5

The Politics of Leadership

This chapter takes us into some of the most contested terrain in all of management and organization studies: leadership. On the one hand, we find an almost constant demand for leadership: In society we are said to need leadership in order to manage climate change, poverty, innovation, and all various kinds of problems; in organizations we are said to need relational leadership, coaching leadership, change leadership, authentic transformative leadership – not mere management and administration. And academics produce a seemingly endless stream of studies of the benefits of leadership. Leadership seems to provide a solution to most problems – at least in Western society, we seemingly have a romance with leadership, that is, the term is loaded with positive values, and it is also so vague it can be used to explain almost anything (Meindl et al, 1985; Bligh and Schyns, 2007; Collinson et al, 2018). And on the other hand, when things go wrong, we hear the Queen of Hearts within us demanding the heads of the leaders.

Leadership becomes significant in a professional service context for three reasons. First, the one just mentioned: professional service organizations are no exception to demands for more and better leadership. Quite on the contrary, in fact. As I have shown in the previous chapters, ambiguity plays a key role in professional service work, and ambiguous situations tend to generate calls for clarity – something leadership purportedly provides. Second, leadership in professional service organizations is often of a particular kind: Traditionally, professional service organizations have often had various collective solutions to the 'problem' of leadership, involving shared leadership and different forms of collegial decision-making. Third, leadership in professional service organizations is often referred to as 'herding cats', implying its futility.

In the following, I first highlight common assumptions about leadership in professional service organizations – the idea of 'cat herding'. I will then address the romance of leadership, followed by a discussion on leadership

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theory. These are necessary in order to set a theoretical stage for the further discussion: how leadership is accomplished in professional service organizations through legitimizing, negotiating, and manoeuvring. Finally I will, once again, come back to the role of ambiguity, this time in leadership processes.

On the herding of cats

> You can't really tell people what to do. You can say what you're going to do and then hope people will agree with it … and the people you can least tell what to do are those who are most important for the success of the business. (Empson and Alvehus, 2020, p 1243)

> [F]rankly nobody has to follow anyone. (Empson and Alvehus, 2020, p 1243)

The two quotes come from key players in the top leadership echelons of two global, very successful, professional service firms. These firms are certainly no anarchies, yet these managers talk about leadership in ways that almost imply this: 'hope people will agree', 'nobody has to follow'. In this way they express the key professional service organization value of individual autonomy (Empson et al, 2015a). If we look only to this, accomplishing leadership in professional service organizations seems almost impossible.

This idea about how leadership and management happen – or do not happen – in professional service organizations is colloquially referred to as 'herding cats'. The implication is of course that this is an impossible feat. Cats go wherever they want to go, and they do whatever they choose to do. They are not easily herded.[1] Consider, however, this:

> Having grown up on a dairy farm, the characterization never made much sense to me. Cows and sheep earn our disparaging remarks because they are easy to push around. Their occasional resistance seems counter to their character. But cats are also easy to herd; just have milk. Cats may walk by themselves, but they quickly all choose to walk in the same direction following the pail. Cats may quickly resist getting pushed in common directions, but they are easily pulled there. Got milk, got cats. (Deetz, 2008, p 387)

[1] In an episode of the television show *Mythbusters* (Discovery Channel), hosts Jamie Hyneman and Adam Savage actually tried to herd cats (Season 12, Episode 6: 'Mythssion Impossible'). They failed spectacularly.

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Pull. Don't push. Is it that easy? If so, how is this done? And what is 'milk' in a professional service organization context?

There is no point in getting stuck in the metaphor for too long but one thing to note, and that I will get back to, is the milk issue. It implies that leadership has to do with resources, and thereby with formal structures and the rights and obligations that go with them – but also that other resources, such as knowledge and client contacts, come into play. This means that there is no use trying to establish a clear line between leadership and management, or seeing leadership as disconnected from professional work. Instead, I take the starting point that resources, formal positions, management control, and work processes all play their part in accomplishing leadership. This further means that in the light of this chapter, also the two previous chapters were about the accomplishment of leadership. Here I will however focus more on interpersonal relationships than on the systems per se, but of course this is a largely artificial distinction.

Anyway, what Deetz's dairy farm experience highlights, is that professional service organizations are indeed possible to lead, although they bring out a number of leadership issues that are, if not unique to these organizations, at least easily observed in them.

