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A paper presented at the 13th European Conference on Management, Leadership and Governance, London, 11 - 12 Dec 2017.

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# Leadership as Practice and a Meta-Profession: Conceptual Propositions

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*Paper*

*Submitted to the 13th European Conference on Management Leadership and Governance*

*11 - 12 December 2017 - London, UK*

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## **Abstract**

In the past, leadership theory has been heavily influenced by deterministic theories and the search for appropriate leader. In this paper we discuss later approaches, from humble and wise leadership to the developing notion of Leadership-as-Practice. We argue that by looking at leading as a process of engaging in sense-giving and adaptive management which requires embracing moral values and ethics. With these dimensions in mind, and looking at leadership as a state of preparedness, we examine how these challenges can be incorporated within a professionalization context. Our conceptual proposition is for leadership as a meta-profession where leading is a process, of adaptation to changing and challenging realities, in which leadership and followership are co-developed and co-exist.

**Keywords:** *leadership practice; professional identity; wise leadership; followership*

## **1. Introduction**

The Complexity of modern communication and social movements reduce leaders' ability to easily rationalise and operationalise their decisions. In the liquid (Bauman, 2006), mediated (Thompson, 1995) and increasingly dis-embedded society (Giddens, 1991), it is important for leaders to embrace complexity and learn to act decisively to meet the challenges posed by organisational structures that are in flux, subject to constant formation reformation and even transformation.

Optimism about the ability of organisations and charismatic individuals to organise the social life of business systems still dominates management theory and corporate behaviour. Driven by prescriptive notions of best-practices and the constant search for optimal operational models, the role of the leader has been to transfer expertise and knowledge into the field of organisational action and decision-making (Hel & McGrew, 2004). Despite being an organisational factor that is driven by situational particularities, extremely diverse organisational factors and a large number externalities,

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leadership, has also been surprisingly influenced by strong deterministic perspectives. From the early searches for the great leader, through the quest to locate the ideal leader's characteristics/ traits or even the processes that would allow us to find the right leadership system for the right audience, universalist models of leadership have dominated the literature (Blanchard et al., 1993).

However, in recent decades, leadership theory has not embraced the dynamics of 'leading' people. Several theories have approached leadership as driven by complex communication and even celebrity dynamics (Rindova et al., 2006) or institutional forces that constrain the decision-making power of individuals in executive positions. Traditional leadership theory does acknowledge the problem of focusing too much on agency at the expense of structure appreciation. For example, a more careful reading into Meindl's theory of charisma offers a less normative, deterministic and more complex view of leaders while other studies have provided accounts of the dark side of 'good' leaders (Bass & Steidlmeier, 1999; Sandowsky, 1995). Recent developments in leadership theory have accounted for the critical role of followership and the servant leader (Grint, 2005; Spears & Lawrence, 2002), humility (Morris et al., 2005; Nielsen et. al, 2010; Owen & Hekman, 2012; Argandona, 2015 ), moral values (Gerard, 2017), spirituality (Fairholm & Fairholm, 2009; Cacioppe, 2000), mindfulness (Sinclair, 2012) and wisdom (Nonaka & Takeuchi, 2011).

Thus, leadership theory has been steadily advancing into an understanding of leadership practice that does not focus entirely on the individual traits or leadership action for sustainable organisations. In this vein, Raelin's (2016) edited introduction on leadership practice offers the foundations of a new approach to leadership, which is analysed and embraced in this paper. As the complexity of social environments and situational constraints have been highlighted, the limitations of leadership action, leadership practice has been conceptualised as the individual's emerging efforts to develop trust, human and relational capital and organisational continuity.

