Managers doing leadership: the extra-ordinarization of the mundane

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Managers doing leadership: The extra-ordinarization of the mundane

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ABSTRACT   Based on a case study of managers in a large, international knowl-
edge-intensive company this article suggests a rethinking of leader-
ship, taking the mundane, almost trivial, aspects of what
managers/leaders actually do seriously. In the study, the managers
interviewed emphasized the importance of listening and informal
chatting. Managers listening to subordinates are assumed to have
various positive effects, e.g. people feel more respected, visible and
less anonymous, and included in teamwork. Rather than certain acts
being significant in themselves, it is their being done by managers
that gives them a special, emotional value beyond their everyday
significance. Leadership is conceptualized as the extra-ordinarization
of the mundane.

Most of the leadership literature emphasizes that leadership is very signifi-
cant and something quite special. There is a lot of mystique around leader-
ship as it appears in academic texts and the mass media, as well as in
conversations among practitioners. The signifier leadership frequently leads
people to associate with acts and accomplishments beyond the petty and
mundane. Leadership creates results. Contemporary writing usually frames
leadership in visionary and heroic terms, it is the leader's ability to address
(by talking and persuading) the many through the use of charisma, symbols,

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and other strongly emotional devices, the ambition being to arouse and encourage people to embark upon organizational projects. The leader has been likened to 'a saviorlike essence in a world that constantly needs saving' (Rost, cited in Barker, 1997: 348). It does so in a way that is positive for most participants. Leadership is about the manager/leader being active and powerful. The leader acts, the follower responds.

As part of this mythologization a distinction is frequently made between leadership and management, which is understood as something closer to bureaucracy and stability. Some people who are skeptical of ideological overtones in the treatment of leadership also use this distinction. Barker (1997, 2001) expresses a critique against what he calls the feudal and industrial paradigms of leadership with its assumptions about the leader being at the top directing the people in a top-down way. But he also contributes to the portrayal of leadership as something very special and remarkable by claiming that: 'The function of leadership is to create change while the function of management is to create stability' and 'leadership creates new patterns of action and new belief systems' (Barker, 1997: 349). Leadership is often defined as being about 'voluntary' obedience. There are assumptions of harmony and convergence of interest, and the leader seldom uses formal authority or reward/punishment in order to accomplish compliance (Barker, 2001; Nicholls, 1987; Zaleznik, 1977). These researchers – and many others – claim a great divide between management/managers and leadership/leaders, between bureaucrats and people of true grit capable of offering strong ideas and a sense of direction with which people choose to comply. The leadership–management distinction further emphasizes the more grandiose aspects of leadership, reserving this term for the more dynamic, inspirational aspects of what people in authority may do.

Little attention is paid in the leadership literature to the more mundane aspects of managerial work and leadership. Arguably, it makes sense to consider the possibility that what managers and leaders do is not always that remarkable or different from what other people do in work organizations. In our study many interviewees themselves emphasized mundane activities such as listening, chatting and being cheerful. Rarely accounted for in management and leadership studies, or usually neglected as being insignificant in leadership, are the many mundane and everyday activities such as administration, solving practical and technical problems, giving and asking for information, chatting, gossiping, listening and creating a good working atmosphere. In a recently published textbook summary of the roles of leaders, the mundane acts mentioned earlier are not listed among the many activities elaborated upon (Dubrin, 2001). The literature seldom refers to leaders as great listeners or great chatters. Sjöstrand and Tyrstrup (1999)

emphasize that management is very much a matter of 'small talk', e.g. informal, everyday talk; this view is, however, exceptional. Leaders are typically portrayed as great communicators, doing much of the talking and little of the listening, getting others to listen. It thus seems as though possibly a large part of what managers do, mundane and everyday activity, is denied or at least marginalized in contemporary leadership discourse (Bryman, 1996; Wright, 1996; Yukl, 2002). There may, however, be reasons to take more seriously the more mundane aspects of managerial work and leadership. In many cases, the meaning and significance of leadership may be more closely related to the mundane than to the carrying out of great acts or the colourful development and implementation of strategies and changes.

At least this is what our field research seems to propose. In a study of leadership in a knowledge-intensive company, middle and senior managers gave accounts of their work in ways that are more in line with the mundane than with the grandiose and heroic leadership talk found, not only in the business press and among top-management, but also in the more academic literature. An important feature of what the interviewed managers talked about in terms of leadership was listening. This was not limited to getting input into decision-making or checking whether employees had understood and internalized the leader's vision, but was considered to be important in itself. It is, we feel, worth considering at some depth and thus is a key empirical input in this article.

When managers talk about themselves doing something seemingly ordinary such as listening, the act itself is endowed with extraordinary dimensions, in spite of its being performed by most organizational members, usually every day. Although listening might seem to be a mundane activity, it is not seen as being petty among managers talking about it. Its significance comes from the fact that managers – and not just anybody – perform these activities.

We make three points in this article. The first is to illuminate the question of the distinctiveness and significance of leadership. We do this through elaborating and problematizing the idea of leadership being something extraordinary, distinct and special in relation to organizational work in general. If mundane activities are central to leadership then it seems difficult to argue that leadership differs greatly from what non-leaders do. This article thus suggests that at least in one important respect leadership might not be as heroic and special as indicated in most of the literature.

