

Rethinking leadership: a way forward for teaching leadership?

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Research Paper

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Purpose

There have again been increasing calls for management educators to strengthen the development of leadership in their programmes. However, it is unclear as to how such calls can be best answered. One way forward may be to rethink our conceptualisation of leadership.

Design/methodology/approach

Dominant theories of leadership may offer limited help to management educators. The dominant conceptualisation of leadership is questioned using empirical evidence from recent studies and interviews undertaken by the authors which examined managers' understandings of leadership.

Findings

We suggest that mainstream leadership theories are framed by systems-control thinking and highlight a number of issues in respect of teaching leadership. We propose that a process-relational framing of leadership may be a more useful way to think about leadership.

Research Limitations/implications

Whilst the interview data drawn upon is exploratory and therefore cannot be taken as conclusive, we hope to stimulate a wider rethinking of leadership than is currently present.

Practical Implications

Tentative suggestions are presented for responding to calls to improve the teaching of leadership.

Originality/value

The paper emphasises a process-relational understanding of leadership and may be seen to offer practical help to management educators concerned with the teaching of leadership.

Keywords: leadership, management education, teaching, process-relational

Introduction

Over recent years there have been increasing demands for management educators to pay more attention to leadership development in their programmes. The CEML Report (2002) for example, questions whether currently MBA programmes provide effective preparation for leadership, and recommends that business schools need to strengthen the application of knowledge and the development of practical leadership skills within the MBA. The report suggests that despite the growth in management education over the past decade, there are still shortages in the quality and quantity of people with leadership abilities and thus echoes concerns raised by reports in the late 1980s (Constable and McCormick, 1987, Porter and McKibbin, 1988). This would seem to suggest that business schools have long struggled with the issue of 'teaching leadership'. Thus the challenge once again for those responsible for developing programmes is to find ways of attending to the issue of leadership.

It is suggested here that one way to tackle this thorny issue of teaching leadership may be to rethink leadership or put differently, to conceptualise leadership in a way which is more helpful to our attempts to teach leadership. It is suggested here that dominant leadership theories may conceptualise leadership in ways which are of limited help to management educators. The theories of transformational leadership (Bass, 1985, Bass and Avolio, 1994) and charismatic leadership (Conger and Kanungo, 1987) represent popular approaches to the conceptualisation of leadership and have arguably evolved to be central to the field. However, a number of scholars have raised several issues with these

approaches (Pawar, 2003, Yukl, 1999) and it is the intention here to highlight a number of concerns which relate to the challenge of teaching leadership. This addresses an area of neglect in the literature as there has been limited consideration of the teaching of leadership (Doh, 2003).

Rethinking leadership

Barker (1997) argues that the ambiguity surrounding what we understand as leadership is central to the struggle of teaching leadership. Rost (1991) indeed notes that the leadership literature although vast, is often contradictory, confusing and lacks cohesion. Bryman's (1996) documentation of four chronological phases of leadership theory, is illustrative of changing conceptions of leadership: trait theories (concerned with an identification of leader's traits); behavioural theories (concerned with identification of behavioural styles of leaders); contingency theories (concerned with a focus on fitting behavioural styles to situational factors) and 'new theories of leadership' (concerned with a focus on the articulation of a vision). Arguably, such 'new theories' of leadership have over recent years evolved as central to our understanding of leadership with an emphasis on transformational leadership where a leader stimulates followers to change their motives, beliefs and values and capabilities so that the followers own interests and personal goals become congruent with the organisation (Bass, 1985). An important facet of this leadership is charisma and indeed Conger and Kanungo (1987) have developed a leadership theory which specifically focuses on this dimension. Conger et al (2000, p748) suggest that charismatic leaders differ from other leaders by their 'ability to formulate

and articulate an inspirational vision and by behaviours that they and their mission are extraordinary'. In both models there is thus a common suggestion of a leader inspiring followers to a shared vision. This conceptualisation has arguably become widely accepted in the literature. However, some have questioned such mainstream thinking and invite a greater openness to the consideration of leadership than is presently found (Alvesson and Sveningsson, 2003).

