

Reflexive Leadership

Organising in an imperfect world

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Reflexive and Unreflexive Leadership

In this chapter we look at the theme of reflexivity or lack thereof among people holding a senior position, primarily as managers but most of our views are also relevant for informal authorities (e.g. leading professionals, experienced and resourceful non-promoted people acting as informal leaders).

As said in Chapter 2 we see reflexivity as a broader orientation where people not only reflect on a limited topic, deal with a tricky situation or think about feedback they have received, but think more deeply about issues, including their own framework, assumptions, expectations, and favoured vocabulary. Reflexivity means being able to examine and, if motivated, transcend established templates for how to think and act. Although all people reflect to some degree and have at least a rudiment of capacity and interest in reflexivity, there are enormous variations. This is partly a personal matter, but situation also matters. With hard work pressure, stress and anxieties over failures and conflicts, even many with significant reflexive capacities may become unreflexive and limit their thinking to instrumental concerns. How can I reach my objectives? This question takes centre stage while deeper thinking about *how* one is thinking and considerations of problematic or questionable objectives or requirements escape attention. Unfortunately, much managerial and organizational work often pushes people to develop a limited capacity for and interest in reflexivity.

In this chapter we develop the topic of reflexivity based on some cases¹ that are discussed in depth. We start with illustrations of the unreflexive leader (or in some cases unreflexive HIP) and then move on to some more impressive and hopefully inspirational examples.

UNREFLEXIVE LEADERSHIP

Interestingly enough, our almost twenty years of in-depth studies of managerial life and work indicate that managers are often limitedly thoughtful about what they do, the way they are and what relations they are involved in. Some of our cases also indicate limited reflexivity – managers often have rather basic and contradictory views of themselves and their leadership (Sveningsson & Alvesson, 2016). In addition, managers often have

high regard for their own ability, motives, ambitions, and practices, while subordinates tend to be less impressed. Of course, most people are reflexive to a degree – and so are our two case examples below – but there are often significant elements or aspects of most HIPs' work, including leadership, that score low on reflexivity, and it is to these we now turn.

A middle manager preaching coaching while practising directive interventions

Kim is a middle-aged manager with over ten years' experience in a senior role in a global manufacturing company (Alvesson & Jonsson, 2016). She combines a traditional line manager role with an overall integrating role in which she also coordinates other line managers. Kim likes to be a coaching leader but also recognizes that some situations demand other styles: 'sometimes you have to be a manager'. She enjoys reading about leadership and coaching. Over the years Kim has also participated in several leadership and mentoring programmes, both initiated by the company and of her own accord. In the following extract from a conversation with Kim, we hear reflections about leadership and whether coaching is different from being a leader:

I think leadership questions are interesting so I try to read as much as possible. Something that particularly interests me is this coaching element of leadership. In the role I have towards one of my co-workers, I want him to use me as a sounding board, but he shouldn't get the answers from me. I want to ask questions to make him think.

When you read books about coaching ... they can be extreme, in my opinion. Because they say that everything you do should be based on that and I'm not there yet. Maybe I'll get there some time. But I think a mix is preferable.

Kim strongly inclines towards the ideal of coaching, finding that this 'particularly interests me'. She indicates that this should be central although not 'extreme' in terms of leadership. She also emphasizes the importance of participation and responds to a question about what she thinks distinguishes good leadership from bad by stating that:

A leadership style where you don't listen to the organization, or to your people, when you think you know best because you're the manager. I don't like that at all ... I think leadership needs to be different in different situations. There are situations when the manager has to go in and say: No, we're doing it this way. But for the most part, when you've got a little time, then it's better that the group or the organization comes up with the answer, because then they'll commit.

Here, we can spot a clear and coherent view of 'leadership'. Occasionally, there are reasons for exceptions and it needs to be a mix, but Kim's view appears to be strongly in favour of coaching and participation. Mostly it should be the group or the organization – not the manager – that comes up with the answer. Kim expresses some awareness of

variation, talking about the importance of adapting leadership and the impossibility of having *one* leadership style. This is to an extent in contrast with the company's efforts to achieve a uniform style of leadership:

Different situations require different kinds of leadership ... I want to coach but this is not the same kind of situation as when I work with the people in my organization. Here I'm the person responsible for our organization and I'm talking to another person and making demands on them. And that means I'm not in a position to develop them, so it's not my style of leadership. That's what I mean when I say you can't just have one style of leadership. I don't believe you can.

Put another way: developing the employees and leading/managing the work are two quite separate things. At the same time, in our many interviews with Kim this view of the necessity of having a mix is sparsely expressed compared to the principles of good leadership, particularly coaching and participation, for example, when she claims that it is important to take on different roles as a leader and not least to: 'make the managers let go of things in the organization and not do all the work themselves. They should let people in the organization help them to do things and to grow and increase the level of motivation further down'.

