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Well then – What now? An everyday approach to managerial leadership

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Abstract
This article examines leadership in practice through an investigation of how 62 managers (including project leaders), competing in a cutting-edge environment, perceive and describe the characteristics of everyday leadership. Based on the common notion of fragmentation in managerial work, as well as the unfortunate lack of understanding of how managerial work relates to the overall work processes of the organization, the article addresses the integrated job of managing (e.g., see Barley and Kunda, 1992; Hales, 1986, 1999; Mintzberg, 1994). In this study, everyday leadership is uncovered as a sense-making process consisting of three sets of activities – interpretations, constant adjustments and formulations of temporary solutions. Another striking feature of everyday leadership is that, to a considerable extent, it is event-driven. We therefore suggest that everyday leadership, as an event-driven activity rather than an intention-driven activity, should focus on skills such as improvisation and the ability to tune in.

Keywords
everyday leadership, improvising, managerial leadership, narratives, telecom industry

Introduction

In recent decades, there has been an intense debate regarding the role of leadership in managerial work (Bass, 1985; House et al., 2007; Mintzberg, 2004; Watson, 1994). The background to the debate is the transparency of the global economy, the deregulation of the financial markets, a steady increase in the competitive environment and a ceaseless call for creative innovations (Castells, 1998). While leadership most often is depicted as setting

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goals, formulating strategies, providing guidelines, and/or incorporating values (Yukl, 1989), the managerial work tradition continuously describes managerial work as fragmented and extremely short-sighted. Concepts such as 'causing' and 'all-embracing' can be used to summarize and describe the general view of leadership, a view that stands in stark contrast to the managerial-work tradition that portrays managers as highly reactive (Hales, 1999; Stewart, 1989).

With its focus on the more or less objective facts of managerial work and its causal, situational factors, the research on managerial work systematically neglects the connection between individuals' actions and their understanding of organizational activities (Noordegraaf and Stewart, 2000). As far as the research on leadership, there has been a strong tendency to put the leader at centre-stage, thus disregarding the context and the dynamics of leadership practices (Knights and Willmott, 1992).

Based on the common notion of fragmentation in managerial work, as well as the unfortunate lack of understanding of how managerial work and leadership practices relate to the overall work processes of the organization, the article addresses the integrated job of managing (e.g., see Barley and Kunda, 1992; Hales, 1986, 1999; Mintzberg, 1994). This, above all, calls for studies putting everyday work, the creation of meaning and sense-making processes at centre stage (Alvesson, 1989; Sandberg and Targama, 2007; Weick, 1967/1979, 1995; Weick and Sutcliffe, 2006).

This study is based on a collaborate project with a global telecom business, with headquartes located in Sweden, henceforth referred to as TECO. More specifically, the article examines leadership in practice through an investigation of how 62 managers (including project leaders), competing in a cutting-edge environment, perceive and describe the characteristics of everyday leadership. We used 62 narratives ('live cases'), roughly classified according to a simple process model to examine leadership activities in everyday work. Using this process model as a point of departure, we identify a particular situation we call '*Well then – what now?*' that we examine further by presenting and discussing three mini-cases. Our study reveals a sense-making process consisting of three sets of activities – interpretations, constant adjustments and formulations of temporary solutions. Another striking feature of everyday leadership is that, to a considerable extent, it is event-driven. We therefore suggest that everyday leadership, as an event-driven activity rather than an intention-driven activity, should focus on improvisation and the ability to tune in.

Managerial work and leadership

Since the literature on managerial work and leadership is extensive, a theoretical framing focus is needed for more explicit study of these topics in everyday settings. A seminal and well-known study of managerial work, particularly of managers' activity patterns from the early 1950s revealed that managers have a heavy workload with many issues to attend to. In addition, this study revealed that the time spent on each of these issues was less than 10 minutes (Carlson, 1951).

Carlson's pioneering work in the field has been validated by almost every later study of managerial work where the focus is on activity patterns and work content (e.g., Burns, 1957; Hales, 1986; Holmberg, 1986; Kotter, 1982; Mintzberg, 1973; Stewart, 1976, 1982; Tengblad, 2002, 2003, 2006; Tyrstrup, 1993).[1] The main conclusion of these studies, including Carlson's, is that managerial work is highly fragmented, and managers would be

better-off if they managed their time so that they could devote more time to strategic thinking. In one of the most quoted sections from his study, Carlson portrays his assumptions about the managing director as an orchestra conductor who can and should supervise both operations and the organization at the same time. Although this image starkly contrasts with his findings, that is, the manager as a puppet, controlled by people 'pulling the strings', the conductor image of the strategic manager has endured among both managers and academics (Collins, 2001a, 2001b; House et al., 2007; Yukl, 1989).