In the light of this trajectory, we argue in this paper that we need to construct a more phenomenological and practice-based view on leadership. We propose a number of leadership theory directions, focusing on sense-giving, humility and wisdom as conditions of leadership within a practice-based perspective. However, we also attempt to deal with the challenges of professionalization of leadership, especially as, in certain configurations, it promotes a structuralist view on organisations and emphasises a universalist conception of leadership practice. Following Bourdieu (1990) we argue that practice, the 'habitus' or unfolding realities do not relieve the individual from personal responsibilities and do not lead to the disembodiment of leadership. On the contrary, our key conceptual call is for a look on leadership as meta-profession that exceeds the prescriptive nature of the professional identity but imposes a different kind of expectations from the leader.

The structure of our paper is as follows. First, we briefly summarise the growing concern for leadership as practice (L-A-P). We outline sense-giving, humility and wisdom as the key conditions of the leader within complex environments. We then discuss the professionalization trend in modern societies and the problems of fitting leadership within a professional identity context. This is followed by our proposition of leadership as a meta-profession and the final section summarises the implications of this perspective.

## **2. Practice Theory in Leadership Studies: the L-A-P movement**

Bourdieu claimed that focusing on practice provides a moment of realisation, that individuals, their bodies and knowledge do not have as much power as we tend to believe they do (Bourdieu, 1990: 56). In social theory, practice approaches promulgate a distinct social ontology: the social is a field of embodied, materially interwoven practices centrally organized around shared practical understandings (Schatzki, 2001: 55). This conception contrasts with accounts that privilege individuals' actions, language, signifying systems, the life world, roles or systems in defining the social order. Social phenomena, practice theorists argue, can only be analysed via the field of practices. Actions, for instance, are embedded in practices, just as individuals are constituted within them. The sources of practice theory may be found in the works of Martin Heidegger who approached life as an impossible object to analyse; we can only observe phenomena once we are in the process of experiencing them (TB: 211). And change, for Heidegger, is not planned or structured but mainly based on microscopic events, evolution, emerging human action and episodes.

In management theory, a focus on practice, in its Heideggerian sense, has influenced organisational behaviour (see Watson, 2010), Organisational Change (Tsoukas & Chia, 2001), Strategic Management (Whittington, 2001; Johnson et al., 2014) and Crisis Management (Sutcliffe & Weick, 2009). What these theories have in common is an appreciation for practice as a driver for understanding and changing social reality. But it has not been popular in Leadership theory. This is due to a persistent emphasis on the instrumental role of the leader, performance-driven functionalism and an inherent (almost naturalistic) drive to search for the 'leader'. For example, the death of Steve Jobs has triggered an existential moment for Apple as the organisation sought ~~was seeking~~ to replace the individual, to find a leader, or, as a Wired columnist expressed it, to put another king on the throne (The Wire, 18.7.2015).

In contrast to this, the limitations of the leader's authority and the existence of informal structures that often undermine the unity of command and organisational decisions has been acknowledged as long ago as the publication of Herbert Simon's (1945) "Administrative Behaviour". Simon presented the organisational context as a social space that includes informal structures, irrational agendas and often unknown conditions. Bauman (1989) highlighted the problem of de-humanised bureaucracies where the outcomes of human actions is hidden and neglected. A key trend in leadership theory has been the possibility of one individual or an administrative structure to overcome the limitations of everyday practice and setup stable systems and dominant (or hegemonic) ideologies. For some, both the challenges proposed by Simon and Bauman may be resolved by a charismatic and well trained individual in charge.

Others have been attracted by theories bridging socio-philosophical trends, like Giddens' structuration theory or Bourdieu's (1990) analysis on the objectivity of the subjective. Even if the systemic forces are strong, there is always a possibility for an agentic behaviour that may change the course of action. For leadership theorists that idea that everyday practice, habits and social dynamics produce unpredictable organisational experiences was too passive and unbearable.

Raelin's (2016) edited volume clearly tries to overcome this reluctance in leadership theory by proposing what the authors suggest as a new possible paradigm in

leadership theory, coined as an abbreviation of L-A-P. Realin (2016: 27) argues: “The foundation of the leadership-as-practice approach is its underlying belief that leadership occurs as a practice rather than reside in the traits or behaviors of individuals. A practice is a coordinative effort among participants who choose through their own rules to achieve a distinctive outcome”. Accordingly, leadership-as-practice is less about what one person thinks or does and more about what people may accomplish together. It is thus concerned with how leadership emerges and unfolds through day-to-day experience.

We can also argue that this approach is not only driven by a philosophical investigation of what practice theory can offer to leadership studies; it is also linked with a growing body in leadership theory that observes the ‘leader’ as a humble individual, a servant, or someone who mobilises resources and needs to engage with followers in order to be able to trigger change within complex systems. Such conceptualisation focuses on the need for a leader to go through a process of personal transformation (Blanchard, 1993: 109) and approach organisational life through the eyes of a member of a community. In other words, the leader is a person that has to deal with the moments, situations and emerging events while also being herself/ himself within a context of institutionalised habits and existing routines. Leaders are both guards and prisoners. Crisis Management theory, a field that by default deals with complexity, has proposed that effective handling requires the right cognitive preparedness (Vogus and Sutcliffe, 2004) or a balanced mindset (Mitroff, 2011).

A number of questions also arise from the conceptual view of leadership as a practice. If we focus on the communicative aspects of leadership practice and ask the questions: What is the role of the leader in these conversations, texts, and conversations? How can they motivate individuals to act collectively and purposefully? It is arguable that both, the communicative and practice-based view of leadership challenge the traditional orthodoxy of leadership. What are the key dimensions of leadership practice? We outline three critical aspects of the leader within a practice context - constructing shared meanings, stimulating creative thinking and maintaining a clear ethical consciousness.

In this world of ‘emerging’ realities, leaders are expected to construct shared meanings for the organisations, or “join a public agora and fight with their symbolic resources for the construction of meaning” (Bourdieu, 1991: 103). This is a sense-giving process that serves an organisational entity that seeks to understand unfolding realities and complex developments. When the Deepwater Horizon oil rig collapsed in 2010, BP’s CEO Tony Hayward, attempted to ‘resolve the issue, in a way that will allow BP to return to normality. We can fight this” (FT, 16 April 2010). However, the leader in this case has little power to manage human grief, regulatory complexity, the mass media frantic coverage or internal blame games and institutional chaos. Things happen and change happens in unpredictable ways as they happen. The role of the leader is precisely to establish a process of sense-making, allowing individuals to understand the events and what they mean to them (see Weick, 1999). This could be seen as the interpreter leader.

Moreover, leadership is based on humility (Morris et al., 2005) and followership (see Ladkin, 2010). Morris et al. (2005) subscribe to the traditional leadership theory, in that they add humility to the long list of leaders’ traits (ibid: 1325). But their seminal contribution indirectly flirts with the idea of the practice-based leader who motivates people to think critically and creatively and facilitates people in action, rather than controlling individuals. The humble leader appreciates the limitations of power and uses

power purposefully and wisely. Such a leader does not necessarily end up with a passive or apathetic leadership style.

Finally, leadership as practice leaves the reader with a very clear question: what are the ethical and moral implications of people being in action and involved in uncontrolled events? Martin Heidegger himself became the object of this analysis as he was involved with the Nazi party and watched books being burnt. Sarah Bakewell's recent book, "The Existentialist Café", show how this happened as Heidegger became part of an academic elite, which shaped his relationships with the upper echelons of society and isolated him from the consequences of his actions. We argue, that instead of relieving the leader from his/her moral obligations, practice-driven leadership requires the individual to be ethically armoured and morally prepared to handle complex events.