Two characteristics of professional service organizations that were introduced already in Chapter 2, when I defined the term professional service organization, are important to remember: extensive individual autonomy and contingent managerial authority. Extensive individual autonomy has popped up continuously in this book, and I need not repeat it here; it is a property normally associated with professional work, although it needs to be somewhat qualified (see Chapter 3).

Contingent managerial authority means that a 'leader of professionals may only lead by their consent' and that authority 'is collegial and fragile and deemed to rest with the professional peer group rather than the individual' (Empson, 2017, p 21). In some cases, this is formalized. In professional service organizations it is not uncommon to see different forms of collegiality, and professional service firms are often structured as professional partnerships in terms of ownership. A partnership ownership makes a lot of sense in a situation where the assets are almost exclusively immaterial and bound up in individual knowledge, experience, and client relationships (Greenwood et al, 1990; von Nordenflycht, 2010). It also somewhat emblemizes professional service firms, and many organizations mimic it (Empson and Chapman, 2006). In other cases, collegiality is built into the legislative structure of the organization, as in old-school universities that are still ran by collegiums; arguably a suitable form for running universities (Sahlin and Eriksson-Zetterquist, 2016). In these kinds of formal arrangements, leaders are literally in the hands of the presumed followers: one unsuccessful election, and

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they have to leave. Non-professional leaders can have a hard time gaining influence, and perhaps find themselves trying to herd cats. Their authority is contingent on the acceptance of the professional workers.

I have, together with Laura Empson, argued that this gives rise to a set of processes that together make the leadership situation in professional service organizations quite fragile: legitimizing, negotiating, and manoeuvring (Empson and Alvehus, 2020). But, before exploring these in detail, I need to expand somewhat on the concept of leadership.

The romance of leadership

Leaders serve as symbols and scapegoats, and by leadership we seem to be able to explain almost anything that is going on in organizations, good or bad. This was noted over 30 years ago, when Meindl et al (1985) argued that we – scholars and society in general – have a 'romance with leadership'. They argued that the term leadership in itself is vague and can encompass almost anything and that, therefore, it serves very well to explain that which we cannot understand. They wrote:

> It appears that as observers of and as participants in organizations, we may have developed highly romanticized, heroic views of leadership – what leaders do, what they are able to accomplish, and the general effects they have on our lives. One of the principal elements in this romanticized conception is the view that leadership is a central organizational process and the premier force in the scheme of organizational events and activities. (Meindl et al, 1985, p 79)

This romance with leadership seems to go on. Despite research continuously showing a lack of evidence when it comes to specific leadership traits, or clear connections between leader style–situation–effectiveness, or the problematic status of concepts such as 'transformational leadership', the interest in these and similar ideas does not seem to wear off.[2] The term leadership itself seems to have taken on an almost Velcro-like character: you can throw anything at it, and it will stick (Alvehus, 2021). Moreover, many seem to want leadership to be something inherently good. Leadership researchers sometimes refer to this as 'the Hitler problem': many leadership enthusiasts do not want to

[2] The critique is extensive. Good starting points are introductory books such as Grint (2010) and Schedlitzki and Edwards (2018). Tourish (2019) provides an elaborate critique of authentic leadership. Regarding transformative leadership, see Alvesson and Einola (2019).

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include power abuse and the dark sides of leadership in their leadership talk. That is supposedly something other than leadership 'proper', an anomaly to be explained (away). Similarly, questions of organizational politics – for example manipulation, talking behind others' backs, or the withholding of information – are rarely discussed at the same time as leadership (see, however, Watson, 2001; Ammeter et al, 2002). Yet, anyone who has ever worked in an organization knows that these are quite persistent elements in organizational life. Thus, the romance of leadership is a rather problematic circumstance, in that it also affects the way in which we as participants in everyday organizational life engage with leaders and leadership. Meindl et al concluded:

> One plausible hypothesis is that the development of a romanticized conception of leadership causes participants more readily to imbue the symbolic gestures of leaders with meaning and significance. Accordingly, the psychological readiness to comprehend things in terms of leadership, whatever dysfunctions it represents, may play an important role in determining the ultimate effectiveness of symbolism as a political tool, benefiting most those leaders who are adept at its manipulation. (Meindl et al, 1985, pp 99–100)

The critique against romanticized notions of leadership is extensive, and it has been repeated over the years (Bligh and Schyns, 2007; Collinson et al, 2018). I will leave it for now. What I would like to draw attention to is the very last part of the quotation: 'leaders who are adept at its manipulation'. As has been the case throughout this book, I keep an eye on agency, and this chapter is no exception. There are reasons to look a bit more closely into what people actually do, when they 'do leadership'. But this demands a brief excursion in recent leadership theories, more specifically the notions of *collective* and *distributed* leadership.

