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Getting Everybody on Board: The Mundane and Relational Views on Leadership and Management

Aromaa, E

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Getting Everybody on Board: The Mundane and Relational Views on Leadership and Management

Eeva Aromaa

University of Eastern Finland, Business School, P.O. Box 1627, FI-70211 Kuopio, Finland

eeva.aromaa@uef.fi

Eeva Aromaa is a PhD student of Innovation Management in the Business School at the University of Eastern Finland. She is interested in research areas such as innovation, emotional labour, humour in organisations and qualitative research methods.

Päivi Eriksson

University of Eastern Finland, Business School, P.O. Box 1627, FI-70211 Kuopio, Finland

paivi.eriksson@uef.fi

Dr. Päivi Eriksson is a Professor of Management in the Business School at the University of Eastern Finland. She is interested in research areas such as strategy, innovation, gender and qualitative research methods. She has published research in a number of academic journals and co-authored a book titled *Qualitative Methods in Business Research* (SAGE, 2016).

Tero Montonen,

University of Eastern Finland, Business School, P.O. Box 1627, FI-70211 Kuopio, Finland

tero.montonen@uef.fi

Dr. Tero Montonen is a university lecturer in the Business School at the University of Eastern Finland. His background is in Social Psychology, which he applies to management and innovation research. His research interests include research-based spin-out companies and the identities of managers with a background in academic research.

Abstract

This research case examines leadership and management in the context of a small service company. The ways in which leadership and management activities are collectively performed by a CEO and their employees when they encounter practical issues in the introduction of a new service are of particular focus. The study's theoretical background draws from mundane and relational views of leadership. Interviews and videotaped data from one office meeting are used to examine the case. The analysis reveals how polyphonic chatting consisting of two iterative phases—playful chatting and factful chatting—enables democratic and appreciative interactions between the CEO and the employees to such an extent that it is difficult to determine who is leading the conversation.

Keywords: leadership, management, polyphony, chatting, listening, joking

Introduction

Most of the current research literature has conceptualised leadership as a mysterious task, drawing upon such visionary and heroic terms as *charisma*, *symbols* and *metaphors*. Furthermore, a leader is typically viewed as active and masculine, as having superior insight, and as capable of enacting a strong impact on subordinates. As a result, there is a strong assumption of asymmetry in the relationship between a leader and other members of the team, as the leader dominates the interactions. Alvesson and Sveningsson (2003) argue that little attention has been paid to the more mundane aspects of managerial work; based on their empirical study on managers in a knowledge-intensive company, they suggest rethinking leadership through the mundane activities that leaders perform, which are not always exceptional or much different from what other employees do. Based on their empirical findings, Cunliffe and Eriksen (2011) noted that the directors they interviewed did not discuss individualistic heroic action but consistently emphasised the importance of mundane details, actions and conversations (see also early findings of Garfinkel, 1967) and, importantly, that these were usually seen in relation to others. Alvesson and Sveningsson (2003) have suggested that the mundane activities, such as chatting and listening, of leaders are not addressed within current management literature.

This research case offers an interesting example of mundane and relational views on leadership. It shows how a specific kind of interaction—polyphonic chatting—between the CEO of the investigated company and her employees enables equal co-construction of the management and leadership activities they collectively perform. The CEO sees that her role as a leader is to help her employees grow as human beings. In order to achieve this goal, the CEO encourages her employees to participate in hands-on management and leadership activities during office meetings.

This paper will briefly introduce the theoretical background of the study. Thereafter, the methodology employed in the case study will be explained. In the empirical section, a conversation between this CEO and her employees will be described and analysed. The paper then discusses the study's findings in relation to previously published research literature. The paper concludes with theoretical contributions, managerial implications and conclusions.

