

Three Leadership Communication Styles

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Abstract

This paper takes the social constructionist view of leadership and uses a qualitative discourse analysis method to describe the discourse elements used to create three styles of leadership communication. In the past 75 years, the study of leadership has taken four broad movements: First, to identify which traits are correlated with leadership; second, to investigate leadership behavior, such as task centric and people centric styles; third, to focus on the situation in which leadership takes place; and fourth, to consider a leader's ability to formulate visions and transform their followers. A social constructionist view sees leadership differently: as a co-constructed reality that emerges from the interaction of social actors. This paper identifies the specific functions of language and their combinations as they are used to produce three leadership communication styles--directive, facilitative, and collaborative—in decision-making meetings of business professionals. The analysis illustrates a “post-heroic view” of leadership by asking us to look at a multitude of actors doing leadership on a temporal basis (Gronn, 2009).

Introduction

More and more research is looking at leadership by looking at language and approaching the phenomenon as an act of social constructionism (Alversson & Karreman, 2000; Fairhurst, 2007, 2009). From this perspective, leadership is viewed in the context of what leaders do and is thus discursive in nature. According to Robinson (2001, p. 93), “leadership is exercised when ideas expressed in talk or actions are recognized by others as capable of progressing tasks or problems which are important to them.” According to Fairhurst (2008), this definition enables us to understand leadership as a process of influence and meaning management that advances a talk or goal, an attribution made by followers or observers, and a process, one in which influence may shift and distribute itself among several organizational members.

This discursive leadership approach contrasts with psychological leadership, or the traditional perspective adopted by many management scholars. The former approach understands leadership as a social process, while the latter tends to view leadership as cognitive operations that often correspond with a single individual, perhaps in a particular situation.

This study uses some foundational assumptions of interaction analysis, thought broadly, to look at how leadership emerges in groups. From an interactional perspective, relational patterns are always co-defined. This is because individuals in leadership relations do not relate and then communicate; instead, they relate through communication (McDermott & Roth, 1978). Interaction analysis is the study of interaction process. McDermott & Roth (1978), defined interaction analysis as when “a person's behavior is best described in terms of the behavior of those immediately about the person, those with

whom the person is doing interactional work in the construction of recognizable social scenes or events (p. 321).

This study is an attempt to more fully understand leadership if it is understood as primarily discursive in nature and co-constructed by those involved in interactions in which influence emerges. More specifically, it provides three cases that illustrate three common processes by which leadership emerges. These cases were drawn from observations of 20 teams of business professionals ($N = 100$) involved in decision-making meetings. Based on those observations, the three leadership discourses exemplify the most common of the successful leadership attempts that emerged. That said, there were unsuccessful leadership attempts observed in our study that are just as revealing in terms of the challenges of “doing” leadership, but those are not the focus of this discussion.

Methodology

This study will focus on the sequence and temporal form of talk, in part, to demonstrate that the individual leader or follower is no longer the unit of analysis. Our specific method of analysis is based on a model developed by Coates (1993) to analyze naturally occurring interactions in which she describes cooperative and competitive conversation styles. Coates’s (1993) method was selected to give us additional tools to provide a finer grained analysis of our data. In addition, we draw upon two conversational styles developed by Tannen (1990) to describe cultural differences. Speakers who put the signaling load on involvement are described as having a high-involvement style, while speakers who use strategies to express the need not to impose are characterized as having a high considerateness style (Tannen, 1990). A high involvement style is characterized by fast talk and overlapping of others’ speech while those who prefer high considerateness style may find this style makes it difficult for them to participate; they may feel “crowded” out of the conversation. Tannen notes that a key issue for many high considerateness style speakers is that of pace. They prefer a slower pace of interaction.

Coates’s (1993) model of analysis focuses on the following areas: (1) the meaning of questions, (2) links between speaker turns, (3) topic shifts, (4) verbal aggressiveness, (5) listening, and (6) simultaneous speech. The following provides definitions of these six constructs.

1) *The meaning of questions.* Questions are speech acts that require a subsequent speech act and thus, ensure that conversation continues. According to Coates (1993), questions may be direct in purpose or may be used indirectly to facilitate conversation. The difference in direct and indirect modes may result in miscommunication.

2) *Links between speaker turn.* When the speaker takes a turn, he or she can acknowledge the contribution of the previous speaker or talk on the topic without acknowledging that contribution.

