

BEYOND THE HYPE OF 'LEADERSHIP'

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Introduction

Since arguably the 1990s there has been a distinct turn in research, scholarship and professional discourses towards 'leadership'. This turn has been so successful that as a disciplinary space, it is no longer called 'educational administration', or even 'educational management', rather 'educational leadership'. This is reflected in journal titles, academic positions, promotional positions, professional discourses, and most notably, the various edu-preneurs (I use this to denote those educational entrepreneurs who leverage their skills and knowledge for profit from educators, schools and systems) and various consultants doing the rounds. That is, both professional and academic discourses have legitimised, and arguably canonised, 'leadership' while abandoning and demonising previously popular labels such as 'management' and 'administration'.

In the broader organisational studies, while central, the scholarly value of 'leadership' remains contested. This has not stopped a rather voluminous, and exponentially increasing, set of literatures – especially through online sources and social media such as twitter. Even a cursory glance at the various literatures of 'leadership' brings me to ask questions of the whole agenda. That is, while 'leadership' is being promoted as the solution to a whole array of social crises, I have questions as to what exactly are we talking about when we mobilise the label 'leadership'? You need only attend a 'leadership' conference or simply google it to hear / read of the latest adjectival 'leadership' that will transform, turnaround, revitalise, etc your organisation. Well I say "enough is enough"!

In this provocation I am going to argue that 'leadership', despite its contemporary popularity in organisational discourses, is actually limiting our understanding of social institutions. To do so, I am going to build my argument on three markers: first, 'leadership' as the great hope to get beyond organisational roles; second, the explicit linking of 'leadership' with change; and third, the underlying

generative temporality of 'leadership'. From this, I argue that 'leadership' is a product of the managerialist project and therefore rather than providing any possible alternative or meaningful way of knowing, doing and being in the social world, 'leadership' is merely an extension of managerialism.

'Leadership' beyond roles

In breaking with administration and management, 'leadership' was seen as a means of getting beyond organisational roles in the descriptions of what it is really like to work and belong to organisations. That is, 'leadership' was to get beyond the bureaucracy. Oh how this has failed. Notions of distribution, borrowed from a range of social sciences have been appropriated, or dare I say bastardised, in educational discourses to such an extent that contemporary dialogue around teacher 'leadership' or middle management 'leadership' actually reinforce organisational roles and conceptually offer nothing when it comes to understanding 'leadership'. This is not to suggest that they do not illuminate the complexity of the role of the teacher, or middle level manager, but when it comes to 'leadership' they tell us nothing that we did not know going in. Rather, the need for the adjective is due to a lack of being able to contextualise the concept.

As it stands, in the face of criticism of what exactly 'leadership' is, as a set of discourses, 'leadership' has not directly engaged but rather sought to make itself relevant by expanding the use of adjectives (in this case, linked to organisational roles). Much like a professional association more concerned with increasing its membership base and expanding to target various levels of 'leadership' (again, reinforcing organisational roles) and in doing so, 'leadership' has destroyed that on which it was originally premised. Therefore, at least for me, 'leadership' discourses have failed to get beyond an analysis of institutions based on organisational roles – or to use the demonised language of a previous era, 'bureaucracy'.

‘Leadership’ equals change

In one of my favourite arguments to engage with, many academics and practitioners equate ‘leadership’ with change. To cite a specific example, Brian Caldwell (2007) argues that change equals leadership and no change indicates that either leadership was not needed or that it failed. Two things are worth noting here. First, if ‘leadership’ is change, then why do we even need ‘leadership’? Why not simply talk about change? The same argument can be raised against those who claim that ‘leadership’ is influence. If ‘leadership’ is something else, why do we need ‘leadership’?

Alternatively, there is a substantial discourse around the idea that change is everywhere. If change is everywhere, then by Caldwell’s logic, ‘leadership’ is everywhere. In that case, ‘leadership’ tells me nothing that is of use. It quite simply cannot be used to highlight distinctions. If it is everywhere it can mean many things – and not necessarily be transferrable – and is really just a word brought out to make things (usually a person’s actions, and often by themselves) sound important / significant.