Leadership as a collective and distributed phenomenon

Leadership researchers have only recently started to show an interest in understanding leadership as a dynamic, interpersonal process. This should, to an outsider, come as a bit of a surprise. Of course leadership is an interpersonal process! In fact, most definitions emphasize that it is (see Rost, 1993, whose assessment of leadership research is still relevant). And the phenomenon of influence in interpersonal interaction has been explored for many, many years in social and group psychology. Even more, pioneering management writer Mary Parker Follett wrote about this a hundred years ago (a number of her essays are collected in Follett, 2013). To be honest,

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leadership research is embarrassingly slow to the table. (I see myself as a leadership researcher, so I can say this.)

Anyway, the understanding of leadership as an interactive, dynamic process has become rather popular of late, and has reinvigorated leadership studies by engaging in studying leadership in practice, as it is accomplished in everyday work. Terms such as collective leadership, shared leadership, distributed leadership, co-constructed leadership, and leadership-as-practice, to name a few, abound. Largely, these can be sorted into two main orientations regarding what this collective dimension amounts to, both of which are relevant in this context. (For an overview, see Denis et al, 2012.)

The first is understanding leadership as collective in the sense of a structure for how to handle the problem of leading organizations. We can, for example, talk about dyadic leadership, where two individuals share leader responsibilities, or leadership that is shared by a broader leadership constellation. In professional contexts, such models are not uncommon. Collegial structures, for example, sometimes imply different forms of shared leadership and participative decision-making (Sahlin and Eriksson-Zetterquist, 2016). However, collective leadership structures need not to be formalized, or very democratic either. Sometimes a 'shadow government' rules the organization (Empson, 2017). Often, although not always, these notions of collective leadership carry with them ideals of democracy and they have been accused of harbouring a 'naïve democratic ideal in which leadership is an organizational quality shared by all' (Denis et al, 2012, p 274) and of understating the role of power (Alvehus, 2019b).

A second and completely different understanding of the collective dimension is when it is understood as an inherent element in all leadership processes. In this view, leadership is always an outcome of the interaction between people. Power, influence, and leadership are therefore phenomena that must be understood as distributed in social systems – they do not reside 'in' or 'with' individuals. In this process all participants have agency, although agency is always circumscribed by the situation in different ways. This is well illustrated by Latour's power paradox: 'when you simply *have* power– *in potentia* – nothing happens and you are powerless; when you *exert* power – *in actu* – *others* are performing the action and not you' (Latour, 1986, pp 264–265). Any social activity depends on the actions of those involved, no matter who turns out to be leader and who turns out to be follower; such role assignments are by themselves an outcome of interaction, not a cause of it (DeRue and Ashford, 2010). Leadership is, in this view, a distributed process of accomplishing direction (Crevani, 2018; Alvehus and Crevani, forthcoming). In the leadership process, various kinds of activities are included, even those shied away from in romanticized accounts of leadership – including politics and manipulation – and this therefore invites

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a view on leadership that also includes the 'dirty' elements in the process (Alvehus, 2021). It also means that the distinction between leadership and management becomes blurry and often quite pointless. Management, formal structures, and control over resources will influence the leadership process as they are contextual elements that cannot be ignored.

We must be careful to keep these two different notions of the collective dimension in leadership apart. The first is a model or structure, a way of arranging situations for enabling certain forms of leadership; the second is a question of ontology. For the purposes of this book, I will use the term *collective leadership* as a label for arrangements where leadership is deliberately shared, formally or informally, among several people (the first understanding). The general view I have on leadership is that it is a *distributed* phenomenon (the second understanding), and therefore I see leadership as an outcome of social processes. I can't really draw unequivocally on established terminology here. At the time of writing the terminology is a bit confused in the leadership research community. It might turn out that when the terminology stabilizes, other terms are used, or my stipulative definitions here have changed places. (I guess at that point I will get a reason to make a second edition of this book.)

The perspective I take on leadership enables asking the question: Which social processes are involved in accomplishing leadership? This means that when discussing leadership, I will draw attention to structural arrangements and formal positions, as these are undeniably relevant as they influence the distributed leadership process, albeit we cannot reduce discussions of leadership to only about these. Quite the contrary. We certainly need to address the way in which different actors act, in order to understand how leadership is accomplished – leadership is about interactions and how roles such as 'leader' and 'follower' are negotiated in interaction (DeRue and Ashford, 2010; Empson and Alvehus, 2020). And it makes sense to think that different people have different skill sets in this regard, and that these come into play in different ways in different situations.

With this in mind, we can get to the meat of this chapter: How is leadership in professional service organizations accomplished?

Legitimizing: role modelling to lead

The words 'leader' and 'leadership' have, Schedlitzki and Edwards (2018, p 16) claim, their origin in the Anglo-Saxon word 'laeder', meaning 'a road' or 'a path'. A path is something that gives direction and it is something you can choose to follow, literally and metaphorically, and in this imagery lies one key aspect to leadership in professional contexts.

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For a person in a managerial position in a professional service organization to gain followers, it is key to have professional legitimacy – to be recognized by one's peers as a person who has a profound understanding of the job. Professionals, as expressed by a respondent, 'will accept almost unlimited decision making and authority from someone that they think understands the things they are going through' (Empson, 2017, p 45). There is basically a strong element of trust tied to being seen as able to deliver. In a study of health care medical managers, one manager argued:

> if I devoted more time to it [managerial tasks] and, say, only did five sessions – I know someone who is half and half like that – I would lose the confidence of my colleagues. They would say 'He's no longer a proper doctor'. For my professional well-being I want to be full-time, you've got to see a healthy number of patients to keep up your skills, you can become de-skilled very quickly. (Llewellyn, 2001, pp 604–605)

Professional performance is a rather vague criterion, which stems from the ambiguity of professional work and the difficulty of establishing relevant performance metrics. In the firms studied in Empson and Alvehus (2020), the relevant performance metric was success in the market: bringing in clients, making deals, and expanding the business were important to be seen as successful; what is sometimes referred to as being a 'rainmaker'. In the case of medicine from Llewellyn (2001), it was about keeping up the time spent with patients. Another example is in today's academia, where it is increasingly important to publish in top-tier academic journals (instead of, for example, writing books). While not a universally or unequivocally accepted criterion (see, for example, Alvesson et al, 2017, for a critique) it has increasingly become a performance metric to be reckoned with.

For an individual to reach top positions in the professional service organizations studied by Empson (2017) and Empson and Alvehus (2020), professional legitimacy was a *sine qua non* – without it, nothing. But, as Empson and Alvehus note, we need to be a bit more detailed about what comprises this professional legitimacy. It must be recognized as an interpersonal process, a dynamic between someone performing and some others inferring leadership ability from this. Different professions and different organizations will have different such ways of displaying success and continued performance within the professional work. In a study of physicians, Andersson (2015) emphasized the role of maintaining a medical identity as a strategically important choice for managers. One medical manager said:

> I think I provoked people more during the first years I was manager. I thought I had 'seen the light' through improvement science

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> and I wanted to implement my ideas, I directed people too much. Especially my physician colleagues reacted in a sour manner. Several times I heard 'I don't have time for this crap, I need to take care of my patients'. Now I have taken a few steps back and talk to my physician colleagues as colleagues. I think I have re-gained some of my influence, a strategy of 'help it happen' has worked better than one of 'make it happen'. (Andersson, 2015, p 92)

Here, we see the legitimacy played out in terms of the strategic use of identity. The process of legitimizing takes place in interpersonal relationships.

The legitimizing process may at first glance appear rather one-sided: A person performs in a way that others perceive as good, and these persons then attribute leadership qualities. But, if we look to the importance of the master–apprentice relationship in the professional division of labour, the role of superior knowledge in creating leadership legitimacy makes sense. It is embedded in the way in which professional work is organized. When discussing the mentor–protégé relationship in large accounting firms, Dirsmith et al (1997) show how relationships could span 'decades and even generations of mentor-protégé dyads' (p 14). In these relationships, the protégé benefited from getting insight into the internal politics of the organization, and in terms of how to relate to formal control systems. But there was a clear reciprocity in the relationships; for example, the mentors gained political influence that extended further in the relationship network. Thus, the master–apprentice structure mirrored in the mentoring relationships might also play a role in the legitimizing process.

But individual professional proficiency is no guarantee for organizational success. Sennett (2008) tells the story of Antonio Stradivari, an excellent craftsman creating masterpieces that are still, 300 years after their making, held in the highest regard. Yet, he failed to pass on his excellence to his two sons, and the secrets of his violin-making died with him. Sennett argues that 'in a workshop where the master's individuality and distinctiveness dominate, tacit knowledge is also likely to dominate. Once the master dies, all the clues, moves, and insights he or she has gathered into the totality of the work cannot be reconstructed' (Sennett, 2008, p 78). Being an excellent craftsperson – or professional – is not enough.

Division of labour is key to the organization of professional work. In this, arguably, lies an element of leadership. The insight from Dirsmith et al (1997) illustrates that this is also related to the politics of the organization, which is something I will return to later. What the failure of the Stradivari workshop tells us, is that this leadership element is crucial in everyday work. A proficient professional worker needs, for the long-term benefit of the organization, to allow the apprentices to expand their professional

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undertaking from the initial peripheral positions, to full participation. Role modelling is key in this, and this demands participation in the professional division of labour. Yet, this is not always so straightforward. For one thing, scale of operations sometimes invites a more exploitative relationship between different professionals – up-or-out systems come to mind (see Chapter 4). The image of a well-functioning professional workshop becomes, in the light of that, somewhat rose-tinted. Moreover, there is a point in the ambiguity embedded in the division of labour, in that it fosters the kind of autonomy held in such high regard in many professions (see Chapter 3).

The normative lesson here is that leadership cannot be reduced to professional role modelling. Just because someone is good at their work – in terms of billing clients or meeting patients – does not mean that they are a good person or that they have genuine motives. But at the same time, a thorough understanding of the profession's work seems significant not only for professionals striving for top positions, but also for professional service organization performance.

Legitimacy and organizational performance

Sometimes it is argued that who is in charge of organizations matters little, and in many cases this is a reasonable assumption. Top managers have limited influence on the everyday work of most people in a large organization, and, for example, corporate performance depends on conditions outside the control of managers (financial markets, competitors' moves, development of the economy in general). Put bluntly, luck outweighs skill when it comes to the performance of top executives (Piketty, 2014). In many cases the power ascribed to top managers is highly exaggerated – likely an effect of the romance of leadership. However, at least in professional service organizations there are indications that a top leader having a good understanding of how the organization's core 'business' works has some distinct advantages.

In a study of the performance of research universities, Amanda Goodall (2009) shows a causality between the academic performance of the top leaders and the performance of the university. In short, universities where top researchers take top leadership positions start to perform better. The need for specific 'management skills' seems limited. Goodall's explanation for this is fourfold. First, they have credibility – just as the studies mentioned earlier argue. Second, the expert knowledge of the core business – research – provides a 'deep understanding' (2009, p 99) of what the work at university is about, and what conditions need to be in place for successful work to happen. Third, they function as 'standard bearers', in that they have themselves achieved a high level of performance, and therefore their expectation of similar performance from others becomes more legitimate – they may

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become legitimate role models. This again shows the connection between leadership and how formal control systems work in practice. Fourth, just as top managers in general, they are taken as symbols for what the organization stands for. This also has practical effects, such as increased ability to attract funding.

Interestingly, Goodall also draws parallels to other areas, and specifically US basketball. There, too, she shows, performance of teams is related to previous performance of coaches. Coaches who were themselves good players, become more successful in coaching.

The rather trivial observation that people who are good at what they are doing are more likely to be able to make others good at the same thing, is sobering. The failure throughout the history of leadership studies to find specific leadership skills or traits may primarily be due to leadership researchers' dream of finding something uniquely 'leadery' that can legitimize their area of study. But leadership researchers may have been barking up the wrong tree. Perhaps the key to leading is not something specifically 'leadery', but mainly the ability to be good at the job itself – at least it seems to play an important part in professional service organizations.

Negotiating: managing the 'what's in it for me?' factor

Formal organizations are, among other things, systems for distributing resources, and managers are in the positional power to make decisions over such resources. This means that resources need to be negotiated. Moreover, and as noted in Chapter 4, professional service organizations just like any other formal organization have their fair share of control systems, and these systems are of course most of the time operated by people. A partner in a large professional service organization in Empson and Alvehus (2020) says:

> Partners say 'you're too tight' and they say 'get looser'. So you get looser and they say 'it's chaotic, get tighter'. If the money is going up, you can do what you like. If the money is going down, you can't do anything. But the money going up or down isn't within control of the senior partner. (Empson and Alvehus, 2020, p 1244)

There are demands for control activities. It's easy to guess that such activities are often directed towards 'others, not me'. But if a manager tightens up too much, this might get her into trouble and make her lose the trust of her peers. At the same time, too loose controls are problematic, too. There need to be ways of reining in those who go astray. Moreover, there might be cases where for example different professionals compete for the same clients, things that need to be resolved in one way or another.