It is suggested here that a notion of a leader inspiring followers to a shared vision represents only one way to think about leadership and may not be of much assistance to those concerned with the teaching of leadership. The paper will argue that this dominant conceptualisation represents a particular way of thinking about organisations and managerial work (of which we argue leadership is one aspect), namely what may be described as 'systems-control' thinking. Systems-control orthodoxy tends to promote a rather mechanistic view of organisations and managerial work seeing managing as an activity mainly concerned with 'designing and controlling work organisations as if they were big machine-like systems rationally devised to meet unambiguous organisational goals' (Watson, 2005, p). Such thinking derives from modernist and universalistic aspirations to maximise control over human circumstances with the manager being viewed as an expert who controls and motivates subordinates to behave in particular ways consistent with the organisation's goals. Indeed, Barker (2001, p.479) challenges the notion of 'new' leadership theory, arguing that the work of Bass for example, clings to the idea that 'leadership is about leaders supervising subordinates, about subordinates working hard toward institutional objectives as the primary goal for leadership and about

the leader's ability to persuade/inspire/motivate subordinates to release their own needs to work toward the interests of the leader or the institution that the leader represents'. The extent then to which new theories provide an alternative perspective of leadership is thus questionable since along with previous conceptualisations, they continue to be framed by systems-control thinking.

It is suggested that an alternative way to think about leadership is to adopt process-relational thinking. To adopt such thinking would be to recognise that 'managers like everyone else in organisational settings, are continually striving to make sense of numerous crosscutting and conflicting goals and purposes. Managers and non-managers alike constantly have to make and remake bargains, exert power, resist power, cope with conflicts of interest and negotiate understandings with others to make sure that the goods are produced or services provided to a level and quality that enables the organisation to remain in existence' (Watson, 2005 p). The origins of such thinking may be seen to be associated with a dissatisfaction with mainstream systems-control thinking and in particular, the critique of Silverman (1970) which drew upon ideas from social action theory (Berger and Luckman, 1967), highlighting an understanding of organisations as social constructs produced and reproduced through their members' activities and later being built upon to emphasise the notion of negotiated order (Day and Day, 1977). To view the organisation in process-relational terms thus involves a shift from seeing the organisation as a goal pursuing entity as suggested by a systems-control perspective to thinking about the organisation as 'ongoing patterns of meaning making and activity brought about as...people in relationships to others and to their cultures' (Watson, 2005,

p.). Viewing the organisation through a process-relational lens thus accepts that only partial managerial control can ever be achieved given the ongoing and emergent nature of organisational activity and the centrality of 'people in relationships to others' with their inevitable complexities and differing interests. However, it is important to note that the adoption of a process-relational perspective (or indeed a systems-control one) goes beyond a way of seeing the organising and managing of work, it also represents a way of talking and acting towards organising and managing. Thus a manager who adopts a process-relational framework is more likely to take into account broader and more subtle aspects of work behaviour.

Arguably, the central notion of leader's inspiring followers to a shared vision seen in new leadership theories becomes more problematic when thinking in process-relational terms. It is thus suggested here that thinking about leadership in process-relational terms may be more helpful to management educators as it does greater justice to the complex, messy realities of organisational life and as such provides greater assistance in helping managers to make sense of their management practice, and in particular, the part of their practice that is leadership.

The paper thus attempts to highlight an alternative way to think about leadership by raising a number of issues which relate to the ways in which popular leadership theory is framed by systems-control thinking. We draw upon evidence from recent empirical studies and our own exploratory research which examined managers' conceptualisations of leadership. It is thus useful to now say a little about the research undertaken.

Methods

The research we draw upon here is part of a larger study based on 36 interviews with MBA graduates which explored their management learning. As part of this project, managers were asked to talk about the challenges they faced in their roles, some talked about leadership as such a challenge and others were asked more explicitly about leadership and what it meant for them. This part of the research was stimulated by the difficulties surrounding the teaching of leadership and the noted limitations of mainstream thinking about leadership. The study adopted an interpretive approach in order to provide a more in depth exploration of leadership in contrast to the predominant quantitative survey research which focuses on measurement of leader characteristics and behaviours (Hunt, 1999). The intention here was to focus on the meanings managers gave to leadership to enhance our understanding of the concept. Further, such an approach allowed for openness to alternative perspectives on leadership which could potentially provide valuable insights into ways forward for teaching leadership.

