

# **THE ELUSIVE NATURE OF LEADERSHIP PRACTICE**

**An investigation into the distribution, practice  
and discursive processes of leadership in  
universities and other large organisations**

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of Doctor of Philosophy in Leadership Studies, **February 2010**.

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# ABSTRACT

This thesis outlines a personal attempt to explore leadership in a holistic manner that recognises the contribution of both individuals and the collective whilst remaining sensitive to contextual factors. It endeavours to do this through presentation, analysis and discussion of two empirical studies of leadership, informed by distributed and practice perspectives, which regard leadership as a shared and contextually situated social process. The thesis begins with an overview of leadership theory and research, proposing that the time is right for a reframing of the field of leadership studies in order to redress the balance accorded to individual and collective accounts of leadership; review how we recognise, reward and develop leadership; and revisit our methodologies and approaches to leadership enquiry. The first empirical study investigates perceptions and experiences of leadership in the UK higher education sector, proposing that whilst leadership may be considered as widely dispersed, the notion of ‘distributed leadership’ also carries a powerful rhetorical function that may mask an uneven distribution of power, resources and rewards. The second empirical study explores the notion of ‘leadership-as-practice’ in three large, complex organisations outside the HE sector, and reveals the significant impact of discourse and sensemaking in shaping perceptions, experiences and the accomplishment of leadership for middle-senior level operational managers. The discussion chapter draws together the various themes explored in the thesis, in particular demonstrating the significance of issues of discourse, identity and purpose in making sense of the elusive nature of leadership practice. It is argued that a holistic representation of leadership remains difficult to achieve because of the manner in which grand Discourses and micro-level discourses of leadership interact to attribute the social process of leadership to the actions of individual leaders. The thesis concludes with a series of recommendations that highlight the value of a somewhat eclectic approach to leadership theory, research, practice and development that facilitates the emergence and recognition of contextually-appropriate ‘hybrid configurations’ of leadership.

Keywords: distributed leadership, leadership-as-practice, discourse, identity, power, rhetoric, sensemaking, leadership research, hybrid

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# FOREWORD

The subject of leadership has been of interest to scholars and practitioners for over two thousand years. Since the writing of Lao Tzu's *Tao Te Ching* and Sun Tzu's *Art of War* in 5<sup>th</sup> Century BC China, through the works of Plato and Aristotle in Ancient Greece, Machiavelli in 16<sup>th</sup> Century Italy, Shakespeare, Tolstoy, Conrad and others over the following centuries, to the plethora of management and leadership gurus whose books now fill airport bookshops, numerous people have endeavoured to convey what it takes to be a great leader and the contribution that good leadership can make to groups, organisations and societies. Despite the level of attention given to the topic, however, there remains a certain mystery as to what leadership actually is and how to develop or nurture it, such that in 1985, in an article entitled *The Romance of Leadership*, Meindl et al. concluded that:

“It has become apparent that, after years of trying, we have been unable to generate an understanding of leadership that is both intellectually compelling and emotionally satisfying. The concept of leadership remains elusive and enigmatic.” (Meindl et al., 1985, p. 78)

This thesis recounts the fruits of a personal journey, from 2004-2010, in which I, the author, endeavoured to explore and understand the elusive nature of leadership practice. During this time I was employed as a Research Fellow (and for the last 18 months as a lecturer) at the Centre for Leadership Studies, University of Exeter, and was fortunate enough to work alongside some very experienced and insightful colleagues who joined me for part, and in the case of Professor Jonathan Gosling all, of the journey that is presented here. Throughout this period of time I was involved in a number of leadership research projects, several worthy of a PhD in their own right, however in compiling this thesis I decided that the greatest contribution would come from focussing on two of the most significant of these projects through their ability to reveal something of the underlying processes of leadership and the manner in which it is constructed.

The focus of this thesis is on the distribution and practice of leadership in large and complex organisations, in particular universities, but also drawing on data from other sectors, including the military and private sector. In exploring these ideas, however, my aim is not to capture an objective account of how leadership occurs in these contexts (for I do not believe that such an account is possible) but rather, through consideration

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of the various ways in which leadership is described, experienced and enacted, to gain a greater appreciation of why it remains so elusive and what this elusiveness might tell us about the nature of leadership itself and the implications for leadership practice, research and development.

Throughout this period of enquiry, and from my initial registration for an MPhil/PhD in Leadership Studies, a number of common threads have run throughout my work. Specifically, I have been concerned with the following perennial issues in leadership and organisational studies: the links between the individual and collective, structure and agency, and theory and practice. Consequently, the fundamental question behind this thesis is *how to explore leadership in a holistic manner that recognises the contribution of both individuals and the collective whilst remaining sensitive to contextual factors*. It aims to go beyond a static representation of leadership practice and the process(es) of studying leadership to give an insight into how an understanding of aspects of leadership can emerge over time.

The pieces of research chosen for this dissertation represent two distinct and independent pieces of work connected through the primary involvement of myself in determining the research questions, approach and working through from data collection to analysis and interpretation. Whilst each could potentially be discussed and analysed in many ways, within this thesis I have chosen to focus specifically on a sub-set of findings from each study that gives some insight into a different yet significant facet of leadership practice and theory. Whilst both of the studies drawn upon in this thesis were conducted in association with collaborators in each case I took a principal role in the research design, data collection, analysis, interpretation and write-up and, in binding them together with a connecting narrative and integrative discussion, I believe that I can justifiably argue that the resultant thesis is my own unique contribution to the field - credit will be given where this is not the case.

An additional aim of this thesis is to reveal a 'behind the scenes' account of leadership research. It would have been entirely possible to focus on a single theoretical lens for this thesis - to articulate and present a clear rationale as to why this topic was worthy of enquiry, how my research method fitted with the aims, and to argue a strong case for the resultant conclusions. In so doing, however, I believe that I would have glossed over some fundamental issues. Our lives as researchers are not clearly delineated from one enquiry to another – we do not 'solve' one problem before moving on to the next. Rather our enquiries generate new questions that require further investigation which, in

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turn, lead to further questions... with the occasional illuminating insight along the way if you're lucky! Over the past six years I have come to realise that research into leadership should be considered not so much as a quest for truth but as a quest for understanding - a quest which may require the acceptance that there may well be multiple 'truths' and no final destination.

A similar conclusion was drawn by the authors of the book *The Quest for a General Theory of Leadership* (Goethals and Sorenson, 2006) which arose from a five year process of enquiry and debate between an interdisciplinary group of leading US leadership scholars. First convened in 2001 by James MacGregor Burns, the group aimed to explore whether it would be possible to create an integrative theory of leadership. To cut to the chase, the aim of articulating an overarching theory of leadership studies was (for good reason) ultimately unsuccessful - there was no Holy Grail of leadership waiting to be found – however, like many quests the group soon realised that the journey was as important as the destination. What this book uncovers is the *process* of searching for a grand theory of leadership - the discussions, agreements, disagreements, brief moments of clarity and intractable dilemmas - rather than the *product* itself. As Joanne Ciulla concludes in the final chapter:

“I wondered if Burns was being coy about his real goals for this project[...] maybe the idea of finding a theory was just a ruse to get people talking[...] I think this project demonstrated, first, that you don't have to have a theory to be legitimate; second, a grand theory would not be helpful.” (Ciulla, 2006, p. 232)

In presenting the studies contained in this thesis an analogy comes to mind of snapshots from the banks of a river – they are static representations, fixed-in-time, of something that is, by its nature, continually shifting and ultimately beyond our grasp. Yet even a single vantage point from the river bank offers a changing collage of images as time passes, day moves into night, and the seasons change, revealing new information and experiences that may help inform our appreciation of the dynamics of the environment. Quite how useful this learning will be depends on our aims and intentions – whether we wish to study the inhabitants of the river, the aesthetic qualities of the image, the potential for commercial development, the volume and flow of the water, or if we simply seek some form of experience – relaxation, calm, adventure, etc.

In approaching this thesis I, like all researchers, bring a host of beliefs and aspirations with me that shape my engagement and render me an integral part of what is being studied. Thus, like the observer from the river bank I can not hope to capture leadership

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itself but, through time spent observing and reflecting upon its form, process and potency, invoke in the mind of the reader something of its splendour and mystery. Overall this is a thesis about 'Leadership Studies' as much as a particular study of leadership. It is inevitably somewhat autobiographical in tone, recounting my endeavours to come to terms with this slippery notion and my attempts to find meaning and purpose from this work. It is a story of my professional journey as an academic researching leadership and my various interactions with other leadership scholars and practitioners. In reading this thesis I invite you to sit with me a while and ponder on the nature of what remains one of the most significant yet contested phenomena of our times – the nature and purpose of leadership.

# 1. INTRODUCTION

“The nature of management and managers and of leaders and leadership is highly problematic: there is no agreed view on what managers or leaders should do and what they need to do it. And there never can be, since such definitions arise not from organisational or technical requirements, but from the shifting ways in which over time these functions are variously conceptualised. The manager, as much as the worker, is a product of history.” (Salaman, 2004, p. 58)

### *1.1 Overview*

This thesis sets out an attempt to explore some of the perennial questions of Leadership Studies, including the link between the individual and the collective, structure and agency, and theory and practice.

It does this through focussing on two distinct studies. The first, an in-depth investigation of the distribution of leadership in UK higher education (HE); and the second an exploration of how leadership is accomplished on a day-to-day basis within three large, complex organisations from different sectors.

The theoretical framing of the first study is broadly around the concept of ‘distributed leadership’ as widely advocated within the school sector (e.g. Gronn, 2000, Spillane, 2006, Leithwood et al., 2009). This study endeavours to reveal the various ways in which leadership is talked about and enacted within universities. The second study is framed around the notion of ‘leadership-as-practice’ (Carroll et al., 2007, 2008) and the extent to which a practice-perspective on leadership may offer new and valuable insights into how leadership is enacted and developed within organisations.

Findings from each of these studies capture evidence of both the potential benefits and limitations of these approaches. Thus, whilst Study 1 reveals examples of how leadership is distributed across numbers of people, it also brings into question the extent to which a ‘distributed’ perspective offers a realistic alternative to person-centred (or individual/heroic) accounts of leadership. The conclusion, echoed in recent work published by Gronn (2008, 2009a) and Collinson and Collinson (2006, 2009), is that leadership is best understood as ‘hybrid’ or ‘blended’ in that it requires a mix of forms. Distributed leadership complements rather than replaces individual leadership. It is also concluded that the very act of labelling leadership as ‘distributed’ or ‘shared’ has a powerful effect on perceptions and interpretations that, whilst potentially empowering, may also mask underlying dynamics of power and influence within organisations in ways that could actually be detrimental in terms of employee engagement and voice.

The conclusions of Study 2 complement these findings through a detailed analysis of the ways in which mid-senior level operational leaders accomplish ‘leadership’ in their day-to-day work. Whilst a number of concrete practices and tools, ranging from the mundane (such as the use of email and after work drinks), to the more elaborate (such as advanced management reporting systems and competency frameworks) were identified, the manner in which these ‘practices’ were converted into leadership action (or ‘praxis’)



were highly dependent on personal and interpersonal sensemaking processes. Leadership, it seems, is highly discursive, inexorably linked to the meaning that people attribute to different aims, artefacts and actions.