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Just like legitimizing, negotiating is a dynamic process. Professionals want to feel that they have a high degree of autonomy that they can exercise, yet at the same time there is a need for at least some control over them. Managers in professional service organizations constantly need to balance between these two. This of course becomes particularly salient in organizations where governance is partnership based or in other forms of collegiality, where the manager's future is directly in the hand of her peers.

Put in slightly jaunty terms, the 'WIIFM' factor – *what's in it for me?* – seems to play a significant part in professional service organizations. Leadership is enacted in relationships between professionals, and at the top of the organization between professional peers. Their expectation of autonomy makes leadership 'a matter of guiding, nudging, and persuading' (Greenwood et al, 1990, p 748) – pulling the cats with milk. The expectation of autonomy is often backed up by individual professionals controlling key resources, such as client relationships. 'The one who owns the client relation is king in his own country' as a respondent in Alvehus (2017, p 419) put it.

Again, we see how leadership and the potential for influence cannot be disconnected from organizational context. On the one hand, the way in which hierarchies are tied to resources, and a perceived need for ensuring that other professionals are kept under some sort of observation, mean that there is an expectation on individuals in formal leadership positions to assert some degree of control in the organization. On the other hand, expectations of autonomy paired with actual control over key resources (knowledge, client relationships) mean that control is in a constant balance with the exercising of autonomy. This, in turn, should draw our attention to the role of political astuteness.

Manoeuvring: the importance of seeming earnest

Organizational politics is a term often frowned upon. Yet, for anyone who has been part of an organization, it will be a familiar theme. How to prepare for decision-making by framing information, how some are left out of a decision process, alliances upwards, disassociation from failure, and so on. But are organizational politics only a question of 'reprehensible images that include … backroom manipulation, behind-the-scenes maneuvering, and self-serving posturing' (Ammeter et al, 2002, p 753)?

The argument put forth by a few scholars, such as the just mentioned Ammeter et al (2002), is that it is not. Organizational politics, in this view, is a naturally occurring element in organizations, and is basically the question of how things get done. It is a necessary practice in organizations (Pfeffer, 1981) and we should perhaps ask ourselves, before throwing the concept of politics out, what an organization *without* politics would

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be like? A place with no room for influence and no distribution of power whatsoever?

The negative image of organizational politics is also expressed by practitioners. Overt political behaviour is abhorred by the professionals in Empson and Alvehus (2020):

> To me politics smacks of alliance building in the corridors, in offices behind the scenes. It smacks of people engineering agendas, which creep up on the firm and deliver fait accompli or behave in ways that become disruptive. Or politics could manifest as someone undermining another person. I would like to think we don't have those behaviours in this firm. (Empson and Alvehus, 2020, p 1245)

There are strong negative connotations with regards to politics, yet the firms studied were organized as partnerships. This meant that there were elections to top leadership positions and there were clear political activities in terms of election campaigns, rallying speeches, and such. People in leadership positions talked about their 'constituents' and the 'mandate' given to them (Empson and Alvehus, 2020, p 1245). Thus, politics were recognized on one level but at the same time refuted.

On a practical level, political behaviour was clearly manifest. One common element was the need for creating coalitions and support for decisions:

> If there's an idea, a sort of major initiative, it will start with the inner circle. Then it will get the air cover from the board … As it develops and it's got some legs [the senior partner] will involve one or two other heads of offices … and there will just be a sort of few people here and there. Then, if the thing is going to happen, there will be a call of all the heads of major offices and all the heads of the other practice groups to get their views before launching it on the partnership. (Empson and Alvehus, 2020, p 1245)

The process described by this partner is one of incrementally building support for an initiative, spreading virally throughout the organization before seeking more formal support. This also means that it is of key significance to know one's networks and where informal power resides, what Empson (2017, p 35) refers to as the 'key influencers', people that 'may have no formal leadership role but have considerable informal power, derived from their client relationships, valuable technical knowledge, and strong reputations'. Despite the verbalized abhorrence of political behaviour there is a clear recognition of the need for such behaviour, although it is framed in less political language.

