Leadership and Mundane Technologies

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ABSTRACT

This paper is interested in the extraordinary topic of leadership and its relationship with some pretty mundane or ordinary technologies. The social interaction it documents is 'leadership work', outlining some of the complexities involved in the provision of management information, and the utilisation of that information in support of decision-making, managing and motivating. It further considers the role of mundane 'technologies of leadership' – email, Word, Exel, Powerpoint – in dissemination, coordination and control. Finally it considers how technology is routinely implicated in 'team management' as an aspect of both the 'emotional labour' and 'emotional intelligence' of leaders.

INTRODUCTION

In this paper we deliberately juxtapose the supposedly 'extraordinary' nature of leadership work with the very ordinary technologies by which it is accomplished. So this is not a paper about the 'BlackBerry' or any other 'sexy' technology. Instead it is primarily concerned with the everyday use of mundane information and communication technologies and applications – email, Powerpoint, Exel - in supporting and advancing the work of 'leadership'.

The starting point for this work is the commonplace observation that modern organisations are experiencing enormous growth in the deployment of information and communications technologies. Extensive use of IT self-evidently serves to 'reconfigure the organisation' through its application in data analysis and processing, communication and decision support. It would be surprising, then, if technology of various kinds was not heavily implicated in 'leadership work'. Given the acclaimed transformative capacity of IT for organisations, technology is already, and heavily, embroiled in 'leadership work'. However, while workplace studies have provided immense detail on how technology impinges on and contributes to particular kinds of work, particular jobs or occupations, few have specifically considered the effect of information and communication technologies on 'leadership work'. In terms of 'leadership' the majority of research relating to technology seems to have simply focused elsewhere, not least because 'leadership' is, of course, a notoriously slippery and difficult topic.

In documenting leadership work with and through technology we are talking about the every day work of leaders, their various social interactions and their use of a range of pretty mundane technologies, – as already mentioned we are primarily talking about email, powerpoint, MIS, Exel, and so on – but whose successful adaption and routine use often turns out to be remarkably important for the organisation. While this is simply stated, this is not a simple story – there are no utopian or dystopian visions of technology and leadership offered here. We want to present a more complex analysis, where there are no heroes or villains, and no simple or obvious solutions like the BlackBerry, solutions that might be presented, for example, as 'implications for design'. When it comes to leadership, technology on its own rarely offers any simple, or universal solutions – how could it? Technology can appear a coercive force for the collection of data with no clearly identified purpose, gathered simply because it is now possible (or fashionable, or compulsory) to do so, or a facilitator of 'joined-up thinking' and streamlined work practices across the organization – and sometimes, often, it is both. In detailing these practices then, we are concerned with the organizational 'affordances' of mundane technology (Anderson and Sharrock 1993) – in particular with regard to how it 'affords' certain kinds of leadership work. We use our ethnographic studies of College 'leaders' in action in order not to present some new vision of 'technology enhanced' leadership, but to document, explicate and analyze some important and organizationally relevant ways of working with mundane technologies.

1. LEADERSHIP & ORGANISATIONAL LIFE

Our interest in the connection between leadership and technology is stimulated by two important but rather complex organisational and political developments. These developments extend far beyond the education sector, where our research takes place, and thereby, suggests that our analysis may well have a far more widespread organisational application and relevance.

Firstly, there is the readily apparent and growing importance attached to leadership as a way to resolve organisational problems. Football teams and a range of commercial organizations Unfortunately leadership has come to be regarded not only as a solution to a range of organisational problems but also, in some instances, as the cause of those problems too. "Leadership' then, is both problem and solution – yet few people seem agreed on exactly how 'leadership' itself might be defined – and how can we develop technologies to support leadership if we don't know what leadership is? Of course, there is some sense in which 'everybody knows' what leadership is, though the plethora of books on leadership that seemingly populate the airport bookshops of the world attest to the fact that 'what everybody knows' still needs explicating – at £15 a throw. Certainly the idea persists that there is something special about leadership. Leadership as a phenomenon seemingly transcends the everyday, the mundane, and is typically associated with more mystical qualities such as the ability to influence, arouse, inspire, enthuse and transform. Exemplars of leaders and leadership also transcend the mundane and often identify charismatic figures such as Ghandi, Stalin, Jesus and Attila the Hun. Within organizational settings

leadership is associated with the exercise of power, the setting of goals and objectives, and the mobilisation of others to get work done so that leadership – like technology - is increasingly associated with the transformation and modernisation. Of course 'leadership' clearly is a complex and difficult phenomena, and notoriously difficult to define. But from our perspective the central problem appears to be relatively simple, that in most academic accounts of leadership work the actual activities and practices through which leadership 'gets done' seem to have mysteriously disappeared and in the process the distinction between being the leader of an FE College and a supermarket, or an FE College or a battalion of the Scots Guards bizarrely, inexplicably, gets lost.