Although most studies that take the management behavioural approach have argued against detached conceptualizations – for example, Gulick and Urwick's (1937/1987) famous POSDCORB (planning, organizing, staffing, directing, co-ordinating, reporting and budgeting) – the fragmentation of managerial work remains a major concern. While challenging the depiction of management as the rational, reflective, systematic accomplishment of predetermined objectives, the understanding of the highly reactive work pattern of managers is still in dispute. Snyder and Glueck (1980) claimed that the methods used in studies of managerial work themselves produced what looked like fragmentation. They argued that managerial tasks, such as problem-solving, often consist of several, sometimes seemingly disparate activities, which may seem 'fragmented' if aims and purposes are not related to each other on an overall level. Tengblad (2006), in his replication of Mintzberg's (1973) study of managerial work, concludes that measuring the amount of time spent on activities, as opposed to measuring the frequency of activities, provides a different view of the fragmented pattern of managerial work. Thus the appreciation of the fragmentation of work as a problem may be due to a lack of understanding of how managerial work relates to the overall working processes of organizations (Hales, 1986). Mintzberg (1994: 11) expresses a similar idea in his argument that researchers have been 'so intent on breaking the job into pieces that we never came to grips with the whole thing. It is time, therefore, to consider the integrated job of managing'. Noordegraaf and Stewart (2000) also support this conclusion with their claim that the majority of research studies try to understand the more or less objective facts of managerial work and the causally determined situational factors. With a few exceptions (e.g., Watson, 1994, 1996), the study of processes and sense-making, and thus the creation of meaning related to organizational activity, is severely neglected. Evidently there seems to be a growing understanding among leading scholars, who have researched managerial work for decades, that for a deeper understanding of the role of managerial work and leadership, studies are needed that more explicitly take everyday work, the process perspective and 'sense-making' as points of departure (e.g., Barley and Kunda, 1992; Knights and Wilmott, 1992; Weick, 1995).

In his explicit focus on the interplay between individuals' actions and how they reach understandings in organizations, Weick (1967/1979, 1995) has convincingly shown that individuals act first and understand the significance of their actions afterwards. Based on this research, Weick also claimed that in an organized context there is a constant need for interpretation and sense-making. Since actions precede their interpretation, the time perspective is crucial in understanding how things are done in organizations and, thus, in understanding how managerial leadership functions in everyday settings. Even though the sense-making processes tend to filter away information that does not fit in or contribute to the process of making sense of problems, situations or events (Knorr Cetina, 1981), the output of sense-making processes is by no means self-evident: actors create their environment and the environment creates the actors (Weick, 1995; see also Berger and Luckmann, 1966; Giddens, 1984).

Returning to Carlson's pioneering work, there is no reason to believe that today's managers work less hard than in previous years or that the number of issues they attend to has diminished. On the contrary, recent studies show that the intensity of work is increasing, the mode of work is now based on co-ordination of activities in both time and space, and there is a constant need for change and adjustment (Mintzberg and Westley, 2001; Tengblad, 2006). However, in recent decades, the focus on managerial work has been replaced by studies emphasizing the leadership dimension. In contrast to managerial work, leadership is defined as the ability to present compelling visions and goals that are grounded in a company's value system (Bass, 1985; Bryman, 1992; Conger, 1989; Conger and Kanungo, 1998; Holmberg and Åkerblom, 2001, 2006, 2007; Yukl, 1989).

When scholars distinguish leadership from managerial work in the fragmentation of day-to-day work, they imply a certain sense of timing – partly reflecting the different tasks that should be completed and partly reflecting who is responsible for them (Kotter, 1990; Zaleznick, 1977). Expressed differently, the concept of leadership is closely connected to a perception of the ordering of things that is quite different from Weick's ideas on sense-making and action: in the present certain people (the leaders) take actions that have consequences for the future because others (the followers) perform activities as a consequence of these actions. Thus leadership becomes a question of relationships between activities that occur today and those that are expected to occur in the future. This view of managers as strategic actors with a mission, clearly places the manager at the centre stage of the sense-making processes (Bass, 1985; Bennis and Nanus, 1985; Collins, 2001a, 2001b; House et al., 2007; Nanus, 1992; Selznick, 1957). Based on our studies of everyday work and leadership, we argue that there is a far more complicated interplay between current activities, historical events, expectations and the perceived need to exercise leadership.

Methodology

How do you capture people's everyday experiences? How do you understand leadership in such a context? How do you study the events and developments that are important in and for individuals' everyday tasks? Such questions are not easily answered. In the preparation for our study, we decided to address these questions with the managers in TECO in a relatively simple and straightforward way. Therefore we asked them to briefly describe an example of leadership by writing one or two pages about an event or a situation that they associated with leadership. Our only requirement was that the event or situation should be a personal experience.

The study described in this article is one of several studies undertaken jointly with TECO in Sweden. The main goal of this particular study was to collect live cases of everyday leadership (i.e., leadership events or situations that the managers consider everyday phenomena). In total, 62 managers participated in the study – 28 managers submitted written, live cases, and 34 managers presented their cases verbally. All cases were documented and analyzed at workshops that took place between 2001–2003. The managers in the study were middle managers or project leaders. There were more than two organizational layers between most of these managers and the top management group. With a few exceptions, these managers, who had other managers reporting to them, had operational leadership responsibilities, including human resources responsibilites. It is important to note that a middle

manager in a company such as TECO can be responsible for a substantial budget and a considerable number of co-workers. These responsibilities are comparable to those required of managing directors of medium-sized companies.

TECO as an international telecom corporation operates in an extremely competitive environment where product development and innovation are crucial for survival and success. Our study of everyday leadership was conducted during the years when TECO was engaged in a huge downsizing program. Due to heavy investments in the late 1990s, combined with an aggressive expansion strategy, the company suffered serious difficulties when the IT and telecom markets collapsed in 2000–2001. In the struggle to avoid bankruptcy, the top management group, headed by the CEO, launched a series of tough cost-cutting programs in combination with the adoption of outsourcing programs. In 2003, the TECO group had recovered from the severe crisis and was once again a competitive global player. However, these rather extreme circumstances raised the question of whether the results of this particular study could be generalized to other organizations and other contextual settings. We will return to this issue at the end of this article.