These sensemaking processes form a key focus of the discussion chapter, in which it is argued that a holistic representation of leadership is largely unattainable because of the manner in which grand Discourses and micro-level discourses of leadership (Alvesson and Karreman, 2000) interact to attribute the social process of leadership to the actions of individual leaders. These findings are drawn upon in the concluding chapter to identify the contribution of this thesis and the implications for leadership theory, practice, research and development. In particular, a somewhat eclectic approach is encouraged that enables the emergence and recognition of appropriate ‘hybrid configurations’ of leadership (Gronn, 2010) for the contexts in which they occur.

In bringing together these various theoretical lenses (distributed leadership, leadership-as-practice and sensemaking) this thesis makes a unique contribution to the field of leadership studies. In particular, this contribution demonstrates the significance of various forms of discourse in framing and shaping a sense of shared identity, meaning and purpose that is key to the achievement of supposed ‘leadership’ outcomes (such as direction, alignment and commitment). It is noted, however, that the very same processes that create these outcomes are also responsible for the common tendency to attribute recognition for leadership onto specific individuals rather than the collective processes from whence they arise. In addition to this contribution, by reporting empirical findings from a number of under-researched contexts (e.g. distributed leadership in HE) and advancing some relatively under-exploited research methodologies (e.g. collaborative academic-practitioner enquiry) this thesis makes a useful contribution to the research base for this discipline. This contribution is discussed further in Chapter 7.

## ***1.2 Setting the scene***

### **1.2.1 Changing perspectives on leadership**

As a field of study, investment on leadership research has grown almost exponentially over the past century. During this period there have been substantial developments in leadership theory, beginning with the progression from universalistic trait and style theories to more contextually-sensitive ‘situational leadership’ models (see Chapter 2). Despite the recognition of contextual factors (primarily characteristics of the task and

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followers), however, all these models remain predominantly focussed on the actions of the individual ‘leader’, treating followers as somewhat passive recipients. The move to ‘follower-centred’ (Dansereau et al., 1975, Graen and Cashman, 1975) and ‘transformational’ (Burns, 1978, Bass, 1985) leadership in the 1970s, 80s and 90s went some way to recognising the dynamic nature of the relationship between leaders and followers but through the predominant emphasis on charisma and inspiration in latter theories perhaps did more to reinforce than challenge the image of the ‘heroic’ leader (Yukl, 1999, Badaracco, 2001, Alimo-Metcalfe and Alban-Metcalfe, 2005).

Recent years, partially in the wake of corporate scandals such as Enron and catastrophes such as 9/11 (and more recently the global banking crisis) and accelerated through the digital revolution and emergence of the ‘knowledge economy’, have seen increased calls for greater inclusion and participation in leadership and decision making that shift the perspective from ‘who’ is leading to ‘how’ leadership is accomplished. This approach, regards leadership as “a social influence process through which emergent coordination (i.e. evolving social order) and change (i.e. new values, attitudes, approaches, behaviours, ideologies, etc.) are constructed and produced” (Uhl-Bien, 2006, p. 668) – no longer an attribute of individuals themselves but a property of the system.

One of the more influential leadership models of recent years is ‘distributed leadership’ (Gronn, 2000, Spillane et al., 2004). Informed largely within the UK by the work of the National College for School Leadership (NCSL), and subsequently adopted by the Centre for Excellence in Leadership (CEL) for the post-compulsory education sector and the Leadership Foundation for Higher Education (LFHE), distributed leadership presents an image of leadership as widely dispersed. In a review of the literature Bennet et al. (2003) suggest that the concept of distributed leadership is based on three main premises: (1) that leadership is an emergent property of a group or network of interacting individuals; (2) that there is an openness to the boundaries of leadership; and (3) that varieties of expertise are distributed across the many, not the few. A distributed approach to leadership, therefore, draws attention to some very different aspects of leadership than do traditional leader-centric perspectives – it “puts leadership practice centre stage rather than the chief executive or principal” (Spillane, 2006, p. 25) and proposes that “leadership practice takes shape in the interactions of people and their situation, rather than from the actions of an individual leader” (Spillane, 2004, p. 3).

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Whilst this approach may militate against leaders (and followers) being seduced by overly simplistic accounts of personal agency, however, by bringing to attention a diverse and potentially limitless range of alternative factors it makes the concept of leadership far harder to pin down. Furthermore, despite the best efforts of distributed leadership theory to dislodge the simplistic ‘leader-follower’ distinction it struggles to provide an alternative vocabulary and/or to provide empirical evidence that does not focus heavily on the contribution of people in formal leadership roles (see, for example, Leithwood et al., 2009). A number of key questions remain, therefore, such as why is it that some people are regarded as ‘leaders’ rather than others? What is it that enables certain people with limited formal authority to exert considerable influence whilst others remain relatively powerless despite holding a formal role? How is leadership experienced by those involved as it unfolds? And how is personal agency constrained and/or enhanced through access to, and control of, resources and other sources of power?

Thus, despite significant attention and investment we remain relatively unclear about what leadership is, how it is accomplished and what ‘leaders’, ‘followers’ and organisations can do to enhance the quality of their leadership practice.

### **1.2.2 Dissatisfaction with management research and education**

The perceived disconnect between the theory and practice of leadership is symptomatic of a wider trend within management and organisation studies to question the relevance and practical significance of much current theory and research.

In December 2007, for example, the Academy of Management (AoM) published a special issue of their journal reflecting on the past 50 years of management research and setting an agenda for the future. In this edition a number of leading scholars in the field added their voices to the growing concern about a field that has become overly theoretical at the expense of practical relevance. Thus Donald Hambrick, a former president of the AoM, argued: “our insistence in the field of management that all papers contribute to theory may actually have the unintended perverse effect of stymying the discovery of important theories” (Hambrick, 2007, p. 1351) and Jeffrey Pfeffer (2007) proposed that most management research fails to have an effect on actual management practice. Indeed, such is the current concern with relevance that the focus of the 2008 AoM conference in Anaheim, California was on *The Questions we Ask* (particularly exploring how theory and research can more meaningfully inform management practice) whilst in the same year the British Academy of Management conference was

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entitled *The Academy Goes Relevant* (focussing on how to achieve both relevance and rigour in management research).

Although increasingly high profile, calls for enhanced relevance are not new to the field. Indeed both the authors cited above had previously questioned the extent to which management research was relevant or seen to ‘matter’ (Hambrick, 1994, 2005, Pfeffer and Fong, 2002) and numerous others have queried the extent to which business and management education is ‘fit for purpose’ (e.g. Bennis and O’Toole, 2005, Mintzberg, 2004a, Raelin, 2007).

Given the level of investment now made in management and leadership education and research, however, why might this be the case? Sara Rynes in a review of the contributions to the 2007 special edition of the *Academy of Management Journal* identified three repeating themes: balance, boundaries and legitimacy, and three underlying tensions: competing criteria for judging quality; tensions between research and other activities; and tensions between management and source disciplines such as economics, psychology, and sociology (Rynes, 2007). The field is thus presented as one that in its struggle to assert its status and credibility as a legitimate academic discipline may have overstated its reliance on particular methodologies, approaches and assumptions. In particular, there has been a tendency to promote ‘scientific rigour’, grounded in the quantitative analysis of empirical research data, as the route to knowledge and understanding, as illustrated in the following quote from Bennis and O’Toole (2005):

“During the past several decades, many leading Business schools have quietly adopted an inappropriate-and ultimately self-defeating model of academic excellence. Instead of measuring themselves in terms of the competence of their graduates, or by how well their faculties understand important drivers of business performance, they measure themselves almost solely by the rigor of their scientific research. They have adapted a model of science that uses abstract financial and economic analysis, statistical multiple regressions, and laboratory psychology. Some of the research produced is excellent, but because so little of it is grounded in actual business practices, the focus of graduate business education has become increasingly circumscribed-and less and less relevant to practitioners.” (ibid, p. 98)

Whilst Bennis and O’Toole critique one important aspect of management education - the knowledge production process - they do not really question what counts as ‘useful’

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or ‘practical’ knowledge, nor how this is learnt and applied by ‘practitioners’. Their call for more ‘practical’ knowledge is not uncommon but carries its own assumptions about what sorts of information is required by practitioners and fuels another tendency within the field – that of focussing predominantly on the development of technical knowledge rather than ‘practical wisdom’ (often referred to as ‘phronesis’ - see, for example, Flyvbjerg, 2006, Grint, 2007). Raelin (2007) proposes:

“The dominant empiricist epistemology governing our educational enterprises in higher education as well as in corporate training and development leads us to separate theory and practice in an aspiration to define the best conceptual models to map external reality [...]. Unfortunately [...] our professionalized form of education has emphasized the technical over the interpersonal skills, the accumulation of facts over wisdom, and a focus on individual accomplishment over intersubjective appreciation.” (ibid, p. 496, 507)

An interesting illustration of this distinction is the observation that MBA students make more utilitarian decisions relating to ethical dilemmas in business than do experienced executives (Harris and Sutton, 1995) and the assertion that management education had a role to play in the criminal misconduct of executives in companies such as Enron, Global Crossing and Tyco (Ghoshal, 2005). In these cases, clearly the learning acquired through Business Schools is ‘practical’ but perhaps not in ways we would like to encourage.

In his book on Studying Organizations Chris Grey (2009) goes further, to suggest that “there is *absolutely no evidence* that taking a management course has any effect on making people better managers” (p. 134, initial emphasis). He proposes that “management education is deeply flawed, and will continue to be so until some fairly fundamental truths are recognized” (ibid, p. 135). Central to these, he argues is “the conceit of management knowledge to offer a way of exerting systematic, predictable control over organizations is just that, a conceit: flawed, incoherent in theory, unrealizable in practice” (ibid, p. 135). For Grey management education functions as a process of acculturation or a rite of passage by which people demonstrate their commitment to managerial principles and acquire the vocabulary of ‘management speak’ rather than as a scientific basis for informing management practice<sup>1</sup>.

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<sup>1</sup> Whilst these are critiques of ‘management’ education I would propose that due to the close relationship between management and leadership (as described in section 2.2.2) they are also relevant to much ‘leadership’ development.

Whatever your views on the utility of management education and enquiry, achieving *both* relevance<sup>2</sup> and rigour<sup>3</sup> in research is not an easy task. Pettigrew (1997) termed it the ‘double hurdle’ and Colville (2008) proposes that its origins may lie in processes of sensemaking and discourse that render it unlikely that academics, practitioners and policy makers will find the same things interesting or relevant due to differing aims and measures of performance (a challenge he termed the ‘double dialectic’).

Partially in response to such concerns recent years have seen an increased interest in the ‘practice turn’ (see Schatzi et al., 2001 for a review) that endeavours to take the practical concerns of managers and policy makers to the heart of management and organisation studies whilst retaining academic rigour. Whilst such a perspective is now well embedded in parts of the business and management literature, especially ‘strategy as practice’ (e.g. Johnson et al., 2003, Jarzabkowski, 2004), its application to the field of leadership remains somewhat ad hoc. It is an exploration of the value of such a lens that is the main focus of Chapter 5 of this thesis.

### **1.2.3 The challenge of representing what leaders do**

Earlier in this chapter I highlighted how leadership theory has broadly moved from regarding leadership as a property of individuals to a contextually situated process. Despite this, it seems that organisational practice remains wedded to a number of tools and techniques that reinforce a ‘person’ rather than a ‘process’ perspective, one of the most dominant of which is the competency approach to leadership and management.