A second central framing concept for this study draws on the well documented development of a highly visible 'audit culture' within organisations as outlined by Power (1994) and Strathern (2000). The idea of an 'audit culture' points to the growing demand for transparent and documented accountability in organisational life – and where technology is generally a central feature of any audit. In a time of 'audit culture' leaders face a range of problems and opportunities in their everyday use of information systems concerning the collection, utilisation, integration and dissemination of data. While we focus on education we believe that many of the ideas and arguments we marshal here are more widely applicable as a consequence of both the widespread deployment of technology and the wide portability of the notion of 'audit' As Power argues: "*The great attraction of the audit idea is its portability across diverse contexts: public sector efficiency, corporate governance, environmental management systems and so on..*" (1994: 12) Hence we have not been surprised when the idea of audit has resurfaced in the current extension of our research into technologies of leadership in local government, the legal profession and the health services.

Our interest here is specifically in how technology is used to facilitate leadership work. Our analysis is concerned both with actual technologies and with the skills of educational leaders and their staff in configuring and utilising information in order to get work done. In the context of educational leadership, the 'nuts and bolts' include email, electronic diaries, MIS, spreadsheets, and Powerpoint. It is how these seemingly mundane technologies are integrated into, and shape, leadership work that we seek to explicate.

2. LEADERSHIP IN AN AUDIT CULTURE: CALCULATION WORK AND TECHNOLOGIES OF ACCOUNTABILITY

We begin with a number of issues surrounding the complexities involved in the use of ICT in the provision of management information, the utilisation of that information in support of decision-making, managing and communicating as an aspect of everyday leadership work. The emphasis here is on documenting the actual work, 'calculation work', that principals do in meeting the practical difficulties of determining which figures are required for which purpose and knowing how to manipulate and present them. Underpinning our concern with management information systems is an interest in how leadership work requires some subtle uses of technology in order to respond to changing managerial philosophies and priorities.

One particular managerial philosophy that currently dominates issues of leadership in FE is the need to demonstrate competence, compliance and effectiveness to a variety of audiences. In the UK education sector, competence and effectiveness is assessed by Ofsted (the office for standards in education) whose reports on colleges and schools are commonly regarded as a measure of organisational effectiveness and, ultimately, worth. As Strathern (2000) argues, such 'audit cultures' are increasingly common in both public institutions and private enterprise, reflecting the need to practice and

perform a new kind of accountability based around the twin goals of economic efficiency and good practice. As JoAnne Yates (1989) first recognised, these new kinds of accountability have generated new managerial and organizational forms and technologies through which they can be expressed. The concept of the audit, previously constrained within financial applications, has now expanded to become a ubiquitous element of daily organisational life. The result is a raft of 'technologies of accountability' which, as Power suggests *"do as much to construct definitions of quality and performance as to monitor them"* (Power, 1994:33). In this sense, certain technologies, with their particular capabilities and limitations, can be seen to determine the format of what is required to be made visible and what is accepted as evidence. In particular, in their position as 'auditees' (Power, 1997) the users of technology can be seen as *valuing what can be measured* rather than *measuring what should be valued*: thus in constructing the evidence which supports the requirements of audit, they are in danger of encumbering the organization, and themselves, with *'measures which increasingly do not correspond to the first order reality of practitioners' work"* (Power, 1994:37).