Systems-control v process-relational framing of leadership

It was suggested above that theories of transformational and charismatic leadership are tied to a systems-control perspective of organisations. Below we raise a number of issues which emerge from the adoption of such a perspective. The issues raised here are by no means exhaustive but rather serve to illustrate some of the difficulties in framing leadership in a systems-control way and in particular ensuing tensions for the teaching of

leadership. Table 1 draws on the work of Watson (2005) and summarises the issues discussed below, highlighting the central features of a systems-control leadership perspective contrasted with a process-relational one. We problematise a number of features of systems-control thinking in relation to leadership, namely the assumption of a unitary organisation; the emphasis placed upon the individual leader often portrayed in terms of superhero status and the subsequent neglect of others involved in leadership processes, and relatedly the separation and elevation of leadership from other organisational activities. We suggest that adopting a process-relational leadership perspective offers a more grounded and realistic conceptualisation which accepts the plurality of organisational life, focuses on leadership as an emergent process which includes the contributions of others and sees leadership as integral to the organising and managing of work.

“Take in Table 1”

Issue 1: The Unitary and Fixed Organisation

Central to systems-control thinking is a notion of the pursuit of clear organisational goals, designed by the manager or leader who then motivates others to act in ways which will achieve these goals. It is suggested that this is problematic for a number of reasons. Such a way of thinking about leadership is based upon a unitary view of organisations which proposes all organisational members share the goals of the organisation and are thus motivated to act in ways which will ensure the realisation of such goals. Both

transformational and charismatic leadership theories can be seen to uphold unitarist assumptions. Central to Bass's theory is a notion of subordinates transcending their self interests for the goals of the organisation, with Bass and Avolio (1994, p.3) for example suggesting that 'the (transformational) leader creates clearly communicated expectations that followers want to meet', and similarly Conger and Kanungo (1998) hypothesise that charismatic leadership will result in high internal cohesion, low internal conflict, high value congruence and high consensus. It is suggested that such assumptions are problematic since they downplay the multitude of conflicting goals, purposes and beliefs that organisational members hold in reality which seriously questions ideals of consensus and cohesion. Although Bass and Avolio (1994) acknowledge that followers hold a diverse set of views, needs and aspirations, they suggest that through the use of inspirational motivation the leader is able to align diverse followers around a vision. Thus there remains a belief that high consensus can be achieved and thus conflict, negotiation and politics which are inevitable in organisations tend to be marginalised. Notably, Barker (1997) reminds us of Burns's (1978) definition of leadership which emphasises leadership as a process which occurs within a context of competition and conflict. Interestingly, Bass's theory of transformational leadership has built upon Burns's work and yet downplays this important dimension. The following comment from a manager in our study highlights the reality of conflicting organisational goals.

'I feel that myself and a lot of other managers we are like pushed in different directions depending on what is flavour of the month and that doesn't long term get you anywhere, it puts a short term fix in place, then you go off in a different direction and that problem

reappears six, twelve months down the line. We have a lot of improvement programmes that have a different end gain that take people down in different directions’. [Change

Project Manager]

Managers in our study also often described the challenges in working with others who held very different views and the necessity of politicking to build support for ideas:

‘Learning how to get your point across, how people can understand, how to get your argument heard and taken on board, deal with people who have completely different points of view to you and selling your ideas and probably learning who you need to talk to on various issues which is sometimes an awful part of the job but is actually quite a necessity I think, it’s sort of the management of influence’. [Commercial Manager]

This would seem to suggest a rather different reality to notions of consensus, cohesion and willing self sacrifice for the greater good. Rather it suggests a more complicated, messy reality where conflicts of interest prevail and as such the manager must sometimes behave in uncomfortable ways to persuade others of personal viewpoints.

It may be argued that assumptions of a unitary organisation may oversimplify the reality that is found in organisations. Similarly, systems–control thinking implies that the goals of the organisation are somehow fixed and once achieved the work of the leader is done. Again, this is seen to oversimplify the case. Conger and Kanungo (1998, p. 46) exemplify a focus on achievement of fixed goals suggesting that ‘one cannot lead when there is no

future goal to pursue'. This is seen to ignore the essentially emergent nature of organisational life in that organising and managing is in a constant state of becoming (Watson, 2002). The fluid and dynamic nature of organisations makes it difficult to envisage when there would be no future goal to pursue.

Generally, given that models of transformational and charismatic leadership are framed by systems-control thinking means that they may be seen as less helpful in assisting managers to understand leadership as they do not do justice to the complex reality found in organisations. Recent leadership research and findings from our own work further suggest a number of issues with such theories which relate to this tendency to present an oversimplified and sometimes romanticised view of organisational life.

Issue 2: The promotion of the superhero

Consistent with systems-control thinking, theories of transformational and charismatic leadership present an individualistic conception of leadership, since there is a focus on the leader as a special person. Indeed, there is a focus on a gifted individual seemingly in possession of almost superhuman, magical powers which may be seen to spellbind followers to act in ways desired by the leader. Words such as 'extraordinary', 'unconventional' and 'heroic' typify a description of leader behaviours. Bass (1985, p47-48) for example, highlights the extraordinariness of the transformational, charismatic leader suggesting that 'the unusual vision of charismatic leaders that makes it possible for them to 'see around corners' stems from their greater freedom from internal conflict'

whereas ‘the ordinary manager is a continuing victim of their self doubts and personal traumas’. However, it is unclear from the literature what exactly it means to be extraordinary or unconventional and therefore limited help is offered to our practical attempts to teach leadership. More worryingly, Alimo-Metcalfe et al (2002) have argued that new theories of leadership create dangerous myths because ‘they create a notion of leadership that is inaccessible to most ordinary mortals’. Further, the idea that a leader must in some way be gifted shows a regression to notions of leadership as an innate ability and as such suggests little can be done by way of teaching leadership. Indeed, in our own work, we found several managers who perceived leadership as an inspirational gift and therefore attempts to teach leadership were seen as limited.

‘I don’t think good leaders are people that you can, I think the term is a good leader is born, you can’t turn somebody from being a poor leader into a good leader by putting them on some courses...that sort of inspirational skill is something that that individual has and I don’t think you can always train that into somebody.’ [Project Manager]

Whilst the notion of heroic leadership may hold weight for some there is a growing body of evidence which debunks this leadership myth. Numerous studies are now found which may be said to contribute to an emerging anti-heroic leadership perspective which suggests leaders are not larger than life individuals with special powers rather they are far more ordinary and reserved.

The work of Alimo-Metcalfe and Alban-Metcalfe (2001) offers a very different conception of transformational leadership to that described earlier. Their work highlights the salience of what the leader does for the individual such as empowering, valuing, supporting and encouraging. This is contrasted with dominant ideas of the leader acting as a role model and inspiring the follower. Indeed, Alimo-Metcalfe and Alban-Metcalfe suggest that followership, so central to transformational and charismatic leadership theory is absent in their work. Comments made by managers in our own study were consistent with this view with managers talking of supporting and encouraging others rather than inspiring followers:

'Well those things leadership can be a reassurance, a firm decision, a supportive decision, giving people encouragement, being actually prepared to stick your head above the parapet where other people aren't sometimes. Being decisive rather than indecisive. Not always leading from the front but just letting people know that you are supportive of what they are doing that they can rely on you if things go wrong.' [Operations Director]

Taking away the notion of followership diminishes the importance of the heroic leader since there is a decreased need for an inspirational figure to model the way for followers. Instead Alimo-Metcalfe and Alban-Metcalfe (2001) argue that their work suggests a greater sense of proximity, openness, humility and vulnerability. A comment made by a manager in our study likewise exemplifies a heightened emphasis on the fragility of the leader which has been overlooked in popular theory:

'And I think shyness can be an asset you know, because you can actually talk to people and say, you can actually be seen as friendly, personable and I think being a leader is often about exposing your weaknesses as well, well I think so because people can see that you are fallible, maybe part of it is being honest and saying you know this is what I can do but what I can't do.... So to me being a leader is actually recognising, being open about your weaknesses as well'. [Training Services Manager]

The manager here suggests shyness may be associated with an enhanced leadership ability which is contrasted with a popular conception of the larger than life leader. Other research studies offer a far more ordinary conception of leadership and point to a more modest notion of leadership. Collins (2001) provides evidence which suggests that successful organisations do not have leaders who are charismatic, heroic figures but rather individuals who display personal humility and professional will. He found that successful leaders which he terms 'level five' leaders, were shy unpretentious, awkward and modest but at the same time had an enormous amount of ambition not for themselves but the organisation. Similarly, Badarraco (2002) suggests the importance of 'quiet leadership'. This is seen not to inspire or thrill, but to focus on small things, careful moves and measured efforts. He further suggests that quiet leaders have an understanding of the reality of their situations noting the limits of their powers and understanding that they are only 'one piece on the chessboard'. This emerging work would seem to conceptualise leadership in perhaps more realistic ways focusing attention away from ideas of inspirational powers and instead a suggestion of an ordinary person working alongside others. This is consistent with a process-relational framing of leadership since it

is recognised that leaders are 'like everybody else' and do not possess special powers thus moving attention away from ideas of special personality attributes. Thus there is hope for the majority of being able to contribute to leadership and a suggestion that there may be some role for the management teacher.

Issue 3: The isolated leader and the neglect of group processes

The above focus on the heroic leader is further problematic since it diverts attention from others involved in the leadership process and thus downplays the relational aspects of leadership. Whilst the contribution of followers is noted, there is a tendency to over emphasise the ability of the individual leader, this is perhaps exemplified when poor performance is automatically blamed on the actions of the leader (Khurana, 2002). Yukl (1999) proposes that instead of focusing on a single person who influences followers, many people can be viewed as contributors to the overall process of leadership in organisations. He suggests that this conception of leadership does not require an individual who is exceptional or who can perform all of the essential leadership functions, only a set of people who collectively perform them.

Research undertaken by Heifetz and Laurie (2001) supports the notion of a more collaborative conception of leadership. They suggest that the leader is not somebody who has all the solutions at their disposal; rather they are somebody who asks questions. They suggest that 'one can lead with no more than a question in hand'. Comments made by the managers spoken to in our study similarly suggested that the leader did not have all

answers and frequently draws on the expertise of others thus questioning the certainty implied in popular leadership theories:

'Myself I have had issues and concerns alongside the other people and I didn't have the answers and I am trying to support other people when myself I don't know what is going on'. [Finance Manager]

'It is using the people that are on your side and have the expertise as well, some of those jobs I have needed to tap into the expertise that I haven't got' [Commercial Services Manager]

It was also suggested that the managers are themselves influenced by others and are seen to question their own ideas suggesting greater scope for a two way process of influence:

'It is about how I can bring my colleagues on board with my ideas. And how can I question some of the ideas that I have got wrong and how do I need to change? It is also about listening to others and being influenced'. [Training Services Manager]

A greater degree of uncertainty than is allowed in previous accounts of leadership is seen here and thus challenges the traditional leader-follower relationship and gives greater scope for contributions of others. In previous work the leader is seen to somehow possess a clear vision for the organisation but more recent work allows for a joint construction of a vision by numerous individuals. Managers in our study did not seem to suggest that

they had clear visions or ideas but rather they worked with others to jointly make sense of what was needed and what could be done:

‘Leadership is about knowing what the organisation wants to achieve,... if you have got a bit of that you manage, knowing what that bit can contribute and working out with the people who will help you deliver that how to deliver’. [Performance Manager]