Second, Peter Gronn (2008) among others, claims that change itself is a rather vacuous concept with no specific concrete referent. That is, change is a bit of a nothing. If change is vacuous, and ‘leadership’ is change, then ‘leadership’ is vacuous. This is problematic for those in ‘leadership’ and even more so for those who pursue their income through ‘leadership’ development and professional learning.

The temporality of ‘leadership’

I want to take a slightly different line of enquiry here and highlight a less obvious problem with mainstream uses of ‘leadership’. In many, if not most cases, there is an assumption that ‘leadership’ exists, is a real thing, and more importantly, is necessary for successful – whatever that means – organisations. The most glaring issue here is the prior assumption of the existence of ‘leadership’. There is never a doubt, and therefore the possibility of ‘leadership’ not existing, rather just a continuum for the success of ‘leadership’.

Building from this original assumption, ‘leadership’ is identified post event. That is, there is an assumption it exists, but we identify where it took place after the events. Take for example the idea of successful/effective schools. We assume that ‘leadership’ exists, and in many ways this is defined in our pre-established criteria of what is a successful/effective school. The school is then studied to ascertain what ‘leadership’ did to bring about the success. This is used to produce a list, framework, model, capacities, competencies, standards and so on, which are then used against the original criteria to establish their validity. So the successful school / department etc is identified on the basis of some criteria pre-established.

This pre-established criteria is then used to validate the leadership that it identified. Shock surprise, the pre-established criteria supports the model of leadership that it created. As such, ‘leadership’ as a label adds nothing as the criteria of its establishment is circular. This is a fundamental methodological flaw in much of the School Effectiveness School Improvement – to which I include successful schools – literature.

So what?

I can imagine that the argument I have built in this paper may be quickly dismissed. As it stands, if you have read this far I am impressed. After all, this publication is aimed at ‘leaders’ in their various forms. As a group, this audience arguably has the highest stakes in ‘leadership’. I can also see others claiming that I am anti-progress or turning my back on those with whom I study. Or that I am even engaging in some snooty nosed ivory tower work and ignoring the complexity of the day-to-day of school life. All of these claims I am happy to engage with. But to be clear, I have a strong belief in the work of educators – a role I still consider myself to hold, despite not working in a primary/secondary school. Second, I strongly defend the influence of different actors within organisations on the day-to-day work of educators. Having worked through numerous re-structures at multiple universities, I have witnessed, felt the stress and pressure and the like of those above forcing mandates and the joys of collegial endeavours and building relationship. At the same time, I do sit in the privileged position of a university – a publicly funded institution explicitly charged with the mandate to thinking critically about issues that matter. For me, and the disciplinary space to which I pledge allegiance, ‘educational leadership, management and administration’, I see a problem in the way ‘leadership’ is being used, abused, and just plain stupidly by those in influential positions. My argument is easily summarised: be clear about what it is we are talking about and call BS when needed.

A key question that I can predict coming my way is, of what value is a critique of ‘leadership’? Herein lies the challenge. For all of its claims to cutting-edge practices and innovative and creative solutions, as a set of discourses, ‘leadership’ is caught up in the hegemonic position of managerialism. That is, ‘leadership’ is a product of its own invention. ‘Leadership’ is the solution to a crisis of its own invention. Managerialism, built on a foundation of Frederick Winslow Taylor’s Principles of Scientific Management seeks perpetual improvement (that is, you can always do better by pursuing more effective / efficient practices). In its various appropriations over the past century plus, but most notably Edward Demings’ quality improvement (or Total Quality Management) movement, explicit calls have been made for ‘leadership’ as the means to bring about improvement. As a result, ‘leadership’ is the solution to a problem (the need for perpetual – meaning you are never good enough) of its own creation.

For me, the uncritical acceptance of 'leadership' in mainstream literatures, research and professional discourses is highly problematic and needs to be challenged – or at least engaged with. Without such dialogue and debate, 'leadership', that somewhat illusive and yet over hyped solution to the woes of the social world simply does not live up to the hype.

References

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