Extended abstract

Articulating a shared vision is considered one of the central practices of organizational leadership (Bass, 1990). A leadership vision facilitates a shared understanding of goals and creates commitment among organization’s members to work towards their completion (Kotter, 1995). Consistent with this idea, Haslam, Reicher and Platow (2011) treat leadership as an identity construction and management process, wherein social identity building communication is considered a key aspect. Their theory provides further insight into the demands of effective leadership communication, discussing the required fit between leaders’ communications and follower identities. Viewing the leadership vision as a form of identity building communication, this paper studies responses to leadership communications in an organizational setting. We examine leadership efforts in a multi-cultural, geographically dispersed unit of a multinational ICT company undergoing a strategic change. The leader of the organization sought to establish support for the organization’s new strategic direction by different forms of visionary communication. As suggested by the identity leadership approach by Haslam et al. (2011), these efforts were influenced by local identities in the organization’s sub-units. We discuss the implications of these fragmented identities for organizational leaders who seek to address and lead organizations as coherent wholes.

As Haslam et al. (2011) astutely express, communicative practices and the articulation of an actionable future are at the core of leadership. Their social identity approach (cf. Haslam et al., 2011) underlines people’s interpretations of leadership communications in the context of their own group identities. A leadership vision needs to connect with the follower identities, which are in turn influenced by the local context. These follower identities refer to organizational members’ group identities, which act as a
source for shared meanings and values (Haslam et al., 2011). When the organization in question is a multi-located, multi-cultural, and functionally diverse, the theory implies complications. The frame of reference, the group values and meanings, may not coincide. The resulting fragmentation (cf. Sveningsson & Alvesson, 2003) signifies that there is no single salient identity for leaders to address, but instead multiple. Consequently, leaders become less effective if the visionary communications do not match its contextually embedded audience. They fail to connect with the identities of their followers in a meaningful way (Haslam et al., 2011).

This setting implies a paradox: Simultaneously, a vision should be a tool for organization-wide alignment and commitment, yet also address the idiosyncratic conditions faced by followers in different contexts. The identity leadership theory (cf. Haslam et al., 2011) proposes that successful leaders present themselves as exemplar in-group members – embodying characteristics of group prototypes – while concurrently seeking to define group values and beliefs, and the ensuing “correct” collective behavior, to fit their purposes. In a fragmented organization it is to be expected that leaders would need to possess ‘chameleon-like’ characteristics, representing different qualities depending on the observer. But how one would construct such ‘chameleonship’ yet deliver a unifying message remains the key question. To influence leadership outcomes (cf. Drath, McCauley, Palus, Van Velsor, O’Connor & McGuire, 2008), to direct and align organizational members, a leader must emphasize one-ness, while concurrently tending to the idiosyncrasies of individual group identities to create commitment. However, if the leader builds his or her influence by strengthening individual group identities the organization will travel towards increased fragmentation.

This paradoxical leadership condition is highlighted through a case study of a sub-unit of a multinational ICT company. The organization operated in multiple locations under multiple nationalities in Asia, Europe and the United States. The study focused on the three main sites of the organization, two of which located in the United States, one in continental Europe. 28 mid to top level managers in the organization were interviewed between the three locations, including the managers responsible for each site. The interviews were recorded, transcribed and analyzed thematically. These semi-structured interviews dealt with the topics of organizational transformation, identity and leadership. The interviewees were asked to describe how they saw the organization’s recent development path. They were also asked to describe the organization’s newly appointed leader, in terms of leadership style, visibility, etc. Relevant organizational and press documentary was also examined in the reconstruction of the organization’s recent history.

The interviews revealed the groups’ varied histories, which amounted to diverse identities, further resulting in different positions in relation to the parent company, the organization’s leadership and each others. Interviewees expressed clearly distinguishable group identities within their units. Similarly, their evaluations of other units were relatively stable across the units. The study illustrates how the leader’s communications receive different interpretations depending on the local group memberships and the group identities within. Individual reactions vary from enthusiasm to pessimism, as judgments of plausibility and appeal are made based on the local context.
In one sense, the interview process made the group identities salient as the interviewees were encouraged to explicate the differences between the organization’s three major sites during the interviews. However, the interviewees were also able to explicate and link the bases for these evaluations to historical processes within different parts of the organization. Personal experiences were also frequently used to explain in-group and out-group identities.

In interviewee testimonies the leader’s behaviors, characteristics, and communications were given various interpretations, which remained relatively consistent within the three units. This would suggest that the evaluations were being influenced by the local group identities. Prominent issues in the interviews included such as meanings attached to certain communicative instances, suitability of strategic intentions, managerial or leadership practices, and the leader’s personal identity and perceived allegiances to certain locales. The data suggests that the leadership vision was evaluated more positively in units, where its content was more congruent with the interviewees’ group identities.

The results of our study question the traditional treatment of leadership contexts as unproblematic and universal. Our data points to the important role of the followers’ local contexts when leadership interpretations are made within organizations. Furthermore, we seek to illustrate how followers come to possess these interpretations by invoking certain events, performances, or ‘states of affairs’ to construct them. This description serves to show how entangled leadership processes are in the complexities of every day events and reinstates the importance of followers within this process. Finally, through such observations we can perhaps move closer to discussing the realities of managers and other organizational leaders, whose work includes meeting such conflicting or paradoxical requirements.

List of references:


