# Leadership as Practice: Challenging the Competency Paradigm

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**ABSTRACT**

*Competency frameworks, models, instruments and thinking have long been ingrained and utilised in management and organisational life. Not surprisingly they have been transplanted both swiftly and seemingly easily into the leadership domain. While there certainly has been both discomfort and critique from both academic and practitioner sources, nothing has emerged strongly enough to date that would provide an alternative mode of framing and translating both leadership and leadership development in the different contexts that seek to make it visible. In this paper consequently we submit leadership and its development to the 'practice turn' to enable a radically different perspective from a competency orientated one. The ontology, epistemology and methodologies of practice are both examined and translated to the leadership field. We argue that a focus on praxis, practitioner and practice offers both challenge and transformation to the ways that leadership is bounded and constrained by current organisational and managerial conventions.*

**Keywords:** leadership, micro-emancipatory practices, rationality and rationalisation, theory of practice

**Introduction**

Competencies have been called 'ubiquitous' (Bolden & Gosling 2006: 147) in both management thinking and its implementation, thus their transplant into the relatively newer leadership domain should appear as no surprise. While they can and have been critiqued within the management sphere (Cullen 1994; Grugulis 1998; Lester 1994), their dominance and influence in both leadership and leadership development, if one credits any degree of notable distinction and difference between management and leadership (for a range of discussion on the relationship between the two see (Alvesson & Sveningsson 2003; Kotter 1990; Yukl & Lepsinger 2005; Zaleznik 1977), should give new pause for concern and reflection. Consequently the facility with which competencies have entered the leadership terrain marks the initial point of inquiry of this paper.

While it is not too difficult to call attention to the conversion, even colonisation of leadership by such a distinctly managerial framework and apparatus as the competency one, it certainly is more problematic to replace it. For an alternative ontology, epistemology and methodology we then look to the practice turn and this marks the primary contribution of this paper. While practice theory comes strongly from social theory (Bourdieu 1990; de Certeau 1984; Heidegger 1926/1962), it has undoubtedly made its strongest impact in the organisation related discipline in terms of strategy and the advent of a coherent and influential stream of thinking known as strategy-as-practice (see, amongst others, Jarzabkowski 2003; Samra-Fredericks 2003; Whittington 1996, 2003). We argue then that the time is ripe for a leadership-as-practice body of work that, for virtually identical reasons as strategy, aims at the demystification, deepening and appreciation of the 'nitty-gritty details' (Chia 2004: 29) of routine and practice that Chia (2004: 33) calls 'a practical logic'.

In approaching leadership from a practice perspective, it is not our intention to discuss issues of methodology, outline how the practice approach can be applied directly to leadership theory and development, or offer specific recommendations for leadership practice. Similarly, our intent is not just to call new theory into the leadership domain, but to pay attention to dimensions of leadership thinking and doing that are neglected, if not actually invalidated, by competency

thinking.  Bolden and Gosling (2006: 158) site that neglect as around the 'subtle moral, emotional and relational aspects of leadership'. Any dilution or skirting of such terrain renders leadership an impoverished and largely mechanistic imperative.  Equally, a practice orientation has the capacity to put something of the lived experience of such a landscape into words so that researchers engage with what Whittington (2004: 62) terms 'managers' real problems' and Chia (2004: 30) typifies as 'the scene of everyday action'.  Ultimately then, the impact of exploring leadership through a practice orientation aims to penetrate how actors 'get on' (Chia & Holt 2006: 647) with the work of leadership: something which both traditional and mainstream leadership research has shed surprisingly little light on.

**The Ubiquity of Competency**

It is not difficult at all to understand the appeal of competency models to management, and by extension, leadership.  Both, albeit leadership to a much stronger degree, have a quality of vagueness and complexity that invite discomfort and unease in an organisational world which has long privileged rationality, control, clarity and simplicity (Grey 1999; Townley 2002).  A rather benign interpretation would view competencies as an attempt to usefully describe and thus operationalise what can appear a bewildering and contradictory array of expectations, while a more critical viewpoint would identify them as conscious instruments of managerial manipulation, inculcation and regulation.

A more detailed  look at the definition of competency as 'an underlying characteristic of an individual that is causally related to effective or superior performance in a job' (Boyatzis 1982: 21) thus would appear a useful starting place to explore what and how competencies might mean. From the above definition at least four words stand out as critical to any exploration of competency, with those four being 'individual', 'causally', 'superior' and 'performance'.  Those four words aggregated together constitute the premises of what Chia and Holt (2006: 638) term 'methodological individualism' whereby the individual agent is credited with primacy, a linear relationship is constructed from intention to intervention, and performance is governed by purpose, principles and co-option into an overarching strategic plan.

On the surface of it, those would appear so normative as not to be particularly worthy of comment. But the competency approach has surprisingly little empirical robustness behind it (Bolden & Gosling 2006: 152) and many of its assumptions don't stand up to much in the way of active scrutiny. So competency thinking assumes 1) that individual actors act and perform in isolation to others and the context and 2) one achieves or exceeds requisite performance by adopting the same generic prescribed behaviours and roles and 3) success comes from being strong across a wide range of behaviours rather than being cognisant and compensatory with where one is stronger and weaker (Grugulis 2000; Loan-Clarke 1996).

There are further deeper and underlying problems with the competency ethos. Attention has been drawn to their reliance on processes of reduction and fragmentation whereby numerous parts are distilled on the assumption that, if they are to be reassembled, then a credible, impressive and integrated 'whole' can be attained (Ecclestone 1997; Grugulis 1998). Equally problematic is the derivation of competencies from past or present organisation scenarios with the assumption they will be relevant and appropriate for whatever constitutes the future (Lester 1994). However, most tellingly is the reality of competency frameworks as disciplinary mechanisms (Townley 2002) which seek to define and enshrine an 'ideal' in terms of management and leadership by which others can be measured, evaluated, legitimated, disciplined and disciplined by. To this end they become constitutive of identity and an apparatus of domination to be submitted to.

Given that competencies, by their very nature, can only articulate that which is objective, measurable, technical and tangible, their presence and power in the managerial sphere, at least partially, is to some extent understandable. While one can (and should) argue with management as predominantly technocratic, functional, disembodied, objective and instrumental (Townley 2002), most would accept that some of management activity does meet this criteria as in processes of budgeting, operational planning, project management and policy/ compliance systems. However, little if any of the leadership domain would be construed by many at all as being of this nature, thus the acceptance of competencies for leadership seems particularly problematic, inappropriate and misplaced here.

Bolden and Gosling (2006: 147) liken the use of competencies for leadership to the notion of a 'repeating, recurring refrain' in music which impose structure, predictability, restraint and boundedness to further development of melody or voice.  Competencies don't address or facilitate what gives music (or leadership) its vitality, life, originality and distinctiveness.  They conclude that competencies don't provide 'a sufficiently rich vocabulary' (2006: 158) for the subtle, textured, complex, embodied and highly situated mindset that is required for leadership.  Rather they breed conformity to a standardised and unfocused leadership model, rather than fostering diversity and connectedness which could grow true both personal and organisational capacity. It seems timely and necessary therefore to both contest and surplant the growing reliance on competency in the leadership terrain.

**The Promise of Practice**

A practice approach could be positioned as directly opposite to the competency approach discussed previous to this section.  Where competency is rooted in objectivism, practice is explicitly constructionist; competency aims at an individual level of analysis, while practice is inherently relational and collective; competency confines itself to what is quantifiable and measurable, while practice draws on discourse, narrative, rhetoric and narrative; competency is unanchored in relationship and context, while practice is situated and socially defined.  We propose that a practice ontology, epistemology and methodology offers different and multiple units of analysis (Jarzabkowski, Balogun & Seidl 2007), considerably broader definitional scope, a new vocabulary and a re-theorisation of both agency and action (Chia & Holt 2006).  The intent of this section is to explore and consider what is meant by practice theory.

Whittington (2006) proposes three strands of practice theory as characterised by Reckwitz (2002): praxis (the interconnection and embeddedness of action, actor and institution), practice (routinised types of behaviour or what Chia and Holt (2006: 637) term 'a patterned consistency of action'), and practitioner (those actors active in the domain).  Each of the three separately constitute a different unit of analysis and site of research and taken together they bring together the micro ('the situated doings of individual human beings') and the macro ('different socially defined practices') (Jarzabkowski, Balogun & Seidl 2007: 7).  This interrelationship between the

micro and macro is an exceedingly complex one where the bulk of the research focus is on micro-action, micro-phenomena and micro-activity yet from an explicitly relational or non-individualistic stance (Chia & Holt 2006; Schatzki 2005). At this point the ontolological and theoretical nature of practice theory requires some elaboration.