A second point, and perhaps our most important one, concerns how leadership is still ascribed some special and symbolic meaning, making it more significant than the fairly trivial behavior noted in our study would suggest. By labeling certain activities as leadership what are possibly seen as

mundane and petty acts are instead interpreted as remarkable and significant. A crucial element is that what is taking place in a superior/subordinate social and interpretive context is given a special meaning. We argue that what managers ('leaders') do may not be that special, but because they are managers doing 'leadership', fairly mundane acts may be given an extraordinary meaning, at least by the managers themselves.

A third point is to question the validity of the management/leadership distinction. Based on our study we argue that there are significant activities 'outside' the seemingly all-embracing, but on closer inspection the dichotomy of leadership and management is not fully convincing. The common threads among these activities are their seemingly everyday, ordinary nature. Significant activities are incompatible with both the 'heroic' leadership ideal central to much contemporary writing on leadership and also the traditional managerial bureaucratic role more associated with issuing standardized rules and regulations.

We approach these themes as follows. First, we briefly review the literature on leadership. We then make a short methodological comment on the study of leadership. Next, we present some empirical material on leadership in the case company with respect to the above-mentioned aspects. This is followed by an analysis and discussion of listening as a fragile ground for identifying leadership in any substantive sense. The article ends with some ideas on the implications of the study for the general understanding of leadership.

A note on leadership research

The leadership area is enormous and there is little point in us reviewing it here (for reviews, see Andersen, 2000; Bryman, 1996; Dubrin, 2001; House & Aditay, 1997, Palmer & Hardy, 2000; Yukl, 1989). Comparisons between leader/leadership and manager/management abound in the literature (Barker, 1997; Fagiano, 1997; Kotter, 1990; Mintzberg, 1998; Zaleznik, 1977). Mintzberg (1998) describes management as controlling, coordinating and directing, and Kotter (1990) adds that it is more formal and scientific than leadership. Fagiano (1997) describes managers as those 'multiplying effectiveness of ... superiority by getting others to carry out instructions'. Management is frequently also related to the creation of stability, structure, systems and bureaucracy. In contrast, leadership commonly involves visions, cooperation, networking, teamwork, creativity and inspiration. Mintzberg (1998) characterizes leadership of knowledge workers as 'inspirational' and 'supportive,' and Kotter (1990) emphasizes the formulation of 'vision' as

central. Similarly, Fagiano (1997) suggests that leaders 'help others do the things they know need to be done in order to achieve the common vision'. Leadership is also often understood as producing change and releasing innovation and development. Dubrin (2001) lists a variety of characteristics of being a leader versus being a manager. The former is typically visionary as opposed to rational, passionate versus consulting, creative versus persistent, inspiring versus tough-minded, innovative versus analytical, courageous versus structured. Among these it seems that the basic role of leaders when exercising leadership is the release of the 'human spirit' to shape creativity, inspiration and motivation (Bartlett & Ghosal, 1995). Many of these categorizations and dichotomizations of concepts are similar, often with similar cautionary remarks of not taking any aspect to its extreme. Managers must somehow balance these as Dubrin (2001: 4) harshly states: 'Without being led as well as managed, organizations face the threat of extinction'.

The person doing leadership is typically viewed as active and masculine. He – or she – is in control, has superior insights and enacts a strong impact on subordinates. Heifetz and Laurie (1997), for example, say that 'leaders have to ask tough questions', disorient people so that new relationships can develop, 'have to draw the issues out' (p. 125). However, although much of the contemporary research on leadership emphasizes people instead of systems (Bartlett & Ghoshal, 1995), with a theme like emotion being viewed as important (George, 2000), a strong assumption of asymmetry in the leader–others relationship dominates. Less active, less controlling ingredients of the manager's/leader's work receive little attention, even though observations indicate that a lot of managerial behavior is reactive, i.e. responds to the initiatives and requests of others (Larson et al., 1986). Communication is a central theme in leadership, but almost exclusively in terms of managers doing the talking. With few exceptions, listening is not addressed in the literature. Although one might assume that listening is part of some other activity – such as information gathering, participatory decision-making or checking if the subordinates have got the vision right – its significance and role remain unclear. This non-directive side of leadership seems particularly relevant to consider in the context of knowledge-intensive companies and knowledge work in which the facilitating and inspiring aspects of leadership are said to be central (Alvesson, 1995; Mintzberg, 1998; Trevelyan, 2001). The level of authoritarianism and asymmetry in social relations here is typically viewed as fairly low.

As noted earlier, listening is not entirely absent from the literature on leadership. In the vast number of descriptive and prescriptive taxonomies of managerial activities, listening and chatting are occasionally listed, although perhaps more infrequently than one might expect considering the rather

extensive list of managerial practices (Luthans et al., 1988; Wright & Taylor, 1994; Yukl, 2002). For example, Wright and Taylor (1994) suggest that listening is a skill required under certain circumstances for conducting effective leadership. Listening may make subordinates feel more favorable towards managers and also make them feel better having discussed their problems. It may also result in the form of less resistance to change. However, Wright and Taylor's reasoning is normative and functional without empirical input. The abstraction of listening detached from any specific empirical context makes it highly problematic as a basis for understanding the practices of listening. To the extent that listening and chatting are treated empirically, they are usually viewed as marginal, in contrast to planning, decision-making, staffing, monitoring and other activities that are typically understood as more significant (Luthans et al., 1988; Yukl, 2002). To what extent listening is important, in what situations it occurs and the meaning it is given by those talking about it remain, by and large, unexplored.