3) *Shifts between topics* may be abrupt or the speakers may build on each other’s contributions.

4) *Verbal aggressiveness* is indicated by tone of voice and loudness as well as sentence construction.

5) *Listening* may be measured in at least two ways: as backchannels or latching. Backchanneling is often a minimal response that gives the speaker an indication that the hearer is still listening. It is intended to keep the communication going by confirming or reacting to a preceding statement (Clyne, 1994). Some researchers regard back-channeling as positive interruptions. Backchannels consist of such vocalizations

as “yes”, “uh huh”, and “I see”. Backchannels have been found to be prevalent in work situations, especially where subjects were working in teams (Clyne, 1994).

Latching takes place when a second speaker begins speaking without any perceptible pause (Tannen, 1990). Latching serves the function of active listenership and co-participation rather than interrupting, which denies the previous speaker the ability to complete his or her turn. Previous studies have noted that latching can be perceived as intrusive by high-considerateness style speakers (Asian group members in this case), but high-involvement speakers usually do not show evidence of discomfort or annoyance.

6) *Simultaneous speech* involves the analysis of overlaps and the different meaning they have for participants as well as different strategies for handling interruptions. Conversational overlaps are defined as periods when both speakers talk at the same time and the conversational contribution of one speaker overlaps with that of another. In the case of cooperative overlaps speakers do not change topic but elaborate upon the current one. Interruptions, on the other hand, are defined as periods when both speakers talk at the same time but the contribution of the second speaker contradicts or disrupts that of the first speaker. Interruptions are also generally considered to be evidence of a high-involvement discourse style and can be perceived as dominating and inconsiderate (Tannen, 1990).

These interactional elements are used to analyze how their combination affects the emergence of leadership within teams of business professionals.

Data Collection and Analysis

Two types of data were collected in this study. The first data set consisted of three transcripts of videotaped recordings of small group decision-making meetings drawn from a total of 20 such transcripts. Business professionals enrolled in an MBA program ($N = 100$) at a private university in Southern California were chosen to participate in the simulation. The study used graduate students, who had all worked in the professional workplace for at least two years.

The simulation used in the study, Subarctic Survival, asked each group to take the role of airplane crash survivors. Groups were then asked to discuss and ultimately agree upon the ranking of items salvaged from the aircraft in terms of their critical function for survival. The meetings were 20 minutes in length and were held and videotaped in an experiential learning laboratory equipped with professional facilities and technicians. The meetings were held in English, and the videotapes were then transcribed.

This study attempted to isolate leadership in its most “pure” form in that it attempted to eliminate confounding variables, such as the effects of corporate culture, relationship history, knowledge of other participants’ abilities, knowledge, and skills, and designated or assigned power. Therefore, group members had little knowledge of each other and no leader was formally designated.

In addition, we draw on leader categorization theory, which suggests that the decision to label someone a leader involves matching another’s observed behavior to the prototypes that define our personal “leader” category, such as influential, visionary, articulate, and so on (Lord, Foti, & Phillips, 1982; Lord & Maher, 1991). Drawing from Rosch (1978), Lord and colleagues suggest that leadership knowledge structures are not just a single category, but a hierarchical cluster of three levels: perceivers’ most broad categorization of leaders at a superordinate level (such as “leader” versus “nonleader”); at a basic level, perceivers distinguish leaders between context (for example, “military,” “political,” “business,” and so

on); and at a subordinate level, they distinguish leaders within context ("senior manager," "middle manager," "supervisor," "team leader," and so on (Lord, Foti, & De Vader, 1984).

Analyses and Results

This section provides an analysis of the three transcribed meeting interactions, or cases, followed by the results of the leadership questionnaire.

The recording begins almost immediately after the group was given detailed instructions for the task. Individual group members were first asked to rank the items from the crash in order of importance using a scale of 1 to 10. Then the group was asked to collectively decide on the ranking of items.

Case Study I

Analysis of Questions

Lines 1-35 show Speaker 1 (S1) emerging as a group leader in case study 1a. In line 1, S1 is the first to announce his choice of the most vital item for survival - matches, "I figure you can use fire, otherwise you're screwed." In what follows, S1 uses questions in a competitive way to defend his decision. When his choice of the most important item for survival gets questioned in line 3, he interrupts S4 in line 6 and uses a tag question to challenge an alternative choice, "[well] at least you can start a fire, though, don't you think?"