Both an assumption of relationality (Chia & Holt 2006; Cooper 2005) and a 'logic of practice' (Chia 2004) are core to practice theory. Relationality represents the commitment to understanding individuals or collectives not as separate or isolated or discreet entities but as a 'field of re-lationships' (Cooper 2005: 1693) or 'bundles of practices' (Schatzki 2005: 12). This means that it is practice that is 'the source of meaning and normativity' (Schatzki 2001: 12) more than (individual or collective actors) with practice constituting the identities (leadership and otherwise) of such actors. Relationality epitimizes an understanding of practices as 'non-individualistic phenomena' and 'social sites in which events, entities, and meaning help compose one another' (Schatzki 2005: 480). Wittgenstein (in Dreyfus (1991b: 7) and Chia and Holt (2006: 639) perhaps best represents relationality in both radical but pragmatic terms in the following statement:

'How could human behaviour be described? Surely only by showing the actions of a variety of humans, as they are all mixed up together. Not what one man is doing now, but the whole hurly-burly, is the background against which we see an action.'

This 'logic of practice' (Bourdieu 1977/2002: 19) not only privileges practice over actor, but is also critical of what Chia (2004: 30) terms 'a means-ends analytical logic' and what Bourdieu (1990: 29) calls an 'intellectualocentrism' whereby causal logic, intentionality, deliberateness, instrumental reason or a 'vocabulary of intentions, rules, plans and laws' (Chia 2004: 30) are imposed by academics on more practical reason and activity. Thus, action, behaviour and life are shaped by an academic view of the world which doesn't recognise, even disregards, that which isn't linear, progressive, conscious, planned and organised. A practice perspective in contrast reminds us that the overwhelming majority of action takes place 'on the hoof' (Chia & Holt 2006: 643), involves 'skilled, improvised in situ coping' (Chia 2004: 33) and 'takes place unreflectively, on-the-spot and in the twinkle-of-an-eye' (Chia & MacKay 2007: 238). The radicalness of a practice perspective invites us thus into what de Certeau (1984) terms

'the everyday' and Whittington (1996: 734) terms 'the unheroic work of ordinary [strategic] practitioners in their day-to-day routines.'

Heidegger's distinction between building and dwelling (as discussed in Chia 2004; Chia & Holt 2006; Chia & MacKay 2007) speaks very tangibly, if symbolically, to the vast gulf between competency and practice. The building mode is the one that characterises competency logic. That mode relies on the agency of a motivated and intentional actor to act on a world they stand separate from to achieve pre-conceived ends and objectives. In a dwelling mode action is 'immanent' (Chia & Holt 2006: 637), in that it unfolds along with identity through feeling, responding, coping and negotiating with the day-to day. Dwelling, for Heidegger is mindless, not because it lacks sense and efficacy, but because it must 'follow an internalized predisposition: a modus operandi rather than any deliberate conscious intent' (Chia & MacKay 2007: 236). This is what Bourdieu (1990) calls habitus or a repertoire of background dispositions, improvisations, embodied skills, internalized habits or know-how that shape 'what it is to be a person, an object, an institution' (Dreyfus 1991a: 17). While the building mode is purposeful in that it involves a pre-defined outcome, the dwelling mode is purposive in that it 'gives consistency, stability and ultimately, identity to the agent, be it individual or organization, as a locus of action' (Chia & Holt 2006: 650). We propose then that practice, relationality, a logic of practice and a mode of dwelling would provide a more appropriate paradigm and place with which to explore leadership and its development.

**A Leadership-as-Practice Agenda**

Much of what has fuelled the strategy-as-practice research momentum and energy would appear equally valid to the discipline of leadership. How many leadership researchers and scholars would identify strongly with Whittington's (2003) admission that after decades of successful teaching *about* strategy (or leadership), he was impoverished at helping enable practitioners with *how* to strategise (or do leadership)? Like strategy, leadership is ripe to throw off 'the epistemological straight jacket' of modernism that has valued 'scientific detachment over practical engagement, the general over the contextual, the quantitative over the qualitative' (Whittington 2004: 62). Like strategy, leadership now 'faces deep questions concerning the deep

and simple assumptions made by those in the 'positioning' schools [of strategy]; the centrality of modernity and the power of ideal types, matrices and positivistic methods' (Wilson & Jarzabkowski 2004: 14). Like strategy, leadership needs to make the journey to 'the internal life of process, the practices by which work is actually done' (Brown & Duguid 2000: 95).

Whittington (2003: 117) proposed a series of six questions to consider for the strategy-as practice agenda. We use them verbatim here except for the substitution of 'strategizing' for 'leadership' in italics: 'where and how is the work of *leadership* actually done; who does this *leadership* work; what are the common tools and techniques of *leadership;* how is the work of *leadership* organized, communicated and consumed?' As he later clarifies, 'this is the world in boardrooms and away days, on phones and in front of computer screens' (Whittington 2003: 119). With the amount of ink and paper dedicated to the discipline of leadership, it may seem extraordinary to claim we do not know enough about the above questions, but the challenge of focusing on 'situated activity rather than abstract processes' (Whittington 2003: 118) should appear, on reflection, as a real one.

