The Hero - Leader Myth questioned! How to go further?

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Abstract

Certainly, the myth of the sole heroic leader who is governing, giving orders, planning and controlling still is a strong idea in several minds and media in our world. It is enough to open a newspaper and read about all the problems that the leaders should solve. However, a critic against hero leadership has gained growing interest. Mintzberg states that “we have become enamoured of a heroic view of management” and what we get “is not management, but hubris” (in Kavanagh & Leary, 2004). Yukl writes about a heroic bias in leadership research (2002). Consequently, other models have been discussed and developed in our post industrial world. A perspective called relational leadership argues that instead of focusing on the decisions of one single leader, the actions in a work team should be viewed as something which the whole work team is responsible for (Dachler, Hosking & Gergen, 1995; Uhl – Bien, 2006). There is also a growing body of texts concerning postheroic leadership which suggest that leadership would be based on shared or distributed practices (Fletcher, 2004; Gronn, 2002; Pearce and Conger, 2003).

However, to act as a relational leader is not always easy, although a person in a leader position would have the knowledge of the principles and the will to enact them. In practice a lot of meaning making in organizations occurs as everyday negotiations and small talk where both the leaders and co-workers participate, and where different kinds of issues are purged. These events don’t tell about good, harmonious relations, only, they can be contrary, too. Based on interviews with some people in formal leader position, the aim of this text is to study how the interviewees handle different kind of negotiations, resistance and controversies as a part of construction of their “relational leader role”. How these “negotiations” are understood highlights the importance of aesthetics in knowledge creating processes (Biehl-Missal, 2010; Ladkin & Taylor, 2010; Soila-Wadman & Köping, 2009; Strati, 1998; Welsch, 1997).
Introduction

The old myth of the hero who solves all kind of problems and has control over fate lives in much talk and discussions on leadership/management in our contemporary world. It is enough to open a newspaper and read, on the one hand, about all the problems that the leaders should solve, like “a lone cowboy who single-handedly vanquishes the bad guys” (Yukl, 2010: 201). On the other hand, these expectations can be quite unrealistic; the leaders/managers seldom can live up to them and, consequently, will be pointed out as a scapegoats. It is like a ritual in human history to blame someone for the misfortunes that befall us; through assigning blame, we are released from guilt (Frazer, 1951/1913).

Can we benefit from understanding these old myths and rituals today? Hatch et al. (2005) argue for understanding the role of myths as an aid to understanding our world in general and our organizational world in particular. They state that myths stem from a sacred realm of our human world and provide us with the symbolic and imaginary material, which we need when telling the stories through which we make the world comprehensible. Concerning the role of rituals, Douglas (2006) writes that they provide a focusing mechanism and help us perceive the world. In other words, “the ritual focuses attention by framing; it enlivens memory and links the present with the relevant past” (ibid., p. 79). She also states that we can look at our modern secular rites and how their symbolic enactment affects us, in order to understand the mechanisms of older rituals. Bowles (1989) maintains that modern work organizations have largely come to represent the institutions which influence our meaning making and thus how we structure our lives. He lists some secular organizational rites and ceremonies, for instance breakfast meetings and after-hours company gatherings, as means to create desirable attitudes, values, and behaviour in a company. But he doubts if the organizations have succeeded in their attempts to create meaning, and argues that it is important to challenge the forms of mythology in contemporary organizations.

What kind of stories of leadership should we tell in our contemporary world? Given our post-industrial world with its highly skilled work teams, I argue that there is a need for another kind of stories of leadership as the traditional one in business administration in which leadership is described as a rational act, concerning planning, issuing orders, governing and exerting control. Certainly, there has also been discussions about the human aspects of leadership. Leadership research has included studies of leadership traits, style, behaviour,
contingency, as well as symbolic leadership in which the leader is responsible for the vision of a company or a work team. However, it is still the solo leader who is pointed out as being in charge of events, and the problems and risks with celebrating the hero leadership has been noted by several researchers. Mintzberg states that “we have become enamoured of a heroic view of management” and what we get “is not management, but hubris” (in Kavanagh & Leary, 2004). There is also a growing body of texts concerning post heroic leadership which suggest that leadership would be based on shared or distributed practices (Döös & al., 2010; Fletcher, 2004; Gronn, 2002; Pearce and Conger, 2003). A perspective called relational leadership argues that instead of focusing on the traits and behaviour of one single leader, leadership should be viewed as something which occurs in on-going negotiation processes in a whole working team (Hosking, Dachler & Gergen, 1995; Uhl – Bien, 2006). How these “negotiations” are conducted and understood highlights the importance of aesthetics in knowledge creating processes (Biehl-Missal, 2010; Hansen & al, 2007; Ladkin & Taylor, 2010; Soila-Wadman & Köping, 2009; Strati, 1998; Welsch, 1997).

