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The connecting leader. Aligning leadership theories to managers' issues

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“During performance reviews we had to assign A-E ratings to our employees. However, to maintain a normal distribution each manager was handed pre-decided ratings from HR. That round I was handed two Bs and a D. I had to review three team members, who in my opinion were two As and a B. I tried to influence my boss to get me a better hand of grades, but not only I failed in securing that, I was also told not to disclose the forced rating mechanism, which was a confidential organizational policy. I still remember the tears of this ambitious, and diligent young lady who received a D from me. I wanted to explain that I really meant to give her a B, but I couldn't. By doing that I would have let down my boss, and the company. She left after 6 months.”
(Middle-Manager, Financial Institution)

The middle manager in the opening vignette appears as performing an ordinary, mundane, bureaucratic activity: assigning performance ratings to direct reports. It is one of those activities that would fall into the category of “manager”, rather than “leader” - according to a long lineage of literature ([Bennis and Townsend, 1989](#); [Zaleznick, 1977](#)) that sees managers as strategic administrators, and leaders as inspirational influencers. Despite more and more scholars are seeing this longstanding division as obsolete ([Collinson and Tourish, 2015](#)), the performativity of our writing influences business students, as well as MBAs and executive development programmes through publications exploring “How managers become leaders” ([Watkins, 2012](#)) or “When managers become leaders” ([Chiu et al., 2017](#)). 40 years after Zaleznick's paper, scholars still proceed by asking MBA students whether these terms are “synonyms or separate” ([Kniffin et al., 2019](#)), reinforcing an outdated contradiction. The contradiction survives because most leadership theories are not adequate to analyse the complexity of managers actions. On the one hand they romanticise leaders and depict them as heroes who can save followers, distancing them from the day to day mundanity of administration (see servant leadership, [Van Dierendonk, 2011](#); authentic leadership, [Avolio and Gardner, 2005](#); transformational leadership, [Bass et al., 1996](#)). On the other, they deny the existence of the concept of leadership as a redundant extra-ordinarization of management, depriving managers from opportunities of reflection on how to influence and connect ([Alvesson and Sveningsson, 2003](#); [Learmonth and Morrell, 2017](#)). However, another way to look at leadership is emerging ([Collinson, 2014, 2020](#); [Jaser, 2017, 2020](#)), one that considers it as a relational, dialectic process, in which leaders face and deal with dilemmas and conflicts, in the process of connecting multiple relationships ([Fairhurst, 2016](#)). The Connecting Leader: Serving Concurrently as a Leader and Follower ([Jaser, 2020](#)) is an edited collection of chapters that aims to develop this perspective further. It is published in the Leadership Horizon series (edited by Michelle Bligh and Melissa Carsten, and founded by James Meindl), and follows in the footpath of previous books that aim at overcoming romanticized conceptions of leadership (see [Uhl-Bien and Ospina, 2012](#); [Uhl-Bien et al., 2009](#)). For a connecting leader (CL), leadership involves struggle, crossing power differentials, engaging with dilemmas. From this perspective, and at a closer inspection, the manager in the vignette appears involved in a more subtle sequencing of actions, than just administration. Her actions are the apex of a story that started months before. Our manager, as a ‘follower’ in a position of lower authority, would have been trying very hard to influence her boss to give adequate ratings for her team. She would have spent weeks, and months, sending carefully crafted emails to her boss, or speaking attentively at meetings to endorse her own direct reports, praising their achievements and contributions, both qualitatively and numerically. She would have paid particular attention not to exaggerate her team's effort, as not to be seen as treating them as favourites. She would have been careful to demonstrate some detachment from them, by controlling her emotions and masking concerns, whilst emphasizing facts, by producing reports and spreadsheets. Closer to the event she would have had some tougher conversations with her boss, putting their own relationship at risk, to get the ratings she felt her team deserved. Concurrently, in these weeks and months, from a position of greater authority as a ‘leader’, she would have sheltered her direct reports from the uncertainty surrounding the promotions and performance conversations. She would have had to use emotional labour tactics to uplift them, despite her concerns; so they could stay motivated in the demanding tasks required by the organizations. She would have also inspired them by trying to increase psychological safety, despite

the threats looming at the top. She would have had to make choices on how much of her social and political capital she would want to use, to support them, and fight for their cause. She would have been empathetic as well as directive, passing on her boss corporate messages, despite not always fully agreeing with them (e.g. about redundancies, promotions procedures, cost cutting, strategy). This would have caused her to struggle with her own personal authenticity and facing moral dilemmas. In short, behind the administrative activity of implementation of performance ratings, laid a series of actions aimed at influencing, envisioning, inspiring, convincing, connecting. Actions which pulled the manager in two directions one in which she had to be a subtle, skilful, persuading follower, the other a motivating, encouraging leader (Jaser, 2017). In failing to influence her boss, as a follower, she let down her team member, as a leader. That manager was me, in my previous 15 years career in banking.

From my profound internalised experiences as a manager, I see clearly that the unease with the congruence of the two notions of “manager” and “leader” stems from an inadequate conceptualization of mainstream leadership. The concept of leader and manager are not synonyms, nor separate: simply, the word “leader” needs to contain the concept of “follower”, for it to be representative of a manager’s work. Beyond the autobiographical example in the vignette, the literature brings wide evidence of the dilemmas faced in the role co-enactment. Just as an example, head of departments in Higher Education have been found to engage in tight financial planning with top managers (influencing from a lower position of authority as followers), and then to protect their teams from these pressures (influencing from a higher position of authority as leaders), by taking the stress on themselves in “shielding” them (Gjerde and Alvesson, 2020: 135). Managers have been found to agree with cost cuts from the top (as followers), to then protect their teams in scavenging resources for innovation (as leaders; Burgelman, 1983); to be asked to follow mandates from the top, yet to make their own independent authoritative decisions (Lüscher and Lewis, 2008). In sum, we are obsessed with the manager-leader division, because we do not have leadership theories that can clearly capture the dialectic choices of managers vis-à-vis power, status, authority, relationships, which riddle managers’ activity.

Aligning leadership theories to actions within organizational structures

From these reflections stem the concept of a CL, defined as an individual concurrently contending with identities, actions, emotions of a leader and a follower. The CL approach locates leadership at the core of organizations and communities, where leaders are very much stuck in the middle of a web of relationships. This perspective was born in conversation, with academics across the world, which culminated in few symposia that took place at the Academy of Management (see Alvehus et al., 2016; Bligh et al., 2017, 2018). Scholars from different paradigms brought their viewpoints to the emerging concept which culminated in Michelle Bligh and Melissa Carsten idea to put together a book, so it started: the production of the edited collection of *The Connecting Leader* (Jaser, 2020). The CL offers an approach to leadership that is more aligned to organizational reality as it is lived by employees and managers: one in which they are not just leaders in some occasions, or followers in others (DeRue and Ashford, 2010), but both all the time. This perspective finds its roots in previous theoretical work that frames leader and follower roles as coexisting fluidly within individuals and co-constructed through relational exchanges (DeRue and Ashford, 2010; Uhl-Bien, 2006). However, it wants to further overcome dichotomous views of the leader and follower roles as juxtaposed and enacted separately by two people facing each other by adopting a dialectical view (Benson, 1977; Collinson, 2014, 2020; Hargrave and Van de Ven, 2017). It therefore focuses on the exploration of the dynamic relationship of these roles not just as coexistent, but as interconnected and transforming each other through tensions and conflict. It recognises the roles as co-enacted by organizational actors who exercise agency albeit situated within a constraining organizational structure, characterised by asymmetrical power (Giddens, 1979, 1984). It echoes previous critics of our tendency to romanticize heroic leaders (Meindl, 1995) by overemphasizing their agency, yet, differently from previous post heroic theorists (Learmonth and Morrell, 2017) it retains the semantic difference between leading and following, to acknowledge the influence of structure (hierarchical or horizontal) on individual roles and actions. In other words, the CL lens is preoccupied with issues of middle power (Anicich and Hiursh, 2017), of middle-levelness (Gjerde and Alvesson, 2020), of strains that arise from structural dynamics. Where individuals find themselves stuck, and yet need to act, to attain leadership outcomes and/or fulfil personal and organizational objectives. Hence, although the term “connecting leader” might sound leader-centric it is not, as it considers the two roles as co-enacted. In doing so the CL perspective adds followers’ preoccupation to the leader agendas, and leaders’ preoccupations to the follower one (Jaser, 2020: 3):

“It illuminates the vulnerability, doubts, and fragility stemming from the careful balancing of the demands of the two roles. In doing so, it provides a ground to develop theory about the interconnectedness of the two roles, and the tensions faced in the co-enactment process.”

It bypasses the confusion of considering leaders as managers, and followers as subordinates: the CL perspective democratizes leadership, by showing that action is the result of a leading/following struggle, so that every member of the organization can be appraised as a CL. In other words, it highlights how the limits of a leader to enact leadership are tightly intertwined with his/her enactment of followership. In doing so it makes it possible to flip the logic sequencing of leading and following. So where traditional leadership theories see following as a consequence of leading, through the CL lens, we can now explore how following action influences leading action, to consider leading as influenced by processes of following (Jaser, 2020: 22):

“To sum this up, treating following as a consequence of leading, as customary in the leadership literature (Uhl-Bien et al., 2014), does not take into account that there was following before. For the connecting leader ... the enactment of the role of leader can depend upon and be informed by the role of follower having already taken place.”