In contrast to these studies, our work is based on a study of listening in a variety of situations. We, therefore, postpone taking a firm theoretical stance of, first, whether listening might be important, and if so, why, and second, the meaning given by those talking about it. We acknowledge that listening is not entirely new in writing on leadership, but claim that the talk and meaning, as well as the practice, of listening in an empirical setting remains unexplored. The fact that writing on leadership can include listening in taxonomies of skills important in leadership does not help us much in understanding how people talk about, and possibly practice, leadership in complex settings. Before moving on, we should perhaps emphasize that we are not claiming that listening in itself is important in leadership, but see the significance and meaning ascribed to this activity by the managers we studied as an interesting clue to understanding the construction of leadership.

Our approach has similarities with attribution theory, which emphasizes the perception of leadership and the inclination to see leadership as the cause of various outcomes (Calder, 1977). Lord and Maher (1991), for example, define leadership as 'the process of being perceived by others as a leader' (p. 11). We are, however, interested in how managers themselves – rather than their subordinates or other people – perceive leadership and we explore meaning rather than investigate reasoning in causal terms.

The study

This article is based on a fairly comprehensive field study in a large knowledge-intensive company, Byoteck, in the life sciences sector, with a main focus

on one research and development (R&D) unit. Interviews were carried out mainly with middle- or senior middle-level managers, but also with some senior managers and a few project managers and researchers. We also regularly attended the formal meetings of a local management team, as well as some informal gatherings of managers. Those studied are thus highly qualified people, most with academic backgrounds, often holding PhDs. Much of the research in the company is carried out in alliances between departments and people from academia, and members of Byoteck look upon themselves as being very independent and self-governing, requiring less managerial intervention. One could say that a large part of the work at Byoteck is done by teams of highly educated individuals informed by the professional norms of the science community. The organizational culture includes values and meanings such as autonomy, network building, interest in knowledge, and fairly symmetrical relations across formal hierarchies. People may, to some extent, also be considered as being highly intrinsically motivated as to a large extent they do what interests them. All these conditions shape issues of leadership significantly in a knowledge-intensive setting, to the extent that they might all substitute for leadership, or at least strongly downplay the necessity of it (Howell et al., 1990). The complexity of the work and the difficulties managers have in understanding and intervening in the work processes also contribute to the production of a particular situation in which it is difficult for managers to exercise much behavioral or output control.

The empirical work was fairly open and not guided by fixed research questions, apart from a wish to understand organizations from an interpretive and constructionist point of view. Gradually, some themes appeared as interesting to investigate, partly as a result of the encounter with unexpected phenomena. In the present case, the leadership talk produced by interviews was only partly in line with what familiarity with the literature would lead one to expect. As some literature recommends, focusing on surprises or breakdowns in initial understandings may be a good methodological rule, encouraging studies that can offer new insights (Agar, 1986; Asplund, 1970). The study then follows a form of skeptical interpretivist line, in which pre-understanding and the use of alternative frames of thinking are central (Alvesson & Sköldberg, 2000). However, our assumption that social reality is best understood as constructed rather than given and natural, and that this can productively inform the study of leadership, provided some direction to the study.

Leadership interviews were mainly non-directive. People were asked to talk about their work and, when they started to address leadership, what they thought leadership meant in practice. A fairly broad spectrum of accounts was produced. We did not ask them to respond to a specific view on leadership.

As this article focuses on one of many leadership themes within a larger study, we briefly present the broader picture and relate the theme in this article to our other work. In interviews, managers initially talked of their leadership as conveying and formulating visions, strategies and overall guidelines. However, when asked to specify the practice of leadership they constantly failed to specify and illuminate in practice notions of visions and strategies. In contrast, they elaborated on other aspects of leadership, some of which would be close to traditional management rather than leadership (Alvesson & Sveningsson, 2003b) and some of which could be described as rather mundane and petty activities as elaborated upon here. In another article we also tried to demonstrate the difficulties for managers in elaborating consistently on leadership as a basis for significant influence. A careful and critical reading of leadership accounts showed that claims about style, values and intentions were contradicted or undermined by further talk explicating on the topic. The reading problematized leadership to the extent that it seemingly disappeared, at least as understood as a coherent set of ideas and practices, exercising significant and intentional influence (Alvesson & Sveningsson, 2003a). In the present article we also exploit some of the specifications of what managers do when exercising leadership, although the selected theme is somewhat different from the mentioned articles. Here we focus on talk of listening and chatting, which our interviewees claimed to be important when exercising leadership. We think that this talk is interesting and illuminative enough to make it the empirical topic of an article. We treat it as examples of a particular understanding of leadership among organizational practitioners that allows us to develop some theoretical insights about leadership as a social phenomenon. Although not our main argument in this article, we believe that managers may have problems in coming up with convincing talk about visions, strategies and overall guidelines when asked to specify their leadership (Alvesson & Sveningsson, 2003b). We see little indication in our material that talking about listening and chatting could be seen as expressions of, and thus related to (whether intentional or not), what is typically labeled as visionary or strategic leadership. In Alvesson and Sveningsson (2003b) we suggest that talk of visions and strategies seems more connected to the promotion by managers of their own significance and consequently more linked to their identity work, than being a description of what they do as managers. In contrast to the idea of displaying the contradictions in talk of leadership by showing how talk of visions and strategies was not followed up in consistent specifications (Alvesson & Sveningsson, 2003b), the ambition here is to problematize the specifications made, that is, to display the uncertainty that appears related to attributing extraordinary significance to the mundane.