In an article co-authored with Jonathan Gosling (Bolden and Gosling, 2006) we argued that the competency approach, initially developed as a mechanism for identifying and promoting effective management practice, is flawed for a number of reasons when applied to leadership. Firstly, it is *reductionist*, fragmenting functions and roles rather than presenting them holistically (Ecclestone, 1997, Grugulis, 1998, Lester, 1994). Secondly, it is *universalistic*, assuming a common set of competencies no matter what the nature of the situation, individuals or task (Grugulis, 2000, Loan-Clarke, 1996, Swales and Roodhouse, 2003). Thirdly it is *retrospective* in that it focuses on current and past performance rather than future requirements (Cullen, 1992, Lester, 1994). Fourthly it is *behaviourist*, emphasising measurable behaviours and performance

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<sup>2</sup> Defined by Hammersley (1992, p. 78) as “the importance of the research topic and the contribution to our knowledge made by the findings from the study” to researchers, practitioners, or both.

<sup>3</sup> Considered to as the ‘proper’ application of research methods. Criteria vary according to the type of research but typically include validity, reliability, replicability and generalizability for quantitative methodologies and factors such as credibility, transferability, dependability and confirmability for qualitative methodologies (Gray, 2009).

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outcomes to the exclusion of more subtle qualities, interactions and situational factors (Bell et al., 2002). And fifth, it is *mechanistic* in terms of prescriptions for development, recognition and reward (Brundrett, 2000).

Overall, therefore, it can be argued that the competency approach, now prevalent across public and private sectors, is founded on the premises of ‘methodological individualism’ (Chia and Holt, 2006, p. 638). Such an approach is likely to encourage conformity rather than diversity (Buckingham, 2001), neglects evidence that leaders may achieve similar results via different approaches (Hunt and Laing, 1997) and that people may well be successful despite or even because of significant personal weaknesses (McCall, 1998, Maccoby, 2000). Furthermore, it may disguise or obscure core organisational assumptions, such as what constitutes an ‘appropriate’ leadership style, which would be better left open to scrutiny. Salaman (2004) concludes by proposing that, like management competencies, leadership competencies have failed to deliver their promise:

“... the problems it promised to resolve are not capable of resolution and its promise consisted largely of a sleight of hand whereby organizational problems were simply restated as management responsibilities.” (ibid, p. 75)

A competency framework is, at best, no more than a map of the terrain of leadership and/or management. It offers a lens and a vocabulary from which to see and talk about our experiences and what we value but like all representations, takes a particular perspective, embeds certain norms and assumptions, and by drawing our attention to certain features of the ‘landscape’ distracts us from others that may be of equal (or more) importance. We should beware of falling into the trap highlighted by Magritte in his famous painting *The Treason of Images* (1928-29) which shows an image of a pipe with the legend ‘ceci n’est pas une pipe’. Indeed, it is not a pipe - it is a representation of a pipe and serves a quite different purpose!

To escape from the repetitive, reassuring and potentially misleading refrain of leadership competencies we proposed in our article that more consideration should be placed on reflection, discussion and experience (Bolden and Gosling, 2006). Organisations should endeavour to develop opportunities for their members to articulate and explore their experiences of leadership in all their richness. To use a musical metaphor, we should encourage people in leadership roles to not only develop their music reading and basic playing skills (i.e. competencies) but also their interpretation,



improvisation and performance abilities (i.e. emotion, intuition, moral judgement, experience, etc.).

Although the desire to select and assess people in leadership positions will remain for organisations, simply adding more terms to competency lists will not solve the problem as it will fail to capture the micro-sensemaking processes through which individual and shared meanings emerge and transform over time (Weick, 1995). All this supports a shift from individualistic notions of leadership to more inclusive, social process perspectives. Nonetheless, given the ubiquity of the competency approach it is worth considering why it remains so appealing and how it continues to shape and inform the work of leadership practitioners.

### **1.2.4 Reframing leadership studies**

We find ourselves, therefore, at a time when potent calls are emerging for a reframing of the field of Leadership Studies (see, for example, Grint, 2005a, Goethals and Sorenson, 2006, Sinclair, 2007).

*(1) Firstly, there is a call to redress the balance accorded to individual and collective accounts of leadership, and the relative importance attributed to leaders and followers.*

In response to the limitations of ‘heroic’ perspectives that place the responsibilities and rewards of leadership firmly in the hands of a few senior individuals, a process-informed perspective endeavours to convey a ‘post-heroic’ representation whereby leadership arises from the collective efforts of a wide number of people and variables (Alimo-Metcalf and Alban-Metcalf, 2005).

Wilfred Drath (2001) has likened leadership to the ‘deep blue sea’ – with ‘leaders’ as the white wave caps but the true power and force residing more broadly within the mass of water (people) from whence they came. Tolstoy in his epic novel *War and Peace* likened the political leaders of the Russian Revolution to a bow wave – always there ahead of the ship but ultimately produced and propelled by the force of movement through the water. To understand history, he argued: “we must leave aside kings, ministers, and generals, and study the common, infinitesimally small elements by which the masses are moved” (Tolstoy cited in de Rond, 2003, p. 168).

Despite this there remains a tendency for our attention to keep returning to the wave crests – to seek comfort in the presence of ‘leaders’. Such dependence, however, may ultimately be detrimental both for individuals and organisations. Gemmill and Oakley



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(1992), for example, accuse leadership of being “an alienating social myth” that “functions as a social defence whose central aim is to repress uncomfortable needs, emotions and wishes that emerge when people work together” (ibid, reprinted in Grint, 1997, p. 273). In over-idealizing the leader, they argue, members deskill themselves from their own critical thinking, visions, inspirations, and emotions and unconsciously maintain the status quo.

What balance, therefore, needs to be struck between individual and collective accounts of leadership, and which factors determine an appropriate approach for the situation?

***(2) Following on from these concerns, come calls to reframe how we recognise, reward and develop leadership.***

Day (2000) draws a useful distinction between ‘leader’ and ‘leadership’ development. Whilst, he argues, leader development is about developing individuals in leadership roles, leadership development is concerned with the development of the collective leadership capacity of the organisation.

“In this way, each person is considered a leader, and leadership is conceptualised as an effect rather than a cause. Leadership is therefore an emergent property of effective systems design. Leadership development from this perspective consists of using social (i.e. relational) systems to help build commitments among members of a community of practice.” (ibid, p. 583)

He goes on to argue that ‘leader development’ can be considered primarily as an investment in the *human capital* of selected individuals, whereas ‘leadership development’ is an investment in *social capital*<sup>4</sup> via the nurturing of interpersonal networks, cooperation and collaboration within and between people and organisations. Both are important, although traditionally development programmes have focussed almost exclusively on the former.

The tempering of leader-centric perspectives forces us to look elsewhere for leadership (Wood, 2005) yet, in so doing, renders it less tangible and more elusive. Studies informed by feminist theory, for example, note the tendency for relational aspects of leadership to ‘disappear’ (Fletcher, 2002, Sinclair, 2007) or to be treated as ‘invisible’ (Sorenson and Hickman, 2002) thereby reinforcing masculine stereotypes and approaches. The challenge, then, is how to offer a process-informed perspective on leadership that feels concrete and real rather than abstract and ephemeral? Furthermore,

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<sup>4</sup> Defined by Adler and Kwon (2002: 17) as “the goodwill that is engendered by the fabric of social relations and that can be mobilised to facilitate action”.

how can we meaningfully capture the full array of factors that contribute towards effective leadership and attribute appropriate recognition and rewards? And how can we challenge taken-for-granted assumptions about who is involved in leadership in a constructive manner?

***(3) The points above indicate a need to review our methodologies and conceptual approaches to the study of leadership***

Despite leadership having been a topic of study for centuries, systematic empirical research did not really commence until the 1930's and 40's. Since its inception leadership studies has remained a topic of particular interest to social psychologists and those from the behavioural sciences. Whilst increasingly an interdisciplinary subject with contributions from many fields (see, for example, Goethals and Sorenson, 2006) the dominant research approaches remain based upon 'scientific' enquiry with a broadly objectivist epistemology and positivist ontology.

Such approaches, whilst helpful in offering a sense of rigour, consistency and legitimacy to the field also limit the extent to which we can meaningfully capture the relational, ethical and emotional dimensions that are increasingly considered essential aspects of leadership practice. In consequence, many authors are now calling for a more qualitative approach grounded in an interpretivist epistemology and constructivist ontology (e.g. Conger, 1998, Collinson, 2005, Grint, 2005a, Sinclair, 2007) that recognises the contextual and discursive nature of leadership practice (e.g. Alvesson, 1996, Fairhurst, 2007). These issues are explored in Chapter 3.

### ***1.3 A conceptual and methodological approach for this thesis***

In this section I will outline the main research principles and ideas that have informed the chosen approach for this thesis. As indicated earlier, this thesis endeavours to draw together insights from two different studies of leadership in order to shed light on the nature of leadership practice and the processes of researching leadership. It does not endeavour to articulate a single normative model of leadership nor a 'best practice' approach to studying it, but rather to tell a story of how, through applying a number of different lenses over a period of time, I was able to come to a deeper appreciation of the elusive phenomenon that is 'leadership'. More detail of the precise methodology for each study will be given in the respective chapter. This section, however, tells the story of how I came to be studying leadership, the questions and insights that informed each of the two studies, and why I chose these rather than other studies to report. I will begin

by recounting my journey into and through the field of leadership studies, in order to situate myself in relation to the topic of investigation and to give a brief 'reflexive' account of my engagement (Alvesson and Sköldberg, 2000).

### **1.3.1 My journey into and through leadership studies**

I come from a comfortable and stable upbringing, most of which was spent in and around Exeter in the South West of England. My father was a General Practitioner, with an active interest in the development of doctors and their teams, and my mother was a Practice Nurse.

I was the youngest of three children and from the age of seven followed my brother to attend the leading private boys' school in Exeter. During my time at school I was always a fairly average performer vis-à-vis my classmates – I didn't excel at sport (unlike my brother) and wasn't at the top of my class academically (unlike my sister). I learned how to get along but can not recall any particularly formative leadership experiences from my childhood (except, perhaps, a few instances of attempting to resist the influence and control of my contemporaries and sometimes teachers). I was neither a rebel nor a 'born leader' but I also didn't take well to being pushed around – I tended to keep out of people's way and they generally left me alone.

During my time at school I particularly enjoyed life sciences however, by the time I came to select a subject for university, I had become rather tired of the approach and chose, instead, to study psychology. Psychology was a promising subject to the extent that it was something new and offered a range of different career prospects. I found the way in which it was taught, however, disappointing: as if it was a 'hard science' – all statistical probabilities and hypothesis testing. During my time at university as an undergraduate the two main subjects that caught my interest were an elective on anthropology - which enabled a more creative engagement with the literature and my recent experience of other cultures having taken a 'year out' - and a third year option on human reliability in hazardous technologies - which used case studies of major catastrophes to reveal the relatively minor and insidious chain of events (and errors) that led up to them. My third year dissertation was spent with the driver behaviour unit at the University of Manchester exploring the impact of persuasive messages on driver perceptions of drink driving and speeding.