Methodologically, the study is a structured interpretation process conducted jointly with those individuals providing the research data (i.e., middle managers and project leaders). It is worth mentioning that our studies were not quantitative in nature and had no quantitative ambitions. Our research design is based on a qualitative approach where the analysis emphasizes identification of 'typical' cases and themes. Our main purpose was to reveal interesting and, from a managerial point of view, relevant aspects of leadership in an everyday context. The events and situtations described by the managers are expressed in a narrative form. The main characteristics of a narrative is the temporal ordering of events and a suggested connection between events, a plot, which is the basic means by which specific events are put into one meaningful whole (Czarniawska, 1998: 14). Accordingly, the narratives presented by the managers reflect self-experienced situations, where leadership is part of the plot. In using narratives as a research method, the role of the researcher is to tell a good story (i.e., a story informed by theoretical insight). Although narratives in the social sciences are still in their infancy (Gabriel and Griffiths, 2004), they are used in organizations in many forms. This study draws on the tradition of collecting narratives and treating them as material to be interpreted (e.g., Martin, 1982; Martin et al., 1983), as opposed to the narrative tradition that explores more specifically how stories are constructed so as to give meaning (e.g., Gabriel, 2000). The narrative is a mode of association, of putting different things together (and, and) whereas, for instance, metaphors and labeling are modes of substitution (or, or) (Czarniawska, 1999; Latour, 1988). In our analysis, we will draw on a metaphoric mode of understanding, thus making use of labeling as an interpretative device such as, for instance, in improvising (Czarniawska, 1999).

Different ways of structuring the material were developed during the workshops where we analyzed and discussed the leadership narratives. While some workshops were an integrated part of a senior management training program, other workshops took place because the participants asked for a follow-up session. Using the narratives as points of departure, the workshops were designed to identify relevant themes. Plenary sessions (with 10–15 participants and 6 full-day seminars) were combined with small-group work (approximately five participants per group). By alternating between small-group discussions and plenary sessions, the process of joint analysis and interpretation moved from the individual cases towards more generalized concepts and models that portray the perception of leadership in an everyday context.

Introduction of a process perspective

In analyzing and discussing the managers' cases, two questions immediately arose in the plenary sessions – (1) What were the narratives about? and (2) What were the narratives not about? It was also evident that time was an active ingredient in the managers' narratives about their leadership experiences. Although the first question was quite difficult to answer precisely, more so than the second question, our general conclusion was that most cases concerned some type of sequencing of 'critical incidents'. Since we gave no instructions to the managers on either the content or the form of their cases of everyday leadership, the concept of 'critical incident' is a research result rather than part of the research design.

In order to identify and classify the everyday aspects of leadership, a simple process model was introduced. It was obvious that a process model was requried since all cases had a beginning and an end, and leadership in an everyday context was usually framed as a kind of intervention of an ongoing series of events. Yet another aspect of time reflected in the cases was the common agreement that many activities are performed working against the clock or working according to a very tight schedule (i.e., the calendar). Time was also significant in understanding leadership action in that a decision that appeared very logical one day might seem completely absurd a few days later. For example, information, events, etcetera, may suddently pop up that affect how the situation appears to all involved.

Hence, we started to discuss what most of the TECO managers acknowledged as a common point of departure for thinking about leadership and leadership conditions. Quite early in the discussion, opportunities versus problems and intentional versus chance outcomes were mentioned. Our next step was to characterize the leadership process as either smooth or difficult, depending on the conditions where leadership was required. A smooth process implied there was a reasonably high degree of predictability concerning efforts made and measures taken; such predictability was not a characteristic of a difficult process. Finally, we classified the outcomes by comparing them to what had been the managers' initial intentions. The outcome was either 'According to plan' or 'Other than planned'. See Figure 1 for a schematic structure of this classfication of the outcomes.

We used this classification scheme to discuss the managers' cases individually. In the first step we asked each manager to classify his/her case according to the classification scheme. The results were the following: 36% of the live cases began with an 'opportunity' of some kind, which means that 64% of the cases had a perceived 'problem' as a beginning. In terms of whether the process was smooth or difficult, 25% of the cases were described as fairly

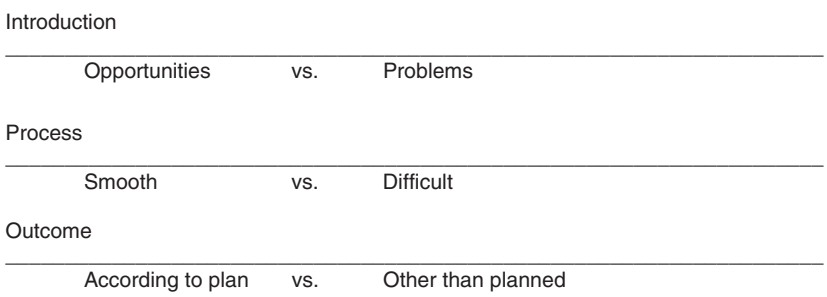

Figure 1. Classification scheme for leadership narratives from a process perspective

'smooth' and 75% were described as 'difficult'. In terms of outcomes, 54% of the cases were classified as 'according to plan' and 46% were classified as 'other than planned'. Interestingly, however, most cases classified as 'other than planned' were not, in themselves, judged as failures.

From a theoretical point of view, the interpretative scheme specifies eight different models or possible courses of events. However, the narratives clearly indicated that three models – the *Textbook version*, the *Heroic story*, and the *Well then – what now?* scenario – were more relevant than the others as far as how the managers think about their leadership in an everyday context. According to most managers of this study, these three models reflect the tension between controlling and managing events as opposed to finding oneself trapped by circumstances.