Here we get an impression of a certain level of reflexivity. Kim reads a lot, but is not uncritical about certain ideals; she believes there are limits to the use of a coaching leadership style. Some mix is inevitable and you have to look at the situation.

But if we carefully observe Kim's actions in various situations we get a quite different picture. Kim's leadership *practices* are generally loosely coupled or even inconsistent with the (diverse) ideas and meanings expressed. Kim's self-image as a coaching leader is also difficult to discern in practice. Despite Kim's avowed love of coaching, this seems to be at odds with an otherwise natural tendency to speak up and take over. Kim seems to respond to situations by exercising 'stimuli-response leadership' where issues are dealt with based on a spontaneous reading of the situation, without much sign of careful reflection or an integrated, coherent idea or framework guiding an overall leadership ambition.

We will look at two interactions where leadership is – or could be – displayed.

The first is a meeting between Kim, in her role as line manager, and people from another part of the organization, who are responsible for spare parts. The purpose of the meeting is to agree on a price for an upgrade package. Kim confronts her co-workers with the fact that they do not have a full command of the central question and that they are unable to supply an answer within a reasonable time:

This is absolutely crucial. It's unbelievable. I mean, you must know which level you're going to place yourselves on? What are you talking about? We need to have an idea of what this is going to cost. Surely you're well enough prepared to know what price you charge today?

This intervention may be read as reprimanding but, as is often the case when it comes to 'leadership', it can also be seen in other terms, as educational for instance, if slightly

harshly expressed. Kim is pointing out the importance of the price and having a clear idea of this fundamental issue. But even if leadership as the management of meaning does not necessarily call for softness, perhaps this is more a case of Kim favouring exercising power: co-workers probably feel that Kim is inclined towards KITA (kick in the ass). There was no evidence of Kim's espoused trademark – coaching – or claimed tendency to give co-workers 'a very free hand'. She could, in principle, have been more interested in their thinking, experience of problems, and reasons for prioritizing issues other than the price. At least we could image something less than an opposite move from the espoused coaching-participation. If Kim then still saw the price question as vital she could try 'leadership manipulation' to coach them into zooming in on the price question. Instead of pursuing that line of action a more direct, power-oriented approach was taken, despite Kim's claim to dislike this approach and her emphasis on the need to listen to people.

Another case gives a similar impression of practice as disconnected from the espoused ideal. In a discussion with a project leader, Robyn, who was responsible for ending the product that Kim as a line manager is responsible for, Kim starts by stressing that the project leader has done a good job, thus supporting the project leader in the work.

I must say, Robyn, I feel very comfortable having you in charge here. I think that you are lifting every ... and see what's underneath, you are involving everybody, I really appreciate that.

But signs that Kim believes that Robyn is doing far too much without realizing it soon contradicts the satisfaction she expressed. Kim also gives Robyn some advice about how to make sure the project avoids criticism or failure – perhaps with the intention of trying to steer the project:

Kim: One risk when you do something this big, and as cost-functional as this, is that you will probably be criticized from time to time.

Robyn: I accept that.

Kim: You have my full support, but I think that you are taking a very broad teacher role here; we can never be 100 per cent. We need to clarify to the organization that this is much, much, much more than we ever did before. Let's try to capture as much as possible, but there will be things that are not handled correctly, and then we will have to do some of the work again.

Robyn: I see it pretty much like any other project. There are failures in the testing or in the parts, and then you have to reschedule or plan to do something more special. And recover.

Kim: But this is worse, because you are the first. This is not like any ordinary development of a product, because we have a lot of experience in this area. This is something totally new, and I think you are fully aware of this. I think

that we need to push that in the organization. Some will be captured under the communication; the expectation level should be set right. I will definitely make sure that the engineering department here in the city fully understands that this is a huge task. But the expectations ...

While on the one hand Kim expresses full confidence in Robyn, on the other she appears to think Robyn is unaware of fundamental difficulties. Kim believes it is important to explain the situation and how Robyn should act, and does not really accept Robyn's relaxed and confident attitude. Robyn appears to be calm and sees the project as being like any other, while Kim is concerned about Robyn's broad teaching role and that the whole thing is 'much, much, much more than we ever did before' and 'something totally new'. Even after Robyn has responded that this is like any other project, Kim claims that 'This is something totally new, and I think you are fully aware of this', directly contradicting Robyn's statement. The assertion about how things are, the helpful tips and raising the awareness of problems are central. There is also a fairly strong effort to direct Robyn. Kim says 'we need to ... clarify... push that' but this seems to signal what *Robyn* should do. There is no coaching, only efforts to do directive leadership (or perhaps rather management). Whether Kim's directed style is motivated or not, is hard to tell. It may be a motivated deviation from Kim's espoused ideal, and it is not a clear contradiction of the participation ideal either – as Kim's tries to influence meaning and make Robyn see issues in a particular light, rather than directly instructing her to do something specific.

But it is interesting that during the eight meetings and interactions we observed we did not notice much, if any, of the coaching style or the participation ideal that Kim often preaches, or at least sees as the guiding star for being a good leader. Kim dislikes a leadership style based on strong leader-driven work, where 'you think you know best because you're the manager', as she puts it. But Kim actually appeared to have little doubt that she knew best and insisted on expressing that view in her acts as a leader (or HIP) in the two episodes above. Nor was the ideal of giving people very free hands obviously expressed in practice.

We can see that while Kim saw coaching-participation leadership as the core approach and the occasional – sporadically motivated – departures from that as a good mix, the actual mix involved peripheral coaching-participation, and 'the manager knows best' approach at the core. In Kim's case there are signs of reflexivity when thinking about leadership and its complexities, including the limits to coaching, but the practice often contradicted this and indicated that non-reflexivity was guiding a great deal of the practice.

A principal implementing standards and shaping things up in a school

A US state dealing with school problems decided to implement increased standardization of the curriculum and instructions. It also established rigid benchmarks for student promotion and threatened to close low-scoring schools (Hallett, 2007, 2010). In this

context, Mrs Kox was seen as a rising star. As an assistant principal at an improving school, she learned the business ideal of accountability. She loved this education because ‘business people have a different orientation to improvement. They have a better sense of urgency’ (Interview).²

The school board believed Kox was a good match for accountability mandates because ‘she’s very opinionated and has very high standards’. She was seen as ‘very tough’ and as having a ‘no nonsense’ approach (Interview). Test scores played a role in the decision to hire Kox. The school performed better than the city average but fell short compared to its sister school Baxter Elementary. Importantly, the board also viewed Kox as a strong leader because she guided the school into the new era of accountability, had exhaustive knowledge of education policy, was tireless, and held firm to her convictions. She emphasized that she thought results, rather than being liked by everybody, to be central for her work. Senior management gave her outstanding reviews and enthusiastically renewed her contract. Excellent leadership, one may think. But going beneath the surface reveals a more complicated story.

Costen was a large school, with 90 teachers and 1,600 students from diverse backgrounds. For years, the school responded to heterogeneous student needs by creating a system of high autonomy and low surveillance. Teachers created their own work routines. Some teachers were rigid authoritarians; others used reward systems to promote good behaviour. Many relied on a teacher-driven, skills-centred style; others used an inquiry-based method. The teachers at the school described the previous principals in very positive terms: ‘they hired good people who they let do their jobs ...’ (Interview). And despite an increased emphasis on accountability, teachers could ‘do their jobs’ without intervention.

For Kox accountability provided a ‘rational theory of how’ schools should operate. She told the researcher:

They’d [the teachers] been running the school without a principal for six months. Everyone took full advantage of running in every direction that they chose to. Well, that’s not going to happen with this administration. [Referring to teachers flooding her with reimbursement requests]. If you want to make any purchases with a reason, you submit a roster of what you need to purchase and you get approved and then you get reimbursed. I mean, if you allow no system in place, 100 people out there doing shopping on their own ... can’t function that way. (Interview, in Hallett, 2010, p. 60)

Kox liked to get involved in the work and say, ‘What’s going on here? This is what we’re going to have to do’, rather than just allowing the teacher to do it. She gave flesh to accountability through her surveillance of classroom and student management, grading, and curriculum and instruction. While previous administrations rubber-stamped grades, Kox scrutinized them. Recalling a meeting, Kox said teachers were ‘panicking’ and that one was ‘very worried because she had never seen anyone review her grade book for the last 26 years’ (Interview).

Teachers felt frustrated, many resigned, and over time, as they created meanings around the changes to draw upon as a means for political action, they tried to protect

the prior order by mobilizing against Kox. They gathered a large number of complaints into a 119-page volume titled *Turmoil at 'KOX'sten School*.

I plastered her [Kox's] name all over this city. Everybody I could think of I sent that book to. And the book was just magnificent ... It had, oh God, maybe a good 40 odd letters from various teachers... And through the whole process, all I kept hearing was 'You can't make principals change ... Let's just ride her out and eventually she'll be gone.' I was just like 'No, no.' The reason it's so difficult to combat leadership is that everybody runs scared. (Interview) (Hallett, 2010, p. 65)

One may view Kox as a slave to accountability, as an empowered entrepreneur who brought accountability to Costen, fighting conservative and sloppy teachers spoiled by lack of accountability, as a task-oriented despot (the teachers' view), or as an intrepid leader (the board's view) (Hallett, 2010, p. 67).³

It is thus not easy to find the optimal, 'correct' view of Kox's leadership – if indeed that is the best term for capturing her work. The resistance from the teachers' side can be viewed as an outcome of being spoiled and too autonomous, partly an outcome of previous management at the school, which could be described as *laissez-faire*, delegatory, trust-based or supportive of autonomy. Opposition does not necessarily mean that a manager is wrong or practising ineffective or unmotivated leadership. For example, acting as a psychotherapist or a party-host may not be the most appropriate leadership ideals if the task is to rapidly improve performance. However, if opposition is maintained or strengthened, then it is or becomes 'wrong' in the sense that it creates too much discontent and disturbance and most likely leads to less than optimal results.