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Given the negative view of politics, it is perhaps not surprising that being caught with trying to 'do politics' is in itself something problematic. In order to be eligible for higher positions, and in order to earn the trust of one's peers, it is important to appear sincere. The Empson and Alvehus (2020) study highlights how leaders should avoid being seen as 'a player' and instead appear as if their motives are authentic and that they are always operating in the best interests of the firm, that '[the firm] is stamped on their heart if you open them up' (p 1246).

> Sometimes my sense would be [senior partner] doesn't necessarily always understand how influential he is. He's very modest about it, quite self-effacing, and he himself doesn't attach such great importance to some of those things that might be under the heading of creeping as in slightly sinister. He is not himself a player in that way at all … it's simply because his own motivations in this world are so, I think, very genuine and clean. (Empson and Alvehus, 2020, p 1245)

It is of course naïve to assume that someone aiming for the top of a global and highly successful firm, with fierce competition for leadership positions, would do this without any self-interest. Yet interestingly, this is the view that these professionals hold of their elected leaders. It seems displaying a reluctance to take on the leader role is quite favourable (Andersson, 2005) – there is an importance of seeming earnest.

Underneath the polished surface there is a political undergrowth in the organization that we need to understand, if we want to understand how leader–follower relationships are accomplished. The firms studied by Empson (2017) and Empson and Alvehus (2020) are extreme cases of peer-to-peer relationships. They may thus not be representative in a statistical sense, but they do highlight processes that are otherwise less easy to observe. Because, also in contexts where professionalism is not only about peers, but about superordinate–subordinate relationships, the role of political manoeuvring comes through. Kellogg (2019) studied how two hospitals tried to implement patient-centred medical home reforms, and in a comparative analysis shows that recruiting subordinate semi-professionals can be a valuable way of influencing professionals. In the reform, it turned out that recruiting the low-status medical assistants was a key to success:

> subordinate semi-professionals, despite having no formal authority over professionals, have a high capacity for influence derived from their favorable structural position. When they occupy a central position in the professionals' workflow, they can control professionals' access to information about new practices and can offer professionals opportunities

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> for consultation about these practices before implementation. When they perform tasks that are critical to professionals' daily work, they can ask for favors of them. When they occupy a central position in the professionals' peer network, they can convert one or two professionals and then tell the others about the new practices peers are using. And when they are positioned between the client and the professional, they can suggest changes in professional practice while also shielding professionals from the emotional challenges of upset or angry clients. (Kellogg, 2019, p 957)

The example shows that in complex professional service organizations, we cannot look at single professionals or single professions. Politics is about understanding an organization as a political ecosystem, where all parts are to some extent interlocked in the flow of everyday work. And it is impossible to sidestep the role of formal authority relations and control over resources in discussing leadership – as Kellogg's example clearly illustrates, we need to understand leadership processes as distributed and depending on interaction; those presumably influenced actively influence how they become influenced. And, this interaction and political processes are embedded in everyday work.

Leadership as an unstable equilibrium

All the three relational processes identified – legitimizing, negotiating, and manoeuvring – should be understood as just that: processes, taking place over time. Together, they constitute an instable equilibrium: 'leadership dynamics are in perpetual flux, moving through periods of destabilization and stabilization, but never achieving a stable equilibrium' (Empson and Alvehus, 2020, p 1247). This is, again, something that is also the case in any organization, but in a context of extensive individual autonomy and contingent managerial authority (Empson et al, 2015a) they become accentuated. Destabilization may be triggered by imbalances in any of the three relational processes.

> First, declining success in the marketplace may cause professionals to infer that a colleague no longer has the ability to lead them. Second, asserting too much control may cause professionals to infer that a colleague is preventing them from exercising their autonomy, and asserting too little control may cause professionals to judge them as ineffective. Third, being seen to act politically may cause professionals to infer that a colleague lacks integrity. (Empson and Alvehus, 2020, p 1250)

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Leadership is a distributed phenomenon, and the accomplishment of leadership cannot be disassociated from formal and informal structures of authority, and it cannot be understood without considering the way in which it relates to professional work. Moreover, the leadership dynamics in turn affect the formal and informal power relationships in the organization. Some professional service organizations, in this chapter mainly exemplified by professional partnerships, adopt collective leadership structures, where these processes become clearly distinguishable.

The hybrid professional–manager

In general, as professions have increasingly become tied to and dependent upon large formal organizations, management has also become professionalized. As should be clear from this chapter, viewing leadership and management as separate from the 'core' professional work is problematic. On the other hand, many contexts are multiprofessional, and of course the question of which profession can and should take on managerial responsibilities arises. Moreover, as noted in Chapter 4, stratification is a way of protecting professional jurisdictions. This has led to the rise of hybrid professional–manager roles that blur the distinctions between professional and bureaucratic logic (Kirkpatrick, 2016). Llewellyn (2001) has described these roles as 'two-way windows', where (in her case) clinical directors occupy positions where they mediate between professional and bureaucratic logics. Professionals seem to be 'more advantageously positioned than managers to occupy the "two-way" space opened up by mediation; managerial work being more permeable, and therefore, more easily appropriated, than professional work' (Llewellyn, 2001, p 618). Just as in Kellogg's (2019) study, intermediate positions controlling resources and flow of information seem particularly efficient in affecting the direction of the organization. But the process identified by Llewellyn also allows managerial discourses to enter the professional vocabulary and thereby possibly operating as a Trojan horse, sneaking its way into professionalism and eventually overpowering it: 'The established professional regime, until recently uncontested in its authority over medical practice, is silently dying', as Bejerot and Hasselbladh (2011, p 1618) dramatically put it in a study of quality registers in health care.

The outcome of these processes, and the struggle for power over everyday professional work, is not easily determined. In Chapter 6 I will return to the question of hybridity, and to how we can conceptualize these power struggles.

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The romantic ambiguity of leadership

In the assumption that leadership is of key importance, it is often the more romantic view of leadership that comes into play. Leaders should inspire, provide vision, and transform organizations. Certain leader qualities are sought after. Leadership in this sense is, however, arguably of little significance in general, and in professional service organizations in particular. On the other hand, cat herding seems an inapt analogy. Leadership in professional service organizations is more complex than either romance or cat herding implies. Understanding leadership as a distributed process opens up for a very different, and less romantic, view of leadership.

First, let me return to a note I made in the beginning of the chapter, regarding leadership and management. Insofar as leadership is understood as a distributed phenomenon, a sharp distinction between leadership and management – a classic suggestion of this is Zaleznik (1977) – becomes rather pointless. As I have shown, management control technologies, resource allocation, and formal authority is all part of the negotiation process and thus part of accomplishing leadership.

Leadership, in the broader sense in which I approach it here, indeed seems to be of some importance in professional service organizations. Arguably, leadership is accomplished in a complex process of legitimizing, negotiating, and manoeuvring. For leaders to gain the legitimacy to lead, professional skills are significant. But these skills also seem to play a part in the efficient operation of professional service organizations. They provide a thorough understanding of the ambiguities of professional work that is key for leading them. And, arguably, professionals apt at negotiating and skilful political manoeuvring will likely have an advantage in getting to leadership positions. But seeing these aspects depends on a distributed and empirically sensitive understanding of leadership, as they are not generally associated with leadership: legitimizing is about professional work, not leadership; negotiating over resources is more commonly associated with management, not leadership; and political manoeuvring is often not associated with leadership at all. Thus, the discussion in this chapter opens up for a new view of what skills might be important in leadership. But those skills are not the romanticized leadership skills; rather they are about performing in everyday work, about formal hierarchies, and about navigating and manipulating interpersonal relationships in a complex political milieu.

Some professional service organizations adopt leadership structures of collective character. From the characteristics of professional work, this makes sense. It is difficult to see the relevance of more grandiose ideas about leadership (such as transformative leadership) in these contexts. Yet, these organizations of course also have their heroes and role models. 'War stories'

of difficult client contracts, last-minute efforts of finishing projects, and dramatic solutions to urgent problems of course abound. But in the light of this chapter, it is hard to see this as qualifying for the label leadership. Instead, we should understand these stories and anecdotes as part of the imagery of leadership, providing legitimacy and evidence of professional competence and personal integrity, so key for legitimizing and manoeuvring. In this sense, romantic images of leadership become part of even more romanticized views on leadership. The romance of leadership reproduces itself not only by making recipients of leadership ready to 'imbue the symbolic gestures of leaders with meaning and significance' (Meindl et al, 1985, p 100), but also by denying the 'dirty' everyday leadership work that underlies it (Alvehus, 2021).

This chapter thus brings in another dimension to the discussion of ambiguity. On the one hand, we find managing – or at least appearing to manage – profession-relevant ambiguity important in gaining legitimacy. But to this comes the ambiguity always involved in political processes, where the motives of others, and the motives one attributes to others, become significant. Appearing genuine and clean is one thing – and what personal aspirations lurk behind the façade, another. Ambiguity has a function in that it blurs this incongruity.

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