Theoretical Background

Relationally responsive orientation (Cunliffe, 2008, 2009; Cunliffe & Eriksen, 2011) emphasises communication, making sense, creating action and knowledge with others and hearing others' ideas as leadership strategies. Relationally oriented leaders view communication not as an expression of something pre-conceived but as emerging and open (Cunliffe & Eriksen, 2011); meanings and actions are expressed through everyday 'back and forth' dialogues in 'living conversations' (Bakhtin, 2010a, 2010b), which are characterised by polyphony—the emerging, fluid, multi-voiced and unique nature of dialogue. To illustrate the importance of dialogic conversation, Cunliffe and Eriksen (2011) argue that mainstream heroic leadership models are mainly grounded in monologism, wherein a single figure in an authoritative position aims to convey a common understanding of his/her pre-established view and is unresponsive to how his/her voice is being received, which silences and marginalises other voices (Bakhtin, 2010a). On the other hand, dialogism involves talking with people—not to them—and emphasises that everything that is said must acknowledge other peoples' voices and ideas, as well as other conversations. This manner of communication establishes trust and honours the need for respect and inclusivity in conversations through asking questions, reflecting on issues and agreeing on a way to move on (Cunliffe & Eriksen, 2011).

Methodology

The empirical data for this study comes from an action research-based project (INWORK) that investigated innovation management in small companies. The company analysed in this research was one of the organisations studied in the project. The first author of this paper conducted four interviews with the company CEO and one with each of its employees, which were transcribed verbatim. In addition, two company development workshops were organised and non-participant observation was carried out during 11 monthly office meetings. Interactions within the workshops and office were videotaped and also transcribed verbatim. To achieve a wider perspective on the case company's operational environment, the first author of this paper performed a one-day observation of a large franchise meeting held outside of office in which the idea of renting removal boxes was introduced by a franchisee.

The conversation analysed in this paper took place in one of the videotaped office meetings. The case outlines five subsequent episodes from the 15-minute conversation between four employees and the CEO, in which they engage in polyphonic chatting to discuss and make decisions on the operational issues of renting removal boxes to customers. Even though the CEO considered this new service as a minor one in relation to their more ambitious business development projects, this particular conversation was chosen for analysis because it illustrates various perspectives on mundane leadership. The conversation was analysed through qualitative content analysis (Eriksson & Kovalainen, 2016).

The New Service Conversation Case

The CEO and employees of the service company participated in a franchise meeting in February 2013, where one of the franchisees explained that he had started to rent removal boxes to his customers. Following the meeting, the CEO of the case company made the decision that her company would also start renting out removal boxes. The next month, the removal boxes were put on the agenda for the monthly office meeting. During this meeting, the CEO (Paula) and four employees (Anna, Emma, Irene and Rosa) engaged in a multi-voiced conversation focusing on the practicalities of providing the new service to their customers. In the following sections, five episodes from this conversation between Paula and her employees will be analysed.

At the beginning of the conversation, the CEO briefly introduces the topic of the removal boxes, and the employees then begin to discuss the stickers sent by the franchise headquarter, which they planned to stick on the removal boxes.

Episode 1. Active listening and eager planning

Emma talks quickly: 'So, we [employees] were not very pleased with those stickers, as you know, we are quite critical, mainly because there is just [the franchise's name]... actually that does not ...' Paula looks at Emma and nods: 'Yes, yes.' Emma continues: '... tell people anything. I think that we need to think that if we put our address there, for example.' Anna continues: 'Or just [the company's name].' Paula nods several times: 'Hmm, hmm, hmm.' Emma agrees with Anna: 'Yes, that would provide more information.' Anna adds, smiling: 'It helps to identify us as a housing agency.' Still nodding, Paula listens to Emma, who adds: 'And then it would be nice if it said our address, Savonia Street 8.' Paula turns to Anna, who offers a thumbs-up: 'Or... [the company's name] unites!' Emma quickly agrees: 'Yes yes, something like that.' Paula looks at Emma and also agrees: 'Yes.'

In the first episode, the CEO focuses on listening to the employees, who engage in a lively conversation based on the stickers' design. When the employees express their criticism and start to present ideas for the stickers, the CEO offers them positive non-verbal and verbal cues, such as eye contact, nodding and affirmative vocalisations. Through active listening, the CEO encourages the employees to actively participate in the conversation and share information. Alvesson and Sveningsson (2003) have emphasised how managers listening to subordinates convey many positive messages, such as feelings of participation and enhanced social significance as respected and contributing team members. Even though the CEO herself is usually enthusiastic and active in offering her own ideas, here she conceals her eagerness and concentrates on actively listening to her employees which, according to Alvesson and Sveningsson (2003), is a very important lesson for enthusiastic leaders to learn.