The module on human error was particularly influential in shaping my decision to go on to do a Masters in Psychology with Industrial Studies at the University of Liverpool

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(after taking another ‘year out’ to go travelling). I was intrigued by how relatively inconsequential acts could lead to major problems and what organisations could do to help limit the possibilities of this happening whilst also being able to continue operating effectively. It was during my time on this course that my academic interest in leadership began to develop although I’m not sure I (or many other people that I was engaging with for that matter) called it ‘leadership’ at that time. My Masters thesis was on teamworking in British manufacturing industry and was based upon a longitudinal case study of the introduction of team-based work practices at a food manufacturing company, complemented through a number of shorter cases on the use of teamworking in other kinds of manufacturing company. The primary insight from this research was that the key factor affecting the effectiveness or otherwise of such work practices was not so much ‘what was done’ but ‘how it was done’. Where employees were engaged and involved throughout there was a far higher likelihood of practices being perceived positively than where it was driven top-down with little or no consultation. Indeed, what I witnessed through my main case study was an example of poorly managed organisational change that had a fairly detrimental effect on everyone involved.

Following my Masters degree I was fortunate enough to secure a research job at the Institute of Work Psychology, University of Sheffield. During my two years in this role I was involved in three main studies: (1) a national study of stress and job satisfaction within NHS Trusts (see Wall et al., 1997, Haynes et al., 1999); (2) a study of the uptake and perceived effectiveness of a range of manufacturing practices (see Bolden et al., 1997, Waterson et al., 1999); and (3) a study of the introduction of new technology in a distribution organisation (see Axtell et al., 2002). Once again, whilst the term ‘leadership’ was not used explicitly within any of these studies, it was a common theme that ran through them. Our concern, however, was not so much with how to make ‘leaders’ more effective, but to limit their potentially toxic effect on other members of the organisation through effective work design. I used to describe my aim as “helping to make jobs fit people rather than people fit jobs”.

Following my period of time at Sheffield, due to personal circumstances, I took the opportunity of moving to the French Alps, endeavoured to get to grips with the language and managed to find work with a small company that made survey design and analysis software. What had, at first, looked like a step outside of academia in fact continued to use and develop my research capabilities through the development and promotion of an integrated quantitative and qualitative analysis program. I came to

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master some new techniques such as lexical analysis (see Bolden and Moscarola, 2000) and hone my skills at teaching and promoting the merits of effective research. I also developed a sensitivity to the needs and concerns of researchers and research users from a wide range of disciplines both within and outside higher education in the collection and application of research findings.

Upon my return to the UK in 1999 I managed to gain work as a freelance researcher for the Centre for Leadership Studies (CLS) at the University of Exeter. Initially I conducted evaluation studies of two international leadership and management development programmes: one for Egyptian healthcare managers and one for Bosnian doctors and nurses. Both of these studies highlighted to me the political nature of evaluative research and the cultural specifics of leadership practice. In each case I noticed difficulties for participants in transferring what they had learnt into their work and social environment. For example, on following an Egyptian health director to a number of village hospitals and health centres it became apparent that people looked to him in quite a paternal way to provide direction and assurance. When he experimented with a less directive approach (as discussed during the programme) his staff clearly felt uncomfortable and he quickly reverted to type. I also noticed how the structures and systems within which people operated largely influenced their ability to bring about a change in work practices. On the Egyptian programme, for example, the Egyptian Ministry of Health had funded a cohort of senior directors to complete a leadership development programme in association with a British university yet gave them very few opportunities to use what they had learnt to inform and shape policy and practices within their own country - it was a prime example of changed (or at least potentially changed) people returning to an unchanged system (Raelin, 2004).

Research on the Bosnian programme revealed similar insights about the capacity for senior level leaders to block or inhibit change. It also alerted me to the significance of inter-personal and social dynamics which may well remain beyond the gaze of the researcher. Working with a culturally mixed group of people in post-war Sarajevo one could not help but wonder about the history between participants and the religious and ethnic differences to which I was largely blind.

My next study explored leadership development rather closer to home, in small and medium enterprises (SMEs) in the South West of England. This project looked particularly at owner-managers and their development needs. In the preliminary piece of research (Bolden and Terry, 2000) it became clear that many of the difficulties that

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leaders within such organisations faced were to do with managing people and developing and implementing a strategy – factors commonly associated with leadership. A subsequent development programme offered opportunities for managers to work through these issues with a cohort of peers and many found this very beneficial (Bolden, 2001).

Following these projects I spent a period of time working at the School of Education at the University of Exeter, where I respectively explored skills and learning issues in the South West and negotiated the development of an integrated humanities degree in the Department of Lifelong Learning, only to return to CLS in March 2003 to take up a full-time research post. Since my return to CLS I have been directly involved in the design, delivery and dissemination of a wide range of applied leadership research, including a series of reviews of leadership and leadership development literature (Bolden, 2004, 2005, 2006b); two reviews of leadership and management competency frameworks (Bolden et al., 2003, Bolden, 2006a); a number of evaluation studies of leadership and management development programmes (Bolden, 2003, Bolden and Dennison, 2003, Bolden and Kirk, 2006, Bolden, 2009); a collaborative practitioner research enquiry (Bolden et al., 2008a, Bolden and Gosling, 2008); and two major studies of leadership and employer engagement in UK higher education (Bolden et al., 2008b, Bolden and Petrov, 2008, Bolden et al., 2009a). During this time I have also been involved in teaching and in October 2008 I moved across into a full-time lecturer role in order to contribute more directly to the academic life of the university.

Another significant event to have occurred during this period is that of having become a parent. Two months before first registering for the PhD (in September 2004) I fathered my son and have subsequently also had a daughter. This has been a life-changing experience that has made me more personally aware of my influence and responsibility and of the many forms in which leadership may emerge – both through my role as a ‘leader’ of my family and of being ‘led’ by my children, wife and others. In this context, it seems, the line between the leader and the led is rather blurred.

### **1.3.2 The development of a research question and approach**

My journey into and through leadership studies recounted above has left a significant mark on how I think about and endeavour to research leadership. I am not a great advocate or fan of ‘heroic’ models of leadership (although I recognise the significant impact that certain people can have on organisations and communities). I find myself drawn to more collective and systemic views of leadership (yet continue to struggle for

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ways to locate the individual within the collective). I have an inclination towards qualitative and interpretivist modes of research, seeking understanding rather than causal evidence (yet remain convinced of the value of triangulating a variety of forms of data). And I regard research as a dynamic activity that requires engagement with multiple stakeholders, recognition of the dynamics of power and politics, and connection to subjective experience (whilst needing to retain a certain degree of critical distance from the topic of investigation).

In determining a topic for this thesis I found myself somewhat spoilt for choice. For practical reasons I needed to focus the enquiry on research I was carrying out at work, yet frequently found myself spending time writing and disseminating research for policy and practitioner audiences rather than the academic community. After working so long in research fields associated with leadership I felt the need to focus on a topic that was of substantial value and importance to others as well as myself. I was initially drawn to report on a study I had conducted with a colleague, Phil Kirk, on leadership development for social change in sub-Saharan Africa (Bolden and Kirk, 2006) yet the more I got into the subject the more problematic it became. As I analysed the transcripts and reviewed the research methods I became increasingly aware of how political, social and cultural factors may have impacted upon findings and their interpretation. In the end I found that all I could really talk about was the leadership development process itself rather than what the study might tell us about 'African' approaches to leadership or how, through putting people through a leadership development process they may be able to become catalysts for social change within their communities. An article on this work has now been published (Bolden and Kirk, 2009) and offers some sense of closure on this project but it remains a topic that I hope to return to in due course.

A study that I was involved with that did make it into this thesis was on leadership in higher education (Bolden et al., 2008b). The seeds of this project arose from the African project mentioned above – in particular an interest in how leadership might be 'distributed' within organisations and communities. Around this time the National College for School Leadership produced a review of 'distributed leadership' within education (Bennett et al., 2003) and a number of articles were published (e.g. Gronn, 2002, Harris, 2003, Lumby, 2003, Spillane et al., 2004). Whilst these publications appeared to offer a language and way of thinking about leadership that transcended the rather leader-centric perspectives that preceded them, it still remained difficult to



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imagine what ‘distributed leadership’ actually looked like or how it could be developed. When the Leadership Foundation for Higher Education (LFHE) issued a call for research into leadership in HE in autumn 2004 this seemed an ideal opportunity to explore these ideas in greater depth, particularly given the LFHE’s own references to ‘distributed leadership’ in their promotional literature (e.g. LFHE, 2004). The outcomes of this research are reported in Chapter 4 but, suffice to say, whilst they offered some answers they also raised a number of other significant questions. In particular, it became evident that whilst ‘distributed’ was to some extent an accurate description of leadership in the UK HE sector it gives limited insight into the processes by which leadership is ‘distributed’ or the implications of this ‘distribution’ for what leadership actually accomplishes. As much as its descriptive capacity, we concluded, ‘distributed leadership’ should be considered as a rhetorical device that frames and shapes the ways in which people think about (and hence engage with) leadership within organisations. Whilst this can be liberating it can also mask differential levels of access to sources of power and influence.

The second study in this thesis builds upon these ideas about the significance of how leadership is discussed to consider how leadership work is ‘accomplished’ on a day-to-day basis by leadership practitioners. This study was largely prompted by a paper by Brigid Carroll, Lester Levy and David Richmond (Carroll et al., 2007, 2008) that called for a practice-based approach to the study of leadership. Drawing on a number of similar arguments to those presented earlier in this chapter, along with a growing literature on ‘strategy-as-practice’ (e.g. Balogun et al., 2003, Whittington, 2003, Jarzabkowski, 2004), these authors proposed that a micro-level investigation of how ‘practitioners’ make use of contextually situated ‘practices’ in their day-to-day leadership ‘praxis’<sup>5</sup> would offer a real alternative to the discourse of ‘competencies’<sup>6</sup> that dominates much management and leadership practice and development.

The opportunity to explore a ‘leadership-as-practice’ (Carroll et al., 2007) perspective through empirical research came through a collaborative research group I had been running with Jonathan Gosling, John Burgoyne and others since 2005. This group, named ‘CELEX’, comprised a number of leadership and management professionals from a variety of organisations who shared an interest in exploring the relationship between leadership development and performance management. Over a period of two and a half years (from July 2005 to December 2007) the group had met nine times, with

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<sup>5</sup> See Chapter 5 for explanation of this terminology.

<sup>6</sup> Outlined in section 1.2.3.



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a number of interim activities and visits between. A total of 24 participants from 12 large, well-known organisations from the UK public and private sectors participated (averaging around 6-8 per workshop) and during this time three cycles of enquiry were completed, each focussing on specific questions/issues.

This forum gave a direct opportunity to work with experienced leadership practitioners, with a high degree of sensitivity to contextual factors within their own organisations, in working through and reflecting on how leadership theory and research could help address or reframe practical challenges. An article summarising the main outcomes and conclusions of this work was published in 2008 and argued, predominantly that:

“The narrative function of corporate leadership systems in expressing ‘who we are’ and ‘what we value’ is equally, if not more, important in determining their impact (positive or negative) than their corrective or developmental capacity per se.” (Bolden et al., 2008a, p. 1)

In effect, we concluded that talk about leadership and performance within organisations can help to construct a shared sense of identity and commitment to performance targets that, in turn, shapes attitudes and behaviours.