Aristotelian approaches have indeed long promoted the responsibility, practical wisdom and an inherent capacity to judge as the fundamental conditions for 'good' leadership. Nonaka & Takeuchi (2010) embrace this concept and define wise leadership as based on the ability to handle situations, share knowledge and stimulate values, rather than just achieving performance results. However, this wisdom, founded on such values, does not have the same *eclat* within many contemporary contexts as cleverness – that is the demonstration of specific technical knowledge. As Revans astutely remarked: "The Clever man will tell you what he knows; he may even try to explain it to you. The wise man encourages you to discover it for yourself even although he knows it inside out himself. But since he seems to give you nothing, we have no need to reward him. Thus, the wise have disappeared and we are left in the desolation of the clever." (quoted in R. Revans, *Action Learning: New Techniques for Management*, London, Blond and Briggs, 1980. p.9).

The above considerations, leadership as practice (L-A-P) and the resulted leadership characteristics (sense giving, humility and wisdom) leave leadership theory with a wide normative question mark. Is it possible to organise this leadership perspective within a practical and professional framework?

### **3. Professionalization and Professionalising Leadership**

Professionalization may be seen as a process based on historic evolution of vocations but also as the process of codification of mastery, technical skills and behavioural patterns. The professional ethos and professionalism have undergone a number of changes in history. In early capitalism professionalism was driven by individuals that would adopt the appropriate ethos. Weber made a distinction between vocation and profession, attributing to the later a transcendental value that exceeds the limits of control by charisma, history or structure.

Since Weber's time the professional ethos and professionalism have undergone a number of changes. Professionalization has been influenced by the evolution of technology, new social and economic situations that demand the development of new acceptable best practices. For example, in the last century, a professional physician needed to use the stethoscope to qualify for a good medical practice. Professionalization has also been promoted by an increased need for standardisation within service-driven societies. Ritzer (1995) is particularly interested in showing the dominant role of

projecting calculability and predictability in modern societies as a sign of professionalization of certain domains and practice. Ritzer argues that professionalization is intrinsically linked with a highly structured perception of obligations, a framed view of ethical responsibilities and specific training and assessed practices that lead to certain levels of achievement.

The commodification and the monetisation of professionalism have moved the interest from a developmental approach towards the creation of structured frameworks of professionalism. Today, in the United Kingdom, professional bodies require specific qualifications to ensure technical knowledge and skills. They outline codes of ethics and demand on-going development from their professional members. Accountancy, medicine and the law have long been established professions with these characteristics of regulation and commodification. Recently the drive towards professionalization has seen similar developments in other sectors of the economy. For example, the Chartered Institute for Personnel Development (CIPD), dominates the HRM sphere, setting boundaries, rules, behavioural expectations and ultimately regulating a whole profession (Storey, 2011). The same drives are evident in property, finance, building, nursing and the professions allied to medicine. Abbott (2014).

In a structured society where calculability and predictability have dominated social practice it would be hardly surprising to see the dominance of cleverness and the gradual disappearance of wisdom. Nonetheless, professionalization of certain domains of practice is still intrinsically linked to highly structured perceptions of obligations, and a framed view of ethical responsibilities. Herein lies the problem of a prescriptive approach on professionalism. The communicative nature of work and the competing loyalties and responsibilities towards different social groups cannot be encompassed by a prescriptive body of knowledge. Even simpler vocations and social roles cannot be comprehensively and easily placed under a technical framework and a set of guidelines. One of those social roles is leadership.

This poses an important question: is it possible for leaders to fit within a professional identity? It is true that their roles, existence, substance and practice far exceed the limitations of a professional and structured identity. Importantly, leadership requires a clear distancing from the rationality of the “boss” or the manager highlighted by Max Weber ([1919] 1994: 142). Weber (ibid) contrasted what he saw as traditional Anglo-Saxon leader who often used silence, avoided political manoeuvring and was driven by higher principles rather than a constant need to follow changing and volatile practices with what he saw in the professionalization of politics. This professionalization, or we would argue the managerialisation, of politicians was leading to an instrumental relationship between the individual and a system that changes the status quo (and their sources of income). The fear that Weber expressed is still justified by the conclusion of several studies on corporate scandals which have been explained by the developments of institutional forces inside organisations that made the practice of leadership almost impossible (see Enron’s scandal in Boje, 2005).