Episode 2. Being cheerful and convincing everybody to participate

Emma exclaims in a cheerful voice: 'The stickers came! The stickers came!' Irene, who usually does not engage in any kind of humorous behaviour in meetings, turns to look at Emma and laughs gently. Paula laughs and says with a smile: 'Yes, and I have always dreamed about using the logo of our own office.' Anna exclaims with her cheerful voice: 'Let's cover the rental boxes with stickers!' Everyone burst into laughter.

Paula suggests: 'We could have the sticker show the name of the franchise chain, and the logo of our own office below those stickers.' One after another, every employee agrees. Paula continues, directing her words to Emma: 'And then our address on the other side.' Emma agrees: 'Yes, sure.' Pride in her voice, Paula says: 'Let's make more stickers. Let's do this again in our own [the name of the city] style!' Smiling, the employees all agree.

In the second episode, through their cheerfulness, two employees encourage the CEO and the other employees participate in the interaction. Their joy regarding the stickers amuses the other employees and invites them to join in the cheerfulness. The CEO, who engaged in active listening in the first episode, starts to verbally participate in the conversation by offering her ideas about the stickers' design and their potential placement on the removal boxes. The employees take roles as active and approving listeners when the CEO emphasises the willingness of their office to design stickers according to its own preferences as compared to other offices in the franchise chain.

Episode 3. Joking and offering imaginative ideas

Anna asks: 'How many removal boxes we are going to have?' Emma answers: 'The decision is up to us.' Paula confirms: 'Yes, it's up to us... how about five?' Rosa joins in the negotiation: 'Twenty of them would be too many?' Irene emphatically offers her point of view: 'Twenty boxes is too few if you are really going to move out.' Paula frames her view as a question: 'But in my opinion, twenty of them would be too many?' Anna suggests: 'But if we store them.' Emma asks: 'Where are you going to store all the boxes?' Anna laughs: 'In my personal storage...' Everybody laughs. Rosa says dramatically, raising her hands: 'I don't have any [personal storage], my cupboards are overflowing.' Poker-faced, Paula turns to Anna and asks: 'Do you have any storage?' Anna laughs: 'Well, it is quite full. But I do have a huge bath!' Paula and Anna are laugh. Anna giggles: [Getting to work] 'with a huge bathtub full of boxes with me!' Emma turns to look at Irene and suggests: 'Let's give the boxes to you, you have a summer house in the countryside.' Irene grins. Looking delighted, Paula turns to Irene and suggests: 'Your barn!' Irene laughs: 'In your dreams!' She then grins widely. Rosa reminds Paula in a neutral tone: 'We do have storage rented for purposes just like this.' Immediately, Paula nods: 'Yes, we do.'

In the third episode, the CEO and the employees joke about how to store the boxes. The discussion begins with one employee posing a practical question about the number of the removal boxes the office will acquire, and another employee answers her by drawing from we-rhetoric and emphasising collective decision making. The CEO begins a collective negotiation about the number of the removal boxes; this turns into friendly banter about storage options. The employees establish the comedic mood of the conversation by playing with the idea of storing the boxes at their homes. The CEO demonstrates a great sense of humour when, carefully hiding her amusement, she asks an employee about the available storage in her flat, though—as a rental and housing specialist—she is very familiar with each of her employees' living situations. Martineau (1972) proposes that humour can enhance group norms of open communication. The friendly and collective joking imaginatively about places where they could store the removal boxes (a large bath, a summer house, a barn outside the city) ends when one employee rationally reminds the CEO that the office has its own storage. Matching her neutral tone, the CEO ends the comical behaviour.