We wouldn't be the first to note that the leadership literature has spent a great deal of time and attention on the qualities that leaders are meant to have (confidence, optimism, charisma and so on), the behaviours that they should be demonstrating (inspiring others, role modelling and so on), the intelligences they need to develop (cognitive, emotional and even spiritual), the orientation required (to task or people), or the nature of their work (interpersonal, adaptive or strategic and so on). We have a great many leadership typologies and descriptors that highlight or put emphasis on a certain style or brand or effect (transformational, servant, authentic and ethical leadership and so on) and we have, as discussed earlier, copious lists of leadership skills, tools and competencies that delineate expectations of what needs to be mastered. Yet these shed more light on the 'what' and 'why' than the 'how' of leadership (Chia 2004).

Recent critical and interpretive work on leadership is highlighting the lack of meaning, conceptual depth and real know-how that leadership practitioners have around the work of leadership. A stream of work by Alvesson and Sveningsson (2003a, b and c) reveal that many managers who feel themselves engaged in leadership work can articulate the abstract ideals

(vision, inspiration, commitment and so on) of leadership readily, clearly and easily, but are at a loss when challenged to say what they actually do in the pursuit and exercise of such ideals. This has led them to conclude that leadership has more power as a discourse and identity that gives practitioners enhanced self-esteem, significance and 'positive cultural valence' (Alvesson & Willmott 2002: 620), rather than a specific or distinctive set of practices or interventions in organisational life. The one practice that those engaged in leadership could talk to in detail was listening, which Alvesson and Sveningsson (2003b: 1435) categorised as 'the extra-ordinarization of the mundane' on the rationale that it was leadership that conferred significance on the listening, rather than a more conscious practice reading whereby the listening would be seen as constituting the leadership.

In fact, Chia (2004: 30) discussing Bourdieu (1977/2002: 19), reminds us that the academic discourse is so pervasive that even when 'practitioners willingly provide quasi-theoretical accounts of their own practices, they are likely to 'conceal' even from their own eyes, the true nature of their practical mastery'. Practice research thus must seek ''richer versions' of *leadership*' which must come from more intimate and sustained interaction with actors and 'a more theoretically incisive understanding of the importance of language use or talk for constituting actions (shaping *leadership*) and more generally, for socially constructing 'organization/ social order'(Samra-Fredericks 2003: 142, we again substituted *leadership* for strategy).

Samra –Fredericks empirical work offers an interesting exemplar of practice orientated empirical work. She takes a strong ethnographic approach combined with conversation analysis in investigating the routines and interactions (what she calls 'the ebb and flow of everyday human exchange' (2003: 144) of six strategists. She isolates six practices, 'the ability to speak forms of knowledge; mitigate and observe the protocols of human interaction (the moral order); question and query; display appropriate emotion; deploy metaphors and finally; put history 'to work' (2003: 144). These six, combined with timeliness and the relational domain can be seen to constitute the practical wisdom that enables the work of strategy. She assessed these as being

'intricate, dynamic, fragile and skilled' 'attempts at improvisation' and 'real-time efforts to assemble a plausible narrative' constituting 'embodied, emotional and moral human beings' (2003:168).

This particular piece of practice empirical work seemed particularly relevant for leadership, as it would appear completely seamless to read the six practices isolated in this research as leadership practice. Indeed we could expect that a greater practice focus would radically challenge the ways we have carved up organisational life into 'ideologically loaded labels' (Alvesson & Sveningsson 2003a: 985) such as 'leadership', 'management', 'strategy' and so on. One could expect that practices do not fall into such neat and discreet packages, and that, through making them more visible, we have the chance of moving closer to 'the contours of [their] lived experience over time/space dimensions' (Samra-Fredericks 2003: 169).

**Implications of a Practice Perspective for Leadership and its Development**

Whittington (2004: 62) claims that a practice perspective 'has a radically decentring effect on traditional conceptions of the discipline's purpose'. We would propose a number of sites where that 'decentring' would be particularly significant. In an earlier paper, Whittington (1996: 734) has commented that neither scholars nor practitioners know enough about 'unheroic work' and while he is referring to strategy practitioners, we know notions of heroism have long permeated leadership studies. We are supposedly entering a post-heroic leadership age (Gronn 2002), yet much of our data and theory is based on those with profile, status, position and power. One of the impacts of the practice turn in strategy has been the recognition that the work of strategy is distributed far and wide in an organisation and that middle and lower level employees engage in strategy practice (Balogun 2003; Balogun & Johnson 2004, 2005; Rouleau 2005). We would argue that both a broadening and redefinition of who is engaged in leadership work is well overdue and promises the potential for research to be more focused and specific around how leadership is constituted in different sites and from different organisational positions (or 'non-positions').

