed light on how management knowledge turns into buzzwords, hypes (Nohria and Eccles, 1998) and, ultimately “panacea” once they get taken for granted.

The basic argument of this stream of research is that actors involved in knowledge production and diffusion specialize in a single knowledge form and target a particular audience. So, it is possible to study how a given institutional actor works in the management knowledge field and how a given knowledge form travels from producers towards diffusers. In this view, consumers constitute a passive audience; their choices and preferences having a minor impact upon producers and diffusers. Furthermore it is often an implicit assumption in these studies that the various carriers play different roles in the production, diffusion and adaptation process. Thus, academic institutions

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are often seen as the starting point for production of management knowledge. Consultants are typically seen as intermediaries, which commodify management knowledge by turning it into sets of techniques. Finally, press and media are given a role of popularizing and advertising a given new piece of management knowledge.

A different approach (Nohria & Eccles, 1998; Sahlin-Andersson, Mazza & Strandgaard Pedersen, 2005; Gherardi & Nicolini, 2000), however, suggest to displace theoretical attention from the output (knowledge) to the process (knowing). From this viewpoint, institutional actors are considered to be involved in the production and diffusion of management knowledge with a more complex, non-sequential, overlapping and in flux division of labor. They are seen to work more like a liquid, virtual, organization, sharing activities and acting as producers, diffusers and popularizers at the same time. So, each carrier may transport more than one type of knowledge and perform more than one function.

By building on such research stream and on the literature of consumption of management knowledge (Alvarez, Mazza and Strandgaard, 2005), we focus on how leadership has become popularized as a panacea and how this panacea emerges, adapts and contextualizes. In so doing, we assume that managers, as consumers, have a more active role in selecting and acquiring leadership knowledge and translating it into managerial action. We argue that managers acquire management knowledge, and in particular leadership knowledge, from a plurality of sources, both professional and non-professional based. Moreover, managers do not exclusively acquire management knowledge for rational problem solving reasons but also to build their self-image and enhance their social prestige. By aiming to become more similar as their role models, managers hope of being perceived as better leaders. The adoption of this perspective links management knowledge consumption to the “travel of ideas” approach (Czarniawska and Joerges, 1996; Czarnia and Sevon, 1996) developed within the Sociology of Knowledge framework (Latour, 1986). From this perspective, leadership knowledge rise out of a process of co-creation involving all the key actors in management knowledge production, diffusion and consumption. We therefore identify two key elements granting the effective adoption and conceptualization of leadership as panacea: a) the alignment of all the actors involved in producing, diffusing, popularizing and consuming leadership knowledge and b) the active attitude of managers as consumers of leadership knowledge.

Our contribution reveals how also in the case of leadership as for other management knowledge, functional specialization is replaced by ‘multi-task capabilities’. By assuming that institutional actors are ‘eclectic’ about what management knowledge to produce and diffuse, the specialization boundaries among institutional actors tend to vanish. In a similar vein, we hold that the key issue becomes what sort of knowledge is sought and what it is used for, rather than how and what knowledge is produced and diffused.

References


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