The textbook version

We arrived at the first model by beginning in the left column in Figure 1 – the sequence of opportunities-smooth-according to plan. We call this model the *Textbook version* of leadership. The starting point is that there are opportunities that can be exploited. The model is positive and expectant and suggests that something new must be created, built or developed. It's certainly about change. There is a design for a process and a plan that not only includes the different stages and the activities that must be carried out, but also includes a chronological time schedule. The plan is put into action and, through the foresight that characterizes good leadership, is realized without too many disturbing elements. Thus the matter concludes with the realization of the original purpose and the fulfillment of the plan's intentions. Everything has occurred just as intended.

This is leadership in its full glory. What was just an idea of the future has been realized in accordance with the original intentions. It can be said that the majority of what we usually call management literature deals with how this smooth process will be effected. There are numerous models that claim to describe the factors and phases that help to realize this sequence of the opportunities-smooth-according to plan pattern (see, for instance, Collins, 2001a; Kotter, 1990). Yet the *Textbook version* of leadership was not typical among the leadership cases we studied at TECO. Only 10% of the cases followed this model of leadership.

The heroic story

We identified the second model by combining a problem with a cross between smooth and difficult, while still allowing the whole process to end according to plan. This course of events, as outlined in Figure 1, thus ranged diagonally from the upper right corner to the lower left corner. This sequence was managers' favourite narrative – the story of heroic feats. Approximately 20% of the cases of this study were close to this heroic model of leadership.

In general, managers tend to describe their efforts according to this model. They begin with a challenging problem (which, by the way, is much bigger than initially expected). A process follows that includes many difficult turns. Knotty problems arise, and at times everything looks bleak – very bleak indeed. But the competent manager has a basic agenda consisting of a number of stages to follow and steps to take. In hindsight, it can be claimed that the whole process has gone according to plan and a successful conclusion has been reached.

There are many stories of chief executives, managers, project leaders, etcetera, who have had significant triumphs in turning adversity into success and problems into solutions (Carlzon, 1985/2008; Welch, 2005). For these managers, the questions of what should be done and how it should be done are obvious at an early stage. Those who claim such leadership skills believe they know what things will be like at a certain period of time and whether things will actually turn out as planned. Knowing today what should be done tomorrow in order to reach the desired results – plan, implementation, outcome – is presented as an essential factor of leadership. Although such early-stage analysis is considered the hallmark of good leadership, it is, however, far from clear that such insight corresponds to leadership in practice.

Well then – what now?

We identified the third model through a description of a problem situation such as the following. You find yourself in a problematic situation, working hard and wrestling with the issues as they appear, only to find you are constantly trying 'to grasp the situation'. It is not at all certain how you got where you are or what the situation means. It is extremely difficult to assess how the situation fits with the intentions articulated a few days, a week or a month ago. It is hard to tell what has been completed, what is still going on, or what is yet to be accomplished. People are constantly at your throat, asking for different instructions or directions. People higher up in the hierarchy, those lower down and even those at the same level, want information and reports that give the results of decisions taken and activities carried out. One event seems to give rise to another, according to a logic that is anything but obvious. As a manager, you are tired and need a break to go through your papers, e-mails, the heaps of files and the phone messages as well as sort out your thoughts and feelings. In Figure 1, this model corresponds to the sequence indicated in the right column – problem-difficult-other than planned.

The managers of this study identified this model as the most typical one in their everyday work. This leadership model accounted for approximately 50% of the live cases. To describe this familiar situation confronting managers, we labelled the model: '*Well then –what now?*' In this article we focus on this third model by an analysis of three of the cases in our research.

Three cases of leadership

Our purpose in selecting these three cases is not to illustrate either good or bad leadership. Rather, our intention is to present examples of issues and situations that arise in the everyday work of managers – including other people's expectations as far as the exercise of management and leadership is concerned. We have given fictitious names to the managers and other actors in these three cases.

Collaboration problems in Peter's unit

Peter was responsible for what was then a recently established system-management unit. In addition to the staff he 'inherited' from another unit, there were a number of new appointments to his unit. Peter described one inherited staff member, Bengt, as a person of 'considerable competence' but who had difficulties 'fitting' into the organizational set up.

Bengt was a member of staff who didn't 'produce any results'. The situation gradually became untenable as more people began to talk about Bengt in similar terms, as if mirroring Peter's opinion.

From the start, Peter tried to give Bengt 'open and autonomous tasks as that is what he insisted upon and nobody else really wanted to work with him'. When Bengt worked with anyone else, the result was his 'rushing angrily from the meeting' or stopping 'all work by arguing and protesting'. Peter also gradually began to regard Bengt as increasingly 'sloppy' in his work that was often 'inaccurate and couldn't be used'. The situation was an uncomfortable one for all concerned.

After a while, Peter's manager requested a meeting with Peter to ask if he could do anything to help with regard to Bengt. This meeting led Peter to have a 'serious talk' with Bengt. The help he had been offered was, in fact, either Bengt's transfer or dismissal. Finding a solution was essential, but Peter and his manager agreed that they should wait a little longer before making any decision. Peter wanted to try to solve the problem in other ways – at least for a while longer.

In talking to Bengt, Peter explained that the situation 'was serious' and that he 'wanted to help him', but that he found the present situation 'unacceptable'. There was, however, as Peter said, 'no great change even though Bengt's conduct became somewhat calmer and less disruptive'.