Consequently an understanding of 'technologies of leadership' must also include an appreciation of the role of the new accountabilities generated through the performance of audit in rendering organizational information and accounts of everyday practice visible. Much of what counts as everyday leadership work within UK FE colleges appears to consist of producing, sharing and manipulating accounts of events, producing a number of subtly different versions. These versions of events are constructed to conform to the new accountabilities of audit in that they consist of conscious displays of compliance and effectiveness. And yet they can also serve as forms of organizational communication and accountability that allow other kinds of 'ordinary' work to be done within the college. For example, the components of a successful Ofsted inspection may be recycled as the justification for a Beacon Status/premium funding application, an indication of quality provision to entice students to apply to the college, an opportunity for the public praise of staff and as the motivational basis for exhortations to further achievement. In each case, the mode of delivery and the specific choice of content will serve to construct a version or account suited to the leadership work it is required to perform. As this example suggests, organizational life within FE colleges in the UK is increasingly characterized by a need to construct accounts and make oneself, other members of staff and the college accountable to a variety of internal and external audiences. Such accountability work, we argue, necessarily draws upon a wide range of techniques, systems and technologies to ensure its practical accomplishment *as* leadership work.

In focusing on the complexities involved in the use of ICT our interest is on documenting the actual work that principals do in meeting the practical difficulties of determining which figures are required for which purpose and knowing how to manipulate and present them. The leadership work here consists in the selection and calculation through which activities on the ground, as documented and, presented through the management information system, are made to visibly fit the requirements imposed upon the organization by external agencies. It is not simply a question of seeing what is 'in the figures' and then working out what should be done since 'what is in the figures' has to be worked out – these are not just 'any old numbers'. In so doing, there is a need for *"managing the interplay between precision and interpretation in calculation"* (Anderson et al 1989:121) in order to produce an appropriate, and defensible, account of events. As one Principal told us:

"...the data's clean, but in terms of can you use it, is it good enough to use, would you rest your life on it today? – that's more tricky ... it's so complex, in a way you have to manage that ambiguity ... I know how many students I need to achieve overall at the college ... but that's probably got no relationship to enrolments because, you know,

somebody can be enrolled on 8 things, or you can break the course up into four."

This interplay, and the leadership work entailed in constructing the data available to tell a story which supports organizational objectives, is further illustrated by the following fieldnote extract:

"Fieldwork extract:
"Principal works through the numbers on a calculator - rehearses argument in terms of funding implications
Z: But we're not comparing like with like" (explains why)
Principal: "So we dont make that argument at the meeting then. .. .. and we want a clear indication that we're going to get Premium Funding.. that's the key outcome we want from the meeting"
Later: Principal is finalising update paper for LSC (re: progress against strategic targets) .... 'thinking on screen and playing around with content'... Has found a way of using the numbers re: student recruitment and retention selectively to strengthen their case for premium funding. Needs to disguise the fact that they are 31 down overall. ..."

Here, the Principal is observed manipulating management data on an Exel spreadsheet in order to consider how best to present important information to the funding body, the UK Learning and Skills Council or LSC. The existence of various categories within which colleges can calculate recruitment, retention and results, and the differing funding formulae provided by official bodies, mask the way in which reasoning is shaped by contingencies and the 'skill' that goes with recognising, identifying and addressing such contingencies. These circumstances influence how the 'formula' is applied in specific cases, what determines the extent or limitations of its applicability, and the requirements for making any formula 'work' and, perhaps more importantly, *be seen* to work. Indeed, as Anderson et al (1989) have commented in their own study of everyday managerial work, the practice of calculation – like that of audit discussed earlier - frequently involves "*grappling with the sheer practical difficulties of determining which figures are wanted, pulling them out, and then knowing how to manipulate them and assess their product.*" (Anderson et al, 1989:105-6)

Leadership decisions then, despite the proliferation of technology, are the products of socially organized accounting work. Decisions are effectively 'displays' of the methods used to produce them .In these circumstances the principal must keep in mind exactly what others – especially those that might make judgements about him/her - might make of his or her interpretation of the information. Thus the documents produced and the accounts which underpin them also represent 'gambits of compliance' in respect of the perceived rules of conduct imposed by external agencies, such that the process through which decisions are made can be seen as "*extending to the rule the respect of compliance, while finding in the rule the means for doing whatever needs to be done.*" (Bittner, 1965:273)

Here is an example from the diary kept by a Department Head of the 'calculation work' involved as he went about 'fixing' the hours of one of his staff – calculation work that ensured he kept 'within the rules' whilst ensuring he achieved the desired result:

Diary Extract: Jim -fix hours. ..Spoke to him last year about 'fixing' timetable so that he was a 'few' hours under to compensate for teaching large classes, increased marking etc. We can fix it so that Jim teaches a timetable 15 hours light. Which means there is nothing available to put him up to the complete 756 hours. Jim really does not want to teach overtime anyway. ... There is no way that I can openly simply give.(.him) fewer hours to teach... What I did with Jim was give a PT lecturer 25% of one of (his) classes. .. this meant he is now 15 hours under. Near enough I think!