The case suggests that there was little leadership in the sense that most teachers did not accept the idea of the management regime that the principal tried to implement. The teachers saw themselves as autonomous, working based on judgement, preferences and their own individual style. They were typical non-followers. They complied with requirements to some extent, but compliance was based more on what they saw as the exercise of power than rational management. One response was the use of counter-power. Willing followership and the acceptance of subordination gradually gave away to resistance and fighting. The idea was to get rid of the principal or at least to force her and senior levels to make significant compromises. Kox on her side had great faith in management and vigorously tried to get the teachers to work to the standards and tests as designed. There were some leadership efforts – trying to get teachers to accept the ideas and logic of moving from a *laissez-faire*, relaxed system to a culture of accountability and high standards. But this did not work and the management and power modes became dominant. Interestingly enough, the senior level, the school board, who were less familiar with the reception of Kox's style, very much saw Kox in leader terms: engaged, convincing, persistent with an ability to get people to follow.⁴

The case illustrates some un-reflective leadership effort. A particular management system was enthusiastically adopted with limited concern for organizational history and cultural context. Meanings clashed: the principal and school board viewed specific procedures, standards and measurements as carriers of accountability and the means

to better results, while teachers saw them as rigid and serious restraints on professional judgement and viewed autonomy as they key to good results. Reflexivity would mean careful consideration of the meanings of those to be influenced, efforts to find a common ground of understanding based on negotiations of meanings as well as a willingness to evaluate and re-consider one's framework and ideals. Not much of this was apparent for the school principal in this case.

REFLEXIVE LEADERSHIP

A middle manager taking action

The case here is a middle level manager in a French bank who took action against what were seen as unfair and unproductive new assessment rules (Courpasson et al., 2012).⁵ This was triggered by a board decision to punish two branch managers of small branches located in poor rural areas. A note had been sent to all 24 branch managers ranking them from best to worst. The note stressed shortcomings and asked for explanations.

Max, a young, well-educated, promising manager of a large branch, was shocked and saw this note as neglecting and violating the bank's – Bank – traditions: 'They spent time in meetings talking about trust and commitment and cooperation and friendship, the power of the "Household" (the company) and all of a sudden, wham, a cold note identifying two branches'. Max was convinced that an outsider, more precisely from the marketing department, had written the note.

In Bank's organizational culture, branches accounted for their results collectively rather than as individual entities. People talked about a culture of sharing things, 'we do not really compete with each other; we strive to find germane places for everybody', one manager said. In that 'communitarian' context, the note broke these tacit agreements.

Max very quickly understood that the note revealed emerging tensions between two commercial cultures within Bank: those of the 'street savvy banker' and the 'skilled head of market segment'. He decided to act because he thought that it was 'ethically unfair and overly political' to identify two specific underperforming branches. He contacted six close colleagues to obtain their opinions. Max carefully chose these colleagues on the basis of personal affinities, but also, as he said, as representing 'some of the best performing branches. I did not want to give the impression that weak fellows were protecting themselves from the necessities of doing a job. On the contrary, the best among the best were saying "no" to what we considered a personal attack'. Max's colleagues quickly agreed to join him. They formed what Courpasson et al. (2012) call an 'enclave', more precisely an enclave of resistance that opposes decisions arising from prevalent power systems and processes but still acts according to the systems' rules.

Frank, an enclave member, explained that Max's authority and charisma were important, together with the emerging sense of solidarity and collective action that was triggered by the note. Enclave mobilization also resulted from a refusal to let the new 'marketing people' impose their views on the CEO. Max took notes of enclave members' discussions and suggested that he write a synthesis that would be sent to the others for

approval before it was sent to the CEO. He took the leadership because he was particularly aware of the cultural conflict, as he was at the centre of the branches' network. The group sent a 15-page response signed by the seven enclave members to top management, bypassing conventional hierarchical channels. In their report, they mainly elaborated on the fact that Marketing's note did not offer collaborative opportunities. In the introduction, they wrote, 'The initial note sounds authoritarian and strives to impose new criteria without having even discussed the issue with us. This is not acceptable'. Furthermore, the report mentions, 'We suggest that we discuss with the board the very important topic of branches' performance criteria'. They wanted to collaborate with the initiators of the system they opposed. However, they did not call for a truce; the report also reads, 'If no discussion is possible, we have decided that we would not proceed with annual evaluations of our local collaborators'. This is, in most corporate contexts, a strong message – a clear signal of willingness to use power.

The CEO initially responded angrily, finding this 'outrageous', but could not ignore the fact that something important was happening. He also realized that the resistance was not capricious: 'I knew they were regularly discussing, meeting together, and that they mobilized around their buddies. I also knew they made it a fundamental issue between them and the marketing director and staff. I did not want to encourage that but I understood that it was serious. We couldn't carry on as if nothing had happened'. (Courpasson et al., 2012, p. 808).

