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Critical Leadership Studies: The Case for Critical Performativity

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Abstract

Existing accounts of leadership are underpinned by two dominant approaches: functionalist studies which have tried to identify correlations between variables associated with leadership, and interpretive studies which have tried to trace out the meaning making process associated with leadership. Eschewing these approaches, we turn to an emerging strand of literature that develops a critical approach to leadership. This literature draws our attention to the dialectics of control and resistance and the ideological aspect of leadership. However, it largely posits a negative critique of leadership. We think this is legitimate and important, but extend this agenda. We posit a performative critique of leadership which emphasises tactics of circumspect care, progressive pragmatism and searching for present potentialities. We use these tactics to sketch out a practice of deliberated leadership that involves collective reflection on when, what kind and if leadership is appropriate.

Key Words: Leadership, Critical Management Studies, Deliberation, Performativity.

Introduction

Everyday we find calls for more leadership in business, government, public administration and the non-profit sector. Leadership is seen as a catch-all solution for nearly any problem, irrespective of context. This astonishing spread suggests that leadership may have overtaken management as one of the dominant social myths of our time (Gemmill and Oakley, 1992)., or – and perhaps more likely – it may only indicate an interest in re-labelling managerial work to make it sound more fashionable and impressive. In this paper we argue that we need to move beyond naïve celebration or earnest interpretations of leadership. Responding to Zoller and Fairhurst's (2007: 1354) call for 'more dialogue between leadership and critical researchers' by, we developing a critique of leadership. This involves recognising many of the negative consequences implicit in leadership theory and practice that are all too often masked or even wilfully ignored in today's leadership obsessed culture. While we are certainly sympathetic to calls for less blind faith in the curative powers of leadership (eg. Gemmill and Oakley, 1992; Meindl 1995; Pfeffer 1977), we are also suspicious of approaches rejecting the value of notions of leadership. Even though ideals like participation, emancipation and resistance are important and often need to be encouraged and strengthened, few people would like to work in organizations dominated entirely by these ideals. Fewer would like to be clients and customers of such organizations. Of course, management – controlling through structures, procedures, and rules – remains an important part of organizational life (Mintzberg 2004). Nonetheless, leadership – influencing the thinking, values and emotions of followers rather than, and distinct from management, working directly with instructions, structures or results as means of influence – is arguably a potentially valuable element in making organizations work.¹ Sometimes 'substitutes for leadership' (Kerr and Jermier, 1978) such as management and professionalism do not completely work. Some degree of authority is necessary at times (Sennett, 1980).

¹ We broadly here follow Zaleznik (1977) and Nicholls (1987) in their distinctions between management and leadership, acknowledging the varieties of views and definitions of the two themes as well as difficulties in making sharp distinctions. It is important to avoid both the inclination to define leadership as more sophisticated and superior to management and to conflate the two terms and use leadership to cover 'everything'.

Leadership may have a role to play in these contexts. After all, some elements of leadership can be pivotal in pursuing the goals of autonomy and emancipation as a collective project (Zoller and Fairhurst, 2007). But at the same time, placing a messianic faith in leaders and leadership needs to be critically addressed. We will argue that the alternative to the celebration and naturalization of leadership is not necessarily an equally naïve rejection of leadership. Rather, we suggest it is important to develop a suspicious engagement with the concept leadership. Such an engagement asks how valuable relations of authority can be produced, revised and limited.

Building on existing critical studies of leadership (eg. Collinson, 2005, 2011; Zoller and Fairhurst, 2007; Ford et al, 2008), we outline an approach that simultaneously recognises the potentially negative consequence of leadership as well as the potentially positive value of functional exercises of authority. We agree with Western (2008) that ‘critical theorists must go beyond identifying “bad leadership practice” and aim to create and support successful ethical frameworks for leadership’ (p 21; see also Fryer 2011). For us this involves a performative engagement with the concept to draw out the emancipatory potential of leadership. Broadly put, this entails recognising the limits of leadership at the same time as we consider the emancipatory potential lurking with potential uses of leadership ideas. This is a difficult balance to strike, and certainly does not allow universal solutions. Rather, it requires detailed and situationally specific engagement with leadership in action. This calls for combining and switching between performative positions (which largely accept present conditions and constraints) and critical positions (which question existing conditions, emphasize independent thinking and aim for less constraining social relations). Our approach primarily aims at a novel theoretical perspective on leadership, but we also hope to inspire new approaches to education and intervention.

Our performative critique of leadership, makes three contributions. First, by proposing a way of questioning leadership, we seek to move beyond both the naïve celebrations of leadership as well as more nuanced interpretive studies. We argue that a critical approach provides a way of not taking current accounts of leadership for granted. We certainly sympathize with Pfeffer’s (1977) claim that if one wants to understand what is happening in organizations, leadership is often a bad place to start. But at the same time, we hope to not simply conceptually do away with leadership. Rather, we aim to articulate a more limited form of leadership that is compatible with

more emancipatory goals. Second, by providing a more affirmative version of critique we hope to move beyond existing critical studies of leadership that express a largely negative view of leadership that associates it closely with domination (e.g. Alvesson 2010; Collinson 2011; Gemmill and Oakley 1992; Tourish and Pinnington 2002) or lack of real impact or significance above the purely symbolic (e.g. Pfeffer 1977). Instead we suggest the need to reconstruct ideas of leadership. Finally, we hope to foster investigation of alternative modes of leadership that already exist within contemporary organizations.

To make this argument, we proceed as follows. We begin by tracing out the existing functionalist and interpretive approaches to literature. Eschewing these approaches, we turn to an emerging strand of literature that develops a critical approach. This work attends to the dialectics of control and resistance (Collinson 2005) and the ideological aspect of leadership (Alvesson and Sveningsson, 2012). Such studies underscore the case for questioning leadership as a normalizing template. However, they largely posit a negative critique of leadership by pointing out more problematic features of leadership discourse such as ideological commitment, supporting domination, legitimating elites and boosting managerial identity. This means they largely avoid considering the emancipatory potential of leadership. We supplement this agenda by positing a performative critique of leadership. We then use this performative critique of leadership to offer the notion of deliberated leadership. We conclude the paper by drawing out what this means for future studies of leadership.