Likewise, hearing the challenge of exploring 'non-deliberate practical coping' as opposed to 'planned, intentional action' (Chia & Holt 2006: 643) would be truly unsettling of much

leadership research. Chia and Holt (2006: 641) quote Heidegger's illustration of the door in support of this distinction. Given that we go through myriads of doors in our day to day existence, we, in effect, stop noticing or confine to the periphery of our attention, the action of turning the door handle. This reflects what Heidegger calls 'availableness' or a 'non-thematic circumspective absorption' (Chia & Holt 2006: 640) which is indicative of being fully immersed in the world. However, if the doorknob becomes broken, absent or problematic, we become conscious and attentive to what normally is quite non-reflective, and then begin a conscious analysis and planning of action in response. Thus failure, dysfunction, obstruction, surprise and dissonance is what can spark conscious, intentional action in the first place, but it is important to note that the bulk of lived reality is of the former not the latter type. Much of leadership research then focuses on this narrower point of action where the actor is in a self-conscious and decisive mode with a crisis, problem, issue, problematic encounter, choice or challenge presenting. Practice theory suggests two options: firstly it can re-orient us to think about and explore the vast bulk of leadership action or coping that is as non-reflective and non-conscious as the simple opening of doors, and/or secondly it could invite us to bring more of the non-conscious and unreflective into the conscious and intentional domain so we learn to extend what it is we pay attention to and actually have leadership choices about.

Furthermore, if we are to hear Whittington's (2004: 62) assertion that 'studying practice can be practical', then we must pay attention to how a turn to practice can have tangible leadership effects. One place where that is especially pertinent is with leadership development. Given that leadership-as-practice orients us to what is internalized, improvised and unself-conscious, then development must be prepared to work with what is 'unspoken', 'inarticulate' and 'oftentimes unconscious' (Chia & MacKay 2007: 237). Chia and MacKay (2007: 233) speak to a radically different development process than a skill or tools based programme. 'Becoming skilled in a practice, therefore is not simply a question of deliberately acquiring a set of generalized capabilities that can be transmitted from one individual to another. Rather, skills are 'regrown'…incorporated into the modus operandi of the developing organism through training and experience in the performance of particular tasks.' 'Regrowth' is strongly suggestive of depth

and organic learning that would need to address questions of identity, purpose, culture and context.

In a similar vein, Dreyfus (2001: 41) reminds us that while academic knowledge and processes seek to produce competence, they don't produce what he terms 'practical proficiency or mastery of the art'. For that to occur then 'a particular style of engagement' (Chia 2004: 33) is required which he typifies as 'discipleship, apprenticeship or extensive periods of understudy'. The development of leadership practice then would appear acutely experiential, interactive, situated, embodied, sustained and relational that creates a new kind of engagement with self, others and world. Such a new kind of engagement is predicated on learning to operate from a dwelling mode that removes any distinction between subject and object and reliance on mental models and cognitive frameworks (Dreyfus 1991a: 27). Shotter (2005: 2) calls this 'withness' not 'aboutness' thinking and Dreyfus (1991b: 232) reminds us that 'we are the practices' and that they are socially embedded and embodied ways of understanding 'what it is to be a person, an object, an institution' and we would add, to be in leadership.

**Conclusion**

This paper can be read in the light of Bryman's (1986) call to interpret leadership in the light of new and alternative paradigmatic thought. That call is decades old now and while we have seen momentum in critical leadership research (Gemmill & Oakley 1992; Grint 2005), interpretative leadership research (Alvesson & Sveningsson 2003a, b & c) and process leadership theory (Wood 2005), undoubtedly the leadership field has some way to go before it becomes as dynamic and methodologically rich as it could be. An exploration of a practice perspective would present as intuitively appealing as, just like strategy, leadership begs for 'a complementary dialogue' (Wilson & Jarzabkowski 2004: 15) between the agendas, discourses and audiences of both academics and practitioners. The ubiquity of competency in the current mainstream dialogue, we argue, acts more as a restraint to leadership thinking and development than a facilitator of further leadership richness, texture and possibility. Consequently, we offer the notion of practice as far more aligned and attuned to what, an attentiveness to leadership as discourse, identity and modus operandi from researchers, developers and practitioners will require.

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