In leadership discussions, both with practitioners and researchers, there is a consciousness of the demand for perspectives on leadership which problematize the traditional one. However, to act as a leader in practice according to these newer ideas is not always easy, although a person in a leader position would have the knowledge of the principles and the will to enact them. There are people in leaders/manager positions who are deeply committed to their organizations when they act as leaders/managers. However, they also tell about difficulties. In practice a lot of meaning making in organizations occurs through everyday negotiations and small talk where both the formal leaders and co-workers participate, and where different kinds of issues are purged. These events don’t necessarily tell about good, harmonious relations, only; they can be on the contrary, too. I ask what kind of stories we should tell in our contemporary world which, on the one hand, better reflect the situations where we are now, and, on the other hand, facilitate the leadership processes in practice in our ongoing world creation?

The aim of this text is to continue studying how we can understand leadership in our contemporary world. The relational view on leadership as well as the role of aesthetic in organizational theorizing is highlighted. Empirical findings are, partly, based on insights from my studies on film making and other art and culture creating organizations, partly on knowledge-intensive organizations.
**Methodological issues**

The study is inspired by the ethnographic method, both (participant) observation and interviews have been conducted (Clifford & Marcus, 1986; Czarniawska, 1998; Kostera, 2007, Kvale, 1996). I have also used different kinds of secondary material that has been presented in various forms of media, newspapers, radio, websites, films, seminars, conferences, etc. The method can be described as a kind of collage technique; the researcher uses different types of materials based on alert attention concerning the studied field. Aesthesis, not anesthesia, as Welsch (1997) puts it. Much of the empirical material comes from my study of film production, but other art creating fields have been noticed, too, as well as some knowledge–intensive organizations (Soila-Wadman & Köping, 2009; Soila-Wadman, 2010).

The research strategy has been abductive (Alvesson & Sköldberg, 2000), that is, theoretical and empirical exploration is conducted alternately as the project progresses. Interpreting perspective is based on relational constructionism (Dachler, Hosking & Gergen, 1995, Berger & Luckmann, 1967). The individual and society are viewed as processes of relationships, which means that individuals and groups should not be regarded as separate, undivided units. We humans interact with other people and events in the processes in which our subjectivities are created (Alvesson, 2004; Benhabib, 1992; Gergen, 1994; Sevón, 1996) and in which we participate in construction of our world. These processes can not happen without our senses being involved, therefore, beyond our rational understanding, the importance of aesthetics in knowledge creation is emphasized (Lindstead & Höpfl, 2000; Strati, 1999; Welsch, 1997).

**Theoretical and empirical insights**

*Aesthetics*

The aesthetic approach has attracted increasing attention in organizational analysis over the last few decades (e.g. Gagliardi, 1996; Lindstead & Höpfl, 2000; Ramirez, 1991; Strati, 1999). In organizational analysis, rational analysis is problematized, and emphasis is placed on aspects such as emotions, intuition, improvisation, play, and imagination.

The interest in aesthetics in organizing and organizations has also influenced development in leadership theory (Guillet de Monthoux, 1993, 2004; Guillet de Monthoux, Gustafsson &
Sjöstrand, 2007; Hansen & al, 2007; Ladkin, & al., 2010). According to Bryman (1996), much of the energy in the discussion of what he calls “new leadership” (which preceded the ideas of symbolic and aesthetic leadership) is derived from Burns ideas about transformational leadership in the 1980s. From the perspective of charismatic and transformational leadership, it is the task of the leader to create what is good, right and beautiful. Further, the leader is supposed to communicate his vision to his co-workers and facilitate situations where the achievements of the leader and the co-workers coincide. It is also the task of the leader to empower co-workers so that they can realize their own creative potential. Alvesson & Berg (1992) summarise some of the ideas presented in symbolic leadership, asserting that material conditions are not enough to satisfy the labour force; the perceived meaningfulness of the work is also important. Consequently, several authors argue that aesthetics should be given more consideration when trying to understand leadership (Hansen & al. 2007). Ackoff (1999) makes a reference to aspects of leadership such as just production of truth, goodness, beauty, and entertainment. According to Berg (2003) these concepts can also be found in the domain of magic. Kirkeby (1998) writes that the theory of leadership has been moving towards what is traditionally seen as the domain of a witchdoctor or shaman – magic. That is a domain that has remained outside the sphere of science in which logical thought predominates. Guillet de Monthouix (1993; 2004) states that if enterprising is art, then leadership is aesthetics. It is the task of the leader to inspire and fascinate, to conjure up energies and to open up the aesthetic space, the space in which artists are experts.