As such this approach wants to fill a vacuum in the leadership literature, one that is evident when we inductively appraise the challenges faced by managers in their day-to-day activity. In this sense the CL concept has deep practical relevance, because it offers the promise of the development of leadership theory that provides normative support to managers as they face day-to-day issues. It hopes to provide alternatives to a managerial and business education based on heroic principles of leadership that often ignore the reality faced by individuals in organizations.

The CL: A research agenda

A number of scholars from different leadership perspectives have engaged with the concept of CLs in four different directions: the interconnectedness of leader-follower identity; Janusian tensions stemming from the co-enactment; leading and following in practice; and finally, the leader-follower roles as one. These four directions constitute the four parts of The Connecting Leader edited collection and hope to form a start of a broader research agenda. They are expanded below.

Interconnectedness of leader-follower identities

Extant literature provides scant exploration on how individuals in organizations form and develop selfconcepts and beliefs regarding the enactment of both leader and follower roles in concert (Epitropaki et al., 2017; Sy and McCoy, 2014). Nevertheless, role identity approaches can help us explore this phenomenon, for example, leader and follower roles have been theorized as co-constructed through mechanisms of claiming and granting (DeRue and Ashford, 2010). In this case questions emerge on how a CL co-constructs leader and follower roles identities with multiple actors, or with different groups. Two chapters are dedicated to the co-construction of identities: Adriasola and Lord in Chapter 2 present an identity-based structural model for shared leadership, which explains the dynamic adjustments faced by CLs as they construct a leader or a follower situated identities; further, Fladerer, Steffens and Haslam, in Chapter 3, use Social Identity Theory to present CLs as identity entrepreneurs that bridge gaps between individuals and groups in organizations.

Janusian tensions emerging from the co-enactment

Especially in hierarchical contexts, CLs are enmeshed in a web of relationships which generate contradictory, or conflicting demands, as seen in the opening vignette. More research is needed that bridges this gap, in order to provide managers with evidence-based advice on how to be effective in such a complicated position, where heroic, dyadic based leadership theories do not help. Two chapters explore these tensions: Chapter 4 by Pradies, Delanghe and Lewis, bring a paradox

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perspective to dive into the Janusian dialectics faced in the co-enactment, and Chapter 5, by Alvesson and Gjerde, provide insights on managerial challenges by using the metaphor of Yo-Yos, exploring managers double relationality as concurrently leaders and followers.

Leading and following in practice

The ‘practice’ view of leadership conceptualises leading and following as constructed in interaction

(Crevani et al., 2010; Nicolini, 2012) as they unfold through relationships in language. This perspective becomes useful when CL can be observed in the co-enactment during meetings or other multi-relational linguistic exchanges. For example, let us think about a manager attending the same meeting with his/her boss and direct reports: how would leading and following unfold in such a context? Wahlin-Jacobsen and Larsson in Chapter 6 provide us with insights emerging from the analysis of such conversations; whilst Walker, in Chapter 7, exploring middle managers identifies a set of leadership practices of co-enactment, calling them “managerial stances”.

Leader-follower roles as one

The CL approach prompts also unexpected questions. Some pertain to the commonalities, rather than the differences of the two roles of leader and follower. If a same person embodies and enacts both roles, what are the commonalities, affinities and overlaps between these two roles? What makes someone an effective CL, able to enact both roles equally well? The romantic and dyadic-focus prevalent in the leadership literature, considering leaders and followers as embracing “separate mindsets” (Bradberry, 2015), or self-concepts (Epitropaki et al., 2017), has stirred us away from exploring similarities. This investigation is at the centre of Robinson, B erub e and Langley’s Chapter 8. In which they present an exploratory qualitative study of military recruits - in the position of being both leaders and followers. These similarities also preoccupy Riggio, Liu, Reichard and Walker Chapter, the 9th and last in the book, which present the concept of Everyday Leadership, investigating leadership in the community. It does so by studying people with no formal leadership position (hence often considered as followers by some leadership literature).

Conclusion

A better understanding of CLs can help us advance leadership theories in ways that is more attuned to the day-to-day challenges of managers caught in multi-relational exchanges, often characterised by power differentials. CLs are key tassels in the unfolding processes of leadership in organizations and in the community, yet their study has so far been overlooked at the advantage of dyadic and collective perspectives. Understanding leadership from a perspective that acknowledges that many individuals in organizations are not just leaders or followers, but both, democratizes the way we theorise leadership. It does so by challenging the habitual sequencing that characterises leadership, where leading is expected to come before, and determine, following action. The CL perspective takes into account that leading and following happen in iterative relational exchanges, where following actions can indeed characterise and qualify successive leading actions. I am grateful to the scholars who have accompanied me in this journey of exploration of new frontiers of leadership and joined in, to develop this concept further. Thanks to them The Connecting Leader edited collection offers a great starting point to propel the theorization of leadership in this novel direction.

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