At the time in which the article by Carroll et al. (2007) was presented we were planning for the fourth round of the CELEX enquiry and saw this as an ideal opportunity to gain access to a range of organisations and the experiences and reflections of an engaged group of practitioners with whom to explore a practice-based perspective on leadership. The findings from this study are described in Chapter 5 and highlight (a) an apparent disconnect between the perception and experience of leadership by mid-senior level managers, and (b) a high degree of discursive flexibility on behalf of leadership practitioners in how they make use of various management and leadership ‘practices’.

These, then, are the two studies reported in this thesis: distributed leadership in universities and leadership-as-practice in three other large organisations (defence, processing/logistics and data management). They are, however, not isolated studies but two snapshots from a much longer and broader enquiry into the nature of leadership that I have been engaged with almost since I first went to university over twenty years ago. Whilst either one could be treated as the topic of a PhD in its own right I have selected these two because, together they give a glimpse into my own quest to understand and capture something of the nature of leadership.

The first study asks questions such as ‘how is leadership distributed?’, ‘what are the functions of this distribution?’ and ‘who/what controls the distribution?’. The second study asks ‘how is leadership accomplished on a day-to-day basis?’, ‘who is involved?’ and ‘what tools, techniques and/or practices do they draw on in carrying out leadership work?’

The fundamental question behind this thesis is *how to explore leadership in a holistic manner that recognises the contribution of both individuals and the collective whilst remaining sensitive to contextual factors*. It aims to go beyond a static representation of leadership practice and the process(es) of studying leadership to give an insight into how an understanding of leadership can emerge over time. Running through this, as indicated in the Foreword, are the threads of some perennial issues in organisational studies (and the philosophy of social science more generally), including: the links between the individual and the collective, structure and agency, and theory and practice. I do not propose to offer definitive answers to these questions, for they remain ‘essentially contested’<sup>7</sup>, but rather aim to offer some potential insights and markers for those looking to navigate their way through this terrain.

In many ways the narrative of a personal quest for a solution, and then for understanding, presented in this thesis can be taken as an analogy for the field of Leadership Studies more generally. The search for answers is sometimes fruitful in producing insights, and these may enable people to orientate themselves to leadership as they experience it, but the journey is often as important as the destination. In my experience an appreciation of leadership ferments slowly over time rather than appearing in sudden and sharp relief.

### ***1.4 Structure of the thesis***

This thesis is structured around seven main chapters as outlined below:

- 1) *Introduction*: overview of the area of research.
- 2) *Representations of leadership*: a review of the main theoretical perspectives applied to the study of leadership.

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<sup>7</sup> “Concepts are... ‘essentially contested’ when there is no possibility of common meaning because they are based on different epistemological premises or underpin radically different world-views” (Della Porta and Keating, 2008, p. 4).

- 3) *Studying leadership*: an extension of the literature review, and a bridge into the subsequent studies, that considers the various ways in which leadership can/has been studied and the principle considerations that inform the current enquiry.
- 4) *The distribution of leadership*: an account of the approach, main findings and interim discussion of Study 1, an exploration of how leadership is distributed, perceived and enacted within UK universities.
- 5) *The practice of leadership*: an account of the approach, main findings and interim discussion of Study 2, an exploration of how leadership is accomplished on a day-to-day basis within three large organisations outside the HE sector.
- 6) *Making sense of leadership*: an integrative discussion that draws together key themes from the two studies and the insights they reveal into the sensemaking processes of leadership practice and enquiry.
- 7) *Conclusions... and new beginnings*: a summary of the key themes and issues identified within the thesis and reflections on their implications for leadership theory, research, practice and development.

### ***1.5 Chapter summary***

In this chapter I have outlined the focus of this enquiry and the reasons why a revised view of leadership studies may be necessary. I have also discussed the research questions and how they were developed – situating them within a personal narrative of enquiry into the nature of leadership over many years. I have also outlined the overall structure of the thesis. In the next two chapters I will discuss the main literature base on which I will draw. Chapter 2 gives a theoretical overview of the various ways in which leadership has been represented, whilst Chapter 3 will explore approaches to leadership research.

## **2. REPRESENTATIONS OF LEADERSHIP**

“It has become apparent that, after years of trying, we have been unable to generate an understanding of leadership that is both intellectually compelling and emotionally satisfying. The concept of leadership remains elusive and enigmatic.” (Meindl et al., 1985, p. 78)

### ***2.1 Overview***

The previous chapter outlines the general context of this enquiry. It has been conducted at a time when there is dissatisfaction with traditional leader-centric models of leadership yet amidst the sense that more complex, process and relational models often fail to speak to the everyday concerns of practicing managers. In developing ever more elaborate models we may have lost sight of the fact that leadership is ultimately a human endeavour that draws on and is influenced by our emotions, desires and sense of identity. In this chapter I will summarise the main developments in leadership theory and the current concerns and developments that inform scholarly work in this field. I begin by considering the contested nature of leadership and its relationship to management. The bulk of the chapter then considers principal theoretical perspectives and concludes with a working definition of leadership.

### ***2.2 Leadership: a contested concept***

Although Leadership Studies is relatively new as an academic discipline, it is a topic that has been studied for thousands of years. Despite the high level of consideration, however, including by some of the most well-renowned thinkers in history, there remains a certain mystery as to what leadership actually is or how to define it. In a review of leadership research, Ralph Stogdill (1974, p. 259) concluded that there are “almost as many definitions of leadership as there are persons who have attempted to define the concept” and that was nearly forty years ago, before the massive expansion of research into the topic!

At the heart of the problem of defining leadership lie two fundamental difficulties. Firstly, like notions such as ‘love’, ‘freedom’ and ‘happiness’, leadership is a complex concept open to subjective interpretation. Everyone has their own intuitive understanding of what it is, based on a mixture of experience, learning and acculturation, which is difficult to capture in a succinct definition. Secondly, the way in which leadership is defined and understood is strongly influenced by one’s philosophical beliefs on human nature. There are those who consider leadership as the consequence of a set of traits or characteristics possessed by ‘leaders’, whilst others regard it as a process of social influence emerging from group relationships.

It is for this reason that Grint (2001, 2005a) describes leadership as an ‘essentially contested concept’, revealing a number of different ways of thinking about the

phenomenon that makes common consensus highly unlikely. Firstly, he indicates that leadership could be considered as the property of a *person*, leading us to focus on the personal attributes of the ‘leader’. Secondly, he proposes that it could be considered as *results*, leading us to focus on the achievements of leaders. Thirdly, it could be conceived of as a *position* (akin to management), prompting us to ask where leaders operate and what responsibilities they hold. Fourth, he proposes that leadership may be regarded as a *process*, thereby encouraging us to turn our attention to the functions and processes of leadership more broadly<sup>8</sup>.

Following on from these perspectives Grint (2004b) poses the question of ‘*purity*’ – should leadership be considered a purely human endeavour or can it be engaged in by non-humans, including inanimate systems, structures and processes. To illustrate this point, he cites the case of Nazi Germany to argue:

“... a person did not need to be a Nazi to support Hitler, but the network was constructed and held in place so that the only way to achieve anything was to fall in line with Hitler's demands. The power of Hitler, though, derived from his temporary control over the hybrid of people, flags, ideas, songs, uniforms, tanks, guns, oil, and so forth; it did not derive from him alone, however charismatic he may have appeared to some.” (Grint, 2004a)

Drawing on the principles of Actor Network Theory (Callon, 1986, Latour, 1987), Grint argues that leadership is essentially ‘hybrid’ in that it works through a combination of direct human influence and other, non-human factors. To this extent “the leader operates as an engineer of heterogeneous elements, drawing them into a temporary unity, channelling their concerns through a single causeway, and isolating them from all others”. From this perspective, he proposes:

“One might suggest that the search for an essence is irrelevant because the important element is the hybrid, and neither the elements that comprise the hybrid nor any alleged network is the essence.” (Grint, 2004a)

The issues highlighted above are important to consider if we wish to gain a better understanding of what constitutes ‘good’ leadership in terms of its effectiveness. A further distinction, though, firmly embedded in the field is the issue of ‘good’ leadership in terms of ethics. This tension has been referred to by Ciulla (1995) as the ‘Hitler problem’ in that:

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<sup>8</sup> Interestingly Grint does not propose the idea of leadership as *practice*.

“The answer to the question ‘Was Hitler a good leader?’ is yes, if a leader is defined as someone who is effective or gets the job they set out to do done. The answer is no, if the leader gets the job done, but the job itself is immoral, and it is done in an immoral way.” (Ciulla, 1999, p. 168)

Whilst many definitions of leadership restrict it to purely non-coercive influence towards shared (and socially acceptable) objectives (e.g. Burns, 1978, Ciulla, 2004) others are somewhat less prescriptive in their attributions, arguing that all leaders may be perceived more or less beneficially by virtue of the group to which you belong. Barbara Kellerman (2004b) for example argues that “leaders are like the rest of us: trustworthy and deceitful, cowardly and brave, greedy and generous” (ibid, p. 45) and Peter Drucker (quoted in Huey, 1994) stated that:

“Leadership is all hype. We've had three great leaders in this century - Hitler, Stalin and Mao – and you see the devastation they left behind.”

Indeed, whilst on one side attention to the moral and ethical dimensions of leadership is increasing (e.g. Ciulla, 2004, Maak and Pless, 2006) so too is attention to the ‘shadow side’ of leadership. Thus studies of ‘toxic’, ‘narcissistic’ and ‘bad’ leadership are becoming increasingly prominent (Lipman-Blumen, 2005, Maccoby, 2000, Kellerman, 2004a) as are those on executive derailment (McCall, 1998, Dotlich and Cairo, 2003). The psychodynamic approach in particular explores the sub-conscious facets of leadership to reveal the underlying psychological factors that encourage people to act as followers and, at its most extreme point, argues that leadership is “an alienating social myth” that disempowers followers and builds dependency (Gemmill and Oakley, 1992).

So it is that leadership remains a hotly debated and contested concept. It is a word that is used in many different ways and senses - at times a noun, referring to the leader or leadership team, and at times a verb, referring to the process of leading (Ciulla, 2005). In a similar way as Tony Watson (2002) indicates that the term ‘management’ tends to be used interchangeably to refer to a *function* (management), *activity* (managing) or a *person* (manager) so too does the same happen with the term ‘leadership’.

Perhaps a clue to this confusion may be found if we consider briefly the etymology of the term. The roots of the word ‘leadership’ can be traced back to the word ‘lead’, first introduced into the English language around 800 AD from the old Anglo Saxon word for “to travel” and subsequently adapted, around 400 years later, to mean “to guide” (Grace, 2003). The term ‘leader’ originated circa 1300 AD in recognition of the role played by politicians and statesmen but was not applied in organisations until the early

19<sup>th</sup> Century, around the same time that the term ‘leadership’ began to be used to describe the activity carried out by ‘leaders’ (ibid). Thus, it seems, that historically leadership has been the preoccupation of people of Anglo-Saxon descent (Bass, 1990) and is largely “a 20<sup>th</sup> Century concept [...] related to the democratization of Western Civilisation” (Rost, 1991, p. 43, cited in Grace, 2003, p. 4), used more recently to “help Americans find significance in their search for the meaning of life” (Rost, 1991:7, cited in Grace, 2003, p. 2). It is interesting to note, for example, that in French there is no comparable word and in German the term for leader is ‘fuehrer’ – a notion which clearly has adopted a rather different significance since the time of Hitler!