Conceptualizing Leadership

There is notoriously little agreement about how exactly we might define leadership. Two thirds of leadership texts do not define the subject (Rost, cited in Palmer and Hardy, 2000), while the other third tend to provide quite different definitions. Our impression is that this has not changed much in recent years and that the increasing popularity of using the idea of leadership has reinforced conceptual confusion and endemic vagueness. Some more recent commentaries point towards a more positive outlook for leadership studies with the introduction of theories of ‘distributed leadership’ (eg. Gronn, 2002: 423-424). However, the quest to find leadership which is distributed throughout the organization has only made matters worse. It means nearly anything and everything can be viewed as leadership. According to

this approach influencing your boss ('upwards leadership'), working with a co-worker ('peer-leadership') and even motivating yourself ('self leadership') are all kinds of leadership. As the concept has been applied to increasingly varied processes it has become ever more blunted (Alvesson and Spicer, 2011: 18-19).

To avoid this conceptual blunting, a useful place to start is Yukl's (1989) suggestion that leadership 'include(s) influencing task objectives and strategies, influencing commitment and compliance in task behavior to achieve these objectives, influencing group maintenance and identification, and influencing the culture of an organization' (p 253). Although this suggestion might begin to capture a widespread sense of what leadership means, ambiguities remain. Does leadership mean influencing all aspects mentioned or is it sufficient to have an influence of one of all these 'variables'? How is leadership different from other aspects like organizational structures and cultures which also influence the mentioned outcomes? Do we only talk about a positive influence, or is resistance also part of the picture? Leadership is not easy to specify and definitions do not necessarily say that much. There are wild differences in people's assumptions about what leadership is and whether 'it' actually happens in organizations (Lakomski, 1999; Alvesson and Sveningsson, 2003a). This ambiguity has created – but is also reinforced by – a glut of perspectives, theories, models and typologies. There are many ways of carving up this morass of approaches (e.g. House and Aditya, 1997; Parry and Bryman, 2006). One way of considering this large literature is to identify some of the deeper underlying paradigmatic assumptions the literature is based on. These are the shared and often implicit ontological, epistemological and political assumptions that underpin research (Alvesson and Sandberg, 2011). The broader field of organization and management studies has long recognized the underlying paradigmatic assumptions underpinning research in the field (e.g. Burrell and Morgan, 1979). In contrast, leadership studies has been conspicuously quiet about its own underlying paradigmatic assumptions (Gronn and Ribbins, 1996). However, some have highlighted the dominance of a 'positivist' paradigm and the recent emergence of an alternative interpretive or social constructivist paradigm (e.g. Alvesson, 1996; Fairhurst and Grant, 2010). We would like to take this argument further. Following Habermas's (1971) idea of cognitive interests which has been applied in studies of management (eg. Alvesson and Willmott, 2012), we would like to suggest there are three broad sets of paradigmatic assumptions underpinning the study of leadership: functionalist, interpretive and critical. In

what follows, we argue that these assumptions profoundly colour how leadership has been thought about.

Functionalist Assumptions

Functionalism assumes that leadership is an objective phenomenon amenable to scientific inquiry and is primarily grounded in shared interests of system functioning and survival (Burrell and Morgan 1979). Functionalist studies approach leadership as a fairly stable object that exists out there in the world and can be tracked down with the help of the correct analytical tools. These studies have sought to identify which traits are correlated with leadership such as physical and psychological characteristics (for a review see: House and Aditya, 1997: 410-419). They have also investigated leadership behavior such as task centric and people centric styles (House and Aditya, 1997: 419-421). A third broad focus has been the situation in which leadership takes place (e.g. Fiedler, 1967). Fourth, they have considered a leader's ability to formulate visions and transform their followers (Bass, 1985; Bennis and Nanus, 1985; Hartnell and Walumbwa, 2011; Sashkin, 2004). Finally, researchers have begun to move their focus away from the role of the leader to those of followers (Bligh, 2011; Hollander, 1992), some of the follower research coming closer to interpretive approaches (e.g. Meindl, 1995). While each of these approaches tend to focus on different explanatory variables, they all share similar underlying assumptions. Ontologically, they assume that leadership is something with an independent existence out there in the world and is located in a web of causal relationships. Epistemologically, they assume leadership can be known in a value free way through what is claimed to be the rigorous application of the scientific method. Politically, they aim to increase the efficiency and effectiveness of current modes of leadership.

The dominance of functionalist assumptions about leadership were rarely questioned for some time. However, some working within this tradition began to harbor uncertainties and doubts in the late 1970's and onwards (e.g. Andriessen and Drenth, 1984; Barker, 1997). For instance, Sashkin and Garland (1979) claim that 'by any objective measure, the study of leadership has failed to produce generally accepted, practically useful, and widely applied scientific knowledge' (p. 65). According to Yukl (1989) 'Most of the theories are beset with conceptual weaknesses and lack strong empirical support. Several thousand empirical studies have been conducted on leadership effectiveness, but most of the results are contradictory and inconclusive' (p

253). This uncertainty has been complemented by even more trenchant criticisms (e.g. Alvesson, 1996; Lakomski, 1999). Functionalist studies assume it is possible to identify a distinct, coherent essence of leadership. Critics argued this is difficult because ‘leadership’ actually refers to an unwieldy bundle of apparently un-related activities (Alvesson and Sveningsson, 2003a, b; Bresnen, 1995; Carroll and Levy, 2008). The ambiguity associated with leadership has led some to argue that leadership ‘exists only as a perception . . . (and is) not a viable scientific construction’ (Calder, 1977: 202, emphasis in original). A further limitation of functionalist assumptions is that they reify leadership by treating it as a thing that can be pinned down and measured. Approaching leadership as a reified object means researchers are blinded by the dynamic processes of actually doing leadership (Wood, 2005). Third, functionalist studies do not take into account the local meaning attributed to leadership by different actors (Kelly 2008; Meindl et al, 1985). This means that functionalist studies are blind to how the construct of leadership may mean radically different things in different situations and what is seen as leadership and what is not is often an open question. These criticisms led some leadership researchers to conclude that if we wanted to more persuasively and insightfully capture ‘leadership’, it is necessary to drop functionalist assumptions and explore the meaning-laden aspects of leadership and how the presumed leaders and the led actually understand acts and relations (Alvesson, 1996). Put another way, these studies advocated a turn towards a set of assumptions we might associate with interpretivism.