'More out of desperation than thinking it might help', Peter said he began to give Bengt 'limited and in my view boring tasks of documentation and general information gathering' in connection with a report for the unit. 'This was', Peter said, 'completely the opposite of what Bengt said he wanted to do, and I was concerned that he would argue too much'. As it turned out, it was a very successful solution. As a result, Bengt found it easier to work with others in the unit, and Peter saw that Bengt was 'happier and, above all, has started to produce results'. To conclude, Peter could say that he and Bengt 'had reviewed the salary scales today and agreed that while the previous year's results had not been very good, the situation had now changed'. Bengt himself said he was 'on board' again.

John and a solid resistance to change

At the end of the 1990s, a new unit was created within TECO to coordinate purchases and the internal flow of components for a certain product. Responsibility for purchasing and logistics had previously been decentralized in production units distributed around the world.

John worked in this newly created unit. As far as the production set up, he said that the supply of components had previously been rather haphazard and had 'damaged the whole product area'. Therefore John and his staff were supposed to develop systems and routines for the purchase and distribution of components to those units responsible for production. After a number of planning meetings, John and his staff decided to 'work themselves into the different research and development projects in three different places in Europe'. John and his staff began visiting these three units with the intention of establishing an efficient and cooperative production supply system. It was also intended that some suppliers might participate by developing smooth routines and methods that would also be used with external parties. However, John and his staff returned home having achieved little. On their visits they had encountered an atmosphere of surprise. Since the decision to create a purchasing unit had been taken at quite a high level in the organization, the main issue of concern became: What is going on here?

Eventually people in John's unit saw a pattern of obvious resistance to cooperation by all three research units. After spending a lot of time trying to understand why this was the case, John and his staff concluded that the problem might be solved if the people in the purchasing and research and development units could get 'to know each other better'.

John and his staff then re-visited the three European sites. However, this time, they had fewer ambitious expectations about the future activities of the new unit. Their priority was to understand how the work in these units was organized and what the units' staffs thought about the issues of supply and flow. By taking this approach, it was thought that relationships would develop, knowledge would increase, and a platform would be created for working on routines and work methods for the joint supply of components.

Despite this renewed effort, John and his staff still didn't have very many opportunities to accomplish their objective. As the weeks passed, the feeling of not getting anywhere increased in the new purchasing unit. Time was now critical. Yet they were scratching their heads over a problem that later was shown to be quite trivial. John learned that there had previously been quite severe downsizing in the research and development units. He realized there was a fear that the new purchasing unit would take over both the work and the decision-making. To some extent, this fear was justified.

The signs of difficulties were numerous. 'We could barely agree on anything', John said, pointing out that they 'weren't given any information about the projects'. The suppliers were excluded from a large part of the work. He continued: 'Agreements that we made as a result of numerous and long discussions' were never carried out. Indeed, this was still the situation when John told his story.

Development work around Lisa and her group

Lisa was a project leader for a group that worked with the development of production concepts and production processes. In her narrative, she described how 'after a hectic period of construction and production preparation' everything was set to move to a second phase where the purpose was to prepare a new product for serial production. It was then realized that '85% of the products' that had been tested didn't meet the 'performance requirements'. When this fact became known, the management group that had overall responsibility for the new product and Lisa's team began to blame each other.

According to Lisa, the product developers had difficulty in 'accepting that the product suddenly didn't work' and concluded that it must have something to do with mistakes in the testing. She said that people on project side claimed 'the product's construction was unstable and not sufficiently developed'. Therefore they could not initiate preparations for serial production. In her narrative, Lisa explained that it was only after some weeks of dispute that these opinions crystallized and were expressed at a crisis meeting. She also said that 'during the same evening' she had been contacted by her superior who asked her 'to explain it to him', as he had also been faced with 'difficult questions' from the individual with overall responsibility for the product. While this individual maintained he had received information from Lisa's superior, Lisa didn't think this claim agreed with what she and her superior 'had been discussing earlier that same afternoon'.

There was clearly a crisis of confidence between the two units as a result of the many different messages received about the problems and their possible solutions. These conflicting messages originated in part from Lisa and her unit and in part from Lisa's superior.

Lisa's staff also wondered what on earth was going on. They thought that a lot of different information was being circulated, leading to the spread of rumours. Lisa discussed the situation with her staff and tried, as she said, 'to pep them up a bit'. But the confusion continued, both in Lisa's group and in the development work. No one really knew what to do. Most people chose to wait and see whether the situation would become any clearer.

A few days later Lisa, her superior and the product manager decided to draw up a troubleshooting list, headed as 'problems', without specifying any kind of design or test fault. They would go through the list to see what could be done in each case, partly by changing the product design and partly by looking at the manufacturing process. This was how the work would be structured and alternatives for how they might go forward would be identified. As Lisa summarizes the affair: 'The final solution was, as usual, a mix of reconstruction and improved production with closer controls'. She notes that during this period, much of her time was spent supporting and encouraging her staff and getting them to work 'together with those who complained that we were careless and not interested in the new product' and how it should be produced.

Analysis

As noted above, we selected these three narratives to exemplify the issues and situations that characterize the everyday work of managers. We see these issues and situations as typical elements in what is perceived as managerial work that also includes other people's expectations about their management skills and leadership abilities.