Research carried out with directors of public health in the UK supports the notion of focusing on others in the leadership process (McAreavey et al, 2001). The directors of public health interviewed in McAreavey et al’s study suggested that effective leadership placed an emphasis on working with others and not guiding others. This emphasis is also seen in our work where managers talked of ‘working with other people’ rather than guiding others:

‘Say within the next year let’s change how you do things completely, and by the way you have got to come up with the ideas and by the way you will have to try and lead the other people, and try and sell your ideas to them. So my role has been to work with the people here’. [Strategic Manager]

‘I guess that leadership is you know about building good partnerships not only with your colleagues internally but also external partnerships are particularly important, collaboration with others’. [Strategy Development Manager]

These shifts in focus are consistent with work by Barker (1997) and Rost (1991) who suggested that we should be focusing on group processes and think of collaborators and not followers and thus is in accordance with Alimo-Metcalfe and Alban-Metcalfe's rejection of followership. Yukl (1999) has criticised transformational and charismatic leadership theories for a neglect of group processes and thus salient aspects of leadership are overlooked such as networking, building support for ideas and negotiation. Such arguments echo Hosking (1988) who proposed that it would be more helpful to focus on leadership as a process rather than leaders as persons which is clearly to frame leadership in process-relational terms. It is suggested here that viewing leadership as a collaborative process of interaction provides for a more grounded notion of leadership and thus potentially provides more helpful suggestions for teaching leadership. For example, a focus on helping leaders in their attempts to negotiate seems more achievable than helping leaders to inspire others.

Issue 4: The separation of leadership and management

Inherent to theories of transformational and charismatic leadership is a notion that leadership is a specialised and separate activity undertaken by heroic, isolated figures described above. This division of leadership is typical of orthodox management thinking which separates issues of managerial work tending to view these as identifiable and distinct (Watson, 2002). As Schrujer and Vansina (2002) argue such splitting obscures the complexity of life. Further, there is a tendency not only to see leadership as separate from management but also superior. In Bass's theory for example, management is

associated with transactional leadership which is seen to be a useful but inferior leadership approach, which is relatively simple and straightforward to achieve. Bass (1985, p26) argues that 'to be transactional is the easy way out; to be transformational is the more difficult path to pursue'. Such a separation is upheld by numerous scholars such as Zaleznik (1992) who suggests that managers are concerned with humdrum activities and maintaining order whereas leaders are concerned with novel and exciting activities and stimulate change. Mangham and Pye (1991, p.13) have criticised this separation arguing that 'it results in nothing more than a vague feeling that managing is something rather mundane, looking after the nuts and bolts of the enterprise and leading is something special and precious undertaken by the really important people in the enterprise'. They argue that leading is not a specialised and separate activity, but simply an aspect albeit a highly salient aspect, of managing. Others have similarly suggested that leadership and management may be more usefully seen as related roles rather than as separate activities undertaken by separate people (Nadler and Tushman, 1990; Yukl, 1999).

Evidence from our own work suggested that although managers often conceptualised leadership by differentiating it from management, there was considerable overlap:

'There's management, there's leadership, they are not the same thing, they overlap. Management is more to me about putting in place formal processes to make sure things happen, and to involve people in, it's about more operationally working with people. There is a fair bit of overlap. You can't manage without doing some leadership and you

can't lead without doing some management. I would say that leadership is much more about setting visions, persuading people that that is the right vision, encouraging people to come along with you. Painting the bigger picture and allowing people to contribute to that getting involved in that in some way'. [Strategic Planning Manager]

This would therefore suggest that whilst leadership may be relatively distinct from managing there is some degree of overlap and the two are related activities. There would seem to be a sense that leadership may be an aspect of managing which is overtly concerned with thinking about the long term future of the organisation and fostering support for particular ideas. This is also shown in the comments below:

'Somebody doing delivery, somebody doing selling, somebody doing design whatever. But there is this other aspect where you have got this idea where Christ we need to do something with this business and when we do transform we need to go in a particular direction. So you can try and in your own way demonstrate some sort of leadership'. [Training Services Manager]