The variety of constructions of leadership that the different articles within our research project exhibits could perhaps best be seen as a multitude of aspects of exercising leadership in the same organization, bringing forth the variety, complexity and contradictory talk of leadership. Emanating from roughly the same empirical material, the articles suggest that leadership hardly 'exists' as an essential and ultimately objective and transparent phenomenon, waiting to be discovered and eventually revealed once and for all, which many functionalist researchers seem to believe, especially those waiting for The Leadership Theory to emerge (Wright, 1996). There are many possible views of how leadership might (or might not) be understood. This article offers one such interpretation, adding a new conceptualization. Next, we turn to the talk of leadership focused upon in this article.

Managers doing leadership

When managers are asked to elaborate upon and specify what they possibly mean by leadership and how they exercise leadership, listening, chatting and being cheerful have been put forward and elevated as important. Sometimes the interviews imply that these belong to a special (grand) form of activity – or that the managers possess a special form of expertise in carrying out these activities. Some have been quite explicit about this and some suggest, more vaguely, that they favor a style that makes it possible for subordinates to talk with them, presumably making the managers listeners. Some emphasize the ability to be cheerful and bring enjoyment as part of their leadership.

We do not necessarily share the view of the interviewed managers about the significance of listening and cheerfulness. We will come back to this later. Our interest is to understand the ideas and orientations of those being studied, of how leadership is being constructed. An important rationale for our focus is that we see this upgrading of listening as an indication and example of how managers (and presumable others) understand 'leadership'. We start with explicit listening and end with cheerfulness.

Listening

One manager explained that working as a manager means listening, suggesting that it makes people feel that they are part of a team. He states that teamwork:

> Must not turn out to be teams containing Department A and Department B, people (who) only say that: 'this is our case, we'll go out and do it'. But (rather) that anybody can make a suggestion and that

everybody who is a member of the group has the right to make comments, and that everybody is listening to those people. So that everybody feels that: 'we're in', that you take mutual responsibility for the work. By that, I mean that you (as a manager) have to listen to every person. Otherwise you're not a team in the first place, and in the second place it is very important that there are ideas, that there are experiences.

(Manager A)

One manager suggested that she has had to develop the skill of listening in order to maintain people's enthusiasm:

I have to learn that I have to sit and listen to people because the problem with me, I've been lucky and I'm really enthusiastic, but sometimes I can be too enthusiastic and people (feel) that they're being swept along, tired of enthusiasm and I don't want to do that.

(Manager B)

One manager explained that listening is highly important because it gives people a chance to explain what they mean. He developed the idea when maintaining that a subordinate:

Appreciated that I could talk to her and listen and understand what she was talking about and that I was interested. Perhaps the other thing was that I said that I'm not going to restructure until we have a global way of doing things and that helped to reassure her.

(Manager C)

Another manager explained that listening facilitates an understanding of organizational processes:

Much of my job has been an attempt to understand how we have done things in different places in the Swedish cultural sphere, in the American and in the British, and to try to find the lowest common denominator and make people understand why it is so important that we globalize. I don't have that knowledge myself, but what I can do is to listen, to understand and to be a catalyst, and then help to lead the process and to accumulate the information and then to make it clear.

(Manager D)

He also explained that listening presents the opportunity to form structure and strategic orientation:

> To create conditions, create clarity in structures and strategic direction, to a very large extent through listening, absorbing. In a knowledge-intensive organization there is an extraordinary amount of momentum, the will, the knowledge and the ideas exist in the organization. Leadership is very much a matter of extracting, of understanding this.
>
> (Manager D)

He further says that subordinates often have a need to be listened to, it reassures people:

> This doesn't always mean that I can do things that I feel like doing, but (you) still feel listened to, that you have contributed. The other part, which I underestimated for a long time, is the need for recognition, that I as an individual in the company am visible and noticeable. I think that's one of the things that I notice when I talk to people today, it is that you feel anonymous. Not only anonymous, you feel commodified, (like) 'I am physician' that you can use anywhere.
>
> (Manager D)

The same manager talked of listening in a different way when referring to himself in the subordinate position. He made listening the critical factor between success and failure when explaining how he challenged some of his superiors for not listening well enough:

> What we did was to work upwards (in the hierarchy) in order to get authorization to start to analyse and question the whole thing, which we did in February last year by talking to the R&D and HR executives, and simply saying that either you listen to us or this whole thing is going to hell.
>
> (Manager D)

Another manager maintained that leadership as listening facilitates decision-making:

> You make sure that you listen to everybody's opinion in all situations, have respect for everybody's opinion, then you make a decision, this is self-evident. You have probably heard this in every interview.
>
> (Manager E)

Lower level managers also talked of leadership as listening. It is seen as good delegation:

> I believe that a good manager listens and has time to listen, and can absorb the information, and delegates tasks that he has no reason to intervene in.
>
> (Researcher F)

In sum, listening is described as an important activity in leadership by a large number of the interviewed managers. There is some variety of the meaning of, and reasons for, listening among the managers. Listening as a way of getting people to get along in teams and make them feel included and respected (managers A and E), to find the right emotional tone in interaction (manager B), to make people feel reassured (manager C), to understand and gather and structure information (manager D), to get people to feel confirmed and less anonymous (manager D), to facilitate decision-making, and finally to see it as a general sign of being a good boss (manager E and researcher F). One should bear in mind that the cited accounts are spontaneous responses about leadership and are thus made significant by the managers. As noted earlier, our interviews were non-directive and we never raised the issue of listening in our interview questions. Next, we turn to some indirect statements of listening, focusing on the informal chat.