After some meetings, including with Max and the marketing director, the CEO decided to create a task force made up in an effort to establish a dialogue between two opposing groups of actors. Max was appointed leader of the task force. Part of the background to this was that the CEO interpreted Max's leadership and the formation of a resistance group as a result of the bank's specific culture – having people take initiatives, make autonomous decisions, and above all, take care of the company. All in all, the CEO began to see the resistance as credible and to accommodate it; from this perspective, he could easily read Max's leadership as proof of his involvement in the bank's community: 'Well, I wasn't surprised. I know him so well. He is simply the best'.

Eight months after the first meeting, Dan, the marketing manager, resigned and became regional head at another bank. He explains it as follows:

That's not a thing we are used to, people contesting something not contestable. The fact was that a couple of branches were strikingly underperforming, and we wanted explanations from the managers. And they said no, and the boss was afraid of, I don't know, a strike or something. Moreover, the contest was led by a pretty influential guy, and the boss was not ready to have a fight with him. (Courpasson et al., 2012, p. 809)

Courpasson et al. highlight some elements of this successful intervention by subordinate managers. Enclave insurgency dramatized the situation; the enclave leader offered credible interpretations of events, prompting individuals to mobilize and helping the enclaves to form a strong group. This move led to a temporary re-alignment of the power relations at Bank. Sending a well-argued report not only allowed resisters to

publicize their concerns, it also showed their willingness to take over the agenda. Although resisters acted with political subtlety and were able to justify their claims and offer concrete solutions, they nevertheless addressed topics that were normally encoded as being in the top managers' power domain. Here the members of the enclave took on new roles.

After initial surprise and irritation, top managers responded to these actions by retaking the lead and organizing further work. The CEO eventually decided to coproduce new policies in line with the new configuration of roles resulting from the productive resistance processes. Thus, at Bank, Max played a more influential role in the production of new assessment criteria than the marketing experts did. He had to defend the enclave members' view and demonstrate that he was acting for the collective good. The task force helped the CEO to restore his position as 'the boss'. It also smoothed some tensions that arose from growing opposition between the branches and central marketing, although the marketing director resigned (Courpasson et al., 2012).

In this case Max worked highly reflexively. He carefully assessed the initial note and its significance in light of organizational culture. He also considered his own role and decided to transcend his formal mandate. He contacted people in his network, and discussed and evaluated his view on the subject matter. On finding that his colleagues shared the view he decided to act further. He invited people to join a group and was a *primus motor* and spokesperson for the group. This initiative together with Max as a peer with a leader role made him a central actor. Collective action based on aligned understanding and aligned objectives was key to the process. The people involved realized their formal subordinate position but this did not significantly affect their action, which was a strong effort to make an impact on the organization. Some use of power was mobilized to show top management that if they rejected the idea of seriously discussing issues there would be consequences – the refusal to carry out certain work. The group recognized the authority of the CEO and senior management, but were not overly compliant, aiming to form a temporary relationship that was more MIP- than LIP-like. Also the CEO was forced/agreed to take a MIP (medium influencing position) in relationship to Max and his group. The establishment of a group responsible for new policies meant that the group mode of organizing also characterized corporate management issues beyond the resistance enclave work. In this case Max acted carefully in a reflexive way: transcending his role, working horizontally as well as vertically, exercising authority, but also showing respect for hierarchy (the manager-subordinate relationship) and balancing group- and individual-based modes of organizing. Networks and selective use of power were also part of his set of considerations and doings, moving outside of a follower position in order to have an impact upwards on the entire company. One may say that Max 'MIPified' hierarchical relations in this project.

A head of a hospital clinic dealing with suicide and economic issues

Another example of reflexive leadership is Stella, a physician and head of a hospital clinic with 130 employees. Her everyday behaviour and decisions are informed by

careful ethical and cultural reflection and she tries to have a consistent impact on her staff in terms of meanings, values and thinking. She sometimes works very long hours, and is engaged both in management and also in everyday patient care, partly to have close contact with and first-hand knowledge of the quality of the care provided. She is convinced that this will allow her to influence the staff in a better and more credible way than managers who concentrate solely on management/leadership and stay out of medical work. Despite a heavy workload, Stella takes time with terminal patients when the staff are – or pretend to be – busy or emotionally stressed by the anxieties of a lonely death. Of course, Stella is not unaffected by this either and has less time than anyone else, but she thinks this is important in order to set a good example, taking her leadership role seriously. She tries to take time to answer any questions from nurses, even if they do not concern the patients she is in charge of. She is aware that employees pay attention to what she does, at least if it goes beyond the conventional behaviour of people in her position.

