Leaders as ventriloquists. Leader identity and influencing the communicative construction of the organisation.

Traditionally leadership research has been dominated by psychological and quantitative approaches. However, as various authors have pointed out (e.g. Fairhurst 2007), this has failed to deliver analyses of the actual doing of leadership. Consequently, what leadership is and how it is achieved remains elusive. Recently, there has been a steady flow of research using discursive approaches to leadership which has attempted to redress this imbalance. Broadly speaking, discursive approaches to leadership take a social constructionist approach in which the organisation is communicatively constructed and in which leadership is seen as a process of influence whereby the person who has, or the persons who have, most influence in the process of organisational sense-making emerges as the leader. Using transcripts of naturally-occurring talk as data and Actor Network Theory (ANT) as a research methodology, this paper seeks to make visible the seen but unnoticed ways in which networks of actants (human, non-human, present and non-present) are made relevant to the interaction so as to influence the communicative construction of the organisation.

This paper therefore builds on the work of the Montreal School (e.g. Taylor and Van Every, 2000) which has recently given ANT a linguistic and organisational twist. More specifically, using Cooren’s (2010) concept of ventriloquism which is understood metaphorically as the process by which interlocutors animate, and are reflexively animated by, networks of actants, this paper considers how leaders make such networks of actants relevant to the interaction. In presentifying such networks, they influence the communicative construction of the organisation and so ‘do’ leadership.

Findings demonstrate how leaders do influence by ventriloquizing: non-human actants such as the organisation or the budget; non-present human collectivities such as the personnel; and present human actants such as the management team. By invoking such networks the leader creates a hybrid presence (e.g. leader + budget, or leader + organisation) which makes their talk more authoritative. The ability to mobilise authoritative networks is thus seen as being a key element of leadership. Moreover, it is argued that this ability is category-bound to institutional identities which means that whilst hierarchy is not necessarily commensurate with leadership, the ability to do leadership is skewed to those who are in positions of authority. Further, it is argued that leadership studies, rather than concentrating on individuals


and their psychological traits should pay more attention to the enactment of leadership in terms of the networks of actants (human or non-human) that leaders can make relevant to the interaction as a way of influencing the communicative construction of the organisation.

Key words: actor network theory, leader identity, ventriloquism, authority

References