Chat and listen

Although framed in a more indirect manner, there are also some reports about leadership that could be seen as containing a fair dose of listening. Some of the managers emphasized small talk, in which they are on an equal footing with co-workers and where they listen as much as talk. It is not the kind of informal manager-talk as described by Kotter (1990), carrying the 'big agenda' of the manager and being implemented in incremental but conscious and directive ways. One manager, responsible for a unit that has people on two different geographical sites, explained that being available for informal chats is central for many subordinates and thus central in leadership:

> I think it's finding the time to be available for people on both sites that's the most difficult, and where you have to put the most effort in is being available, I mean you can do your work but people want to see you and chat to you informally and that's quite important.
>
> (Manager G)

Another manager explained that he usually keeps himself informed by talking to scientists:

> If you believe you're going to try to understand what's going on in the projects by reading protocols, then I don't think you'd understand. Protocols are important to the project group and also to management, but then again it is important that you're out there, out here. I get to know more about the project if I go out in the lab and I get to know more if I talk to individuals in the projects, because some people have their opinion of what is important. It is important to talk to those on the floor, and not just to leaders.
>
> (Manager H)

A few managers maintained the importance of listening as a way of creating relationships:

> Certain things, like I expect to develop relationships with people where they could tell me anything, they tell me about not doing a good job or, if I am doing a good job they can tell me as well.
>
> (Manager B)

When asked about how it is possible to create such relationships manager B explained that:

> I think it starts from just being interested in people and showing that you're interested and talking about what they do and how they do it and then coming around to 'if I were you I might consider' or 'what do you think' or 'is this a good idea.'

The comments show the importance of managerial presence for informal chatting:

> We're working in an open-plan office, we had a choice and we chose, we felt it very strongly, we chose an open-plan office because it gives us this opportunity that people will just happen to pass your table and ask you how we ought to do things, should we use this parameter, should we add this to the analysis or what shall I do in order to make someone contribute with this part.
>
> (Manager E)

These statements are broadly similar to those on listening. There is a value in informal chatting, learning by listening to those 'on the floor', developing trust in order to listen, forming structure to facilitate informal chatting and listening. In some cases (the accounts of managers B and H), this talk is

job-related, whereas for others chatting is more general and may be seen as almost a value in itself, improving the workplace. Being around, chatting and listening are explained as being part of leadership. This is sustained by talk that values managers who also emphasize a good working environment. A few interviewees pointed towards managers' leadership as creating a feeling of enjoyment. One manager said, for example, that 'a good leader is definitively an enjoyment person' (manager I) or as a global manager said when explaining his leadership: 'a strength and a weakness of mine is that I tend to be cheerful when I go out in the field' (manager J). These aspects direct attention partly beyond the professional and managerial aspects of the work tasks, indeed beyond leadership, as something distinct carried out by 'leaders'.

The extra-ordinarization of the mundane

Outside the dichotomy of management and leadership

The earlier accounts direct attention to aspects of leadership very sparsely addressed by the research. In our case, however, we can notice how the notion of leadership is closely and significantly related to the ability to listen and chatting, and to some extent being cheerful. The managers in this study thus suggest that these activities are far from being ordinary, insignificant and mundane, in contrast they are discussed as being key aspects of their presumed leadership. However, as already noticed these activities are hardly those that are claimed to be vital in the leadership literature. In contrast, leadership is related to grand ideas, visions and engaging speeches that encourage people to take part in great missions. Leadership is connected to radical change and inspiring ideas that facilitate people to rethink old ideas, there's a revolutionary, heroic and romantic epic figuring in contemporary leadership (Meindl et al., 1985). Listening and informal talk are not normally considered to be part of management either. The latter is about administrative concerns in which budgets, structure, performance rewards and other primarily instrumental aspects are central. The 'facilitative,' 'communicative' and 'social' dimensions put forward in our case seemingly fall outside mainstream management. Hence, managers' talk of leadership does, in some respects, point towards themes beyond ideas of both leadership and management as commonly understood (Dubrin, 2001; Fagiano, 1997; Mintzberg, 1998; Zaleznik, 1977).

Listening as an extraordinary activity

A few of the statements about listening imply that listening is part of a process and instrumental to some intended outcome stretching beyond the

notion of listening merely as an end or value in itself. Manager D's first two statements, and to some extent manager E's second statement and manager H's accounts, fit into an information-processing approach which may be part of the manager as a decision-maker or as a provider of direction. In this context, few people would doubt that a manager listening to his or her subordinates is a valuable, indeed necessary, element of leadership. It is an element in all social interaction. It would not, however, necessarily be viewed as particularly vital or interesting. It may be ranked as similar to reading the business press or being informed about corporate policies and overall business plans.

What is interesting in our empirical material is the emphasis put on listening as a vital activity in its own right, expressing a key theme of leadership. The interviewed managers' ideas of good or actual leadership were certainly not only or mainly about listening, however, leading through listening or the good manager as a good listener appear as important aspects of what leadership in this company is about.

One important meaning of managers' listening is that it conveys a feeling of inclusion, participation and social significance. Managers A and B express the idea of listening as a way of creating team feeling and togetherness. Listening to people makes them engaged and interested, it provides a sense that they are contributing and thus included. This elevates the importance of teamwork, of belonging and participating. The listening of managers is supposed to accomplish this.