Seen in this way, the work of leaders when they engage in decision-making and analysis of management information involves a continuous (and clearly often very ingenious) struggle with the technology and the data. In the process, information is not so much 'uncovered' or 'given' as continuously reconstructed. In this sense technology and applications are not there merely for the storage and retrieval of data. The technology, when in capable hands, facilitates its use

for organisational ends as part of the process of performing and demonstrating leadership. The leaders in our study appear to view the construction of such accounts, and the (manipulative) role they play in the application of the management information available, as an integral part of the leadership work required to achieve organizational goals.

3. 'CONTROL THROUGH COMMUNICATION'

A second aspect of 'technologies of leadership' considered in this paper is how information is disseminated and activity coordinated and controlled. This draws on Joanne Yates' (1989) ideas of 'control through communication' and, to a lesser extent, of how technology and technical artefacts become relevant and used in response to changing managerial philosophies and priorities. As Yates would argue, it was not the *availability* of technology that led to its adoption, but its *perception as the solution to a problem*, namely that of satisfying the information requirements of a demanding external funding body and a new framework of corporate governance. Our study showed leaders using technology to make their activities visible to each other (and to staff in general). The following fieldnote extract relates to a Powerpoint presentation for a staff briefing on the merger of the college, where the Principal was concerned about adverse public and press reactions. The presentation had been drafted by the Principal and circulated to his two Vice Principals for the incorporation of their sections:

"Fieldnote extract: Principal asks VPs to come into his office to review this evening's presentation on screen. VP1 corrects the grammar and spelling and questions the content, based on the earlier version she had printed out and annotated. Much humour between the three of them when the Principal loses the formatting, and when VP1's suggested amendments result in her assuming a bigger role in the actual presentation. VPs leave Principal to do the final tweaks, sort out slide transitions, and copy to Memory Stick for transportation to the briefing."

With the rise of an emerging managerial philosophy of efficiency, system, and process (Power 1997) forms of internal communication need to serve as mechanisms for managerial coordination and control. Similarly new communication genres (Yates & Orlikowski, 1992) have developed as a product of organisational needs and available technologies. As Yates and Orlikowski (1992) suggest, technologies of organizational communication shape and are shaped by organizational structures and processes. Forms of organizational communication can also be organized into specific and recognisable 'genres' such as letters, memorandums, meetings, agendas, proposals etc. In this sense, leadership technologies – even those as seemingly mundane as the monthly college newsletter – must be understood as used by principals and senior managers within colleges not only to account for, but also to promote and disseminate, specific leadership visions and objectives. The example below, recognisable as belonging to the college bulletin communication genre, is indicative of the kind of leadership work such documents are intended to accomplish.

"During 2003 SMT recognised that, with increased individual use of IT, there was a need for more consistency of style in College documentation. Examples of the range of diversity in practice were evident in .. inconsistency potentially 'dilutes' the 'brand value' of the College and uses much more ink to print.

A group of 'professionals' was formed to develop documentation standards or 'house style' guidelines for use by all College staff. These guidelines should now be followed:

Ensure documents portray a consistent high quality, attractive, modern image that accords with the College's vision, mission and values etc. etc."

This reflects the use of internal bulletins to instil values through text, both reinforcing those assumed to exist and exhorting staff to further improvement.

4. LEADERSHIP, TECHNOLOGY AND EMOTIONAL LABOUR

Our final, related, aspect briefly considers the use of technology in what might be regarded as 'person management' of various kinds – a term that embraces a range of activities including praise and encouragement as well as disciplining and censure. This involves the use of technology as part of the affective component of organisational life, making people feel valued, encouraging people to work harder or change and draws on a growing literature on the 'emotional labour' of organisational life. In her seminal work *The Managed Heart* (1983) Hochschild drew attention to the increasing requirement by employers in service industries for their staff to manage their emotions such that they express only those deemed appropriate to a given situation and/or suppress those that are deemed inappropriate.