### 2.2.1 Philosophical origins of contemporary leadership theory

Like many subjects, the contemporary field of leadership studies has been shaped by philosophical writings dating back over millennia. Perhaps the earliest known writings on leadership were penned by the Chinese philosopher and founder of Daoism, Lao Tzu (also known as Laozi) in 6<sup>th</sup> Century BC. In his most influential book, the *Tao Te Ching*, he describes leadership thus:

“A leader is best  
When people barely know he exists  
Not so good when people obey and acclaim him  
Worse when they despise him  
But of a good leader, who talks little,  
When his work is done, his aim fulfilled,  
They will say:  
We did it ourselves.” (Lao Tzu, cited in Manz and Sims, 1991, p. 35)

For Lao Tzu the key to good leadership was facilitating others to accomplish some pre-determined task, not through coercion but via a more subtle process of interpersonal influence. Such a perspective remains evident throughout much contemporary leadership theory, although the relative visibility of the leader is something that has changed, particularly within dominant Western perspectives where we tend to encourage ‘visible’ leaders.

Despite the enduring wisdom of early Chinese writings Western thinking on leadership has perhaps been most strongly influenced by Greek Philosophy. The root of this interest and many of the ideas developed are attributed in large part to Socrates although, as he wrote no books himself, they are conveyed primarily through the



writings of Plato, Xenophon and Aristophanes (see Adair, 1989, p. 15). For Socrates, a key prerequisite for holding a leadership position was professional and/or technical competence and he also pointed towards an increased need, or desire, for leadership in times of crisis. Of the various forms of authority available to people - position/rank, personality, and knowledge - Socrates put precedence on the latter. This idea was particularly captured in Plato's book *The Republic* (4<sup>th</sup> Century BC), in which he outlined the difficulties of democratic society that promotes decision-making by consensus and argued, instead, for leadership by those with the most appropriate knowledge and skills, as illustrated in the following extract:

“The sailors are quarrelling over the control of the helm [...] They do not understand that the genuine navigator can only make himself fit to command a ship by studying the seasons of the year, sky, stars, and winds, and all that belongs to his craft; and they have no idea that, along with the science of navigation, it is possible for him to gain, by instruction or practice, the skill to keep control of the helm whether some of them like it or not.” (Plato, cited in Adair, 1989, p. 15)

Whilst works such as these are often regarded as precursors to the trait approach to leadership (Price, 2004) (see section 2.3.1 for further details) an interesting feature of them is the assumption that certain leadership skills can be learnt and that the fundamental education of the effective leader should be philosophy – a call for the ‘philosopher king’:

“There will be no end to the troubles of states, or indeed of humanity itself, till philosophers become kings in this world, or till those we now call kings and rulers really and truly become philosophers.” (Plato, *The Republic*, cited in Ayer and O'Grady, 1994, p. 343)

Xenophon, an experienced military general himself, concluded that there was more to successful leadership than knowledge and experience alone. In his various books he distinguished between leaders who achieved ‘willing obedience’ and those who simply gained grudging compliance (Adair, 1989, Mitchell, 2009). At the heart of this argument was a question about the nature of the leader-follower relationship and the extent to which a leader is able to inspire commitment, within which it is possible to identify the seeds of transformational leadership (see section 2.3.2b), as well as concerns about corporatism and the significance of rhetoric in leadership (Gosling, 2009).

Aristotle, a student of Plato, is another Greek scholar whose work has been largely cited in relation to leadership. Like his teacher, and Socrates before him, Aristotle argued the case for a ruling elite, proposing that:

“[There should be] a union of the naturally ruling element with the element which is naturally ruled, for the preservation of both. The element which is able, by virtue of its intelligence, to exercise forethought, is naturally a ruling and master element.”  
(Aristotle, cited in Harter, 2008, p. 48)

In considering what constitutes useful knowledge, Aristotle distinguished between a number of different forms, including ‘*techne*’, ‘*episteme*’ and ‘*phronesis*’<sup>9</sup> - described thus:

"Whereas *episteme* concerns theoretical *know why* and *techne* denotes technical *know how*, *phronesis* emphasizes practical knowledge and practical ethics."  
(Flyvbjerg, 2001 , p. 56)

The latter of these concepts, *phronesis*, is gaining increasing attention within leadership and management studies as an important basis for the education of managers (Flyvbjerg, 2006, Grint, 2007) and is explored further in Chapter 7 of this thesis.

All of these early writings on leadership were heavily influenced by the political, social, cultural and economic context of the times but these dimensions were perhaps most clearly evident within the works of Machiavelli in 16<sup>th</sup> Century Italy. Although widely criticised as advocating an instrumental approach to leadership (the ends justify the means) his book *The Prince* was a thoughtful and provoking insight into the processes of leadership. Within this work, Machiavelli argued that people are basically weak, fallible, gullible and not particularly trustworthy. His approach to leadership, therefore, proposed that others should be treated as impersonal objects and manipulated whenever necessary to achieve one’s own ends. The fundamental premise was not necessarily to endorse acting immorally just for the sake of it but, rather, to highlight the inefficacy of acting morally in an amoral world. Thus, for Machiavelli, “it is much safer to be feared than loved when one of the two must be lacking” (Machiavelli, cited in Grint, 1997, p. 60), because fear is a more effective mechanism for the achievement of outcomes in a society with no consistent moral framework.

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<sup>9</sup> A fourth form of knowledge identified by Aristotle was that of ‘*theoria*’ (contemplation) although, as indicated by Case and Gosling (2009), this is seldom mentioned in contemporary accounts of management and leadership.

Ideas and ideals of leadership have been explored throughout history by writers including Shakespeare, Conrad and Tolstoy, and together evoke something of the emotional lived experience of leading and being led. They have become part of the cultural fabric of our societies and still today shape our expectations of leadership. Yet, we may be somewhat selective in which aspects we choose to focus on and promote. Whilst, for example, Shakespeare spoke of many flawed leaders, such as Hamlet and Richard III, it is perhaps the heroic speeches of Henry V that remain with us (at least in Britain and the US) and a belief that:

“The history of the world is but the biography of great men.” (Carlyle, 1866, p. 26)

### **2.2.2 The distinction between leadership and management**

One of the many ways in which people have attempted to make sense of leadership over recent years is to contrast it to management. Zaleznik (1977) arguably began the trend with his article *Leaders and managers: are they different*, in which he presented the image of the ‘leader’ as an artist, who uses creativity and intuition to navigate his/her way through chaos, whilst the ‘manager’ was presented as a problem solver dependent on rationality and control. Since then the leadership literature has been littered with bold statements contrasting the two. Bennis and Nanus (1985, p. 21), for example, suggest that managers “do things right” whilst leaders “do the right thing” and Covey et al. (1994, p. 268) propose that “management works in the system; leadership works on the system”.

Central to most of these distinctions is an orientation towards change. This concept is well represented in the work of John Kotter who concluded that “management is about coping with complexity” whilst “leadership, by contrast, is about coping with change” (Kotter, 1990, p. 104). He proposed that good management brings about a degree of stability and consistency to organisational processes and goals, whilst leadership is required for dynamic change (see Table 2.1 for a summary of his ideas).

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	<b>Leadership functions</b>	<b>Management functions</b>
<b>Creating an agenda</b>	<i>Establishing direction:</i> Vision of the future, develop strategies for change to achieve goals	<i>Plans and budgets:</i> Decide action plans and timetables, allocate resources
<b>Developing people</b>	<i>Aligning people:</i> Communicate vision and strategy, influence creation of teams which accept validity of goals	<i>Organizing and staffing:</i> Decide structure and allocate staff, develop policies, procedures and monitoring
<b>Execution</b>	<i>Motivating and inspiring:</i> Energize people to overcome obstacles, satisfy human needs	<i>Controlling, problem solving:</i> Monitor results against plan and take corrective action
<b>Outcomes</b>	Produces positive and sometimes dramatic change	Produces order, consistency and predictability

**Table 2.1: Comparison of leadership and management**

(Buchanan and Huczynski, 2004, p. 718, adapted from Kotter, 1990)

In distinguishing the central role of leadership in bringing about change Kotter (1995) identified eight activities in which a leader must engage:

1. Creating a sense of urgency
2. Forming a guiding coalition for change
3. Articulating a clear vision
4. Communicating the vision
5. Removing obstacles
6. Planning short-term wins
7. Producing continuous change, and
8. Institutionalising new approaches.

The distinction of leadership from management as represented by Kotter and his contemporaries clearly encourages a shift in emphasis from the relatively inflexible, bureaucratic processes typified as ‘management’ to the more dynamic and strategic processes classed as ‘leadership’, yet even he concludes that they are both important, and to a large extent complementary, processes:

“Leadership is different from management, but not for the reason most people think. Leadership isn't mystical and mysterious. It has nothing to do with having charisma or other exotic personality traits. It's not the province of a chosen few. Nor is leadership necessarily better than management or a replacement for it: rather, leadership and management are two distinctive and complementary

activities. Both are necessary for success in an increasingly complex and volatile business environment.” (Kotter, 1990, p. 103)

Despite the popular appeal of a contrast between leadership and management there remains serious doubt as to whether such a distinction is either useful or an accurate description of practice. Firstly there is increasing concern about the way in which such analyses tend to denigrate management as something rather boring and uninspiring. Joseph Rost, for example, highlights the need for consistency and predictability in many aspects of management and leadership behaviour and concludes that “down with management and up with leadership is a bad idea” (Rost, 1991, p. 143). John Gardner (1990, p. 3) makes a similar remark in his book *On Leadership*, arguing that:

“Many writers on leadership take considerable pains to distinguish between leaders and managers. In the process leaders generally end up looking like a cross between Napoleon and the Pied Piper, and managers like unimaginative clods.”

This denigration of management leads to a second, and perhaps more significant, difficulty of the leader-manager distinction - far from being separate practices, they are an integral part of the same job. From detailed observations of what managers actually do, Mintzberg (1973, 1975) identified 10 key roles, one of which was ‘leadership’. He concluded that far from being separate, leadership is just one dimension of a multifaceted management function<sup>10</sup>.

Gosling and Murphy (2004) build upon these ideas to propose that, rather than the common distinction of leadership as being about change and management about maintaining the status quo, retaining a sense of continuity during times of change is also a core aspect of successful leadership. The leader must therefore ensure that systems and structures remain in place that offer workers a sense of security and balance, without which it would be hard to maintain levels of motivation, commitment, trust and psychological wellbeing. Gosling (2008a) describes the process of organisational change as more like a soap opera, with interweaving, ambiguous and unending storylines, rather than an action movie, with a linear storyline, dramatic action, and clearly definable heroes and villains, as might be interpreted from Kotter’s eight steps.

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<sup>10</sup> Echoing Henri Fayol’s (1949) classic five functions of management: planning, organizing, commanding, coordinating, and controlling, in which commanding and coordinating are often now grouped together as ‘leading’ (e.g. Daft, 2005).