However, this does not mean that the regulation and structured professionalization of management and leadership are not useful. Rather, they usually fail to focus upon include fundamental, practical self-identity questions such as: “who am I”, “why and how should I be as a leader”). They also fail to contribute to the ongoing

debate on how leaders are currently developed and how they could be better developed within a highly problematic pedagogical space - the business schools.

#### **4. Leadership as a meta-profession**

In our view, leading is a process, always adapting to-changing realities in which there is a constant co-development of the leader, followers and the organisation. In this perspective it is not the possession of knowledge, but the ability to share knowledge effectively that marks out the leader (Nonaka & Takeuchi, 2011). This sharing requires a certain mindset or wisdom on the part of the leader. Compassion, authenticity and social intelligence, together with strong ties to the organisational systems suggest a 'wise' leader, rather than the 'heroic' narcissistic decision-maker (see McCobby, 2004). Professional leadership consists of a mindset that brings together the leader's identity, personality and values with the organisational settings and challenges. Whether these personality dimensions are in place, or not, the leader as an individual enters into practice by putting the 'self' within a domain of experiences and actions.

Conventional leadership theory assumes that a leader maintains an agentic relationship with the context where she/he interacts. However, having an 'experience' means '[reaching] a certain point in life that is as close as possible to the "unliveable," to that which can't be lived through'. Such experience confirms one's limitations and lack of control over events and outcomes. It can be perceived as a dissociative experience that 'has the function of wrenching the subject from itself, of seeing to it that the subject is no longer itself, or that it is brought to its annihilation, or its dissolution. This is a project of desubjectivation'. This is what Johnson et al. (2007: 45) argue when they write about strategy as practice that "human action comes to be something that is deduced or assumed from findings or insights drawn from much more macro levels of economic or sociological inquiry: strategies are theorized as somehow disembodied. The levels of disembodiment require leadership theory as well, to escape the body or the actions of the body of the leader in search of a meta-theoretical and meta-agency level of practice where things happen. Our review of the literature confirmed the lack of embodied engagement with the complexities of leadership both at practical and theoretical/research levels.

We argue that a level of meta-thinking leads to the idea of the leadership as a meta-profession. A meta-profession is one that constantly and continuously reflects on existing practices, the external environment and the roles within the organisation. In this approach the leader does not resolve problems or change 'reality'. The leader understands the "logic of practice" or the field of dynamics and applies wisdom and humility in everyday practice.

For leaders to act in practice, armoured with a pre-existing set of ethics and values, is an imperative, "the way things are and happen in front of our eyes" (to quote Sartre). However, leaders also maintain an agentic relationship with a world that is still under their influence, there is space for reflexivity or time for reflections. Jack Welch, a commonly used archetype of the leader' has proved his skills and abilities as part of a complex space of practice, by adjusting to wider socio-political changes (e.g. the Reagan nationalist principles) and manoeuvring within a very complex system. As McKelvey



(2010) discussed, Welch did not follow a specific management technique which was practiced at GE. And he certainly did not routinize or organised his strategies around a number of pre-existing set of strategies. On the contrary he has led by creating confusing, complexity and often chaos. However, Jack Welch was unable to fully capture the structures around him and perhaps the consequences of his actions. But he was partially able to influence the system.

Our proposed concept of the meta-profession attempts to resolve the dilemma. As Kellerman (2004: 40) argues, leaders are “individuals who create shared meaning, have a distinctive voice, have the capacity to adapt, and have integrity”. The professionalization of leadership cannot follow the principles of the conventional ‘conversion’ of the individual into a reflective thinker across a number of dimensions (e.g as CIPD is professionalising the HRM practice). Meta-leadership acknowledges the interconnected and continuously changing nature of organisational and social realities. It draws from the best practices of a whole range of professions and distils their essence into unique individual practices of the individual leaders’ own values, integrity, lived experiences and levels of practical wisdom. We argue here that: *“Leaders are sense-making mechanisms, they provide meaning to complex situations, they enact, they translate ideas into practice and power into influence; in that respect they stand outside the norms of a profession yet their behaviours and decisions impact on all professions”*.