**Art and culture creating organizations and leadership**

Like the aesthetic approach in organization theory, art and culture creating organizations and leadership in them has gained a lot of interest during the last decades (Guillet de Monthouix, 1993, 2004; Ladkin & Taylor, 2010). The question if art organizations can inspire leadership in business and other organizations has been raised. In several texts on leadership, leaders in their creative tasks have been compared with artists, who can create the realities that they want to manage (Stenström, 2000). Marotto & al. ask whether the study of art and artists has shed light on the role of the leader in creating collective virtuosity, that is talent, flow and expertise in a work group. Stenström (ibid.) would call it the romanticising of leadership, and not only in a positive terms. That reminds of the critical thoughts concerning hero leadership. However, Wennes (2002) and Koivunen (2003, 2007) notice the paradoxical nature of leadership in art-producing organizations, citing examples from a symphony orchestra and opera. They have interviewed musicians and other co-workers in these institutions. In these
interviews they have identified, on the one hand, the story of “The Artist” in the romantic sense, where individuality is required. The artistic leader, the conductor in a symphony orchestra or an opera, is expected to be a charismatic hero, not unlike the stereo type leader role in business administration. On the other hand, there may be irritation with the great hero as demon, with emphasis placed on the importance of the collective. Köping (2003), for instance, notes that it is actually the symphony orchestra that chooses its conductor.

The paradoxical situation can also be seen in film production (Soila-Wadman, 2003). On the one hand, the role and strategy of the director as leader are constructed in a steep hierarchy. The film director Marianne Ahrne described the role as that of “a commander, who manages the pitched battle that shooting resembles” and who is able to set words to clear decisions. One view of the role of the leader in general is that such a person is responsible for “making the decisions”, an old approach in leadership research. I subscribe to the view that much of the action takes place before the “decision” is made, it is perhaps made afterwards, if ever. In film making this is exemplified by improvisational processes, where the action is going on while the team is searching for the expression. Several of my informants who have long experience of working in several film projects have emphasised the ability of the director to make clear decisions. That would be, the director must have an ability to put words into clear instructions about what is to be done, give a direction and drive the process forward.

Shotter (1995) provides some useful metaphors for a good leader, which correspond with the ideas about how the role of the film director is constructed in a film project. According to him, the good leader is a maker of history, as well as a repairman who has the ability to restore the flow of action. In this role, one must be more than just a reader of the situation. One must also create the landscape to act in, to make the next action possible. One task for a leader then is to formulate into language what is to be done. Taylor finds that the work of most managers is verbal and interactive, much like storytelling. He compares it with artistic work and emphasises that the aesthetic transaction includes both the performer and audience. But he argues that, in organizing activities, the roles of performer and audience “may switch back and forth rapidly as managers intersect with each other and their staffs”… (Taylor, 20002: 824). By the way, interviewing film directors, I have been fascinated by what excellent storytellers they really are.
On the other hand, the film director should be a relational, sensitive artistic leader, who is able to catch the moods of co-workers and create an atmosphere of mutual trust. Several directors have talked about the importance of an atmosphere of trust on a film team. This is required, in part, for the actors. It is said that an actor needs courage to be able to tear away his mask in front of the camera, despite the surrounding chaos of cameras, lighting equipment and scenery building. But I believe that an atmosphere of trust is important for the whole team, including the director.

In these relational processes emphasis must be given to the importance of aesthetics and the human body in leadership and organizing processes, as well as in art-creating processes. The senses of body are involved when judgements are made. The ability of the leader/manager to act and make decisions, and to provide "a linguistic formulation for what is to be done", is built on aesthetic, emotional and cognitive knowledge which is situated in the body. As examples from the studies show, artistic expression is negotiated in an aesthetic play in the art-creating field; that is, it takes form through communication on an aesthetic level among the whole film team. This takes place as team members continuously listen, become attuned, think, feel and chit chat, but also through bodily movements, when the director and actors are looking for expressions, or when the photographer and director are trying to find optimal camera angles – more specifically, as artistic expressions emerge. When everything works perfectly in these processes, it can happen that collective virtuosity is created and the feeling of flow experienced.

Relational perspective
Consequently, I would argue that, instead of seeing leadership as a notion whereby the individual is “a container” for leadership, leadership should be viewed from a relational perspective (Dachler & Hosking, 1995; Koivunen, 2003; Soila-Wadman & Köping, 2009). Crevani & al. (2010) argue that there is a need to focus on the leadership processes instead of individual leaders. These ideas go back to criticisms of the view of humans in the traditional literature on leadership in business administration. Critics argue that it is as if our subjectivities were constructed as undivided, consistent and separate from one another. Dachler & Hosking call this entitative or possessive individualism. In this traditional model, the leader is seen as a subject and the co-workers as objects. Relations are viewed as instrumental and are used to get co-workers to think about things from the leader’s perspective. Leadership seen from the relational perspective means asking questions about the
processes in which a specific leadership model has been construed and is continuously being construed. Leadership is then seen as dispersed in an organization. The leader shares the responsibility with others in the construction of this understanding and, in the long run, its execution. The leader is one of the many voices. Considering ethics and authenticity in leadership, in contrast to manipulation management, Marotto & al. (2002) ask whether the tasks of the leader – creating the good, the important, the beautiful – are not meaningful to the co-workers as well, and not just for the leader.