1. S1: I figure you can use fire, otherwise you're screwed.
2. S4: Okay, so let's
3. S3: z but if you, but if you just have matches what are you going to do 4.
with [them?]
5. S4: [Yea] at least with the [xxxx]
6. S1: [well] at least you can start a fire though, don't you think? 7. ... I
mean it could be one or two, it doesn't matter

In line 22, S1 uses an indirect question to reassert his point, "You know what I am saying?" In line 31, S1 asserts himself again and has his first choice of matches recorded as the group decision. Speaker 1 does not use questioning as a way to facilitate conversation or solicit information from other team members.

Interestingly, the only team members questioning S1's choice are other native speakers of English. For example, in line 3, S3 makes an attempt to question the choice of matches as the number 1 item: "but if you, but if you just have matches what are you going to do with them?" When S4 offers an alternative ranking in line 16, "Okay, so, are we doing sleeping bag first and the matches second?" They are not successful introducing an alternative ranking as S1 takes the group back to his number one choice in line 17 by saying, "um... I think that just not having fire is like..."

Analysis of Links Between Speaker Turns

Speaker 1 does not make a link with the previous speaker's contribution but rather concentrates on making his own point as demonstrated by his turns in lines 9, 24 and 31. The only acknowledgements of others that Speaker 1 makes is when the previous speaker supports S1's point, as illustrated in line 6 above and line 21,

19. S3: [That's true because] it's light and
20. [it's heat]
21. S1: [it's suicide] z Yea, it's light and its heat and 'cuz either way if you start a fire and all of a sudden no matter better than any sleeping bag. You know what I'm saying?

Analysis of Topic Shifts

Speaker 1 does not show an attempt to create smooth transitions between topics. In line 16, S4 asks a question that invites a discussion; however, in line 17, S1 shifts the topic back to his agenda and forgoes the possibility to open the discussion to consider additional items, "um...XXX I think that just not having fire is like..."

1. S4: Okay, so, are we doing sleeping bag first and the matches second? Or the other way around?
17. S1: um...XXX I think that just not having fire is like [XXXX]

There is little elaboration and continuity of the topics introduced into the conversation; instead, Speaker 1 shifts abruptly to his agenda, to record matches as the most important item for the groups' survival.

Analysis of Verbal Aggressiveness

The tone of voice and intonation manifested by loud talk and a fast pace express a high involvement conversation style used by S1.

Analysis of Listening

Speaker 1 does not use minimal responses in the form of *yeah* and *mhm* to signal listening. In this case, the gender of the speaker might be an issue, because it has been found that for men, minimal responses signal agreement rather than listening and support as they do for women (Tannen, 1990; Coates, 1993). Their main conversational strategy--to seize the turn--places little value on listening and thus minimal responses rarely occur in their speech. The only minimal response by Speaker 1 is offered in line 33, *yeah* where in fact it does mean agreement with Speaker 4, who endorses S1's idea of putting matches as the most important item on the survival list.

Analysis of Simultaneous Speech

Speaker 1 uses overlaps that interrupt the previous speaker numerous times rather than cooperative overlaps that support the previous speaker's contribution, as seen in line 6 (above), and lines 21, 23 and 26 (below). This, again, may be an issue of gender, since it has been shown that male speakers value speakership and therefore grab the floor by interrupting and violating the current speaker's right to complete the turn. In addition, men then tend to respond to interruptions by continuing to speak and keeping the floor, as Speaker 1 does in line 21.

1. S1: [it's suicide] z Yea, it's light and its heat and 'cuz either way if you start a fire and all of a sudden no matter-better than any sleeping bag. You know what I'm saying?
22. S3: Th[at's true, that's true.]
- 23: [you can also xxxxxx]
24. S2: [xxx]
25. S4: [es]pecialy if you find shelter and it's going to rain
26. S1: and if z and you [and] you're wet [you know]

The cumulative effect of this discourse style may have a silencing effect on Asian speakers who come from a collectivist culture and share what Tannen defines as high considerateness style. Speaker 2, an Asian male, latches once in Line 8 validating Speaker 1's "Okay" and tries to take the floor in Line 18 and again in Line 25 but is not successful. He and a second Asian male, Speaker 5, are relatively silent compared to native speakers of English.

Case Study 2

Analysis of Questions

Lines 1-73 show the process of leadership emergence in the second intercultural group. At the beginning of the meeting, it looks as if Speaker 6, an older Asian male, may take the leadership role. In line 2 he opens the discussion by asking, "Okay, which of you chose, the uh, most important one?" S6 is quite active taking three significant turns in the beginning of discussion.

It is through the use of her questions that Speaker 1 emerges as a group leader a couple of minutes into the discussion. Instead of using questions to assert herself or challenge others, Speaker 1 asks yes/no and open-ended questions to solicit information about other group members' choices, "Did everyone choose the compass?" In line 36, she directs the question to two Asian females who have not yet spoken, giving them a chance to join the group, "What did you guys put as the number one?" In lines 72 and 73, she recaps the group discussion by summarizing and listing the items in order, "I think that, I think that the compass is good and then should we do the canvas as second?", which elicits an affirmative confirmation by other speakers. By then this more inclusive style establishes Speaker 1 as a leader. She takes on a more vocal leadership role in the remaining part of the transcript.

Analysis of Links Between Speaker Turns

In contrast to the group leader in case study 1 who did not link his comments to those of the previous speaker, Speaker 1 acknowledges the contribution of the previous speaker on several occasions. In line 46, for example, she acknowledges S6's contribution and elaborates on the topic that he introduced, "oh

really? To stay warm.” Similarly, in line 62 and 65, she continues on a topic that had been previously introduced by latching and overlapping with S5:

61 S5 Have you ever stayed in the middle of snow? You have no idea where you are.
62 S1: z you
don't
63 even know w[hat's] up or down.
64 S5: [with] z pu[re snow, complete snow] you have no
65 S1: [everything looks the same]

Analysis of Topic Shifts

Speaker 1 uses elaboration and continuity as opposed to the sudden topic shift demonstrated by Speaker 1 in case study 1. Even when she changes the topic in line 73, her talk is linked to the previous speaker's contribution, creating a smooth transition that guides the team in its discussion:

72 S5: z I'm I'm I'm just saying that we agree on [the com]pass
73 S1: [yeahhhh] z I think that, I think that the
compass is good and then [should we do the canvass] as second?

Analysis of Listening

Although Speaker 1 uses just a few minimal responses (line 72) in this excerpt, her participation is marked by active listening techniques. She actively participates in the conversation by using repetition (line 41) and validating and elaborating on the previous speaker's turn (line 46):

36 S1: z what did you guys put as the
number one?
38 S4: z what'd you get?
39 S3: z I put, I put canvass [not xxxxx]
40 S5: [oh canvass] is uh tent, the tent
41 S1: z oh
canvass
43 S4: z oh canvass
44 S6: uh canvass, I put sleeping bag
45 S5: z ye[ah]
46 S1: [oh really? To stay warm.]

She also uses frequent latching, which is indicative of a high-involvement style.

Analysis of Simultaneous Speech

Speaker 1 overlaps rarely, and when she does, her overlaps are cooperative, as shown in lines 46 and 65. She does not use simultaneous speech to interrupt a previous speaker as was the case with S1 in case study 1. On one occasion, in line 72, she uses backchanneling--*yeahhh*--to show solidarity with S5.

Case Study 3

Analysis of Questions

In this group, the questions in the very beginning are used to establish the cooperative nature of interaction in the group. The first couple of questions used by several members in the group are used to frame the type of discussion that will follow. It frames the type of discussion as collaborative and the team members are co-constructing the rules and the process for discussion.

- 10 S2: Do we wanna go around and just give like [our top 5?]
11 S1: [What's the best], what's the [least]=
12 S5: [Sure.]

Links Between Turns

Because of the collaborative nature of this group, the recognition of previous contributions is minimal but is present and positive. This can be seen in the OKAY in line 90 and "Ya"s of agreement by Speaker 4 in lines 87 and 93 in this example.

87. S4: [Ya, and I] figure if you can't drink the streams, you can use the mirror to help.
88. you melt the water and then [you] just drink the snow.
89. S2: [Or]
90. S1: Okay.
91. S2: Or I was gonna say, you can, you can melt the snow in the metal can [from the
92. matches =
93. S4: [Ya, that's

Topic Shifts

Likewise, in this group, Speaker 2 elaborates on Speaker 1's idea and proposes a different variation that does not sound like an abrupt topic shift but more like an elaboration.

87. S4: [Ya, and I] figure if you can't drink the streams, you can use the mirror to help.
88. you melt the water and then [you] just drink the snow.
89. S2: [Or]
90. S1: Okay.
91. S2: Or I was gonna say, you can, you can melt the snow in the metal can [from the
92. matches =
93. S4: [Ya, that's

Listening

As seen earlier, Speaker 1 and Speaker 4 use minimal positive acknowledgements of others' contribution in the form of "Okay" and "Ya". It does use other active listening techniques such as elaborating on others contribution, but does not use such techniques as repetition or paraphrasing.

87. S4: [Ya, and I] figure if you can't drink the streams, you can use the mirror to help.
88. you melt the water and then [you] just drink the snow.
89. S2: [Or]
90. S1: Okay.

91. S2: Or I was gonna say, you can, you can melt the snow in the metal can [from the
 92. matches =
 93. S4: [Ya, that's

Simultaneous Speech

In this group, there are frequent overlaps but they are cooperative in the sense that they build on or agree with the previous speaker's contribution. Participants also use backchanneling in the form of "Ya" and "Okay" show solidarity or agreement.

87. S4: [Ya, and I] figure if you can't drink the streams, you can use the mirror to help.
 88. you melt the water and then [you] just drink the snow.
 89. S2: [Or]
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 92. matches =
 93. S4: [Ya, that's

Discussion

Table 1 below provides a summary of the differences that were exhibited in discourse styles by the three groups.

Table 1.
Comparison of Discourse Differences Among Groups

Discourse Elements	Case Study 1	Case Study 2	Case Study 3
Meaning of Questions	To direct members	To solicit participation	To frame the interaction and check for agreement
Links between Turns	Few	To acknowledge contribution	Some acknowledgement of contribution
Topic Shifts	Abrupt	Smooth	Smooth
Listening	Minimal	Active	Minimal
Simultaneous Speech	Interruptions	Few overlaps	Frequent cooperative overlaps

As Table 1 shows, there were different discourse elements used in the three groups to enact leadership. In summary, the group leader in case study 1 used questioning to direct members to his preferences, used few mechanisms to link turns with other speakers, made abrupt topic shifts, used minimal active listening techniques, and interrupted others. The leader in case study 2 used questions to solicit participation from others in the group, linked with others by acknowledging their contribution, smoothly shifted topics, used active listening techniques, and avoiding overlapping conversation with others. In the third case study, no one leader emerged, but talk was characterized by the use of questions for the purposes of framing the discussion and checking for agreement. Some acknowledgement of others

was provided but much less than in case study 2, topic shifts occurred smoothly, active listening techniques were minimal, and cooperative overlaps with other's conversations were frequent.

Even though the combined use of these discourse elements resulted in a different type of leadership emergence, there were some similarities among the groups, such as smooth topic shifts observed in case studies 2 and 3 and minimal active listening techniques used in case studies 1 and 3.

As might be expected given the gender of speaker 1 in case study 1, the leadership style that was exhibited coincides with the traditional view of a leader, at least as held in the U.S., as competitive and directive. Similarly, in case study 2, the female speaker demonstrated a more feminine style of leadership talk in what might be described as cooperative. The third case, though, opens up the possibility of viewing leadership as distributed more evenly among group members. It provides a model for what Gronn (2009) has dubbed a "post-heroic view" of leadership in which a multitude of actors "do" leadership on a temporal basis. In other words, it provides an example of how leadership, as traditionally conceived—cognitive operations that often correspond with a single individual—can be deconstructed. This is the potential of a constructionist stance on leadership. Paraphrasing Hacking (1999), Fairhurst (2007) suggests that such a stance holds that "leadership need not have existed or need not be at all as it is" (p. 4).

Such an understanding underscores the view that leadership can surface in many forms.

Limitations and Implications

While the purpose of this study was to isolate the effects of language in the emergence of leadership within a group, it ignored other important variables that would be at play in most organizational settings. These include structural elements, such as designated roles as leader, manager, or supervisor; cultural elements of the organization; established relations between actors; historical knowledge regarding other actors' level of expertise, competence, and skill; and the role of nonverbal communication.

In addition, this was a simulation, which enabled us to eliminate much of the effects of the factors listed above but as such may not replicate the stakes that might be involved in actual decision-making meetings and thus the interactions involved in such.

Still, it provides those interested in leadership and how it emerges a potentially new and concrete way to think about, observe, and practice leadership. This would include practitioners as well as teachers and scholars of leadership.

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