## REPRESENTATIONS OF LEADERSHIP

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Much of the difficulty and confusion that arises from contrasting leadership and management, therefore, comes from the tendency to map them to different individuals. Thus, we talk of ‘managers’ and ‘leaders’ as if they were different, and to a large extent incompatible, people – we consider leaders as dynamic and charismatic, with the ability to inspire others, whilst managers are portrayed as bureaucrats who focus on the task in hand. Such a view, however, does not coincide well with the lived experience of being a manager. People are generally recruited into ‘management’ rather than ‘leadership’ positions within organisations and are expected to complete a multitude of tasks ranging from day-to-day planning and implementation, to longer-term strategic thinking. None of these are done in isolation, and throughout, it is essential to work alongside other people – to motivate and inspire them, but also to know when to relinquish control and take a back seat. As Gosling and Mintzberg (2003, p. 54-55) argue:

“Most of us have become so enamoured of ‘leadership’ that ‘management’ has been pushed into the background. Nobody aspires to being a good manager anymore; everybody wants to be a great leader. But the separation of management from leadership is dangerous. Just as management without leadership encourages an uninspired style, which deadens activities, leadership without management encourages a disconnected style, which promotes hubris. And we all know the destructive power of hubris in organisations.”

Thus, whilst the distinction between management and leadership has been useful in drawing attention to the strategic and motivational qualities required during periods of change, the bipolar representation of managers and leaders as completely different people can be misleading and potentially harmful in practice. Indeed, if it is believed that leaders and managers are different people, one might well conclude that (a) it is necessary to change the management team regularly as circumstances change, and (b) it is not possible for managers to become leaders (and vice versa). Such a view is severely limiting and greatly underestimates the abilities of people in management roles. This is not to say, however, that all people will be equally adept at all aspects of leadership and management, nor that there is one profile that is appropriate in all situations but that to achieve maximum effect we should seek to recruit and develop ‘leader-managers’ capable of adopting the role in its most holistic form.

It is for this reason that, like Mintzberg (2004b) I will use the words ‘management’ and ‘leadership’ and ‘manager’ and ‘leader’ largely interchangeably throughout this thesis. This is not to imply that the two are directly equivalent, but to recognise that within

organisations there is a high degree of overlap and that, in practice, the two can not be meaningfully separated. Furthermore, it is to recognise that common distinctions between the two arise largely through how they are conceptualised rather than through how they are practiced. As will become apparent through this thesis, whilst representations of 'leadership' and what constitutes a 'leader' remain highly contested, notions of 'management' and 'manager' are more frequently tied to specific organisational roles. Given the focus in this thesis on organisational (as opposed to community, political or cultural) leadership the leader-manager divide may not be best suited to expanding our understanding of either function.

### ***2.3 Theories of leadership***

In this section I will review the various ways in which leadership has been theorised over time. It is structured into three sub-sections, beginning with a series of approaches that broadly consider leadership as arising from the contribution of 'leaders'; then as the outcome of leader-follower relationships; and then as an emergent social process within organisations and groups. Whilst these are neither absolute nor exclusive categories they indicate three broad ways of thinking about and describing leadership. Theories have been assigned to each category on the basis of their predominant argument and chronological sequence. Although presented sequentially it is important to note that many of the ideas presented remain popular and influential today and there remains little consensus as to which is preferable or most effective. In his book *Leadership: A Critical Text*, for example, Simon Western (2008) presents a similar range of perspectives as a series of overlapping and somewhat parallel discourses that rise and fade in strength over time but which continue to inform and shape understandings.

It should be noted that this chapter is not intended to be a comprehensive review of leadership theory (e.g. Northouse, 2004, Yukl, 2006) its aim, rather, is to illustrate the main ways in which leadership has been represented conceptually as many of these are building blocks for subsequent theories, including those explored during the empirical chapters of this thesis. It should also be noted that the vast majority of theories and research discussed here, as Leadership Studies more generally, are Western in origin (primarily US and UK). The implications of these various representations for leadership theory and research are considered in further detail in Chapter 3, along with a series of complementary themes/issues from organisational and management studies, that inform the research approach. The third set of approaches form the conceptual basis for the studies reported in Chapters 4 and 5.



### 2.3.1 Leadership as a property of leaders

In this section I will review perspectives that take the view that leadership is something done or possessed by ‘leaders’<sup>11</sup>, and which endeavour to identify the core attributes, functions and/or behaviours that make them ‘effective’<sup>12</sup>.

#### a. Leadership traits

Notwithstanding the early writings on leadership described in section 2.2.1 the field of Leadership Studies as we now know it emerged in the early-mid 20<sup>th</sup> Century, predominantly out of research conducted during and after the First World War to inform the recruitment of military officers. As today, the majority of this work was conducted in the US, largely informed by psychological and scientific principles, and remains a significant influence on how we think about and research leadership (Fairhurst, 2007).

It took, as its starting point, the ‘Great man’ view of leadership whereby effective past leaders (usually male) were considered to have achieved their success through possession of a range of distinguishing characteristics and traits. At the heart of this approach was an assumption that these people were born to be leaders and excelled by virtue of “extraordinary courage, firmness or greatness of soul, in the course of some journey or enterprise” (Adair, 1989: 227).

In an extensive review of trait studies, Ralph Stogdill (1974) found some qualities that appeared more often than others, as outlined in Table 2.2.

- A strong drive for responsibility
- Focus on completing the task
- Vigour and persistence in pursuit of goals
- Venturesomeness and originality in problem-solving
- Drive to exercise initiative in social settings
- Self-confidence
- Strong sense of personal identity
- Willingness to accept consequences of decisions and actions
- Readiness to adsorb interpersonal stress
- Willingness to tolerate frustration and delay
- An ability to influence the behaviour of others
- The capacity to structure social systems to the purpose in hand

**Table 2.2: Leadership traits**

(Stogdill, 1974, cited in Buchanan and Huczynski, 2004, p.720-721)

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<sup>11</sup> Usually considered within this set of theories to be the most senior individual(s) within a group or organisation (almost invariably the occupant of a formal managerial role).

<sup>12</sup> ‘Effectiveness’ is a contested concept and highly context dependent, although rarely problematised in this way within these theories where it is largely equated with task completion and ‘follower’ satisfaction.



## REPRESENTATIONS OF LEADERSHIP

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The same set of traits, however, has not been identified in other studies (e.g. Bird, 1940, Stewart, 1963) although some weak generalizations may exist. Shaw (1976) and Fraser (1978), for example found that leaders tend to score higher than average on scores of ability (intelligence, relevant knowledge, verbal facility), sociability (participation, cooperativeness, popularity), and motivation (initiative and persistence) (cited in Buchanan and Huczynski, 2004, p. 721).

Whilst the trait approach has been (and continues to be) highly influential in the way we conceive of leadership and offers useful examples and benchmarks of successful leaders, there remains no definitive list of traits, the situational context is often ignored, there is scant evidence of a relationship to organizational performance and it is of limited value for leadership development (Northouse, 2004). Thus, whilst traits might be useful it has become evident that they are insufficient in themselves to serve as the basis for the identification or development of more effective leaders.

### **b. Leadership styles and behaviours**

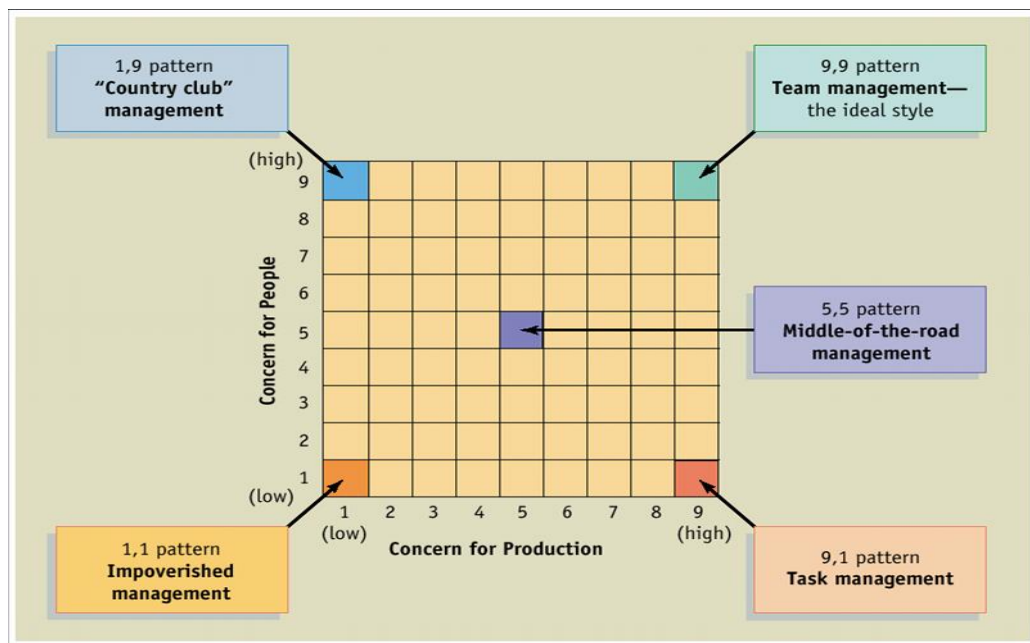
An alternative to the trait approach is to consider how leaders behave, rather than their underlying characteristics. Interest in this approach was popularised by the work of Douglas McGregor (1960), who proposed that management and leadership styles are influenced by the persons' assumptions about human nature. He summarised two contrasting viewpoints of managers in industry. Theory X managers take a fairly negative view of human nature, believing that the average person has an inherent dislike of work and will avoid it if possible. Leaders holding this view believe that coercion and control are necessary to ensure that people work, and that workers have no desire for responsibility. Theory Y managers, on the other hand, believe that the expenditure of physical and mental effort in work is as natural as play or rest, and that the average human being, under proper conditions, learns not only to accept but to seek responsibility. Such leaders will endeavour to enhance their followers' capacity to exercise a high level of imagination, ingenuity, and creativity in the solution of organizational problems. It can be seen that leaders holding different assumptions will demonstrate different approaches to leadership: Theory X leaders preferring an autocratic style and Theory Y leaders preferring a participative style.

Other influential behavioural theories include Kurt Lewin's Leadership Styles (Lewin et al., 1939) the Ohio State Two-Factor Model (Fleishman, 1953, Halpin and Winer, 1957, Hemphill and Coons, 1957, Fleishman and Harris, 1962) and the Blake-Mouton Managerial Grid (Blake and Mouton, 1964). Each of these models identifies two

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dimensions of leadership/management behaviour: a focus on 'task' (also termed 'production' or 'structure') and a focus on 'people' (also termed 'team' or 'relationships'). From this, it is possible to identify a range of leadership styles varying from highly directive/autocratic (focussing mainly on task) to highly participative (focussing mainly on people). In each case it was argued that a high focus on both people and task was likely to constitute the most effective style of leadership behaviour (see Figure 2.1).

Despite attempts to identify an 'ideal' leadership style, however, empirical evidence does not support such a relationship and there is now a widespread agreement that the most effective style will be largely influenced by a range of other factors, not least the situational context (Northouse, 2004).