From the relational perspective, leadership cannot be defined by arguments like how successful or unsuccessful a leader is, or what special qualities he has. The main issue is rather that the leader and those s/he interacts with are responsible for the type of relations and processes that they construe jointly. The differences that exist in one’s understanding of oneself, the other and the state of things should be noted and negotiated. The leader should thus shift his focus to "multiloguing, negotiating, networking" and other social means of narrative that deal with the meanings of individual and collective activities. Doing this in practise means that there is continuous small talk going on, in both the formal and informal organizational arenas. These conversations can be trivial, but it is here that emotions and ambitions are expressed and ideals, norms and rules are created, interpreted and re-interpreted.

Improvisation and The aesthetics of capitulation
To sum up, I want to stress that there is a relational negotiation process going on among the whole film team before judgements are made, while they are being made, before decisions are taken, while the process is going on, a process that needs improvisation and in order to tackle the turbulence. Several informants have emphasised the importance of the atmosphere of trust that prevails during the shooting. Consideration should be given to the ideas of Nussbaum (1990) in talking about creating authenticity. She writes that, when improvising, one must pay attention to what is offered by the other actors and the situation. One cannot do just anything; there are certain rules. When a person improvises, he must keep to the commitment of his role relative to the other characters. He must be responsible to the story of the undertaking, to his own story, but also to the demands of the moment.
In these processes, it is vital for the director to be able to refrain from intervening at times, to be open to emerging opportunities, to timing, to chairos. In other words, the director must be open to the aesthetics of capitulation, as I have described it (Soila-Wadman, 2003).

**How to go further?**

Probably we need our rituals of telling the hero stories, but how can we do it in a way that better reflects our contemporary world. According to Douglas (2006/1966), human beings are ‘social animals’ who interact with the help of rituals to create their social reality. However, Douglas cautions *against viewing rituals as tricks in a purely instrumental sense*, and emphasizes the value of their symbolic substance. Additionally, rituals connect the present to the future by externalising an inner experience and modifying it when it is formulated in words. Meanings can surely be fragmented in our world, Douglas states, but subworlds with their beliefs do exist. Common beliefs and symbolic ideas find form in myths and legends, as well as in the stories we tell each other when trying to make sense of our world. Hatch et al. (2005) argue for understanding the role of stories as an aid to understanding our world in general and our organizational world in particular. Myths are important in this type of storytelling in that they conceptualise the dreams from our collective unconscious and provide us with symbolic and imaginary material. Myths, legends and stories canalize beliefs and create expectations.

From theatre studies perspective Biehl–Missal (2010) connects to the discussion whether art and culture creating organizations can inspire business and other organizations. She, too, notices the problems with instrumental approaches, here concerning the theatre and leadership development. She states that theatre cannot be expected to provide leadership models, nor does it merely serve as a source of inspiration, creativity or positive innovation, which is sought for in leadership development. But, reflective thinking and aesthetic awareness are essential to leadership and in that meaning theatre is well suited to developing these aspects. What theatre can give is a complex hero role, a contentious and problematic hero, an anti-hero. That reminds of the earlier discussion of the paradoxical expectations from the co-worker perspectives on leaders/managers in art organizations.
Can we change our images, values and beliefs concerning the leader role? Should people in leader/manager position change their own view on the leader role, too. Not to believe that it is possible to be in control of everything, but to let it happen what is given by the situation. Kirkeby (1998, 2000) emphasises the ability of the leader to find words to describe what is in the atmosphere. He talks about the magic, the power, which we are not able to explain, but which is there in the capacity of one’s speech and voice to conjure up something. However, he notices the Greek drama: “Just as it is in a drama, the leader, as a choir director, answers only to that what the choir says, because the choir lends him its voice.” So the virtuosity of the leader can only be judged by the reaction of the audience. It is as like stepping beyond the limits of an individual. Kirkeby talks about poetics. He believes that not everything can be said in the speech act; there are still secrets left. Just as the poem is more than the poet, so the thoughts and the actions of the leader are more than the leader himself. What is said, made, is never finished. There is always more meaning in a work of art than the originator believes because a work of art is interpreted by a number of participants.

References:


