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Discursive Leadership

A Communication Alternative to Leadership Psychology

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Without question, the study of leadership has a long and rich history within the organizational sciences despite varying attitudes toward the topic.[1] For example, leadership psychologists portray leadership as an inner motor of leader and increasingly follower traits, states, emotions, and cognitive processing styles that as independent variables cause messages and behavior to be produced. Suffice it to say, researchers have been fine-tuning this motor for decades. By contrast, critical scholars such as Hardy and Clegg (1996) express disdain for the concept by classifying leadership with other mechanisms of domination, such as culture and structure. Many do not distinguish between leadership and management, and they conflate leadership with the study of leadership and its baggage—theoretical and methodological individualism (Zoller & Fairhurst, 2007). Still other researchers appear strongly ambivalent toward the concept of leadership when its arguable presence in new organizational forms receives scant attention (Ganesh, Zoller, & Cheney, 2005; Parker, Dempsey, & Krone, 2006). Indeed, few would dispute the declining popularity of this topic within organizational communication venues such as *Management Communication Quarterly*, causing one to wonder if the untimely death of Fred Jablin, leadership communication scholar par excellence (see Jablin & Putnam, 2000; Jablin, Putnam, Roberts, & Porter, 1987), has hastened the demise of leadership study for the communication sciences.

However, there is an increasingly strong counterargument to be made based on the growing attention to leadership discourse, communication, and relational stances by a select group of scholars, many from communication (Alvesson & Sveningsson, 2003; Barge, 2004; Collinson, 2005; Cooren, 2007; Cunliffe, 2001; Fairhurst, 2001, 2007b; Grint, 2000; Gronn, 2002; Hosking,

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1988; Kelly, White, Martin, & Rouncefield, 2006; Taylor & Robichaud, 2006; Tourish & Vatcha, 2005; Uhl-Bien, 2006). No doubt, this is a ripple effect of the linguistic turn within the organizational sciences (Alvesson & Kärreman, 2000a), a key early move by the communication sciences to study language and interaction, a negative reaction to the overwhelming dominance of leadership psychology, and a belief in the utility of leadership as a concept derived from members' methods. One contribution to this debate is my book *Discursive Leadership: In Conversation With Leadership Psychology* (Fairhurst, 2007a), and it pleases me to see this excellent panel of international scholars willing to further the dialogue in the *MCQ* forum.

Discursive Leadership attempts to answer two questions: First, what do we see, think, and talk about with a discursive lens directed toward leadership? Second, what leadership knowledge is to be gained in the interplay between a discursive lens and a psychological one? The book explores key discourse concepts and how they might create new understandings of the social and communicative aspects of leadership. Although my bias is a discursive one, I position discursive leadership and leadership psychology as alternating lenses; one is neither superior to nor derivative of the other. Why is this position important? As suggested, leadership psychology is the proverbial elephant in the living room because it has dominated leadership research since its inception (Bass, 1981; House & Aditya, 1997). Its presence cannot be ignored and thus invites commentary when posing an alternative stance.

To begin, I attempt to define two notoriously difficult concepts: leadership and discourse. From a constructionist stance, searching for the definition of leadership, amid seemingly endless definitional debate, appears futile (Grint, 2000; Rost, 1991). I prefer Robinson's definition (2001)—"Leadership is exercised when ideas expressed in talk or action are recognized by others as capable of progressing tasks or problems which are important to them" (p. 93)—for four reasons: First, leadership is a process of influence and meaning management among actors that advances a task or goal; leadership is thus grounded in task accomplishment (Robinson, 2001). Second, leadership is an attribution by followers and observers, suggestive of an "eye of the beholder"–like quality (Meindl, 1993, 1995). Third, the focus is on leadership processes, not leader communication alone, ideally, countering any tendency to valorize leaders (Yukl, 1999). Finally, leadership as influence and meaning management need not be performed by only one person appointed to a given role. It may shift and distribute itself among several actors (Gronn, 2002)—hence, the preference for the term *leadership actors*, which includes those who adopt a follower stance.

Defining discourse poses its own challenges, but I generally follow the lead of Alvesson and Kärreman (2000b), who parsimoniously distinguish between language and social interaction (little-*d* discourse) and a more Foucauldian view as historically marked constellations of talk patterns, ideas, logics, and assumptions that constitute objects and subjects (big-*D* Discourse). Although not exhaustive, the book explores several discursive approaches, including conversation analysis, interaction analysis, speech act schematics, discursive psychology, Foucauldian analyses, critical discourse analysis, and narrative analyses. Collectively, they cover the range of little-*d* and big-*D* discursive perspectives and points in between. However, the book is organized around key discourse/Discourse concepts—sequence and temporal form, membership categorization, disciplinary power, self-identities and interpretative repertoires, narrative logics, and material mediations—and what they could mean for the study of leadership. The examples below, drawn from *Discursive Leadership,* reflect some of its potential to further our understanding of leadership.