Interpretive Assumptions

The shift towards interpretive assumptions involves considering leadership as socially constructed through actors beginning to ‘see’ a set of activities as leadership (Fairhurst and Grant, 2010). This calls for qualitative methodological approaches such as ethnography, in-depth case studies and various forms of linguistic analysis that sensitize us to multiple understandings of leadership (for reviews see: Bryman, 2004; Fairhurst, 2007). Interpretive approaches to leadership have come in a range of formats. Some have looked at symbolic leadership and how leaders try to influence frames, cognitions and meanings. This occurs when ‘leadership is realized in the process whereby one or more individuals succeed in attempting to frame and define the reality of others’ (Smircich and Morgan 1982: 258; see also Fairhurst 2005; Ladkin 2010; Sandberg and Targama 2007). Another strand of literature has

investigated the processes of the social constructions (eg. Fairhurst, 2008; Fairhurst and Grant, 2010; Uhl-Bien, 2006). For some this has involved considering how leadership ‘continuously emerges’ from the ongoing interactions between superiors and subordinates (Wood, 2005). Others have looked at leadership as a language game by considering how and when the term is used (Kelly, 2008; Pondy, 1978). Still others have investigated the clashing construction and language that is used to interpret and understand acts of leadership (Alvesson and Sveningsson, 2003b). While these studies exhibit some important differences, they all share a common set of assumptions. Ontologically, leadership is thought to be constructed through an ongoing processes of inter-subjective understanding. Epistemologically, leadership is a process that can only be accessed through examining these value-laden understandings and interpretations that actors use to understand leadership. Many interpretive studies seek to surface different understandings of leadership in the hope of supporting the creation of increased shared meaning.

Interpretive assumptions have opened up new vistas by highlighting how leadership is constructed, as well as the ambiguities and uncertainties associated with it. However, interpretive approaches miss some important issues. First, they often accept the discourse of leadership as presented by the respondents. This makes it difficult to question presuppositions underpinning leadership claims. It does not allow us to clarify what are the conditions of possibility for very different people – from CEO’s to vicars to supermarket supervisors – to want to suddenly identify themselves as ‘leaders’, eager to do ‘leadership’ (cf. O’Reilly and Reed, 2010). Arguably, there are strong social and ideological forces behind this urge to see oneself as a ‘leader’. Second, interpretive studies miss concerns with power and domination. Many emphasize positive aspects of leadership, suggesting ‘that leadership happens when a community develops and uses, over time, shared agreements to create results that have collective value’ (Ospina and Sorensen, 2006:188). Or they talk about ‘relational leading’, which is about creating opportunities for dialogue but also about the ‘need for being respectful, for having “a heart” and for people to be able to “express themselves”’ as well as being ‘morally responsible’ (Cunliffe and Eriksen, 2010:16). Here leadership, at least of the right type, is assumed to be by definition good and free from any constraints. Such formulations belie an underlying assumption that if only it is possible to create the right conditions for inter-subjective understanding (respecting

the views of the other, having a heart . . .), then it is possible to over-come antagonisms and inequalities. However, critics argue that leadership dynamics by their very nature are 'unequal' in one way or another (Harter et al, 2006), and the possibility of coming to some kind of agreement around different understandings of leadership is illusory. This is because power differentials often mean that one person is in a stronger position to impose his/her definition of what good leadership is, particularly if there is strong institutional and ideological support for this definition, normalizing leader-follower distinctions and relations. Finally interpretive studies find it difficult to account for some of the non-discursive aspects such as economic, human, cultural and social capital (Spillane et al, 2003) which place one person in a more conducive position to engage in leadership while another is unable to do so. To put this another way, interpretive studies of leadership do not allow us to get at the underpinning social structures that mean one person can be assigned a leadership role while another becomes a follower (Ford et al, 2008). Rather, they only try to get as close as possible to the meanings, experiences and/or language use of people involved and tend to accept rather than critically explore these.

Critical Assumptions

To address these shortcomings, a limited range of researchers have developed critical approaches to leadership (e.g. Alvesson and Sveningsson, 2012; Calás and Smircich, 1991; Collinson 2005, 2011; Ford et al, 2008; Gemmill and Oakley, 1992; Grint, 2005a; Harding et al, 2011; Knights and Willmott 1992; Western 2008). Often these researchers draw on insights and methodological protocols associated with interpretive approaches such as in-depth qualitative methods and a focus on processes of social construction (Fairhurst and Grant, 2010). Critical scholars do not just seek to understand how leadership is given meaning in different situations (as interpretivists do). They seek to go further by examining the patterns of power and domination associated with leadership, and relate it to broader ideological and institutional conditions (eg. Alvesson et al, 2009; Fournier and Grey, 2000). They also build on feminism by emphasizing gendered notions of leadership supporting and legitimizing male domination (Alvesson and Billing, 2009; Calás and Smircich, 1991). Critical studies try to denaturalize leadership (by showing it is the outcome of an ongoing

process of social construction and negotiation), study it reflexively (by reflecting on how the researcher and her methods are implicated in producing the phenomena of leadership), and treat it non-performatively (by breaking away from attempts to optimise leadership).

These three broad commitments are only loosely abided by in critical studies of leadership (but for a fairly strict application see: Ford and Harding, 2007). However, all question whether leadership is an overwhelmingly positive and necessary thing. Instead, they seek to uncover the ‘darker side’ of leadership. Some see it exclusively in terms of inequality, power, discipline and control. For instance Collinson (2011) emphasises how ‘critical perspectives view control and resistance as mutually reinforcing, ambiguous and potentially contradictory processes. Although control can stimulate resistance, it may also discipline, shape and restrict the very opposition it sometimes provokes’ (p 190). He adds that a key aspect is ‘the potential for conflict and consent’ (p 190). Some have focused their critiques at particular modes of leadership. For instance, Tourish and Pennington (2002) sought to uncover the less seemly side of ‘transformational leadership’ by drawing parallels with behaviour in cults. Others have gone further and argued that leadership *per se* is highly problematic. These ‘anti-leadership’ researchers approach ‘the very idea of leadership as an anathema’ (Gronn, 2002: 427). Many of the ‘anti-leadership’ scholars that Gronn (2002) gestures towards question the usefulness of leadership as a scientific construct (eg. Pfeffer, 1977; Kerr and Jermier, 1978). But there are others of a more explicitly critical bent who have pointed out the negative effects our attachment to leadership can have including de-personalization and domination (eg. Marcuse, 2008), the propagation of conformity and blind commitment (Kets de Vries 1980), and individuals relinquishing their autonomy (Gemmell and Oakley 1992). These darker themes are picked up by Calás and Smircich (1991) who note that the idea of leadership often presents a very heroic and masculine image that is usually very seductive to both the leader as well as the led.

A key aspect of the power of leadership is that it constructs a particular authorized language and an idealized subject position of being a ‘leader’. This allows managers to experience their often very mundane everyday activities as something particularly

grandiose and exciting (Alvesson and Sveningsson, 2003b; Ford et al, 2008). Parts of the leadership literature echo Hollywood mythology about heroism and morally superior persons (Alvesson 2010). Much of this literature might lead us to the conclusion that leadership is a particularly seductive and even dominant discourse that has spread throughout organizations (Ford and Harding, 2007). Leadership then becomes connected with power and domination (Knights and Willmott 1992; Collinson, 2011). However, as we have already noted, there is considerable uncertainty and perhaps fragility around the concept of leadership. Grint (2005a) points out that leadership is an essentially contested concept which different groups seek to define in other conflicting and contradictory ways. This means there are ongoing struggles around who is regarded as being a leader, where leadership is seen to be done or needed, how leadership is thought to be done, and what exactly leadership is thought to. The essentially contested nature of leadership can loosen the grip of leaders and make relations less one-sided and more symmetrical. This is addressed by Collinson (2005) who points out the ‘simultaneous interdependencies and asymmetries between leaders and followers as well as their ambiguous and potentially contradictory conditions, processes and consequences’ (p. 1422). Here Collinson recognised that power exercised by leaders can often give rise to forms of resistance by followers that they hope to quell.

The emerging body of critical studies of leadership have significantly advanced our knowledge of the dark side of leadership. However, critical approaches also have their own problems. The most obvious problems is that they can over-estimate the power of leadership. According to Collinson (2005) critical authors ‘retain a rather deterministic feel that underestimates followers’ agency and resistance’ (p 1426). In many situations, leadership discourse may be quite pervasive but it remains comparatively weak. Close-up studies of leadership-saturated situations often point out the fragilities, ambiguities and insecurities around leadership discourses (Alvesson and Spicer, 2011; Lundholm, 2011). For instance, Sveningsson and Alvesson (2003) have highlighted that managers often struggle to adopt the identity of ‘leader’ in their day-to-day activities which are usually full of administrative tasks. Often subordinates raise objections to the manager’s ideas, suggestions and instructions, partly based on their detailed knowledge about work and practical circumstances (Lundholm, 2011). In addition, Ford and Harding (2007) point out the uncertainties around leadership

discourse provide potential space for reflexive consideration and engagement around the topic.

As well as sometimes assuming leadership is more powerful than it often is, critical studies of leadership tend to ignore how the rejection or critique of leadership is sometimes implicated in strengthening leadership discourse. Sennett (1980) points out that rejection of authority is sometimes paradoxically driven by a desire to have authority figures reaffirm their recognition of us. Of course, leadership and authority are not the same thing. There are other authorities than leaders, and leadership involves more than exercise of authority. Nonetheless leadership is an (increasingly) important embodiment of authority – particularly in organizational settings where powerful actors seek to justify their claims to authority over others with reference to discourses of ‘leadership’. Attempts to resist the authority of leadership do not always escape from such relations. They may paradoxically actually strengthen our dependence upon them. For instance, Sennett (1980: 36-39) discusses a group of accountants who lambast their supervisor in the workplace. He argues that the accountants may not be seeking to escape from the symbolic authority of the leader because they rely on this leader as a symbolic anchor for their own identity work. Despite what appear to be surface attempts to distance themselves from their boss (complaining they are weak etc), the boss still remains a crucial source of recognition (albeit in a negative mode). Far from being a relief, removing this (hated) boss from the accountant’s life would actually be experienced as a psychic problem. Suddenly the employee would no longer have a figure to ‘act out’ against and to recognise them (albeit in a negative way). The result might be the collapse of a follower identity when faced with the anxiety of how to make sense of themselves once the (hated) leader has withdrawn.

The final limitation of critical studies of leadership is that they can ignore how attempts to resist (a particular kind of) leadership often also require or demand leadership themselves. By this we mean that leadership can actually be a vital aspect in facilitating resistance (Levay, 2010), and perhaps even transforming relations of domination (Zoller and Fairhurst, 2007). ‘Resistance Leadership’ can be an important way for nascent forms of individual and covert resistance to become more overt and pronounced forms of collective resistance. If we bring these critiques together, the limitations of existing ‘anti-leadership’ critiques of leadership become clear. To be

sure, critical studies of leadership remain diverse and many do not wholly reject the idea of leadership (e.g. Ford and Harding, 2007; Fryer, 2011; Western, 2008). Furthermore not all critical studies are equally culpable of the criticisms mentioned above. However, we would like to argue that the emerging body of critical studies of leadership needs to avoid these potential traps. For sure critical studies of leadership are needed to explore the ‘dark side’ of leadership. But, we would like to argue that it is also necessary to recognise some of the potential within the concept of leadership. Critical work assumes that leadership is associated with mainly ‘bad’ things such as elitism, legitimization, domination, asymmetrical relations, and constructions that privilege white, male, middle class people. Fairhurst and Grant (2010) note a divide between ‘emancipatory’ studies of leadership which radically question the idea and ‘pragmatic interventionists’ who seek to reconstruct the power relations associated with leadership. Instead of simply choosing between ‘emancipation’ or ‘pragmatic interventionism’, we argue it is possible to navigate a tricky course between them. In what follows, we would like to argue that the concept of ‘critical performativity’ may provide a map for navigating this course. Such critique involves an attempt to chart a way forward by taking the (emancipatory) criticism of leadership seriously without falling into the traps of ‘anti-leadership’ and ultimately reducing or neglecting the possibility of pragmatic intervention.

A Critical Performative Approach to Leadership

To supplement existing critiques of leadership, we would like to turn to the notion of ‘critical performativity’ (Spicer et al, 2009). This is a response to the non- or anti-performativity of critical management studies (CMS) (Fournier and Grey, 2000) which have informed emerging critical studies of leadership (eg. Ford and Harding, 2007: 477). Broadly put, critical performativity seeks to introduce ‘a more affirmative movement along-side the negative movement that seems to predominate in CMS today’ (Spicer et al, 2009: 538). It is critical because it radically questions widely accepted assumptions and aims to minimize domination. It is performative as it opens up new ways of understanding and engaging with the discourse with the ambition to have some effects on practice. This stands in contrast to many existing accounts of performativity in critical theory which tend to see it as ‘inscribing knowledge within a

means-end calculation' (Fournier & Grey, 2000: 17). The concept of critical performativity therefore aims to combine intellectual stimulation through radical questioning with an ambition to use discourse in such a way that has an impact, both in terms of emancipatory effect and practical organizational work.

We think critical performativity provides a way of reworking discourses and practices of leadership (see also Ford et al, 2008; Crevani et al, 2010). A common point in existing work in the area is that the 're-citive' nature of leadership opens up scope for critical investigation and reformulation. However, existing work refrains from drawing out the practices this might involve. We would like to address shortcoming by putting the concept of critical performativity (Spicer et al, 2009) to work.

We suggest a range of possible tactics including: *Affirmation* through working in close proximity to one's object of critique; An *ethic of care* which involves taking the concerns of those studied seriously; A *pragmatism orientation* which entails working with already established discourses through limited questioning; A *focus on potentialities* through uncovering alternatives; And a *normative* stance through clarifying one's ideals (Spicer et al, 2009: 545-554). In various situations 'some of the elements may be more or less relevant' (p. 545). Building on this framework, we articulate three tactics we think are particularly useful for developing a critical performative account of leadership: Circumspect Care, Progressive Pragmatism and uncovering Present Potentialities.

The first tactic for developing a critical performative conception of leadership is *circumspect care*. This involves an attempt to care for the views of how people actually doing leadership understand and engage in the process rather than imposing the researcher views (Fairhurst, 2009). For studies of leadership, this involves taking seriously the voice of managers (leaders) and their subordinates (co-workers, followers) and possibly other stakeholders (top managers, clients/patients/students or whomever are supposed to benefit from the organization). But it also is circumspect insofar as it there is a kind of critical hesitance in accepting the views initially espoused by a respondent. This circumspect care involves taking respondents seriously while at the same time challenging their views. To do this researcher might look for the ambiguities and break-downs in leadership. Doing this helps to get at the 'voice' of leaders in less prescribed ways (see for e.g. Carroll and Levy, 2008; Jackall,

1988; Sveningsson and Alvesson, 2003; Watson, 1994). This requires us to temporarily suspend our theoretical assumptions about leadership and its pathologies. For instance, by suspending assumptions about the importance of leadership, some researchers have noticed that in ‘knowledge intensive firms’ many ‘followers’ essentially self-managed themselves or engaged in processes of peer monitoring (e.g. Alvesson and Blom, 2011; Rennstam, 2007).

To allow the kind of ‘active and subversive intervention’ required by critical performativity, we suggest a second tactic of *progressive pragmatism*. This entails pragmatically but critically working with already accepted discourses. This pragmatism should be progressive insofar as it seeks to reconceptualize and bend existing concepts and practices of leadership in the service of broadly emancipatory goals. Rather than just presenting a strong and one-sided case against the ‘dark side of leadership’, a pragmatic approach may acknowledge that a careful use of organizational forms and practices that reduce discretion, participation, and dialogue may occasionally be beneficial. This requires us to acknowledge the potential benefits that might actually accrue through traditional kinds of leadership found in hierarchies and bureaucracies (Du Gay, 1999). In addition, it would also require us to see the pathologies of more ‘liberated’ modes of leadership (Barker, 1993; Ashcraft, 2001; Ekman, 2010). A performative critique of management would negotiate between the tyranny of structurelessness (Freeman, 1972) brought about by autonomy and ‘soft’ (*laissez-faire*) leadership and the tyranny of more hierarchical leadership.

To begin to put these alternatives into practice, we would like to suggest a third tactic of engaging with *present potentialities*. This entails moving beyond a critique of contemporary practices of leadership that actually exist to create a sense of what could be. To do this, critics should draw out the potential or latent power and possibilities of exist (even in germinal form) in present ‘leadership configurations’ (Gronn, 2009). For instance post-heroic views of leadership ask us to look at a multitude of actors doing leadership on a temporal basis. These activities are directed not only downwards but also side-ways and up-wards in the organizational hierarchy (Gronn 2002; Uhl-Bien and Pillai, 2007). In addition, we might explore new practices of (anti-) leadership and management such as professionalism, committees, peer reviews, and bureaucratic control (Kerr and Jermier, 1978; Rennstam, 2007). One could also develop a conception of leadership as delegation whereby members of a

collective give a person a mandate to exercise authority under certain preconditions during a specified time period (Fryer, 2011; Klein et al, 2006). This is already the case in some professional service firms (Greenwood and Empson, 2003), orchestras (Sennett, 1980), hospitals (Klein et al, 2006) emergency response teams (Grint, 2005b) and craft organizations (Sennett, 2008).

Applying Critical Performativity: An Empirical Illustration

To get a better sense of how Critical Performativity might actually change how we study and engage with leadership, let us now turn to an illustrative case drawn from an ongoing research project on leadership in knowledge intensive firms. Kelvin Goodman is a middle manager at a High Tech firm. During the interview he repeats that he wants his co-workers to be self-managed and not need explicit direction. He views leadership as selling new ideas, rather than telling people what to do. For Kelvin the leader can be seen as a marketer:

I don't think self-management means less demand on the time of the manager. You then have to market issues. I did not say to my people that this is not how we should do it but I rather sold the idea. And that takes time. And ... you don't buy coke only because you've seen an ad, but it needs to be hammered in. It is not certain that from a managerial point you become much more efficient. But it is like planned economy vs market economy, as a manager you can't predict so it becomes much more efficient if decisions are made down there (I.e. by workers). You become so much more flexible and adaptable. That is my picture.

Goodman is in charge of a newly formed group of sales engineers who design new modes of working. This has created certain difficulties:

My biggest leadership challenge, at the moment, is the sales engineers. It is a new role in the firm. And they are four very strong individuals. And, the leadership that I have conducted there has not really worked, I am not certain why, they each have their own picture that needs to be synchronized. And it works badly. Strong individuals that are supposed to work together and no leader, it works badly. They have so much respect for each other, in a positive sense, that they never arrive at a decision. I saw that. I had another group that

now is distributed, product specialists, who worked with the account managers. I worked with them for a year, but it did not work. ‘You run your job very well, but you don’t move further’. And then I try to ask questions like ‘how should your processes look like, what will you do to get further?’ I did have the time and energy for this. ... I have not found anything, how to steer this group ... They are capable individuals and they do what they should, but the group does not really move ahead because there is no obvious leader that pulls them further. This is really my role, but it does not correspond to the kind of leadership I have. But I’ve asked them, ‘how do we do it?’. The thing is that three of them are studying an MBA, so I told them that now you have a chance to work with a real group. But I think this is the real challenge. How the hell can the group make progress and make decisions when there is no clear leader? And they accepted this challenge. But so far I have not seen the result. This is fairly new, we’ll see, it is thrilling.