Much of the work of leadership evidently involves communication of one form or another: holding staff briefings, drafting strategy documents, meeting with senior managers, and being held accountable by governors, to name but a few examples. Emotional labour and 'valuing practices' – that is, behaviours intended to express value for or show appreciation of the work of staff – are inherently communicative and, by their nature, embedded in the day-to-day work of leadership. They are just an everyday feature of the work of a leader for whom, in Garfinkel's telling phrase, there is no 'time out'. In large organisations much of this everyday work is performed via email, and below are some, very different, examples obtained through access to the email archive of a College Head of Department of how 'emotional labour' is instantiated in an email. As he noted in his diary:

'I started on January 5th and meandered into a mire of budget deficits, fraudulent attempts to dress up performance for a 'practice' Ofsted inspection, a troupe of sulking lecturing staff, and a student retention nightmare. I began to feel like the meat in a sandwich, slapped between a slice of principalship and a slice of festering lecturer discontent.. Ofsted inspected the college in December 2001 and another inspection is not due until 2005. However, in order to prepare for this inspection we are having a practice inspection. Of course, nobody is adequately prepared and anxiety has set in. We know what is expected but staff continue to indulge in 'arguing with the ref', inspectors are not going to change their views on the importance of lesson plans or schemes of work, and management efforts to help staff prepare are construed as yet more burdens indiscriminately and unnecessarily placed on already frighteningly overburdened lecturers'..

In this email the Head of Department is attempting to reassure his staff whilst at the same time appear compliant to the demands of a College inspection.

"Attached is a Post Inspection teaching observation timetable. Do not panic, do not even think about it. It's my way of assuring the inspectors that we have a plan. When they go away lets think again, as in, lets negotiate." (HOD email)

In this next email the Head of Department – Aaron – is attempting to deal with some of the everyday problems – exam invigilation - of staffing in a College on multiple sites:

Boris, Ok lets make peace, we normally get along without strife. Sorry to learn that you are under pressure, I'd be surprised if there was anything I could do to help but if there is let me know. I'll fix Tuesday A level cover. Invigilation .. is becoming increasingly difficult because of the number of students and the size of the rooms, this puts pressure on us all. As you know I'm not slow to express displeasure and I have already complained about this situation. Perhaps next year things will improve. Aaron
>>> Boris 06/13/04 10:13 AM >>>
OK, sorry Aaron. The spikiness of my email was not intentional. No excuses here but some reasons for my email: I'm under a lot of personal stress at the moment (both personal and professional) and the discovery last thing on Friday afternoon that I'm double booked was the last straw.

5. CONCLUSION: IMPLICATIONS FOR DESIGN?

It seems a sad, if inevitable, fate of so many 'classic' and highly cited papers in HCI that their subtle, carefully constructed and cogent arguments get lost in a process of 'boiling down' to render some far simpler and cruder message. A message that often bears little resemblance to the original paper. Such appears to have become the fate of Dourish's (2006) 'implications for design' paper; whose sophisticated analyses and arguments have become transformed into the brutal and banal (and verging on the ridiculous) message that 'we' no longer need to 'do' 'implications for design'. We don't want to 'do' implications for design either: at least in the sense of designing or re-designing technology. Clearly the leaders in our studies were adequately, even effortlessly, utilising the available technologies – re-designing them would seem pointless. Instead what we are interested in designing is leadership itself – specifically the design of leadership training and the use of ethnographic data as 'teachable moments'. The point of uncovering and relating the multifarious uses of technologies of leadership lies in developing a set of scenarios of 'teachable moments' that resonate with participants experiences, and that connect with the reality of everyday leadership work.

Leadership can be seen as shared work, reliant upon an ensemble of participants inside and, crucially for our purposes, including the utilisation and manipulation of an array of technologies and systems that support and enable the practical accomplishment of educational leadership. Traditionally leadership and technology have remained separate fields of study and yet our discussion of 'technologies of leadership' illustrates the ways in which leadership and technology are inextricably linked in the *doing* of everyday leadership work, and how specific technologies play a central role in its practical accomplishment. Related to this, we have suggested that the emergence of new technologies within the learning and skills sector is related to, and paralleled by, the development of new organizational forms, new accountabilities and managerial philosophies. Ethnographic research into leadership, that treats leadership as a practical accomplishment, also recognises the supporting role of technology. Such an approach is likely to produce research outcomes that have strong resonances for practitioners in the field, who have struggled to recognise their daily lives in the more theoretical models generated by traditional research methods.

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