Contributions of Discursive Leadership Research

To those unfamiliar with organizational discourse research, several of its concepts may appear strikingly mundane (Edwards, 1997). For example, when leadership can affect life-and-death struggles in high-reliability organizations such as police units, conversational turn taking and category use may appear as just so much minutia. But to borrow a distinction made by Staw (1985), only when these concepts become problem driven through case analysis do they gain import for leadership. They also appear much less literature driven than do concepts from leadership psychology, whose debates chronicle gaps in the literature, inconsistent findings, converging evidence, and so on. Thus, in a visceral sense, discursive leadership and leadership psychology undertake very different kinds of research.

For example, chapter 2 focuses on one key little-*d* discourse concept, the sequence and temporal form of leadership interaction. Although the chapter details how various discursive approaches capture temporal processes—whether through the double interact, turn-taking sequences, episodes, inferred behavioral scripts, or script formulations—what is striking about them is their capacity to detect leadership "wherever it lies" (Robinson, 2001, p. 100). In other words, when compared to the traditional focus on an appointed leader in leadership psychology, leadership comes off as a more distributed phenomenon based on a wider distribution of influential acts of

organizing, which sequential processes more easily reveal. What is similarly striking is the manner in which leadership actors manifest what Sanders (2007) suggests is

> a certain artfulness in the way speakers sequentially place and phrase what they say for the sake of being responsive to what has gone before, and as the same time anticipatory of fostering desired consequences for the ensuing interaction and for their presentation of self. (p. 169)

Schön's notion of problem setting (1983) thus reveals its hidden persuasive potential when leadership actors adeptly prefigure solutions through the constraints they build into definitions of the problem.

Membership categorization refers to the category-based interactional work of leadership actors as they make claims about the world or their actions accountable (Sacks, 1992). An examination of the little-*d* discourse of leadership actors in chapter 3 reveals that they are incessant category users—whether they are coordinating organizational action, creating or invoking social and organizational roles and identities, relationally positioning themselves, engaging in sense making and social theorizing, setting and solving problems, or resolving contested problem formations. Interestingly, Bryman (2004) characterizes the popular view of leadership as the management of meaning as a "lofty and slightly nebulous" (p. 754) notion, divorced from mundane, immediate, instrumental, and material concerns and likely restricted to senior leaders charged with organizational change. However, an examination of almost any segment of leadership actors' discourse reveals not only continuous categorization work but its entrenchment in the mundane, immediate, instrumental, and material aspects of organizational life. Contra Bryman, a discursive view demonstrates how leadership actors in everyday situations routinely bring the management of meaning to life with a great deal of detail and specificity.

Moving to big-*D* Discourse in chapter 4, Foucault's work (1990, 1995) takes center stage because it has been used to critique performance management technologies, such as the performance appraisal (Townley, 1992, 1993). His theorizing of disciplinary power and technologies, such as the examination, exemplify the ways in which employees become knowable, calculable, and administrative objects subject to normalizing judgments (Miller & Rose, 1990). However, a look into leadership training and development reveals more recent performance management technologies in the form of 360-degree feedback (Church & Bracken, 1997; Funderburg & Levy, 1997) and executive coaching (Berglas, 2002; Kets de Vries, 2005)—and even greater

relevance for Foucault's work. Like the appraisal, 360-degree feedback and executive coaching are emblematic of Foucault's panoptic power where leadership actors are permanently on show and open to examination—or at least they presume as much as they begin to discipline themselves in response to the collective gaze of their role set and the often-penetrating gaze of the executive coach. However, executive coaching adds Foucault's confessional technology to the examination. Although management sponsors the coach, the hope is that a close, trusting relationship will develop between coach and leader—somewhat similar to a psychotherapy relationship. The coach then attempts to transform an individual's leadership into a coaching Discourse where the truth is a formulation of both the leader's disclosures and the coach's interpretations.

Nowhere is this more prevalent than with the prime target of executive coaching Discourses—the alpha male leader, whose overwhelming dominance and penchant for masculine Discourses require intervention (Ludeman & Erlandson, 2007). For example, the alpha's resistance to change is putatively worn down by the coach's willingness to "hit him hard enough to hurt." Here the negative emotional responses of the alpha's role set—garnered in interviews, 360-degree feedback, and the appraisal—are finely calibrated when fed back to him. Writing in the *Harvard Business Review*, executive coaches Ludeman and Erlandson (2004) explain, "We regulate the level of pain, keeping it high enough to get their full attention but also presenting the changes as attainable" (p. 63). Such a statement strongly resonates with Foucault's discussion of the art of torture (1995), where specialized knowledge accrued to precisely measure and control the pain administered to the body so that the person being tortured does not die too quickly. Whereas pain is regulated and inflicted onto the body in the case of torture, it comes in calibrated emotional wallops to the psyche of the leader. Evocative of the forced confession at the end of a public torture, it is only after the alpha has been properly chastised that he is now positioned to realize, or avow, the consequences of his behavior. Foucault's Discourse and related concepts thus pull back the curtain of power underlying today's most popular leadership development technologies, revealing how leaders are situated to become passive receptors of meaning as much as they are its managers and transformative agents.

Also influenced by Foucault's work is Ashcraft and Mumby's examination (2004) of gendered identities within organizations, which has a number of implications for the leadership literature and its dividing practices (see chapter 5). For example, the executive coaching literature explicitly excludes the possibility of alpha female leaders. Even though they clearly exist in the

animal world (from which the metaphor is drawn), female leaders apparently do not possess enough alpha-like characteristics (Ludeman & Erlandson, 2004, 2007). However, by excluding alpha females, masculinity becomes exclusive to men and exhaustive of what it means to be a senior leader. Similarly, the recent push toward authentic leadership (Avolio & Gardner, 2005; Gardner, Avolio, Luthans, May, & Walumbwa, 2005; Ilies, Morgeson, & Nahrgang, 2005) is grounded in Discourse that recommends that women leaders strive for relational authenticity. Eagly (2005) urges women leaders to scale back the extremes of their femininity and masculinity (to avoid pejorative labeling such as *bitch*, *dragon lady*, and so on) to not make the males around them uncomfortable or to hinder identification processes. Yet, such a recommendation begs the question, is there no authenticity for women leaders unless it conforms to male expectations? Understanding the intersection of gender and authentic leadership Discourses thus explains the power of these practices to divide and marginalize.

There is still much ground to cover regarding discursive views of leadership, especially when little-*d* discourse and big-*D* Discourse are studied together, such as in the narrative foundations of leader–member exchange (chapter 6) or when discourse and material forces and objects combine in hybrid forms and networks to produce attributions of charismatic leadership (chapter 7). However, enough of a case has been made for the kinds of research to which discursive leadership lays claim such that its theoretical differences with leadership psychology can now be clarified.

Key Differences Between Discursive Leadership and Leadership Psychology

As Table 1 suggests, discursive leadership differs from leadership psychology in at least six ways: object of study, ontology, power, agency, analytic focus, and communication orientation. First, as an object of study, leadership psychology appears enamored with *mental theater*, a term used by Cronen (1995) to "get beneath and behind experience to fret out the connections among cognitions, emotions, and behaviors" (p. 29). As such, leadership psychologists are particularly fond of constructing causal models and analyzing a host of cognitive, affective, and conative variables affecting or being affected by leadership. Unfortunately, the only interaction studied is statistical (Hosking & Morley, 1991), and any sense of coordinated action or real experience is lost. By contrast, discourse analysts study discourse/Discourse in leader–member talk in interaction, interview discourse, and discursive

Table 1
Key Differences Between Discursive and Psychological Lenses

	Discursive Leadership	Leadership Psychology
Object of study	Discourse	Mental theater
Ontology	Decentered subjects, thin actors	Essences
Power	Encompassing views power and influence	Power and influence as dualisms
Agency	Reflexive agency	Untheorized/exaggerated agency
Analytic focus	Textual, contextual	Variable analytic
Communication	Primary	Secondary

formations either as stand-alone systems of thought or in dialogically grounded communicative practices. Thus, discursive scholars are more likely to distinguish between the study of interaction process and reports (self-reports) of that process.

Second, leadership psychology theories embrace an ontology that essentializes leadership, locating it in the leader (e.g., early trait theories), the context (e.g., situational leadership theories, such as the Ohio State studies), or some combination (e.g., contingency approaches, such as when a strong leader and a crisis coincide; Grint, 2000). Discursive approaches reject the notion of essences to focus instead on socially constructed views of leadership with decentered subjects—or at the very least, "thin actors"—lacking a predefined model of what it means to be a human actor to understand the impact of discursive practices and cultural influences (Potter, 2003).

Third, in leadership psychology, power tends to be treated as a negative and repressive property exercised in a top-down fashion, whereas influence is uniquely cast as a positive process of asymmetric influence—often the very embodiment of the term *leadership* (Collinson, 2006). By contrast, discursive scholars tend toward a much more encompassing view of power and influence, one that likely integrates their various forms and conceives of them in both positive and negative terms. Foucault's more relational view of power (1990, 1995) is frequently the touchstone here.

Fourth, in leadership psychology theories, leaders are often untheorized as agents; thus, its research appears epiphenomenal with respect to the rest of the organizational sciences (Hosking, 1988). In effect, overriding relational concerns eclipse any link between leadership and influential acts of organizing. However, Gronn (2000) makes the case for exaggerated agency in leadership theory and research based on a pervasive sense of individualism and leader centrism throughout the leadership psychology literature.

Leadership is thus romanticized (Meindl, Ehrlich, & Dukerich, 1985), hero anointing (Yukl, 1999), and divorced from the tasks that they must complete (Robinson, 2001). By contrast, discursive approaches tend to emphasize the reflexive agency of leadership actors through their accounts and attributions (Garfinkel, 1967; Giddens, 1984). Their language use offers a window on human agency (Boden, 1994), although discursive theories vary in how much knowledgeability they attribute to leadership actors and discourse interlaces with the material to constrain human agency.

Fifth, leadership psychology's entrenchment in variable analytic research complements its essentializing theories in which it seeks to answer cause-and-effect *why* questions concerning leadership. Unconcerned with the search for essences or causal connections among variables, discourse analysts instead want to know *how* a text functions pragmatically, *how* leadership is brought off in some here-and-now moment of localized interaction. In complementary fashion, Discourse analysts query, *what* kind of leadership are we talking about? What cultural forces at play define what leadership is and how it is to be performed in a particular social setting at a given historical moment (Biggart & Hamilton, 1987; du Gay & Salaman, 1996)? Both types of analysts reject prediction and control as key functions of theory while never viewing description as mere description or prelude to the real work of science. Without the immediate concern of building generalizable theory, discourse scholars embrace a thick description of the context, including immediate as well as cultural and political aspects.

Finally, leadership psychology has but a secondary interest in the social and communicative relative to its interest in individual cognitive operations. Indeed, communication matters only to the degree that actors can influence one another's cognitive operations (Cronen, 1995). However, communication is of primary interest to discursive leadership scholars, although interest in human interaction varies, as the distinction between discourse and Discourse suggests. Although there is much debate regarding the utility of the term *discourse* relative to *communication* (Jian, Schmisseur, & Fairhurst, in press), the latter is a key concern among many discourse analysts.

Conclusion

What can we learn from discursive leadership and its relationship to leadership psychology? First and foremost, discursive leadership and leadership psychology can inform each other. In leadership psychology, leadership becomes an analytical activity where leadership actors are likely to say and do things given the psychological characteristics they present in a situation

and the way that they read such a situation (Grint, 2000; Shotter & Cunliffe, 2003). Although discursive scholars' perspectives favor the social and the communicative, the temporal and the evolving, and even the ethically infused and the morally infused, one cannot dismiss the individual and the analytical. As Albert et al. (1986) suggest, the goal here is that of holistic social theorizing, with intellectual schemes "specifically contoured to understanding an interconnected reality" (p. 15). Thus, as *Discursive Leadership* makes clear, neither discursive leadership nor leadership psychology is more or less scientific; the two are simply alternative co-constructing lenses with their own strengths and shortcomings.

Second, critical scholars' disdain for leadership is likely a disdain for leadership psychology; indeed, such critics may benefit from discursive leadership. Given their preference for understanding deep structures of power over relational approaches, they may overlook some of the more obvious dynamics of asymmetric or distributed-influence situations, such as actors' everyday social theorizing and attributions of leadership accorded to themselves or others (Zoller & Fairhurst, 2007) and more generally, the doing of leadership by actors in its name (Kelly et al., 2006). As long as the concept of leadership continues to be a part of members' methods, the concept deserves further study and not just as a whipping boy.

Finally, scholars outside discursive leadership and leadership psychology may simply believe that the study of leadership, like so many other scientific concepts, has run its course given the collaborative organizational forms and networks of globalized societies and information-intensive economies (Ashcraft, 2001; Ganesh et al., 2005; Parker et al., 2006). However, as Shamir notes in comments made by several leadership psychologists at the end of *Discursive Leadership*, the leadership myth has survived intact across societies and historical periods for thousands of years. Why should we not fully expect it to flexibly adapt itself to today's new organizational forms, which Child and McGrath (2001) observe are "intensely social" (p. 1138) and thus suggestive of leadership potential among all members of a collective? Wherever there is opportunity for power and influence—in new or traditional organizational forms, with individuals or groups, or with formal or emergent leaders—attributions of leadership are not just possible but likely. On the heels of such promise, discursive leadership has arrived.

Note

1. Some material in this article represents a condensed version of the contents of *Discursive Leadership: In Conversation With Leadership Psychology* (Fairhurst, 2007a).

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