Normally we should be extremely cautious in accepting interview statements of managers (and of other people as well for that matter) as valid empirical material. There are all sorts of problems: The manager’s understanding of the situation may be bad; he/she may engage in impression management and other forms of selective and self-promoting during the interview (Alvesson 2011; Silverman 2006). Others involved may perceive the situation differently. But in this case, ethnographic work gave some support for Kelvin’s account given during the interview. Others in the firm indicate that hierarchies are not pronounced and managers do not interfere in the work of their subordinates very frequently. More significantly, we don’t use the case as robust evidence, but for illustrative purposes. We show how a critical leadership view can be used to produce interpretations and ask questions for further inquiry. We don’t focus specifically on the manager and his values, traits and skills but proceed from his presentation of the situation and try to add to his reasoning on how organizing issues can be handled.

Approaching this interview with a *degree of circumspect* care involves willingness to express ideas and interpretations which the researcher may judge to be helpful and relevant for those concerned. In this case we can start by accepting Goodman’s view as honest and well-intended and realize that he is faced with a complex situation which has no easy solutions. ‘Selling issues’ may be viewed as not just aggressive

salesmanship but a metaphor for arguing and appealing. His claim that with ‘strong individuals that are supposed to work together and with no leader, it works badly’ may not just express an unreasonable belief in the power of ‘leadership’ (although it is worth considering this possibility). Instead, it may express a genuine frustration at the lack of progress due to people not being able to produce effective work relationships. But as well as caring for this view, it is also vital we are circumspect about it. For instance, it might be possible to compare Goodman’s views to others: Is he viewed as selling ideas by followers/co-workers? Do they view themselves as customers/recipients of the ideas ‘sold to them’? Is this selling responded to in the same way we might respond to a professional sales person (i.e. with a dose of skepticism and resistance)? Are there other possible managerial/leadership positions and actions that co-workers would see as more important? Perhaps Goodman’s appeal for more leadership is actually underpinned by manager(ialist) thinking (‘whatever the situation, a lot of leadership is called for’). By being circumspect we might ask whether the opposite could be argued: strong individuals need something more than just leadership - perhaps humility or skills in democratic decision-making. So rather than seeing the case as expressing managerialist assumptions (and a suitable topic for ‘conventional’ CMS critique), adopting an approach of circumspect care would entail exploring the constraints faced by Goodman in thinking through the situation.

Following a *progressive pragmatic* approach involves developing insights that are adapted to context and can inspire action under current conditions and constraints. In the interview extract, Goodman claims that messages need to be ‘hammered in’ to his subordinates and he draws a parallel with a Coke advertisement. From a CMS perspective, this sounds authoritarian and echoes the power asymmetry between large advertisers and their audiences. Following a progressive pragmatic approach, we would need to start by asking whether critical questioning is relevant in this particular case? If so, one might also suggest alternative metaphors and analogies. What would co-workers say about being ‘hammered at’? One may carefully, in a critical spirit, consider hammering as domination here (one authority figure having the insight and the task is getting others to accept it), and lack of responsiveness as ‘progressive’ resistance. But this could be balanced against the possibility that change or focused attention sometimes call for persistence and repeated efforts. This needs to be checked with others, especially subordinates but perhaps also colleagues and others

stakeholders. If the hammering is targeted against (thoughtful) resistance, rather than just habits, forgetfulness, confusion and/or short term focus, then we must critically scrutinize the manager's understanding. Alternatively, a discussion in the workplace around 'hammering in the message' between the manager and the subordinate could take place. For instance they might consider what their views on this metaphor and activity are? But from a pragmatic point of view, hammering may be seen as efficient managerial action. To manage may often mean to keep hammering away. People may be forgetful, conservatively stick to their habits, or generally be caught in their work tasks and marginalize things that are not directly salient for them in their everyday work. The manager may have a better overview, more time, information and skills to think about long-term issues or in some respects better insights than the others. But the critical element in our approach here would call for at least occasional dialogues on the relevance and value of the way leadership is framed in this organization ('hammering in'). Is this an expression of domination or grounded in shared concerns about legitimate managerial interventions? Perhaps the metaphor could be radically challenged. But more is called for than some indications of monological communication and the perpetuation of the idea of the manager being superior in terms of knowledge and the subordinates being ignorant, slow or reluctant and therefore in need of being 'hammered at'. The views of subordinates need to be expressed and carefully considered (in line with the idea of communicative action, Habermas, 1984; Fryer, 2011).

Articulating *present potentialities* in this case involves identifying space for alternative actions and ideals that already exist as germinal possibilities. In the case we already find some efforts in this direction. Goodman tries to appeal to group members to actively cultivate their own knowledge and ambition to solve issues. His reference to the MBA – and the identity of an educated person capable of dealing with group problems – can be seen as an appeal to alternatives to leadership such as analytical distancing from the situation and, at best, reflexivity. Goodman's vocabulary indicates some other possible relevant ideals. For instance he appeals to post-heroic ideas of the flexible turn-taking in leadership and follower positions, quite independent of formal hierarchy (Gronn 2002). The research might also seek to expand Goodman's vocabulary by pointing out other possibilities that are already present. For instance, instead of leadership, it might be possible to flexibly draw upon

a variety of resources for guidance, support and advice-giving within the organization (and also outside it). Goodman, together with others involved, might also be encouraged to think about organizing rather than leadership here (Pye 2005). The aim of widening the vocabulary here would be to broaden the set of reference points for organizing work. This would entail us seeing leadership as only one mode of organizing that is potentially available in this situation.

We hope this brief case illustrates the kind of research questions and lines of reasoning that a critical leadership approach could take. This could be useful for both conventional research, action research or even ‘normal’ organizational practice. Accomplishing flexible, productive and communicatively grounded forms of leadership, if and when needed, would be a possibility. It might involve invoking a senior person doing ‘leadership on demand’, i.e. subordinates asking for leadership (Alvesson and Blom 2011). We hope this would encourage a search for a balance between autonomy, collective responsibility and the accomplishment of organizationally productive, outcome-oriented relations and actions. The use of hierarchy and leadership could then be a supplementary mechanism, possibly an exception from normal practice, grounded in an assessment that it is sometimes needed, as an organizing principle secondary to autonomy and peer collaboration.