There is a noteworty, and typical, commonality in these narratives – things don't always turn out as expected. Either something unexpected happens, or what was expected to happen does not. What is obvious is that in many situations, everyday work is event-driven. At first, one person experiences a sense of confusion about what is going on, what needs to be done, who should perform the required tasks and who should take responsibility. Then many people experience the same confusion. If the situation does not improve, the expectations for action are targeted at the manager in charge. In general, the process that follows requires three managerial measures: interpretation, adjustments/choices and solution formulations. The first measure is to interpret the situation in order to identify what has happened and to formulate some kind of explanation. The second measure, resulting from the interpretation, is to decide among a number of adjustments and choices. The interpretation points in a certain direction. Acting in accordance with this interpretation may solve a number of problems but at the same time may create others. The third measure is to find a solution, on the spur-of-the-moment, that can be implemented immediately to get things going.

The need for interpretation

An important and very central feature of everyday leadership, according to our study, is to contribute to the interpretation process in which one or more people attempt to understand what has happened and/or to understand why what had been expected has not occurred.

The John narrative is an example of a situation in which the expected did not happen. John and his staff were concerned with one particular question: Why didn't the research and development units want to cooperate in solving an important problem in the product area? The expectation was there would be a collaborative approach to the problem, but the units refused to cooperate. The Peter and Lisa narratives are examples of situations where events

that were neither planned nor foreseen occurred. Lisa said she was constantly surprised by new information about the activities related to her group; this new information led her to re-evaluate her perception of what was going on. Peter said that he really tried to accommodate Bengt by giving him acceptable tasks, but was obliged to intervene on numerous occasions when Bengt rubbed his colleagues the wrong way. Bengt's actions led Peter to wonder what he could do to help Bengt work more flexibly and cooperatively in the unit.

In each case, the manager had to interpret what had already happened in order to formulate what the next step should be. What was the significance of what had or hadn't happened? How might these events and non-events be best explained, and what are their implications? While these are questions managers ask themselves when expectations are not realized, they are not the questions that managers need to actively plan for or explicitly think about. Such events and non-events occur spontaneously and require managers to understand what is happening at the time (Weick, 1967/1979, 1995). Of course, managers manage such situations with varying degrees of success, especially when many people are involved. A certain awareness of the situation, however, increases every manager's ability to actively contribute to, as well as influence, such processes (Gioia and Chittipeddi, 1991). Based on our live cases, it can be said that a significant part of everyday leadership is concerned with interpretative processes.

Constant adjustments and choices

One aspect of these interpretive processes is that they tend to generate several possible scenarios. As a situation continues, the possibilities for a number of adjustments or different alternatives become apparent although the best path is far from obvious. The best path may mean adjustments are needed that allow more time to communicate, to search for a satisfactory solution, or to consider who needs to be involved. Choosing the best path may even involve balancing ethical, practical and economic considerations or balancing short- and long-term goals. These are only a few examples of factors that the TECO managers highlighted in this context.

The situation is made more difficult by the fact that such decisions are never static. Often what seemed right and was a priority one day may seem completely wrong in the light of new experience and information. This was particularly apparent in John's narrative. When the decision to change was first announced, John decided on the necessary tasks. As time passed, and the whole picture of the change problem became clearer, the lack of urgency also became more evident.

Peter tried to achieve a balance between behaving humanely towards a staff member and meeting his responsibility for efficient production in his unit. If Bengt's behaviour had not changed, how long would it have been before the transfer or dismissal that Peter's boss had suggested became a necessity? If tolerance of the disruptive behaviour of one individual damages the working environment for other staff in a unit, how much damage can be tolerated?

Perhaps it may be said that in the world of everyday work, it is difficult for a manager to formulate solutions that cannot be misinterpreted in the local context. Consistent with previous studies on managerial work (Carlson, 1951; Kotter, 1982; Mintzberg, 1973; Tengblad, 2002, 2003) that suggest most leadership, to some extent, is shaped by a series of disruptive and fragmented events, we agree that generally leadership requires 'muddling through' (Lindblom, 1959). This actually means paying sequential attention to events and problems

(Cyert and March, 1963; Simon, 1947). Certain problems and questions are solved while others must quite simply be left to fortune – at least temporarily.

Momentary solutions

The need for everyday leadership emerges constantly since there are always events that require immediate management action. Much leadership is thus about finding the right solutions for the problems of the particular moment and making sure that the most important and urgent problems are solved so that the work may continue. In Lisa's narrative, in particular, this sense of urgency was notoriously present and very important.

Many TECO managers talked about the need to adapt their leadership style to the situation. Where the situation is ever-changing, they constantly search for solutions that typically require them to make adjustments or renewed choices, both in their ways of working and in their priorities. Sometimes it is necessary to change direction – perhaps even permanently. Often the timing of activities has to be re-calculated to meet a changed schedule. Many people are involved – staff, peers, superiors – when these adjustments and choices are required. In different ways, these people have to be involved, informed and allowed to express their opinions. Plenty of time, managers argued in our study, has to be allowed for discussions and explanations. In addition, as it becomes clearer, the motivation for the present policy might be explained. But then something else happens. It may only be a matter of days or weeks, sometimes only a matter of hours and minutes, before new circumstances arise and turn the entire situation in a different and unexpected direction. This development requires finding new solutions for the moment. Some scholars refer to this search for new solutions as a form of 'tinkering' (Clarke and Fujimura, 1992; Knorr Cetina, 1981). Tinkering involves a kind of 'indexical' (local or situational) logic and a fair amount of opportunism – using what is at hand to resolve situations and to solve problems.

