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Metaphors We Lead By: Understanding Leadership
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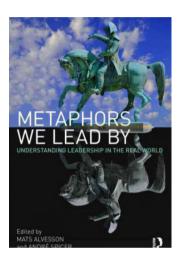
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Leadership studies is a broad and problematic domain. Few, if any, fields of research, theory, and practice in organization studies have grown as quickly and as widely. Indeed, one can be forgiven for believing that the study of and writing on leadership have grown disproportionately in both speed and volume, compared to the development of good theory and convincing research (Clegg, Kornberger & Pitsis, 2012). Even the very concept of leadership poses difficulties. The term is usually used to denote an individual who inspires, directs, and coordinates others towards the achievement of organizational or personal goals (Clegg, et al., 2012; Pitsis, 2007). Almost anyone can name a leader that inspires them. The recent death of Steve Jobs has highlighted how leaders are held in the highest esteem, with the outpouring of grief, millions of messages of condolence sent to Apple, and many articles celebrating Jobs' inspirational, entrepreneurial, maverick qualities as a leader. Leadership as a process and leaders themselves are often deified and almost always presented in a positive, flawless light. They are said to operate with guile, exemplary moral standards, fairness, love and compassion. Indeed, leadership is often discussed and presented with biblical undertones where it is 'morally good' to be a good leader, and people are blessed to be led by such good leaders.

Leadership, however, has a dark side. In psychology we have been interested in how certain personality types pursue a certain form of leadership that has less than positive intentions. Narcissistic leadership is a perfect example of the dark side of leadership, and it has devastating outcomes (Conrad, 2004). In one of my favourite books on leadership, The Man Who Tried to Buy the World by Jo Johnson and Martine Orange (2003), we see how Jean-Marie Messier went from being one of the youngest and richest CEOs in the world to an arrogant, narcissistic leader who eventually self-destructed. Similarly, Einarsen, Schanke Aasland and Skogstad (2010) explore the less savoury aspects of leadership at work and how leaders can bully people into performance. However, as interesting as the literature and musings on

leadership are, what typifies both the more positive and the more negative perspectives on leadership is the dualist notion that leadership is either 'good' or 'bad'. Leadership is in reality neither good nor bad; it is situational and socially constituted, understood and valued.

As a practice theory scholar, that is a scholar who rejects overly dualist notions such as good versus evil, body versus mind, and who is more concerned with the way in which people make sense of ideas in socially experienced contexts, I have always been wary of simplified, dualistic distinctions between good and bad, saintly and evil. Leadership is much more complex than this, much more social and a product of socially distributed cognition where people make sense of the concept relative to their social contexts. In this way leadership is made up of an array of situated practices and socialized norms that constitute the habitus of leadership: the habitus being what drives the taken-for-granted behaviors, thoughts and actions of those being led and of those leading within any given field of practice (see Bourdieu, 1980), or in what Alfred Schutz (1967) refers to as the 'working' world, where what is sensed as reality is that which is inter-subjectively experienced as pragmatically real (i.e. it works) in a world of multiple realities? In this world, symbols are shared and understood, predecessors have laid down the foundations of sensemaking, consociates and associates help to sustain, transform and perpetuate realities, and there are successors who will continue the evolutionary development and growth of the knowledge signs and symbols of our socially shared reality. Everything in this world is experienced and shared as a metaphor. In such a world, what drives the behaviors and actions of the leaders and the led—all of which we take for granted?

When asked to review a book that had the words 'metaphors', 'leadership' and 'real world' in its title, I could not refuse, particularly when two well-established and leading critical scholars such as Mats Alvesson and André Spicer were the editors. Alvesson and Spicer open the book by taking us through the journey of leadership theory and do an expert job in problematizing the domain. As with most modern management texts, they begin with the financial crisis in 2008 (thank goodness for that financial crisis, for we business scholars would not have enough material to hang our arguments upon). It has given academics, especially the critical management scholars, enough material for another decade of work, and the crisis is only going to get worse thanks to those terrible Greek leaders). As I read the introductory chapter I was impressed with the simplicity of the writing, and the way the authors take the reader through the key debates, theories, and ways in which we have come to understand leadership. Society has constructed the story of leadership as both savior and demon, and as I discussed earlier, the good, the bad, and the ugly are often presented as separate entities. Things are never that simple. Alvesson and Spicer make their message clear early on: too much weight, they argue, is given to leadership as a concept denoting the solution to all our problems, and leaders are all too often sanctified or vilified. Often, when things go wrong we either blame leaders or claim there is a lack of leadership. By taking us through the main theories, debates and critiques, the authors prepare