Discussion

Having illustrated a critical performative view of leadership, we now move on and address our perspective more broadly. Most critical accounts, including ours, see leadership as involving the exercise of intended and fairly systematic influence and an asymmetrical relationship of power between the leader and the led. By focusing on this relationship, critical studies of leadership can come up against a number of important shortcomings. First, such a focus often takes leadership too seriously by attributing incredible powers to the discourse. This denies the fuzziness, ambiguities and multiplicity of meanings and relations in the social world. Leadership often involves managers and others wrestling with issues that are difficult to solve, not resulting in much distinct leadership (Lundholm, 2011). We hope that a critical performative approach will lead us to recognise how leadership, in many work contexts, is better seen as an infrequent, temporal, situation-specific dynamic than a

permanent state in the relationship (Sveningsson & Alvesson, 2003; Sveningsson & Larsson, 2006). Such a perspective might pose questions about when leadership is needed or useful and when it is not. Questions like when, why, how strong and what type of leadership intervention become crucial. These questions should be posed to managers as well as subordinates. A critical performative approach encourages researchers to avoid finding an 'essence' through apriori pointing out the domination of subordinates (eg. Gemmill and Oakley, 1992), establishing the dysfunctionality of particular types of leadership (eg. Tourish and Pinnington, 2002), or pointing out how leadership 'mystifies' practices in professional or bureaucratic organizations (e.g. Alvesson & Sveningsson 2003b). Rather, we simply hope to encourage researchers to bear in mind both the potential powerfulness and the possible impotency of leadership. Furthermore, we hope to emphasise greater local appreciations closer to the experienced reality of those being studied.

The second limitation of critical accounts of leadership is that the dismissal may simply reinforce other relations of domination. Rejections of leadership may lead not just to 'progressive' organizational forms based on autonomy and democracy, but also to a deficit of person-based organizational control that can trigger other managerial responses such as bureaucracy, strict output measurement or dictatorial control. It can also trigger complicated group processes. Here we have argued that a critical approach to leadership can help us recognise the difficult challenges which managers expected to act as leaders often face. What may work, given the equally legitimate concerns of organizational results and participants' interest in discretion and democracy, can only be decided in specific cases. By affirming the voice of both leaders and followers, it may be possible to see how these struggles are actually played out and possibly move from a power/resistance dynamic to one in which participation and communicative action are significant elements. Constructive dialogue, including selected elements of critique, is sometimes to be preferred to resistance.

The final limitation we noted was that many existing critical studies do not acknowledge that leadership can play an important role in facilitating progressive social change. Leadership does not have to be about further reinforcing problematic authority relations, but can also call authority relations into question (Zoller and Fairhurst, 2007). By making managers accountable to espoused leadership ideals,

progressive changes can sometimes be supported.

Towards Deliberated Authority

There are strong reasons for an anti-leadership case as part of healthy questioning of dominant ideology. The contemporary leadership craze calls for biting critique, and it remains an urgent task for CMS (Alvesson, 2010). But an exaggerated and immature view of authority should not be replaced by an exaggerated and one-sided rejection (Fryer, 2011; Western, 2008). Recognition and respect for at least some mode of authority are crucial for good social relations (Sennett, 1980). This asymmetry can at times be functional because the manager (who are often expected to be the leader in organizations) can have information, experience, ability that others might lack. Managers also have formal responsibilities of ensuring accountability. However there are also times when our dependence on 'leadership' can become crippling and self-destructive for the both leader and led (Gemmell and Oakley, 1992). The task for critical leadership studies is to account for the difficult balancing act between leadership as a productive source of power *and* a destructive one. In addition it is important to bear in mind that leadership in reality may be quite lame. After all complex organizations often involve many forms of control – from job designs and organizational cultures to output control systems. There are also usually ubiquitous pressures for managers to do administration and deliver short-term results. This leaves little space for managers to do leadership. It also means that transformational, servant or authentic leadership, frequently found in pop-management texts, may be rare in organizational practice (Alvesson, 2010). Critical performativity tries to address this balance and work out ways to deal with these tensions.

We see the critical study of leadership as a struggle. It involves ongoing discussions about the virtues and vices of the use of authority and hierarchy in workplace relations. By heeding these discussions, critical accounts of leadership will be able to make claims around what might be considered to be accepted forms of leadership. By engaging with potential models of 'good' leadership, and perhaps more explicitly outlining alternatives or substitutes to leadership, critical studies of leadership can

offer ways through some of these dilemmas. Finally, by being able to offer guidelines for critical thinking of what ‘good’ leadership might look like, a critical performative approach is also able to register some of the difficult and often painful struggles that are involved in negotiating our way between the different modes of good which a leader may seek to serve. We might go as far as to suggest that one of the central tasks of a leader involves attempts to negotiate between what are often incommensurable kinds of good. Rather than a set of fixed virtues and ideals, critical leadership studies offer support for the use of critical judgement in workplaces when assessing the when, what and how of leadership, as well as finding other modes of organizing work relations.

Some regulatory principles and mechanisms for discussing and clarifying the need for accepting grounded authority are necessary. One way to do this is through deliberation about what ‘good’ forms of leadership might be and what their limits are. During such deliberation, it would be necessary to try to minimise communicative distortions such as ‘false’ hierarchies, repression of viewpoints, power games, ideological domination and narrow agenda setting (Habermas 1984; Alvesson and Willmott 2012; Deetz 1992; Forester 2003). The ideal would be to produce social consensus among organizational participants – or clarified dissensus where motives for disagreement have been put forward and no consensus can be reached – around leadership. Leadership could thus be seen as a productive and communicatively grounded asymmetry in work relations, invoked in situations where coordination, mutual adjustments, bureaucracy (rules), professionalism and other means of control do not work well. Such deliberation would clarify *when* leadership could be evoked and when it might not be. Rather than the leader leading people most of the time, one could imagine that autonomy and supportive horizontal relations in combination with organizational structures and cultural meanings and norms take care of most things at work, but that occasionally leadership may be necessary or positive.

