Discursive process of leadership

Gibbs, Stephen; Reynolds, Kae

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Dr Stephen Gibbs, Senior Lecturer in Leadership, s.p.gibbs@hud.ac.uk
Dr Kae Reynolds, Senior Lecturer in Leadership, k.reynolds@hud.ac.uk
Huddersfield Business School, Queensgate HD1 3DH Huddersfield West Yorkshire

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Discursive process of leadership: A leadership dialogue and Bakhtinian approach to leadership learning

Authenticity is a concept within leadership theory that is equally saturated in positivistic thought as are the majority of studies published (Ford & Harding, 2011). In response, this study takes a critical approach to leadership learning. We reject the monological, linear mainstream conceptualisations of one true leadership process, opting for a pluralistic leadership concept manifested in discursive, co-creative and ongoing dialogue. This fluid and boundaryless notion concerns itself not only with language, but with meaningful relationships in leadership. Drawing on Bakhtinian dialogical imagination (Bakhtin, 1981), we build on fledgling theoretical enquiry into dialogue and position dialogical leadership in the realm of relationality. We respond further to the constraints of hegemonic leadership research by following an extended discursive and digressive conversation between two leadership academics, adopting the Bakhtinian posture for leadership: in order to know the Self, the Other is required, and to be in relationship is to influence in a leaderful sense.

Discursiveness as a way of revealing meaning is an important element of dialogical imagination. Bakhtin asserted that a dialogical Self should lean towards interaction, alert to alternative patterns and searching utterances for meaning. This opposes the aesthetic of the hyper-individual seeking to eclipse competition through a modern ‘my logic must defeat yours’ dialectic, which often dismisses discursion as unproductive. Dialogical imagination also leads to shared voices emerging. Leadership, thus, is revealed by the denotative language used to narrate experience. Such extended conversations reflect, for example, Dostoyevsky’s writing (Bakhtin, 1984), including and illustrating “the myriad of seemingly conflicting interests” (Cunliffe & Eriksen, 2011), and giving weight to a wider literary lens as opposed to a microscopic scientific lens. Conversation departs from orthodoxies, such as psychological metrics, becomes ‘a text’, and offers discursiveness as the counter-balance to analytical leadership forensics. Discourse is
presented as a rationale for questioning bounded meaning in authenticity, echoing the arguments of Ford and Harding (2011) and Benjamin (as cited in Ford and Harding) viewing leadership as intersubjective encounters. The dialogic text defies the expectation for conversation to possess immediate meaning, and introduces concern for the ordinary moment-to-moment thought process. Both parties give permission to the Other, challenging the more literal interpretations of theoretical frames and models, and seeking some measure of ‘what you really think’ authenticity. As such, authenticity is re-framed outside the instrumentalism of monological theoretical positivism, which is ever-present in the field.

By clinging to the coherency that dialectical orthodoxy maintains, we argue, unsustainable action persists. This study deliberately departs from category usage, allowing new intersubjective patterns to emerge from long utterances, and liberating a non-essentialised leadership to surface from the rigidity of the dominant dialectic. This departure from debate amongst legitimised leadership ‘beings’ and ‘knowings’ towards dialogical leadership exposes meaning through the long conversation and views loose patterns of utterances through their intertextual relationship and contextual meaning. Future leadership development may choose to recognise this fluid engagement as a ‘more authentic’ representation, further dislodging dominant monological orthodoxies.

References