Another meaning of listening is the reduction of anxiety. Manager C talks of listening as a way of creating reassurance, a feeling of security among subordinates by showing presumed interest in them. Just listening is important in order to make people remain confident that managers are interested in what they are doing, thus reassuring subordinates of the good intentions of their superiors. Listening displays an interest and caring about their opinions and feelings before embarking upon changes.

Manager D's third statement also points to listening as identity confirmation. Listening is a vehicle for counteracting bad feelings and experiences. The interviewee perceives that people feel anonymous, even commodified. There is a shortage of recognition in the company. The antidote to this is being listened to, presumably by managers. Through the manager's listening alienation is reduced. Manager E also expresses this view, listening is a sign of respect.

Listening and chatting are also very much a matter of having positive relations. It is positive and important to interact informally (managers E and G) and talk about everything (manager B). Some interviewees emphasize enjoyment and cheerfulness (managers I and J). Manager G talks about being

available for informal chats, responding to the subordinates' desire to see their manager. He implies that by being available people feel better, they have the possibility of talking informally with their superior, receiving some kind of confirmation on their being. Again it seems that informal talking facilitates feelings of satisfaction, security and confirmation.

Participation and autonomy are to some extent underlying themes in some of the accounts (perhaps especially in the first account of manager E), but this is vague and uncertain and there are few indications of the extent to which decision-making is participatory. The lack of an explicit connection to issues of influence is worth noting. It is as if listening itself is sufficient.

Manager D is interesting as he refers to the issue of listening from two perspectives – as a superior and as a subordinate. From both angles, he emphasizes the significance of the subordinates. It is from the subordinates that the knowledge, will and ideas emerge. The superior should act partly as a knowledge manager, being receptive to and process further viewpoints and information from below. However, in the third cited statement manager D emphasizes that listening might not lead to any substantive contribution on the part of subordinates, explaining that listening is primarily aimed at making people feel less anonymous. Listening, he explains, displays caring and respect, seemingly partly independent of whether or not it has any substantive effect. Manager D's fourth statement, when he talks from the position of a subordinate trying to get his own superiors to listen, differs from the others. Here listening is a matter of substantive concerns, of the listener being influenced by the speaker. In the earlier statements listening is connected to facilitating strategy work and making subordinates less anonymous, but in the fourth statement getting others to listen is the same as expressing power. He thus implies that his superiors listening to him is far more 'substantive' than him listening to his subordinates. He is clearly not content with his superior listening for the sake of creating feelings of visibility.

Interviewee F, a researcher, emphasizes listening as being important in itself, primarily as part of the maximization of autonomy. For him, listening means the manager realizing that s/he does not have to interfere that much.

A lot of the talk about leadership as listening is fairly passive. The manager listens to subordinates, thereby producing a variety of positive outcomes, including people feeling involved, respected, reassured and being given a lot of discretion. Also when the manager listens and uses listening as an input to action, it is fairly reactive. Manager D ascribes knowledge, ideas and will to the people in the organization. He is very active and directive only in relation to his superiors. We thus get the impression that the subordinate acts, whereas the superior who is supposed to do leadership listens and, perhaps, reacts.

In sum, listening seems to be about conjuring feelings of belonging, of subordinates and peers getting along, of confidence and assurance, of participation and visibility, of being respected and heard, and finally of being paid attention to in general. In trying to explain the meaning of leadership as listening, managers seem not to have elaborated upon the actual impact this activity has on substantive work, rather, the issues raised are towards the feelings of confirmation that listening presumably creates. Whether listening should result in any special activities from managers or lead to anything substantive is not elaborated upon and thus is unclear. Similarly, informal talk directs attention not towards the professional work, but rather towards how, in various respects, managers can make people feel better. This concerns confirming employees' presence at work by talking to them in the coffee room and (at least) giving the appearance of being interested in their work. This is sometimes akin to letting people talk about whatever they want, whether related to work or not.

The extra-ordinarization of mundane acts

From one angle, the earlier statements may perhaps be interpreted as being in line with popular ideas on leadership and organization in knowledge-intensive companies, being facilitating rather than directive (Alvesson, 1995; Trevelyan, 2001). One could read the statements as being related to participatory decision-making in team work, working with issues of engaging and making subordinates visible, thus rendering them less anonymous and more empowered. Managers walking around informally, listening and talking to their subordinates, and cheering them up may have a positive influence on the work environment and may even facilitate creativity. The managers in this company may be viewed as exhibiting 'post-heroic leadership' (Huey, 1994) and an example of the femininization of management (Fondas, 1997), and are thus portrayed as progressive. We think that there is a possible case for this view. Managers, as well as others, may benefit from an un-fixing of leadership from heroic and masculine connotations: more humanistic and democratic workplace relations are to be encouraged.

However, from a closer and more skeptical reading it seems difficult to determine whether listening and informal talk have (or are supposed to have) any substantive or specific impact on the work of subordinates. Based on the statements, it is difficult to assess the extent to which listening affects values, behaviors or decisions. It seems that the very act and/or appearance of listening to and informally talking with a subordinate are viewed as self-sufficient and a major part of good leadership, at least in this organizational context.

Our interviews suggest that listening and chatting are not the main ingredients in more substantive and professional concerns, even though a few interviewees made links to issues such as information- and knowledge processing.