Discussion

In summary, if it is unclear what a number of people are doing, if people's demands and expectations seem conflicting, and if the person who provides input to the team seems confused, there will be uncertainties whose resolution will take the highest priority in the manager's schedule. That is the lesson of these three narratives – at least for managers in similar circumstances. They have to direct their energy towards trying to bring order to what has become unclear or chaotic. Only then are people prepared to get on with their own work. It is thus quite clear that everyday leadership is concerned with situations that call for an answer to the question 'Well then – what now?'

Two ideas appear to overshadow all others in the consideration of everyday leadership. The first idea is that the manager is pressured to interpret the problem situation (i.e., *to make sense of what is happening*). The manager has to understand the situation, as well as what has caused it. The questions requiring answers are: What are the possible implications of the situation for the working group, the unit, the project, the organization, and the future? The second idea concerns the importance of the manager's *ability to take impromptu action*, to act in the here and now, and, at least, to identify the next step in the process. These ideas are very closely connected. If, for example, the interpretation of a situation is that a 'task is

much more difficult than we first imagined', the manager may have to take different action than if the interpretation is that it is necessary 'to find out what is going on'. What needs to be done in any situation depends on its particular interpretation.

Thus, according to the managers in this study, the major difficulty in handling their everyday context is that 'you have to draw the map while orienteering'. Clearly, the map has to be redrawn – over and over again. Next we will elaborate on this seemingly simple idea.

Sense-making and the ability to take impromptu action

Keeping the map metaphor in mind, it is time to return to our two questions that guided the analysis of these leadership narratives: (1) What were the narratives about? and (2) What were the narratives not about? In our analysis of the cases, we found two particularly interesting themes. The first theme, which relates to the managers' understanding of leadership in the everyday setting, highlights the following points: managers deal with events, past and present; new events constantly require new framings for and interpretations of upcoming situations; there is a continual need for adjustments; and the solutions available to managers are often momentary and temporal.

In sum, our analysis reveals a pattern where managers' ability to contribute to intepretations of situations coincides with their ability to take more or less improvised actions. Mintzberg (2009) takes very much the same position when he argues that managerial work and leadership are best understood as practices that are based on experience and manifested in the ability to take impromptu action in a context of ongoing activities. Thus, everyday leadership as improvisation includes the idea that leaders are inspired by and learn from the very process that work is a part of. Acknowledging the process character of leadership also means generating a redescription of leadership that is more compatible with the emerging vocabulary of organization studies, emphasizing *organizing* rather than organization (Czarniawska, 2008; Rorty, 1989). In a similar vein, Hatch (1999) argues that the concept of improvisation can promote our understanding of coordination in postmodern organizations. Referring to jazz, she demonstrates the concept in practice by showing how jazz musicians deal with ambiguities, emotions and temporalities in their performances. A metaphoric understanding of improvising, she claims, can help us understand how structural arrangements, or perhaps the lack of traditional structural arrangements, pose different demands on those who take the leading tune and temporarily are given the opportunity to explore the empty spaces (Hatch, 1999: 84).

When asked about their jobs, experienced managers and especially CEOs, reveal a work pattern and a way to approach their responsibilities consistent with such a world of flux and coincidence. This is a pattern where good and bad luck, chance and opportunity, and even lack of foresight can either play into their hands or turn everything upside down, creating chaos and confusion (Burns, 1982; Burns et al., 1985; Nordegraaf, 2000; Tyrstrup, 2005, 2006). However, these experiences have not yet changed the more general perception of what is considered effective leadership – rather, the opposite is true. The ability to eliminate or fend off the elements of surprise and chance and to take the steps necessary to avoid being at the mercy of luck is the skill we most associate with leadership. A good leader turns situations into constructive challenges and smooth processes by which expected outcomes are realized. Stating this point more strongly, the ability to deal with challenging incidents and situations is the primary characteristic of a competent and skillful leader (Bass and

Steidlmeier, 1999; Bryman, 1992; Conger and Kanungo, 1998; House et al., 2007; Mintzberg, 1994).

The second theme relates to what most narratives in our study left out. We did not find the image of the strategic and inspirational leader who takes planned action through well-organized teams and a series of developmental activities in the everyday setting. However, this does not mean that this leadership model lacks relevance. Our analysis only shows that everyday work in highly innovative and rapidly changing environments requires other processes and quite different managerial skills.

Our aim in collecting leadership examples through narratives was to test our assumption that the experiences of individuals are crucial in understanding leadership as a practice. Another important assumption, built into the research process, was our belief in the group's ability to present narratives of common interest. We recognized that the managers had a clear understanding of their leadership role – as far as leadership, each was familiar with the *Textbook version* and each had a slight preference for the *Heroic story*. How, then, do we explain that their narratives dealt with good and bad luck, chance, coincidences and unpredictable events, with sometimes favourable outcomes, sometimes unfavourable outcomes? In the group setting, the managers saw that their individual experiences, which reflected their everyday work environment, were not exceptional. There was a pattern in the various narratives that could not be explained by bad management. Unexpected events occur again and again, usually resulting in some degree of uncertainty and confusion. Yesterday's well-prepared plan of action may be completely useless or irrelevant today or tomorrow. Hence the managers acknowledged that everyday leadership requires a significant amount of framing, interpretation and action – all of which must take place more or less simultanously. Although these narratives had a micro-setting, in a sense they captured the fundamental conclusion that leadership is most needed in crisis-management situations. The narratives also showed that in such crisis-management situations, processes are typically not smooth and outcomes are usually unexpected.

