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Working with implicit and persistent views on leadership

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Summary

Recently, there has been a growing number of claims that collective leadership development is not receiving enough attention in business schools and other leadership development interventions due to the dominance of individual-centric, heroic perceptions of leadership. These perceptions are often implicit and tacitly supported by both popular leadership books and the business world.

This developmental paper explores how these implicit and persistent views on leadership can be revealed and worked with in a business school setting. The paper contributes to the understanding on the possibilities to structure the business school leadership development classes so that they are better equipped to convey collective and processual views on leadership. Previous studies have revealed that the traditional classroom setting tends to promote individual-centric views and that students have difficulty applying collective, especially processual, views on leadership on a practical level. Thus, new insights are needed.

Track: Leadership and Leadership Development

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Introduction

Recently, a growing number of academics have been arguing for more collective forms of leadership (Ospina et al., 2020; Sergi et al., 2021). At the same time, leadership development is gaining increasing critique on concentrating on the skills, behaviours, and styles of an individual leader, instead of enhancing collectives' leadership capacity (Bolden and Gosling, 2006; Denyer and Turnbull James, 2016; Eva et al., 2021; McCauley and Paulus, 2021); in other words, concentrating on leader development rather than leadership development (Day, 2001). This is evident in both business schools (Collison and Tourish, 2015) and company programmes (Denyer and Turnbull James, 2016).

Moving the focus of leadership development away from individual competency development and towards wider capacity building may be challenging, especially due to the strength and persistence of the traditional heroic view of leadership (Salicru, 2020; Schweiger et al., 2020). One reason for this persistence is the predominance of individual-centric views on leadership in business schools, leadership literature, and across the entire business world (Alvesson and Jonsson, 2018; Collison and Tourish, 2015; Cunliffe, 2009). The strength of the traditional view of leadership might make it difficult for course sponsors to accept a leadership development programme that does not focus on leaders' individual competencies. Similarly, the participants might have a hard time relating to collective, post-heroic, and processual views on leadership (Collison and Tourish, 2015; Denyer and Turnbull James, 2016). The course instructors can also feel intimidated deviating from norms and giving up the expert power and control that is required to fully support the idea of collective leadership and to view leadership critically (Mavi et al., 2023). At the same time several academics call for more critical approaches for teaching leadership (e.g. Cunliffe, 2009; Collison and Tourish, 2015).

The perception an individual has of leadership, or implicit leadership theory (Eden and Levitan, 1975), includes everyday images of leaders that both leaders and followers have (Schyns and Schilling, 2011). These images structure one's perceptions, interpretation, and behaviour; therefore, they may produce a cognitive inertia that hinders collective leadership approaches from emerging and being recognised (Shondrick et al., 2010). Probert and Turnbull James (2011) and Denyer and Turnbull James (2016) claim that any leadership development initiative, completed without reviewing and, if necessary, renewing these leadership perceptions that individuals and their organisations have, is short lived and hinders the learning transferred to the actual job. For these reasons, I argue that if we want to support a deeper understanding of collective views on leadership, it is important that business schools both include information on these novel, nonheroic ideas of leadership for their programmes to spread understanding of these theories and implement learning methods that support third-order learning (Bateson, 1972, cited in Raelin, 2007) that allows learners to uncover the underlying assumptions that they hold and become aware of and challenge the premises of their thinking. This is in line with Kennedy et al.'s (2015) and Carroll and Simpson's (2012) calls for leadership development to include *mindset* development – that is, working with, revealing, and questioning the underlying assumptions of the social world and what leadership is. The following, initial research question guides this paper: *How can implicit and persistent views on leadership be revealed and worked with in a business school setting?*

Academics agree that working with new and non-traditional leadership perspectives in a classroom setting is challenging (Gergen and Hersted, 2016; Iszatt-White et al., 2017; Schweiger et al., 2020). Thus, new insights are needed to acquire a better understanding on the course design and setup that support leadership development on a collective level. To enable theoretical contributions, we – as instructors and academics – need to (1) turn a reflexive eye to our course practices and perceptions, (2) experiment with new course designs and innovative practical exercises, and (3) share these

practices and results openly with each other. This will be the aim of the final paper. The second research question is as follows: *How to overcome obstacles the business school course setup brings to collective leadership development?*

Earlier Research on the Topic

Schyns et al. (2013) demonstrated how implicit leadership theories can be taken as a starting point to leadership training and how this helps participants recognise both the importance of leadership's context and that leadership is a far more complex process than they expected; furthermore, the recognition that leadership is shaped by different views and expectations can encourage participants to question their own premises and part in the process. Even though Schyns et al.'s work is of high quality and has shaped my thinking in many ways, in this paper I will argue that their approach should be taken a step further: to allow people to better take into account the collective forms of leadership in all their richness, we should avoid using the noun 'leader' and instead use 'leadership' or the verb 'lead' – to avoid turning participants thinking towards only individual leaders.