Our material indicates that what is actually heard and/or talked about is perhaps of minor relevance and lesser interest as long as it is managers that are performing these acts. The managers do not touch upon the substantive content of listening. Listening, chatting and being cheerful would thus almost be required per se for these managers in order to talk about good and successful leadership. They seem to suggest that as they listen and talk informally the acts are rendered a special value, both for the managers themselves and for their subordinates. It is not just anyone listening or doing the informal talk, but rather managers who display interest, respect, etc. Managers performing these acts seemingly make them extraordinary and perhaps even grandiose, in spite of the acts themselves being highly mundane and of an everyday character. The transforming of ordinary tasks into something extraordinary and significant, simply by the fact that managers perform them, makes them almost mysterious, as if managers possess some kind magic formula of listening, unknown to those outside management. The manager listens. Thereby, leadership is exercised and a flow of good outcomes is produced. 'Managerial listening' emerges as a formula for fixing a wide set of organizational problems. There is an undertone of leadership as magic.

In order to reveal the mystique seemingly constructed around leadership by interpreting ordinary activities as extraordinary and grandiose acts one might replace managers with secretaries or other organizational members. If secretaries or other organizational members spoke of listening or being cheerful it would perhaps be seen as a normal, but minor, part of organizational everyday life. Claiming that this was a vital part of their work would not be recommended in a wage-negotiating or downsizing situation.

However, when managers make such claims they are read – or rather they read themselves – in a different way. Here, the expectation that leaders do special, significant things matters, turning everyday activities into something remarkable. This expectation, based on images of the leader and leadership, gains prominence in the interpretation of everyday acts, and has a greater impact than what managers actually do. Everyday activities such as listening and talking informally become special when exercised by a manager–'leader' but remain everyday and trivial when performed by someone else. In this case, managers doing leadership is thus strongly related to the symbolic value placed on acts made by people called managers, seemingly regardless of the acts' substantive character. Mundane acts carried out by a manager, when read as something beyond the ordinary, are frequently labeled leadership. Of course, the formal position of the manager, with access

to information and material resources, is far from insignificant, and the impact of anybody talking to a manager may be stronger than when talking to a junior person. But there are no guarantees and the symbolism seems to outperform 'substantive' effects of managerial listening.

Although listening and talking informally are advanced as a way of creating feelings of participation, engagement, interest, visibility and respect, they may also be seen as symbolic acts – 'tricks' (intentional or unintentional) – in order to keep both managers and their subordinates happy (see Pfeffer, 1981). By listening, the manager does leadership, and demonstrates to him- or herself progressiveness, people skills and social significance. Because it is frequently listening, as such, that seems significant rather than its substantive value or potential impact that is called upon, managers might use listening and informal talk as social symbolic devices in order to elevate their own status among subordinates, regardless of any potential impact otherwise. The specific organizational context of managerial work and leadership may be significant here. Given the complexity and ambiguity of the work process and the difficulties managers have in understanding highly specialized scientific work, listening becomes important in the absence of authority, a knowledge base for intervention in relation to key work processes. When managers have problems exercising active control, listening becomes a favored activity.

On the whole, 'leadership' produced in the form of listening can be praised as being harmless and probably having mostly positive effects – if any – for subordinates. Given the strong emphasis on managerialism and the tendency to celebrate leadership – in one form or another – as being 'The Great Solution' to a multitude of imperfections and problems in society and business, we think some words of warning are called for. There is a tendency for 'leadership' to colonize a wider spectrum of social and personal life. At least in Sweden, leadership is also increasingly viewed as a solution in work areas and professions in which self-governance is, or used to be, seen as the norm, for example, in schools, universities and the church. Emotional life is also increasingly targeted for leadership control (George, 2000). An exaggerated view of the significance of management and leadership in the spheres of the everyday and mundane may also lead to an elevation of the attributed importance of managerial presence and the interventions of leaders. The leadership idea expressed by the interviewees probably creates some truth effects. According to one quoted manager, alienation is to be counteracted with 'listening'. With the expansion and increased presence of leadership discourse, employees come to 'need' the attention of managers. Managers also become significant as listeners. At the same time, the extra-ordinarization of mundane acts reflects, as well as creates, (an exaggerated?) dependency on managers in general.

Conclusions

In this article we have made three points.

1.   A lot of 'leadership' (e.g. what people in an organization see as leadership) is fairly mundane, differing little from what other people do, at least at a behavioral level.
2.   Fairly mundane acts are given a particular aura and appear to be significant and remarkable when framed as leadership.
3.   The significance of the formal position as manager is vital for this framing, thus making the distinction leader/manager problematic.

Here we develop these points and briefly discuss their broader relevance.

In this article, we have illuminated part of management/leadership seldom addressed in the leadership literature. We offer a contrast to the popular notions of active, powerful, visionary, and transformative leadership. Of course, these are not the only aspects of leadership mentioned. It is important to notice that it is the interviewees who drew attention to listening and small talk as illustrations of the performance of leadership. The company in focus is currently undergoing a radical reorganization in which visionary leadership is emphasized as critical. Not surprisingly, managers reproduce visionary notions in talking about leadership, in line with the usual heroic dimensions implicated in both popular and academic writing. However, when asked to specify the exercise of leadership, managers explain, in part, that important leadership dimensions consist of listening, informal talk and being cheerful, i.e. they turn to what we interpret as everyday and mundane activities. (In addition, they point to doing bureaucratic work, but we do not focus on this theme here. See Alvesson & Sveningsson, 2003a, 2003b, for the broader picture.) That these elements of leadership are seldom acknowledged in the leadership literature, apart from as a part of information processing, may be because they do not fit the image of leadership as being about exercising strong influence and directing people. However, the contrast between conventional leadership ideas and the focus on mundane activities has not reduced the perceived (or communicated) significance of leadership (or leaders) in the eyes (or mouths) of our interviewees. On the contrary, everyday and mundane activities are ascribed a higher level of significance, portrayed as being important in leadership. In line with much contemporary writing on leadership, the mundane has been strongly flavored as being something extraordinary and special, activities beset with grand proportions.