Stella communicates consistently that the clinic needs to operate in a cost-efficient way and requires people to think through and justify expensive and not obviously necessary purchases and use of materials – explaining that if the clinic does not use the entire budget it will most likely lead to another part of the hospital functioning better because the resources will be reallocated to them. As Christmas gifts for the staff she bought products from charity organizations supporting developing countries. For catering for the clinic's educational meetings including all staff, she asked for an ecological buffet and brown bags to save the food that was not consumed. All this signals an ethical awareness and in particular a strong and systematic influence going beyond conventional efforts to do leadership. There are strong signals to encourage people to think beyond a narrow horizon. Of course, much of this is not uncontroversial. Hospital management often asks heads of clinics to concentrate on management. Many believe budgets should be spent. The responses nevertheless indicate that most of the staff have very high opinions of Stella and celebrate her and her work. Members of her staff proposed Stella as the female leader of the year in Swedish healthcare and she received an honorary recognition. Employees often respond to her with praise and appreciation (e.g. with emails saying 'you are the best' and even 'we love you').

It is worth noting the stamina, consistency, reflection, originality, sacrifice, integrity, willingness to deviate from expectations and conventions, the taking of some risks (of subordinates' collective or hospital management's disapproval), and the use of symbolically effective means, that is, acts and talk that are congruent and make a difference. The influence is almost exclusively about everyday reframing and not about programmes and campaigns or the allocation of specific resources for organizational development work. Change is done as an integrated part of managerial and medical work. Stella clearly deviates from many of the managers we have studied, many of whom are confused about their leadership, seem to have moderate impact and often cause some irritation among subordinates.

Next we find two examples of Stella's specific leadership interventions, both in the form of email correspondence to all employees in the unit:

Illustration 1. Dealing with a sad event

Hello everyone,

During the last month we have had a patient with severe heart failure. He has been cared for on several occasions and has also – against our advice – discharged himself from the hospital. Last night he chose to go home against the advice of the night nurse and this morning he was found in his home, he had chosen to take his own life.

I have spoken with many of you today. But rather than having a general meeting with the whole clinic you can come to me to talk if you want. Of course, we shall talk with each other, support each other and discuss the patient and the care he received on the one hand, but also how fragile life can be and how difficult it is to choose life everyday, with all that comes with that in terms of joy and pain, on the other.

Every year around 1,500 [Swedish] people choose to take their life – there's probably an unreported number of suicides that is hidden behind here as well, car accidents, drowning, etc. Of these, only a minor part, 20%, have had any contact with health care, mostly psychiatry or primary care. This means that most people that take their lives have not talked to anyone about their intentions before committing the act. One often talks about the calm – even joy – that some people with depressions and years of anxiety can experience when the decision to commit suicide is taken.

Physically severely ill patients have a statutory right to refrain from life-supporting treatment. Patients that are in the end stages of a neurologic disease, for example, can receive help with closing a necessary respiratory care. This is not seen as 'active euthanasia' but part of the relief that the palliative care offers.

The patient in our case had several very difficult somatic disorders and a bad prognosis for survival with active treatment and had previously chosen not to participate in hospital care. Subsequently he had a clear mind about what he wanted to do with his life. Suicides can be explained by looking at patients' previous life choices.

Even so this comes with sorrow and anxiety for all of us, especially those that have had contacts with the patient during the time of care. Many thoughts come to us – about the meaning of life, about death and about our own professional role. We will certainly need to talk a lot about these things with each other.

In this situation it is important that you remember your confidentiality. Of course you should talk about this with your dear and near. They need to know the cause of your ruminations and downheartedness. However, talk about it without revealing details of age, gender, disease, ways of committing suicide or other things that are protected by confidentiality. Under no circumstances should this be spread in social media. And you should refrain from talking to people outside your family or health professionals – because then we surpass ethical limits as well as what is lawful.

I will report this to the head physician who decides about what should be done and the clinic will perform an incident report. I will also follow this up with the patients' relatives. You are welcome to talk to me about this at any time.

Take care of yourself! And continue to do a good job as you always do!

Illustration 2. Underscoring the productive use of resources

Dear all,

I'm sorry that you receive this several weeks after its completion. It needed checking and analysis. The conclusion is that we improved the result with more than 12 million SEK (about 1.3 million euro) in relation to budget! The numbers are unbelievable ... The difference between the budgeted and factual cost is almost 10% less, or more than 13 million.

What lies behind this?

This has primarily to do with that we implemented the obliged cuts in staff very fast and that had an impact over the whole year. This involved close colleagues that had to leave their positions with us – and that is always sad! – but for them personally it meant a possibility of speeding up the process of getting a new job. If we had waited it might have been more difficult for them to get jobs they wished for, and that would have increased worries and perhaps also been a significantly higher adjustment for those that are not with us anymore.

We also implemented consumption changes related to our environmental objectives. We had less waste of food and more control over the laundry and storage in general. We also significantly reduced the cost for staff due to vacancies. It has been difficult to find temporary nurseries during the whole year. We also had less administrative staff.

Expenses for drugs decreased significantly as we have been good at changing routines in how we manage drugs. This is also due to the physicians increasingly writing prescriptions for generic drugs ...