Episode 4. Supporting employees and offering substantial ideas

Paula regards the employees and asks: 'The big question is, how we are going to start offering this service?' Anna looks at Paula: 'Have you been asking the other franchisees how they manage the invoicing and other practicalities?' Rosa answers: 'Eddie [franchisee from another city] said [at the franchise meeting] that he markets the removal boxes while signing rental agreements.' Paula imitates a potential customer service question: 'Do you need removal boxes...' Rosa continues to discuss Eddie's practices: 'And then he put the ad in the window.' Rosa points to the window: 'We can use our Fotodigital for that.' Paula smiles and nods. Anna suggests: 'We can advertise the boxes on Facebook.' Emma argues: 'We should have a small leaflet.' Paula suggests content for the leaflet: 'Take a box, pay by cash.' Rosa summarises the conversation: 'Make the information and the text about cash payment'. Anna makes the decision: 'Okay, that's clear!'

In the fourth episode, the CEO adopts a supportive role and the employees start planning marketing strategies. The discussion begins when the CEO poses a question about how they might start providing the new service. The CEO then focuses on listening to employees, who actively share examples of how the service has been put into practice in another office. The CEO's supportive role is in line with popular ideas on leadership as a facilitative rather than a directive influence, especially in knowledge-intensive companies (Alvesson, 1995; Trevelyan, 2001). By imitating a customer service representative who would ask the customer whether they need removal boxes, the CEO establishes the new service as easily marketable in face-to-face interactions. Later, the CEO hints at the concise account of the service ('Take a box, pay by cash') they could provide in the leaflet. The employees in turn perform operative planning by offering ideas on how the service can be marketed. At the end of the episode, the employees end the discussion.

Episode 5. Asking questions, elaborating and making decisions

Rosa asks: 'Has anybody compared prices for box rental?' Emma answers: 'Probably not.' Rosa reminds them: 'We were saying that our prices should be cheaper than prices everywhere else.' Anna looks at the computer: 'Fifteen cents per day.' Paula says: 'Last time, I paid sixteen cents.' Anna looks at Paula and asks: 'So our price will be fifteen cents?' Paula agrees: 'Okay, that's it. Fifteen cents per box per day.' Immediately, Irene asks: 'When we are going to invoice? When the customers fetch their boxes, or when they return them?' Anna: 'Wait a minute.' Anna reads from the other office's draft agreement: 'The customer pays when she returns the boxes to the office.' Anna asks Paula: 'Is that okay?' Paula answers: 'Yes.' Emma asks: 'Do we have any kind of charge for delays?' Paula answers: 'No, because the customer will pay based on the rental days.' Emma hesitates: 'Yes, but how about... I can imagine that...' Paula turns to look at Emma: 'Yes?' Emma raises a possible problem: 'I just wonder what happens if somebody rents the boxes for a weekend, and we book the next customer for Monday, and then the previous customer does not return the boxes in time. What we are going to do?' Paula sounds convincing: 'Well, I will buy twenty boxes. I will squeeze the boxes into our storage. It's only a short haul from here. And we will pick them up from there, and I will buy more of them if needed. Let's plunge into this new service!'

The fifth episode illustrates how the rest of the conversation proceeds through several cycles: the employees pose operative questions, then elaborate on operative issues, and finally confirm the decision from the CEO. In this cycle, the employees have the main roles of asking questions about and providing information on operative issues (e.g. pricing and invoice procedures) created by the new service. The CEO participates in providing information, but the employees control the

conversation; this is in line with the findings of Larson, Bussom, Vicars and Jauch (1986) that much of managerial behaviour is reactive (i.e. it responds to the initiatives and requests of others). When one employee hesitantly raises a potential problem (delays in box returns) in the service process, the CEO has the important role of encouraging her to continue describing the problem and providing a clear plan to solve it. By the end of the conversation, in spite of the possible ambiguities of the new service process, the CEO has inspired the employees to move forward with it.

Discussion

This case study illustrates how mundane leadership is performed by both the CEO and the employees through polyphonic chatting in an office meeting focused on making decisions concerning the practicalities of a new service: renting removal boxes to customers.