The terrain of theories that focus on collective leadership is growing and, at the same time, becoming more fragmented (Denis et al., 2012; Ospina et al., 2020). Denis et al. (2012) distinguish four groups within collective – or plural – leadership theories: (1) 'sharing leadership' concentrates on members of a group leading each other; (2) 'pooling leadership' refers to multiple leaders sharing a leadership space and leading others outside their group; (3) 'spreading leadership', often called 'distributed leadership', refers to a variety of leaders across multiple organisational levels or multiple organisations relaying leadership responsibilities over time; and (4) 'producing leadership' refers to leadership that is dissociated from individuals, located in practices, and seen as the emergence of a direction for action in the form of collective accomplishment. The fourth group is especially difficult to grasp in case we keep discussing leaders rather than leadership.

On the 'producing leadership' theory group, Schweiger et al. (2020) studied processual leadership among the participants of an Executive MBA programme's leadership training modules. In the first module, the participants were introduced to new ways of thinking about leadership, and the subsequent modules included activities such as discussions, action learning settings with group exercises, and individual and group/partnered reflections. In the study, they recognised that most (if not all) participants were able to generate and reproduce insights into processual leadership after the training. However, some of the participants were not able to transfer this knowledge into reflection on their personal situations at work but rather concentrated there only on individual-centric views on leadership. Others were able to apply the processual leadership to their personal situations at work in a reflection exercise but were not able to derive processual practical implications; in the implications, they returned to an individualistic viewpoint. This is similar to my own experience. In the courses I have taught, the collective (especially the 'producing leadership') views seem to generate more excited comments than the individual-centric theories in classroom discussions, but in students' reflections on their own work contexts, collective views are much less present.

One oft-claimed reason for the difficulties in developing an understanding of collective leadership in a business school setting lies in the very setup of these classes: the instructor teaches, gives assignments, grades the assignments, and gives each student a final grade. This setup promotes a heroic view of leadership, as it promotes power and dependence relationships (Gergen and Hersted, 2016; Iszatt-White et al., 2017; Mavin et al., 2023; Nicholson and Carroll, 2013; Schweiger et al.,

2020). Thus, new forms of both developing understanding in the classroom setting and grading the courses are required. Based on earlier research, the implications this has for courses include the following: the business school teacher must adopt the role of a mentor or facilitator of learning (Gergen and Hersted, 2016; Raelin, 2007), and participate to reflexive dialog with students (Iszatt-White et al., 2017) to sensitise learners to the dimensions of their lived experiences, contexts, and practices while helping them understand how to learn from experience (Gergen and Hersted, 2016; Kempster and Iszatt-White, 2013). Some previous studies have somewhat contradictory findings on what leads to reflexivity and third-order learning in leadership perceptions. Kempster and Iszatt-White (2013) suggest using co-constructed coaching pairs in classroom settings, with the members of each pair reciprocally acting as a researcher and a respondent to allow the learners' underlying assumptions that have shaped their situated understanding of leadership practice and the tacit knowledge embedded in their actions to surface and become articulable. Schweiger et al. (2020) found that peer influence might actually have a restricting influence on working with one's leadership perception if the other participant(s) has a similar initial perception of leadership.

Methodology

The study will be conducted in two MBA leadership courses at a university of applied sciences in the fall of 2023. One of the courses will be held in person, and the other will be held online. Both courses will consist of twenty to forty postgraduate students with various national backgrounds. All participants will have a minimum of two years of work experience after bachelor-level studies, and several will have work experience in supervisory or managerial roles (more details regarding the demographics and professional backgrounds of the participants will be added when known). To gain a larger sample, the study can be replicated in the following year.

The data will be collected from (1) students' written reflection reports, (2) observations in group discussions, (3) course feedback, (4) semi-structured interviews with students few months after completion of the course and (5) instructors' written reflections throughout the course planning and implementation.

Further Development

This study is at a nascent stage: the course and course activities are being planned and designed during spring and summer 2023. By the conference the following information will be added: (1) the course outline and the separate items link to the current theoretical knowledge and (2) more details on methodology.

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