the reader's mind to entertain the idea of an "ambiguity-centred" approach to leadership. This approach certainly has the potential to make a major contribution to understanding leadership, but I was disappointed that there was little engagement with practice theory. No Schutz, no Bourdieu, no Schatzki; even Orlikowski avoided any mention in the introductory chapter. This is important because any claim to an ambiguity-centred approach would benefit greatly from frameworks that establish how humans inter-subjectively construct and co-construct ideas – for even leadership is an idea – into a socially shared reality that is created, sustained or transformed through situated and socio-material practices. Maybe that is why the subheading is "Towards an ambiguity-centred approach to leadership": because we are not quite there yet.

Clearly, or at least to my mind, this is a book for Europeans, particularly because we are offered a mainly Scandinavian take on leadership (aside from the two contributors who are from the USA and the UK); Whether intentional or not, in symbolic terms the choice of mainly European contributors intimates that there is a lot to be learned from the European take on leadership in a world that is dominated by both North American scholarly work and more popular culture in the form of airport bookshop texts on leadership. This is one of the book's strengths, and I would hope that students and researchers in the USA would take the time to read it. It may not change their minds about how to study and make sense of leadership, but at the very least it will encourage them to think about and question assumptions regarding the way in which they have come to understand leadership. Leadership, as Alvesson and Spicer establish, is ambiguous, contextual, and as much about followers as it is about leaders. To help their readers traverse this slippery concept, Alvesson and Spicer use one of the oldest forms of knowledge-sharing and sense-making: the metaphor.

In its most simplistic form a metaphor takes an exemplar from one context to make sense of something arising in another. As such, the metaphor is both different from and similar to the target of the metaphor. Targets can include stories, analogies, proverbs, and other words of wisdom. For example, there was Forrest Gump's use of a box of chocolates to symbolize ambiguity in life? That said, I prefer my metaphors to be more subtle, as in The Tree of Life by Terrence Malick (Fox, 2011), but this is a book review, not a movie review. The point here is that because metaphors are both similar to and different from the actual thing they are being used to describe, they typically require us to reflect upon the target concept. If life is like a box of chocolate then is it sweet? Do we sometimes get things we do not like? Do we find that things that look very inviting can in fact be the hardest to chew and swallow, and others that do not look as appealing tend to be the most delicious? And so on. Thus, even though we are talking about chocolates, we are actually reflecting on life. That is the beauty of the metaphor, but it is also its curse. We can make too much out of a metaphor and over-analyse it, and one of my biggest criticisms of academic research and theory is that they unfairly dumb down what managers and leaders do.

There is a propensity among management scholars to underplay the complexities and even ingenuity inherent in the mundane, ev-

eryday practices of managers and so-called leaders. Often we can impose a lens (i.e. theory or set of theories) upon practitioners which are nothing more than a metaphor, "alike but different". This lens imposes our own presupposed image of the world: that everything is a metaphor and hence is deprived of any respect as an object; A fish, a frog, and a worm can all be made sense of from the metaphor of a gardener, or a bully or a commander; but what aspect of the the fish, frog or worm do we understand through the metaphor? It all depends on the metaphor, and rather than making sense of the sisg or frog, it changes its meaning. So, 'metamorphizing' – the personifying of things through metaphors is something that we humans do, and we do this even to concepts such as leadership. In many ways, then Alvesson and Spicer are responding to the public image of leadership. So, their ideas are less about the metaphors we lead by, and more about metaphors of leadership (a subtle but important distinction), as inculcated by the researchers making sense of leaders doing what leaders do. While I am convinced that the use of metaphors is a powerful analytical tool (after all, that is all it is: a tool for social interaction), to make sense of leadership metaphors alone are not viable as the only tool of a proposed "ambiguity-centred" approach to leadership: such an approach actually fosters greater ambiguity.

With this caveat in mind, Metaphors We Lead By provides an excellent resource for students of leadership. Each of the chapters explores leadership practice and makes sense of it through the use of metaphors. Alvesson's take on leaders as saints (which reminds me of Wray-Bliss's take on leaders as devils) is as you would expect from the author in question: beautifully written and argued. We can take this metaphor to unlimited boundaries: if the leader is the saint, who is the god he or she is representing? Who are the believers and non-believers? But even metaphors have their limits. What if, for example, Alvesson presented the leader as the Prophet Mohammed? Would Routledge's offices be burnt down? Here, you see, is my gripe with metaphors as an analytical tool. These metaphors belong to an entire social world; they are boundary objects and spanning those boundaries not only changes the way we view the target object, but also unsettles the world from which the metaphor is invoked. Thus, in many ways they suffer from the same traps as those leadership theories critiqued in the book (such as transformational and transactional theories, etc). The travelling of ideas does not come without implications of power inherent in social relations. To continue with the religious theme, do those invoking the metaphors in order to make sense of leadership have the divine right to choose and apply whatever metaphor they see fit? Do we enter a person's place of work, seek to explore the most intimate details of his or her work, and then frame everything he or she does to fit our chosen metaphor, such as a Devil or a Bully? This is something that is somewhat unexplored in the book. A critical approach would also critique its own assumptions and the ethical implications of framing people in such ways for academic novelty.

The book also presents leaders as gardeners. Huzzard and Spoelstra; imagine the leader fertilizing workers (not done in this chap-

ter, perhaps because the idea of leaders fertilizing employees may not be appropriate for sensitive audiences), cultivating their flowers, and getting the eco-system just right. What about the leader as a buddy? Your feel-good mate? (see Sveningsson and Blom's chapter). Another case in point is Spicer's eloquent leader as the tough coercive commander, although Spicer's commander is very different to the commander on the love boat or even McHale's Navy. Maybe André Spicer watches too many war movies. Muhr then presents leaders as cyborgs, where the leader transcends what is human and non-human; anthropologists inspired by Malinowski have used such metaphors in terms of cyborg consciousness, and Muhr does a great job in exploring this metaphor and applying it to leadership. Karreman then presents us with the leader as bully through practices of intimidation, with all that the bully metaphor implies. Fairhurst probably has one of the most important chapters in the book (though of course its importance rests upon the preceding chapters, which are all very good in and of themselves). Even though the first and last chapters do a convincing job, it is Gail Fairhurst's chapter that wraps the ideas of the book up neatly and pragmatically. Alvesson and Spicer's decision to add this chapter on communicating leadership metaphors was an excellent one, because it gives the book a more practical feel. A chapter in which the reader not only gets a sense of the complexities of leadership theory and practice, but also has a sense of how metaphors as a tool for dealing with ambiguity in leadership can be communicated.

Metaphors We Lead By: Understanding Leadership in the Real World is a book which I have no hesitation in recommending to any student of leadership. I believe it is best for students with a grasp or understanding of the mainstream leadership theories for the book relies upon established ways of understanding leadership to differentiate itself. I also think consultants and leadership coaches would find this book useful as it provides insights into how one might open a discussion on the quality of leadership within client companies. The book would make an ideal counterpart for many of the 'traditional' leadership courses offered, particularly in the USA, as a way of at least opening up discussion about the nature of leadership and the way in which we make sense of it. As to the novelty of the work, I am less convinced. As I read the book I was reminded of Boje and Dennehy's (1994, Chapter V "Leading stories") postmodern leadership, which is surprisingly absent from Alvesson and Spicer's book; this is rather strange given how similar the ideas are. In spite of this, however, this is book is well worth the investment. Buy it, read it, and cite it!

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