'Leadership is very much about understanding where you want to go and thinking about how you want to get there and what you need to do to get there. So I see that sort of thing as being a bit perhaps more strategic really'. [Accommodation Manager]

It seems that managers both lead and manage simultaneously and thus suggests problems in the identification of leaders as a separate group with exclusive leadership

responsibilities. Others also highlighted the problems in separating out leaders and managers:

'The typical quantification is you know is managers do things right, leaders do the right thing. I know there is a great literature written on what is a manager and what is a leader but actually if you are a manager you are a leader so you can't really divorce the two, they say you get bureaucratic managers and charismatic leaders well you do but what it actually means is the charismatic leader is probably a bullshitter that really hasn't got a grasp of the detail.' [Sales Director]

This comment would seem to suggest a rejection of the separation of leaders and managers in the literature and points to the fallacy of the supremacy of the leader. It is therefore proposed that leadership may be more usefully thought of as integral to management rather than a separate activity. We should therefore be cautious in giving leadership special status as this downplays the very real challenges involved in managing and generally adds to notions of inaccessibility for the majority. It can perhaps be suggested that the value of leadership should not be overly stated. It would seem that there is a danger of this at present with increased demands for enhanced leadership which often view leadership as a saviour to organisations in need of saving. It may be that reintegrating leadership and management promotes a more grounded and realistic view of leadership instead of viewing leadership as an isolated activity which holds the answers to all organisational problems. There is some sense here that leadership may be seen as an aspect of managing which is overtly concerned with thinking about the long term future

of the organisation and attempting to influence others to support ideas which are seen to relate to this. With respect to teaching leadership it may therefore be argued that leadership is given attention throughout programmes rather than as a separate module or course.

Discussion

Whilst there have been clear calls for more attention to be paid to leadership in management programmes, it is far less clear as to how management educators can best respond to such calls. It has been suggested that dominant models of leadership conceptualise leadership in ways which are generally unhelpful to attempts to teach leadership. It has been argued that models of transformational and charismatic leadership tend to conceptualise leadership in ways which neglect the complexity found in organisational settings. Further, it has been suggested that popular conceptions of leadership portray a notion of leadership that is beyond the ordinary abilities of the majority. The elevated position leadership enjoys thus may be seen to amplify the problem of teaching leadership.

Adopting a process-relational perspective arguably more closely resembles the very real leadership challenges faced in organisations and thus is more likely to be helpful to managers in practice engaged in leadership processes. It is not suggested that this represents a completely novel way to conceptualise leadership since others have proposed the value of process-relational thinking (e.g. Barker, 1997; Hoskings, 1988; Knights and

Willmott, 1992) however, this has tended to remain marginalised. The intention here has been to stimulate a wider re-thinking of leadership than is currently present with particular concern for the teaching of leadership.

The paper has argued for a more grounded conception of leadership and as such puts leadership back in the grasp of ordinary people. The leader, it has been argued is not helpfully seen as a heroic figure, possessing inspirational powers but is more usefully seen as an ordinary individual who is imperfect and subject to similar existential struggles to us all. Accordingly, this proposes a move away from an individualistic to a relational conception of leadership. As Yukl (1999) has suggested instead of focusing on a single person who influences followers, many people can be viewed as contributors to the overall process of leadership in organisations. Insights from work presented here suggest that leadership is often viewed as an activity which has an explicit focus on the long term future of the organisation where various people make contributions by the way of ideas for the survival of the organisation. Central to leadership processes then are attempts to influence or persuade others of the merit of such ideas, and accordingly processes of communication, bargaining, negotiating and conflict resolution for example become important if we adopt a process-relational framing of organisational life. The manager may be seen to have a more or less prominent role in this process as their higher status allows for a greater contribution to influence. It is suggested that leadership may be more helpfully seen as a particular facet of managing, one that perhaps shows an overt concern with attempts to influence others to accept ideas which are seen to explicitly enhance the

long term future of the organisation. Thus leadership is more helpfully seen as integral to managing rather than as a separate activity.