First, analysis of the discussion shows that polyphonic chatting is characterised by multi-voiced, spirited and rapid-tempo speech patterns, during which other voices are not silenced or marginalised (Bakhtin, 2010a, 2010b; Cunliffe & Eriksen, 2011). This analysis also illustrates that polyphonic chatting includes two distinct phases: playful chatting and factful chatting. In the case analysed, the playful chatting phase was initiated by the CEO, who focused on actively listening to the employees (seen in the first episode), after which the employees started the next playful chatting phase through being in cheerful moods (seen in the second episode). This phase was sustained through comedic behaviour (seen in the third episode), by which the CEO and the employees engaged in imaginative idea elaboration. The factful chatting phase was then begun by the CEO, who posed an open question on organising the new service and sustained the phase by supporting the employees' views and decisions, which enabled them to engage in factual idea elaboration (seen in the fourth episode). The remainder of the factful chatting phase was maintained by the employees through the cycle of asking questions, providing information and confirming the decision from the CEO. In this way, the collective elaboration of micro-operative issues was supported by the CEO, who adopted a reactive and encouraging leadership role (seen in the fifth episode).

Second, the findings illustrate how polyphonic chatting emerged through collectively performed, iterative phases of playful and factful chatting, during which it was not evident who was leading the conversation. Alvesson and Sveningsson (2003) have criticised how previous leadership studies were dominated by a strong assumption of asymmetry in the relationship between the leader and other group members, and how the leader is typically viewed as overly active in group dynamics, as having superior insight and as enacting a strong influence on subordinates. However, the findings of this case suggest that both the CEO and the employees took on leadership roles in the conversation studied. In accordance with Alvesson and Sveningsson (2003), it can be suggested that the CEO in the case study may be portrayed as a progressive leader who demonstrated 'post-heroic leadership' (Huey, 1994) and feminisation of management (Fondas, 1997).

Third, the findings highlight how leadership and management are intertwined in the everyday practices of organisations. Alvesson and Sveningsson (2003) have criticised dichotomies (see Kotter, 1990; Mintzberg, 1998) in which management is described as creating stability through controlling, coordinating and directing, whereas leadership is described as creating change through visions,

networking, teamwork, creativity and inspiration. In contrast, this case exemplifies how management and leadership are intertwined activities collectively performed by the CEO and the employees.

Fourth, the findings suggest that joking behaviour, though it might be considered trivial, seems to release the 'human spirit' and enhance both inspiration and motivation (Bartlett & Ghoshal, 1995). This study illustrates how the playful chatting phase catalysed imaginative idea elaboration (seen in the third episode), after which the factful chatting phase was rich in factual idea elaboration and the collective elaboration of micro-operative issues (seen in the fourth episode). Vinton (1989) found that humour reduces status differences and equalises employees in organisations where teasing and joking are permissible and commonly directed at all members.

Theoretical Contributions and Managerial Implications

This research case provides new data on leadership as a mundane activity and a relational phenomenon. In addition, it has introduced a novel concept of polyphonic chatting to conceptualise multi-voiced, democratic and appreciative interaction within organisations.

Two recommendations can be made from the findings. In accordance with Alvesson and Sveningsson (2003), we suggest that leaders may benefit from viewing their role as not special, but instead as consisting of the fairly mundane acts of providing and asking for information, listening, solving practical and technical problems, in which management and leadership activities are intertwined. As well, both leaders and employees benefit from improving workplace relations to be more humanistic and democratic. This can be done by individually and collectively reflecting on organisational conversation practices to enhance equal participation throughout face-to-face interactions. Finally, it can be suggested that conversations on topics that are specific to employees' work activities, such as the practicalities of a minor new service, are fruitful opportunities for leaders to practise a more polyphonic, equal and relational approach to leadership.

Conclusions

The conversation case examined in this paper suggests that a specific kind of multi-voiced interaction—polyphonic chatting—can have a critical role in the collective construction of relational leadership in face-to-face interaction. This study illustrates how polyphonic chatting is maintained through playful chatting and factful chatting, which are equally important phases in the production of a democratic and appreciative organisational reality. Finally, this case analysis indicates the relevance of micro-level analysis of videotaped research data in studying the interactions between a leader and their employees.

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