We propose that Leadership is a meta-profession as it provides both core and peripheral vision into other management practices and professions. Professional leadership is a meta-profession. At its best it embraces the professional principles of other disciplines, it highlights gaps and identifies issues within existing professional identities and frameworks and operates with wisdom as a periscope observing the efficiency and sufficiency of people working ‘professionally’ in modern corporations. More importantly leaders are the mechanisms for radical change and adaptation of the professional ethos itself by participating in changing norms and standards when needed with integrity, humility and moral power.

When talking about leadership as a meta-profession we cannot neglect those dimensions of the leading practice in late modernity which are dominated by mediated messages and risk perceptions (Thompson, 1995), the symbolic capital of people (Bourdieu, 1991) and organisations and the approach of the leader as a cohesive mechanism and a sense-making device rather than an ideas and process maker. In our current contexts, communications dominate organisational reality and its social construction (Gamson & Croteau, 1995) and legitimacy is achieved in multiple layers. These changes have been incorporated in a number of different theoretical and normative theories, including the servant model of leadership (Spears & Lawrence, 2002), storytelling leadership (Boje, 2014 [in Koweciewicz & Kostera]) and a role for the leader that escapes the normality of a profession.

Leadership does not entail or require a number of formal requirements as much as the ability to embrace virtues (in their McIntyre sense), sense-making and strong cognitive adaptation as well as an inherent work ethic. Reflecting on the VW recent gas emissions scandal, it becomes evident that a break from ethical values and basic professionalism have been fuelled by the absence of leadership as a source for constant re-evaluation of current practice, as a “trouble-maker” asking difficult questions and as a mechanism evaluating professions and professional values across functions, departments and people.

A meta-professional approach leads to the organisation of leadership through a process of ongoing self-development and critical reflection on one's daily activities, rather than a static checklist or a process of periodic assessment of meeting sets of specific criteria.

## **5. Implications**

We argue that “leaders are sense-giving mechanisms”, they provide meaning to complex situations and re-establish organisational identities within evolving and challenging situations. Following this line of reasoning, we approach leadership as a matter of individual practice, a ‘matter of the self’ (Merleau-Ponty, [1947] 2001: 35). It is constantly emerging, situational, ethical, adaptive, empathetic, based on values, beliefs and personal influence. In this respect, we conceptualise leadership at its best as a “meta-profession”. Leadership practice, we propose, stands outside the norms of a single profession as the leaders’ role is to provide core and peripheral vision into other management practices and professions. It is not a profession as it is not based on standardised practice as much as an ability to re-configure structures, conceive alternative options and impose values in challenged or collapsing systems.

In Business Ethics and in a number of research centres ( e.g. SPES) there is ongoing discourse on the need to instil more values and ethics on a personal level. While moral collapses may be explained as driven by institutional deficiencies and a problematic corporate structure the role of the individual in these systems cannot be underestimated.

When leadership is conceptualised as a meta-profession it is approached by a greater sense of responsibility and humility by individuals who aspire to become good leaders. Contemporary corporate failures indicate that leadership is still considered by many as an opportunity to enhance personal gains and power at the expense of others.

These obsolete and damaging ideas will only change when growing number of individuals recognise both among leadership practitioners and academics that personal excellence requires a desire to grow and consistent action to be fully present in the world with the best of our talent and intent to serve a noble purpose greater than ourselves. Discussing these issues in the abstract might be enjoyable but they will not translate into changed mindsets and changed behaviours that the world so badly needs.

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