Implications for management education

Whilst the work presented here cannot be taken as conclusive, it does offer some tentative suggestions for responding to calls to improve leadership provision within management programmes such as the MBA. It should be acknowledged here that the relationship between management education and management practice is seen as more complex than accounts of a functional relationship where management education is seen to equip managers with prescriptive techniques, in this case leadership. Rather, it is suggested that management education is seen to help managers make sense of the messy, irrational activity that is managing. Thus management educators role in improving leadership may be seen to help managers better understand this aspect of managing.

Generally then it may be helpful to assist students in questioning popular leadership theory, such as those of transformational and charismatic leadership since as has been argued here these represent only one way to think about leadership, a way that tends to suggest most managers may be unable to contribute to leadership. Thus management educators may have an important role to play in respect of encouraging students to consider alternative and perhaps more realistic notions of leadership. Indeed, as some of our exploratory findings have shown, some managers may have already begun to do so, thus the challenge may be to further stimulate this process.

It has been suggested here that framing leadership in process-relational terms offers one way of thinking about leadership which more closely resembles the leadership challenges managers face and as such offers greater potential to help managers understand leadership processes. It has been proposed that a focus on negotiation, networking, conflict resolution and communication for example, may be helpful in dealing with attempts to influence others to support ideas and suggestions which relate to the long term future of the organisation. As it has been recognised that leadership may be more usefully seen as a two way process of influence, a focus on openness, learning and self awareness may also be significant. Those attempting to influence others would perhaps benefit from an increased understanding of how their ideas may represent a particular perspective which as such will be subject to limitations. Thus there is scope for disagreement but also the contributions of others. Helping managers develop an enhanced self awareness may in some way contribute here.

Placing a greater emphasis on leadership as a process therefore suggests that it is generally unhelpful to provide outstanding examples of successful leaders since this is consistent with a focus on leaders as persons which we have argued is less useful for understanding leadership. Instead, a focus on helping managers to understand leadership processes thus suggests the importance of drawing upon the leadership experiences brought to the management classroom. The management teacher may have a salient role to play in helping the manager reflect upon and make sense of their lived leadership experiences in a way which is difficult to achieve in the workplace. This also implies that

the management teacher can offer greater help to those with management experience. Further, the central importance of the managers' leadership experience may also be seen to be consistent with arguments proposing a move towards a de-centred classroom where student and teacher jointly construct knowledge and makes sense of what is going on (Currie and Knights, 2003; Dehler, 2001). It may be seen that the management teacher themselves join a collaborative process of learning with management students and as such may be seen to move away from notions of an expert that guides others to one who makes sense with others, thus demonstrating similarity with our re-conceptualisation of leadership.

Watson (2001) proposal of a negotiated narrative approach to management learning would seem to fit particularly well here. A negotiated narrative approach 'involves management students and management academics bringing together accounts of their various experiences and observations (from practical experience or research work) and working together, using where appropriate, academic concepts and theories, to draw out any possible 'story behind the stories' which can inform practices in managerial contexts' p388. Watson suggests that the story captures the very real experiences of managers highlighting social and political dimensions of work which mainstream accounts of managerial work avoid. As such learning through stories provides an approach which is consistent with a process-relational understanding of organising and managing work. Thus in respect of leadership, the story may provide a powerful learning approach for helping managers (and teachers) to critically examine the aspect of managing which is

seen to be overtly concerned with attempts to influence the long term future of the organisation.

These suggestions present challenging roles for both the management teacher and student. However, if the hope of an enhanced attention to leadership is to be realised then discomfort may be a necessary part of learning for student and teacher alike. It seems that there are no easy and quick responses to calls for improvements in the teaching of leadership, what we have presented may be seen to offer one way of beginning to tackle this issue.

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Systems-control perspective of leadership	Process-relational perspective of leadership
Focus on leaders as persons	Focus on leadership as a process
Focus on followers	Focus on collaborators
Leadership as separate to management	Leadership as integral to management
Unitarist perspective	Pluralist perspective
Organisational goals clear, given and fixed	Organisational goals ambiguous, constructed and constantly changing

Table 1: Comparison of systems-control and process-relational leadership perspectives