An important thing here is that a critical performative approach to leadership would encourage the consideration and reinforcement of alternatives to leadership such as various modes of ‘co-operation’ (Stohl and Cheeney, 2001), ‘collaborative communities’ (Adler and Heckscher, 2006) and ‘peer reviewing’ (Rennstam, 2007). This would encourage balancing and switching between leadership and other measures of coordination. Talking about influence processes and co-workership

(Tengblad, 2003) or organizing processes (Pye, 2005) rather than leadership might reinforce the ideal of variation and emergence of initiative without reproducing the idea of someone (the leader) standing clearly above others (followers). This might call for a more relaxed role whereby managers ‘lead by invitation’ (Alvesson and Blom, 2011), rather than seeking to impose their leadership all the time, everywhere. But in other situations, there may be legitimate space for leadership interventions. The task of critical leadership studies can then be seen as the intellectual support of critical judgement in the deliberative process of asking about the ‘if’, ‘when’, ‘why’ and ‘how’ of leadership (or resistance or alternatives to it). Our empirical example to some extent illustrates this.

Engaging in collective deliberation about leadership certainly resonates with many themes that have emerged in recent years in debates about distributed leadership (e.g. Gronn, 2002). Both encourage some democratization of the idea of leadership. Both call for reflection on the multiple modes of co-ordination and authority that may be available alongside, or instead of, individual leadership. Both draw our attention to the fact that organizations often involve ‘hybrid’ forms of leadership that splice together different modes of co-ordinating in creative and unusual ways (Gronn, 2009). However, there are also some important differences. Distributed theories of leadership points out that it can be found almost anywhere with the result of nearly any co-ordinating process becoming considered as ‘leadership’. In contrast, deliberated leadership does not seek to find leadership in all co-ordinating activities. The colonizing effects of leadership vocabulary are strong and problematic. We think they are best dealt with through reducing the scope and (over-)use of the term rather than extending it to cover everything and nothing. Deliberated leadership recognises that there are multiple modes of authority and leadership is only one of them. This means a senior person exercising a fairly systematic or at least more than infrequent influence over followers/co-workers is the distinctive feature of leadership. In contrast, mutual adjustment, peer initiatives, informal influencing are *not* best conceptualized as leadership. For us, they are better described in ‘non-leadership’ terms. Furthermore, deliberated leadership highlights the need to engage in collective processes of deliberation about whether leadership might be needed, when, by whom, and why. Thus instead of claiming that processes of leadership themselves should be completely democratized, what deliberative leadership points to is the need for a

collective deliberation about authority. This means that through collective deliberation, it could be decided in some particular limited situations (such as emergencies or organizational fragmentation) that more autocratic leadership could be deemed appropriate (Grint, 2005b). But equally this highlights the need for serious consideration of other modes of authority and organizing instead of leadership in many other situations.

We recognise that processes of deliberation around leadership are certainly not without their own problems. Studies have pointed out that even in situations where leadership is a matter of collective consideration, people may continue to look for strong leaders who will galvanize co-operation (Stohl and Cheney, 2001: 387-389). Thus, even when there are apparently open forums for deliberation, people sometimes remain attached to assumptions that strong leaders are important. In the context of political theory, some have pointed out that processes of deliberation can effectively defang more radical questions by defusing or diverting many deeper political antagonisms around the distribution of power (Mouffe, 2000). In order to account for these issues, it is vital that a radical questioning of leadership continues to exist alongside more liberal processes of deliberation about authority. This means being able to both take a critical view of leadership while also being willing to consider local views and understandings of leadership (Fairhurst, 2009).

Conclusion

Leadership is an extremely popular idea. It has colonized many fields of social endeavour ranging from middle management work in large corporations to self-direction in everyday life. Today, some speak about the rising ideology of 'leaderism' (O'Reilly and Reed, 2010). But because it is so widespread, leadership may mean almost anything to anyone. It easily and often becomes an essentially contested concept (Grint, 2005a). Often, evoking leadership simply entails re-labelling management to make it more up-dated and sexy. However, one fairly common key component is that leaders are 'more than' managers because they have far-reaching influence on other people - on values, ideals, aspirations, emotions and identities. This idea is ideologically appealing and motivates some skepticism. Talking about leadership, may feed into a broad and powerful discourse, dividing people into

important and superior ‘leaders’ and less significant and capable ‘followers’.

In recent years, critical theorists have sought to question seductive conceptions of leadership by pointing out how leadership works as an ideology that celebrates managers and reinforces passive followership and dependency on leaders (eg. Alvesson and Spicer, 2011; Gemmill and Oakley, 1992; Western, 2008). While this look at the darker aspects of leadership is certainly vital, there are reasons to appreciate a more positive and necessary role of leadership, at least in some situations. We need to develop strong critiques of leadership ideology as a general source of domination, but supplement this with a more nuanced appreciation of how to make organizations work in local situations. We need to counteract problematic authority relations but also cultivate responsibility and acknowledge asymmetries between people in terms of experiences, skills and other relevant characteristics. As Sennett (1980) suggests, we need authorities, but not all the time, in all respects and not only in the form of managers exercising leadership. The challenge is rather to supplement autonomy, mutual adjustment, peer reviews, occupational community, professionals, feedback on results, bureaucracy and other forms of control with leadership if and when it may be needed.

The position we have outlined certainly involves an inherent tension between being ‘relevant’ to people expected to do leadership in organizations and encouraging skepticism about leadership itself. This struggle reminds us that purity is not a possibility. Rather, the critic must engage in a kind of constant dialectical movement between pragmatic engagement *and* emancipatory critique (cf. Fairhurst and Grant, 2010). This dialectical movement requires us to face many issues associated with autonomy and compliance, (a)symmetrical power relations, the productive use of authority and the resistance to problematic forms of domination. In order to begin to face these problems, we build on Spicer et al's (2009) notion of critical performativity and advocate three tactics for studying leadership (circumspect care, progressive pragmatism and present potentialities). By no means do we see these as a closed set. Rather, they are more like they are an invitation to consider alternative processes for developing constructive critiques of leadership. We hope these tactics will open up a more reflexive framing and monitoring of leadership. This reflexivity would involve collectively asking some profound questions about the scope and scale of leadership in organizations. Doing so requires the difficult task of establishing local, horizontal

governance mechanisms which allow managers and others to talk about leadership. Questions at stake might be what is reasonable, what is possible, what the role of a manager is, for what purposes, when and how is leadership needed? The idea is not necessarily that subordinates should approve of everything leaders do. The point is to stimulate on-going reflection and communication about how to establish, maintain, change and sometimes reduce or even do without forms of leadership. This is the task of managers, subordinates, consultants, educators and others involved in the co-construction of leadership. Crucial here are efforts to accomplish a broadly shared, critically informed responsibility for putting leadership in its place in an overall repertoire of ways of organizing. The meta-discussions around the idea and possible role of leadership is a key aspect in getting critical leadership to work.

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