Although the empirical material in this article is restricted to a

discussion of the mundane – to listening, chatting and being cheerful – it is possible that other types of everyday and seemingly trivial behavior, such as administration, participating in meetings or just walking around the workplace, are also defined as 'leadership' by managers and perhaps others.

We can express our key finding in terms of a formula: (1) mundane act carried out by (2) a manager and (3) labeled leadership means (4) an expectation of something significant, even 'magical' being accomplished. Our study reports mainly on the view of managers, in one organizational culture context. Whether the formula also captures the thinking of co-workers and of managers in other organizational settings remains a question for further research to address, although we assume that our results have a broad domain of application.

Most employees in organizations would probably have a hard time convincing other people that they do something special by listening, chatting or being cheerful. It seems as though the construction of mundane activities as extraordinary occurs exclusively when managers are performing the activities. The acts are, in a sense, non-exclusive, even trivial. The formal position of the person performing them is not, because of the symbolic meaning attached to managers and leadership. The ideology of managerialism and the discourse of leadership is such that what managers do, what can be labeled as leadership, is (potentially) highly significant. Leadership discourse says that leaders matter, leadership is important, that meaning, motivation, and a sense of direction within a working life is the result of leadership. It is the significance of leadership that makes people who are in focus of the manager's attention, feel visible, respected, important and – in the next step – inclined to be team members and good corporate citizens. This is all according to the reasoning of the managers we studied, but this is also in line with most writings on leadership. The case inspires us to suspect that managers are eager to uphold an idea (logic, discourse or whatever) that everything which managers do is important and for the most part extraordinary, certainly when it comes to leadership. To some extent, subordinates probably also buy into this idea when relating to their superiors and their leaders. However, our (limited) interview material from the subordinate point of view indicates that subordinates attach less significance to 'managerial mundanity': listening is significant for the subordinates if it is followed by strong influence (manager D, talking as subordinate) or delegation and discretion (researcher F). This topic calls for more research: in general, the interpretations, acts and reactions of those who are supposed to be led are given far too little attention in leadership research.

The case speaks against the value of the manager/leader distinction so popular in much of the literature. One reason is that the mundane acts

highlighted here fit poorly into a standard dichotomy of management using formal means and aimed at stability versus leadership addressing the minds and hearts of people and aimed at accomplishing change. Listening and chatting are routine activities. They do not seem to be part of a conscious agenda of the manager implementing certain ideas or objectives. A second reason is that although the aspects of leadership (if this is a relevant label) highlighted here are informal, the effect intended, and possibly produced, relies heavily of the formal position of the listener and chatter. Without a manager performing these mundane acts, there is no extra-ordinarization effect. It is difficult to imagine an informal leader getting or maintaining this position through listening. In order to obtain an influential position in the absence of formal support, it is probably vital to get others to listen.

The reader, particularly if familiar with the leadership industry, may feel that the empirical material we draw upon is peculiar and atypical, and that the case is not representative of 'real' leaders, at least not at senior levels. Some leadership researchers suggest that leadership research would become more relevant and interesting for practitioners if it paid less attention to supervisors and addressed top managers and 'strategic leadership' instead (House & Aditay, 1997). Our case covers middle and senior middle managers in a very large, multinational company with a good reputation. We have no ambition to generalize broadly. The very point of qualitative research is the insightful example (Alvesson & Deetz, 2000) and leadership must always be related to a specific context (Bryman et al., 1996). There is every reason to acknowledge great variation in the work situations, social relations and ideologies of managers in different functions, countries, organizations, industries and on different levels. There may still be good reason to combat the strong tendencies to deny or marginalize the mundane, possibly even trivial aspects of what people do when they claim to exercise 'leadership'. To emphasize a more grandiose notion (e.g. strategic leadership) may miss vital dimensions. In order to avoid too quick a marginalization of our case and theoretical argument, we refer to the case of Lee Iacocca, CEO at Chrysler. Trice and Beyer (1993) refer to him as a 'genuine charismatic' after having been successful in saving the company from bankruptcy. One element was his 'confidence to generate a vision of a new Chrysler – one free of debt and actively competing in the national and international markets' (Trice & Beyer, 1993: 271). Without denying the difficulties of getting people to believe in this possibility, one can argue that this 'vision' is somewhat trivial – as this indicates the elementary preconditions for any company to stay in business. But such a trivial ambition is seen as a 'vision' and thus extraordinary enough to electrify managers and other employees. More generally, according to Yukl (1989), the only thing that different researchers have in common in their

definitions of leadership is that it is about influence. But all people influence each other. This is once again a pretty mundane and everyday type of act/outcome that is constructed as extraordinary through the notion of leadership.

The study indicates that there are good reasons to pay attention to the role of leadership discourse – as (re-)produced by people in the leadership industry and others – in making managers invest a strong symbolic, even magical, meaning in mundane acts and talk. To the extent that subordinates are also affected by this discourse, they may constitute themselves as highly responsive subjects, dependent upon the attention of managers and 'managerial mundanity' for the securing of selves and well-being at workplaces, perhaps even for doing their job effectively.

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