Besides this we also do a lot of voluntary work during our leisure time. The clinic management don't demand this but the commitment that you all show and that make this clinic so incredibly fantastic contributes to our growing as persons and as a clinic.

Why is finance important?

You have all heard the expression “monopoly money”, “it disappears in a black hole” and all kinds of foul expressions in relation to finance in the public sector. It seems that it is bad to talk about being financially effective but I say once more: All the money that can be saved through more effective ways of working will contribute to more healthcare where it is needed. To spend money without any gains for the patients means to withdraw care and treatment for someone else. We have shown that it is possible to make sustainable savings that doesn't mean that we are all “just running faster”. Our organization contributes to less stress and to increased control over our own work situation. It is also nice to avoid saving on things that are beneficial for the patients. We don't have to suspend activities that we think are necessary and meaningful. We are not subjected to “moral stress” that may occur when you are forced to make savings that affect patients.

You are all part of the reason that this has been successful and that we continue to develop as a clinic – while also having so much fun.

Thanks – once more – for the past year and for being so tremendously fantastic!

Often managers communicate good messages in orchestrated settings – CEOs may for example be excellent at giving a PowerPoint presentation in front of a large audience. Carefully crafted messages may be much better than communication in everyday or non-planned situations, where counterarguments are raised or unexpected issues turn up. Emails may be more impressive than the average interactions. But in Stella's case the emails are in line with other impressions of her practices.

Comments

These examples of leadership interventions show a high degree of reflexivity. Stella carefully thinks about the wider picture and at the same time focuses on the core issues. The frame is broad and considerate in both cases.

In the first illustration she puts the issue – the suicide – into a perspective which is both societal and existential. She confirms the anxieties, sorrow and possible feelings of guilt or inadequacy of those involved, but also tries to reduce them by putting things in a wider context. She points out that the patient probably knew what he was doing and, if so, the sad outcome was probably inevitable. She establishes credibility and trust by mentioning that she also had met the patient, but can move between empathy with him and the people that nurtured him, putting the case in a broader and more distancing context. Stella reduces the drama and emotional charge of the suicide by using knowledge and experience of people who have committed suicide.

The intervention thus demonstrates empathy and support and offers a framework for a more intellectual handling of the situation. Stella also expresses openness and willingness to talk with those struggling with the events and the general need for care and support. The email also highlights the legal issues and how internal procedures are used to make sure mistakes are avoided.

The second illustration focuses on something that can be viewed as the opposite of the suicide example, at least topic-wise. Positive news about budget outcomes is almost as far as you can get from dealing with the death of a patient. Still, there are dimensions that are similar in how Stella is addressing the issues.

Stella emphasizes that this is a shared concern. Everyone is contributing, everyone should think carefully about these issues and everyone plays a part in the outcome. The systematic thoughtfulness about how to use resources is underscored. Difficult decisions have to be made, but making them early is better than waiting. Stella makes people aware of revenues and costs, and highlights uncertainties, contradictions and fluctuations, but underscores that the clinic is not a victim to external forces such as allocated resources; they can do quite a lot to control the situation. She also underscores that many people do a lot of voluntary work, which is not required, but doing so contributes to making the clinic so extraordinarily fantastic. The norm of doing something extra is thus promoted and linked to the excellent performance and reputation of the clinic. This and its employees stand out and should be seen as a strong source of pride for all involved.

Stella also emphasizes the significance of a sound economy. Saving money for the benefit of other aspects of healthcare in the county and not using the budget for herself

is sometimes viewed as stupid. In the email the opposite view is powerfully expressed. It is irresponsible and unethical to spend all the money allocated if it is not necessary, as this means fewer resources are available for healthcare somewhere else. Stella tries to expand the meaning horizon and highlight a fundamental ethical principle of taking broad responsibility and considering the ethical aspects if one thinks about the unapparent consequences of actions.

Stella also expresses warm and positive feelings towards others for contributing to excellent results, mainly in terms of the financials, to very positive developments in the organization, to a positive and joyful work climate, and for being fantastic people. The latter may seem ingratiating and an exaggeration but given the credible overview of the accomplishment it comes out as a reasonable assessment – and probably one that triggers a wealth of positive emotions and identity-responses among recipients of the mail.

As we read the two examples above, they are exemplary in terms of leadership as management of meaning. There are elements such as clarifying meanings and understandings, underscoring important values and priorities, emphasizing community and ‘we’ feeling, taking broad responsibility, combining emotional support with knowledge and intellectual clarity and sharpness. The leadership is anchored in accomplishments and practices and avoids the usual clichés and standardized jargon often used in leadership contexts. Reflexivity is also shown in the handling of quite difficult topics in broadly similar ways. There is situation-specificity – dealing with an emotionally difficult problem and respectively a positive budget outcome – but also a framework and a style that are supportive of an organization scoring highly in terms of both care and emotional support on the one hand, and financial effectiveness on the other. Stella shows examples of all the 5Ps: there is a sense of a low-profile vision in terms of having an excellent, cost-efficient clinic, an underscoring of important values like care and economy (broader responsibility), emphasis on positive spirit and reasons for it, acknowledgement of the emotional strains of the difficult work and time for people in need of her. She is very pedagogical in explaining how things hang together and clarifying meanings around patients’ suffering and choices as well as the significance of always being cautious and thoughtful about costs. Her communication stimulates the broadening of mindsets and consideration of meanings and values outside conventional concerns.

SUMMARY

In this case we have addressed two examples of non-reflexive leadership and two of reflexive leadership. There are no formulae for the former or the latter. It is also important to consider that reflexive is not always viewed as much better than non-reflexive, at least not by everyone. The superiors of Max and Stella experience frustrations that they are sometimes difficult because they are not just loyal followers, they take initiative and are inclined to disobey if they consider superiors’ ideas and decisions wrong while Kim is viewed as a reasonable and good manager by her superiors and Kox received rewards and praise for being an excellent leader from her superiors.

Our point is not to evaluate the entire spectrum of leadership qualities, which is a complicated issue as there are so many criteria and ideals and a wealth of various viewpoints from different actors. We can note that Kox was very committed, consistent and followed a strong line of action to work against the *laissez-faire* ideas that had characterized the school. But given the strong resistance of the teachers her attitude appears rigid and tunnel-visioned. There is a one-sided belief in the right approach combined with a limited ability to critically assess this and consider alternatives to the strict implementation of the preferred management model and close scrutiny of people sticking to it. The strong reliance on management means that alternatives such as a high degree of autonomy and/or perhaps group work do not really enter the picture for Kox. There are also shortcomings in terms of leadership. Leadership – as compared to management, power and horizontal modes of organizing – is not necessarily to be preferred as the only or main mode of organizing. Strong efforts to influence the ideas, values and understandings of the subordinates would have been one option. Here, space for mutual influencing of ideas and adjustments could have led to a shared set of understandings.

The case of Kim partly illustrates an opposite problem. Non-reflexivity is mainly a matter of contradiction between espoused ideals (coaching/participation) and practice (directing/manager domination). Little serious thought is given to leadership guiding work. Leadership – to the extent Kim is doing this rather than using management and power – appear to be more situation-driven and erratic than integrated and systematic.

There are many sources and modes of non-reflexivity but, as illustrated by these two cases, two common ones are being caught in a specific model for HIPs, respectively being disconnected and fragmented in the relationship between leadership ideals and practice. According to our extensive experience these two modes are common among managers (Sveningsson & Alvesson, 2016).

On the more positive side, the two cases of reflexive leadership both illustrate the virtue of broadly and carefully thinking through one's position and line of influencing and thus acting in a fairly systematic and focused way, being aware of problems. Reflexivity means the consideration of a set of ideals and logics. In Max's case it is a matter of doing leadership, being an active follower/subordinate, remaining relatively flexible about the followership (downplaying but acknowledging subordination) and being prepared to be autonomous in the way he thinks and acts. The mobilization of network resources and group work both contributed to the effectiveness of the initiative. In one sense Max used a wide set of the 6Ms, including power and group work, in a clever way and thus demonstrated the type of high-level reflexivity argued for in this book. One could even say that Max demonstrated and confirmed the value of our framework.

The other reflexive case, Stella, illustrates superior leadership in a more confined way – partly because the material we focus on concerns specific interventions. These demonstrate the consideration of a wide set of key elements (emotions, knowledge and cognitions, showing care, ethics and effectiveness, focusing on the performance of the units) but also the broader picture. Stella's communications influence an organizational culture where thoughtfulness, the need to consider meanings and values, and to form

community and identification are key. These values are focused on but also enacted in the communication. Leadership drawing upon and combining the 5Ps is clearly demonstrated in a way that is integrated, coherent and provides direction. There are strong ingredients of the pedagogue, the pastor, the psychotherapist and the prophet. There is less of the party-host – the topics do not entirely invite this P to be so visible – but the positive and joyful spirit associated with being part of such a fantastic clinic also exhibits some party-hosting impact.

NOTES

1. Three of these cases have been published elsewhere and are also the result of other scholars' empirical research. The first case 'Kim' has previously been described in Alvesson and Jonsson (2016). Regarding the second case 'Kox' and the third case 'Max', credits should go to Hallett (2010) and Courpasson et al. (2012) respectively.
2. All empirical material is from Hallett (2010).
3. The remaining text in this section represent the authors' interpretations and comments, going beyond Hallett's text.
4. It is possible that the resistance to Kox's style was reinforced by her being a female. As mentioned in Chapter 3, there are some indicators that females have more problems when appearing authoritarian. However, as most of the teachers, including the most negative ones, were females, there is no easy or straightforward gender explanation for the resistance to Kox (Hallett, 2007).
5. This section is based on Courpasson et al. (2012). The final paragraph presents the comments of the authors of this book.