Event-driven versus intention-driven leadership

Leadership is usually depicted as setting goals, formulating strategies, providing guidelines and incorporating values (Yukl, 1989). Leadership means setting suitable tasks for co-workers followed by careful supervision or even coaching in the performance of those tasks. Paradoxically, this view of leadership places the managers both at the centre of events as well as at a certain distance from the action. Concepts such as 'causing' and 'all-embracing' may summarize and describe this general understanding of leadership.

The argument that managerial leadership, and even excellent leadership, is event-driven may be hard to accept. As noted above, leadership is generally framed differently: leadership is geneally thought to mean initiating actions rather than dealing with unforeseen or unplanned events (Holmberg and Tyrstrup, 2002; Tyrstrup, 2005; Yukl, 1989). The event-driven action that characterizes leadership in the everyday context, however, places leadership in the wake of events. Leadership is exercised, and, according to this logic, must be exercised, step-by-step, often using hindsight. This also means that 'intervention' and 'strong temporary focus' are two concepts that should be explored further in order to fully understand the leadership practice of everyday work.

The issue of time is crucial in understanding the how and why of interventions and the temporality of coodinating actions. As pointed out by Hatch (1999: 94) in a sensitive view of

organizing, the dialectic of past, present and future is compelling. As organizations perform, their memories (in the artifacts, norms and customs) are invoked by cultural practices such as stories, jokes, etcetera. The past colours our present and thereby shapes the future with its ability to stimulate expectations and anticipations. Both the past and the future are situated in the present. Thus, a strong temporary focus may mean a capacity to evoke situations where prior achievements peaked and motivation among actors was high. Refering to the jazz metaphor, Hatch suggests that the manager must enter the process in order to influence the outcome (i.e., engage in the 'threefold present'). The use of metaphoric understanding may help us better grasp processes and impromptu action, that is also event-driven, improvised and temporal.

In their study of leadership in computer-mediated teamwork, Cunha et al. (2003), suggest that critical incidents were major generators of action and, more specifically, acts of improvisation. Furthermore, they argue that improvisation is less likely at both low and very high levels of turbulence. Concluding that leadership may promote as well as inhibit improvised coordination of actions, they suggest that the role of leadership in improvisational processes needs further attention. Even though this study, to a certain extent, supports these results, our findings point in another direction. Leadership *as* improvised action implies that improvisation, as a coping strategy in everyday work, relies on intervention and a strong sense of presence and engagement, rather than an activity, among other activities, that enhances organizational improvisation.

Context of the study – possible limitations

Because our study was conducted during a period of severe economic crisis at TECO, we asked ourselves whether the managers' narratives were significantly influenced by these economic conditions. In some instances, the managers were very engaged in dealing with the crisis. Many managers, however, described events that had occurred a few years before the crisis. A few managers described events and situations that occurred during the crisis but were neither influenced by the crisis nor related to the efforts to resolve it. The implication, supported by our findings, is that managerial leadership in an everyday setting seems to develop as more or less intensive 'crisis management'. However, since the study was not explicitly designed to examine such variations, the impact of 'crisis' calls for a more systematic approach to this particular issue. The argument could, of course, be raised regarding the environmental context (i.e., the highly innovative and rapidly changing world of the telecom industry). Since contextual factors clearly play an important role in the practice of everyday leadership at TECO, further study of these factors is needed.

Conclusions

In this study, we conclude that the most distinctive characteristic of everyday leadership is the strong focus on processes. A second important characteristic is that leadership, to a considerable extent, is event-driven. Everyday leadership is triggered by unexpected occurences and develops as a reaction to some urgent situation. Since leadership takes the form of an intervention, there are strong implications for the exercise of leadership. For instance, everyday leadership seems to involve a high degree of more or less direct leadership, quite often described in terms of firm actions. The idea that leadership is based on interpretation

and a necesssity for action can be explained by events such as those that disrupt regular work and place the leader at centre stage.

However, this conclusion does not disregard the notion that everyday leadership consists of mundane and sometimes even trivial acts (e.g., Alvesson and Sveningsson, 2003a). In many instances, it can certainly be argued that leaders largely spend their time doing what other people in the organization do: they talk, they listen, they joke and they chat. We conclude merely that when managers and leaders believe leadership is needed, another mindset is triggered that is more closely related to what is sometimes referred to as crisis management.

However, by framing everyday interaction as leadership, we may, of course, boost leaders' identity and their self-esteem, thereby sustaining their privileged positions as central actors in organizations (Alvesson and Sveningsson, 2003b). In acknowledging that leadership may also take the form of processes, where the contributing actors are not just the formal managers, our study aims at understanding what constitutes everyday leadership from the point of view of the managers. When reality has to be (re)created on an everyday basis, the role of the manager becomes more focussed on sense-making and intepretation (Sandberg and Targama, 2007; Smircich and Morgan, 1982; Weick, 1967/1979, 1996). In settings characterized by knowledge-intensive work, such as managerial work in the telecom industry, the need for sense-making and interpretation seems even more crucial (Watson, 1994). Then this need becomes a strategic issue.

Finally, our findings have some interesting implications for practice. Although there have been many advances in management thinking in recent decades, we still do not fully understand, for example, how to prepare managers, especially newer ones, for the kind of managerial leadership that doesn't rely on knowing everything before doing anything (e.g., Mintzberg, 2004). This is one of the major challenges that our study poses. How do we prepare managers so that they can, jointly with other managers and co-workers, answer the simple but very important question: Well then – what now?

Note

1. For more comprehensive reviews of research on managerial work see Hales (1986, 1999) and Stewart (1989).

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