**Figure 2.1: The Blake-Mouton Managerial Grid**  
(Source: Buchanan and Huczynski, 2004, p. 592)

### c. Situational and contingency approaches

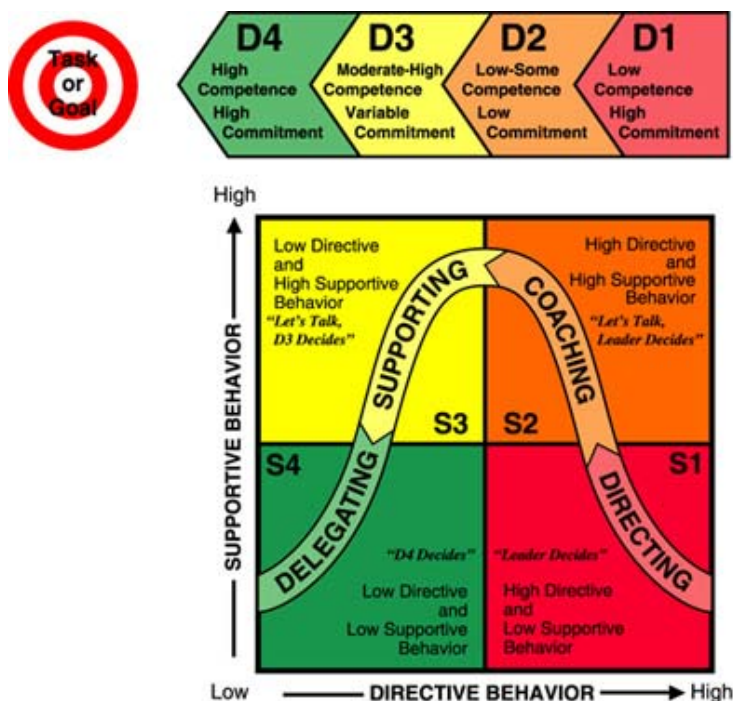
Whilst behavioural theories introduced the notion of different leadership styles, they gave little guidance as to what constitutes an effective leadership approach in different situations. Indeed, most researchers today conclude that no one leadership style is right for every manager under all circumstances. Instead, situational theories were developed to indicate that the style to be used is dependent upon such factors as the situation, the people, the task, the organisation, and other environmental variables.

Fiedler's contingency model proposed that there is no single best way to lead; instead the leaders' style should be matched to the situation (Fiedler, 1964, 1967). He

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distinguished between managers who are task or relationship oriented. Task oriented managers focus on the task-in-hand and tend to do better in situations that have good leader-member relationships, structured tasks, and either weak or strong position power. They also do well when the task is unstructured but position power is strong, and at the other end of the spectrum when the leader member relations are moderate to poor and the task is unstructured. Such leaders tend to display a more directive leadership style. Relationship oriented managers do better in all other situations and exhibit a more participative style of leadership.

Hersey and Blanchard had similar ideas but proposed that it is possible for a leader to adapt his/her style to the situation (Hersey and Blanchard, 1969, 1977, 1988). They argued that the developmental level of subordinates has the greatest impact on which leadership style is most appropriate. Thus, as the skill and maturity level of followers increases, the leader will need to adapt his/her task-relationship style from directing to coaching, supporting and delegating<sup>13</sup>, as illustrated in Figure 2.2.



**Figure 2.2: Situational Leadership Model**

(Source: [www.kenblanchard.com/img/pub/SSL\\_model2.jpg](http://www.kenblanchard.com/img/pub/SSL_model2.jpg), accessed 18/08/09)

Despite the progress made by situational and contingency models of leadership in theorising how leadership occurs in context, offering practical guidance to leaders in determining the most appropriate course of action, and giving legitimacy to the field of

<sup>13</sup> A similar model was proposed by Tannenbaum and Schmidt (1958) who presented a continuum of leadership styles from autocratic to democratic.

leadership development (moving away from the notion of leaders as born not made) the approach remains problematic in many ways. The dominant tools are somewhat simplistic (although this is also part of their appeal) and fail to engage meaningfully with some of the practical challenges of leadership, such as how to master multiple leadership styles whilst remaining consistent; how to respond to multiple, complex and poorly defined tasks; how to determine the needs of followers and balance leadership styles for individuals and groups; how to allow for leadership by more than one person and across multiple and changing groups; and what to do if the dominant style of the leader is ill-suited to the needs of the followers and situation when a change in leadership is not an option (Northouse, 2004). Furthermore, there is very little supporting research evidence for models such as that developed by Hersey and Blanchard, and a fair degree of conceptual ambiguity (see Graeff, 1983, Yukl, 2006, p. 224-5, for further discussion).

### d. Leadership skills and functions

Whilst the previous models focus on the traits and behaviours of leaders, a further set of approaches focussed on the skills and functions of leadership – i.e. what a leader (or group of leaders) needs to do and achieve.

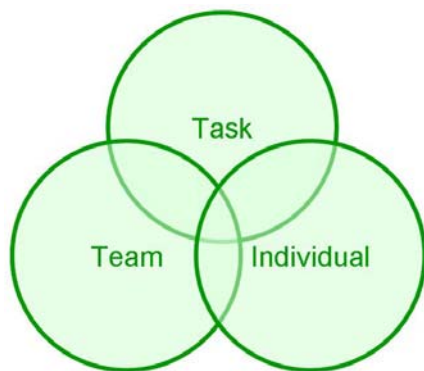
One of the most influential such models - *Action Centred Leadership* - was developed by John Adair (1973), who proposed that the functions of leadership include: defining the task, planning, briefing, controlling, evaluating, motivating, organising, and setting an example (largely echoing Fayol's, 1949 functions of management). Whilst he acknowledges that many people may contribute towards each of these functions it is the formally designated leader who is accountable for the outcomes.

Unlike the situational models described earlier Adair's approach allows for a greater degree of flexibility in how leaders go about their work and highlights the ways in which the functions of leadership might change over time. He also reveals some of the underlying psychological processes of leadership and the importance of the relationship between the leader and the led. For Adair, the leader is both a part of, and in some way removed from, the team he/she leads:

“If he [the leader] exercises the art of leadership properly he will generate a *sense of responsibility* in everyone one of them [the group members], so that members naturally want to respond to the three sets of need [task, team and individual]. But he alone is *accountable* at the end of the day. It is the leader who should get the

sack if the task is not achieved, or the group disintegrates into warring factions, or the individuals lapse into sullen apathy.” (Adair, 1983, p. 44, original emphasis)

Similar to situational models, however, Adair argued that the most effective approach within a given situation will be dependent on meeting both the leaders’ and followers’ needs and aspirations. His influential ‘three circles’ model (Figure 2.3) indicated how the leader must balance the requirements of the task, team and individuals, varying the level of attention paid to each according to the context. Thus, for example, in time critical situations the needs of the task may take precedence over team and individual needs, however, once the deadline has been met the leader should turn his/her attention back to the needs of individuals (including him/herself) and the team.



**Figure 2.3: The Three Circles Model**  
(Adair, 1973)

By showing these circles as overlapping Adair sought to demonstrate the interdependence of each of these factors and the degree to which “each of the circles must always be seen in relation to the other two” (Adair, 1983, p. 38). He proposed that there is inevitably some degree of tension between the various factors and that omission of any one of the three will leave the others incomplete. “As a leader”, he argued, “you need to be constantly aware of what is happening in your group in terms of the three circles” (Adair, 1983, p. 38).

Despite the simplicity of this model, Adair’s approach remains highly influential, particularly within organisations such as the Royal Air Force (RAF) where it continues to form the basis for much leadership development activity (Burridge, 2007).

Evidence of a skills and functions approach is also still highly prevalent in competency-based models of leadership (as described in 1.2.3) that tend to combine traits, behaviours and functions to propose a core set of competencies, qualities and/or abilities to be exhibited by leaders in particular organisations. In a review of this literature Perren and Burgoyne (2001) identified 1013 individual management and leadership

abilities that could be classified under 83 management and leadership ability sets which, in turn, could be grouped under 8 meta-categories: strategic thinking; leading direction and culture; managing resources; managing projects; managing information; managing quality; managing activities; and managing and leading people.

Whilst a skills and functions approach to leadership has become popular due to the clarity it offers for both leadership development and assessment it can over-emphasise the individualistic nature of leadership and under-estimate the significance of contextual factors and personal differences.

### **2.3.2 Leadership as the product of a relationship between leaders and followers**

Whilst a number of the models mentioned above take some consideration of followers, they are generally presented as somewhat passive and the emphasis is almost exclusively on what leaders need to do in order to get the most out of them. As early as the 1940s an alternative approach was proposed by Mary Parker Follett who argued for recognition of leadership as a reciprocal relationship requiring an active partnership of leaders and followers:

“We want worked out a relation between leaders and led which will give to each the opportunity to make creative contributions to the situation [...] The best leader knows how to make his (her) followers actually feel power themselves, not merely acknowledge his (her) power [...] But if the followers must partake in leadership, it is also true that we must have followership on the part of leaders. There must be a partnership of following.” (Parker Follett, 1942/2003, p. 290)

It is only in more recent years, however that such a perspective has been taken seriously and scholars have endeavoured to explore the nature of the relationship between leaders and followers. The theories described below take a somewhat more relational perspective than those described in the previous section in that they regard leadership as arising from the interaction between leaders and followers. Three broad groups of theories will be outlined here: LMX and follower-centred perspectives, transformational and charismatic leadership, and quiet and servant leadership.

#### **a. LMX and follower-centred perspectives**

Leader-member exchange (LMX) theory describes the process by which a leader establishes and maintains relationships with followers over time (Dansereau et al., 1975,



Graen and Cashman, 1975). In contrast to the situational models described in section 2.3.1c in which ‘followers’ are treated as a rather homogenous group to which the ‘leader’ applies an average leadership style, LMX theory considers the extent to which differences might exist between the relationships of the ‘leader’ with each of his/her ‘followers’ (Northouse, 2007).

Early research in this tradition (initially termed ‘vertical dyad linkage’ theory) explored how leaders and followers negotiate their relative roles within work groups (Dansereau et al., 1975, Graen and Cashman, 1975). From this work it was concluded that two forms of relationship (‘linkage’) could be identified: (1) *in-group*, based on individually negotiated role responsibilities and typified by mutual trust, respect and liking; and (2) *out-group*, based on formally agreed employment contracts and typified by a lack of mutual trust, respect and liking. In terms of the implications of this, it was argued that:

“Whereas in-group members do extra things for the leader and the leader does the same for them, subordinates in the out-group are less compatible with the leader and usually just come to work, do their job, and go home.” (Northouse, 2007, p. 154)

Subsequent research on LMX theory has explored the relationship between leader-follower relationships and organisational effectiveness, concluding that high-quality relations (along the line of *in-group* linkages) are positively correlated with a number of individual and organisational outcomes, such as employee turnover, performance ratings, job satisfaction and career progression (see Graen and Uhl-Bien, 1995 for a review).

An alternative to LMX that also takes a follower-centred approach is ‘implicit leadership theory’ (Lord and Maher, 1991, Schyns and Meindl, 2005). From this perspective, it is argued, individuals possess a range of beliefs about what distinguishes leaders from non-leaders, and that what is important is not so much what leaders do as how they are perceived by (potential) followers. These beliefs develop in a number of ways, and are strongly associated with the processes of education and acculturation. House and colleagues (2004) used this rationale as their framework for the ‘GLOBE’ study of leadership across 62 societies, in which they identified six global leadership styles (charismatic/value based, team orientated, participative, humane orientated, autonomous and self-protective) follower preferences which varied according to societal culture.

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A final set of theories that focus on how followers perceive leaders that will be described in this section are those based on the ‘social identity approach’. This perspective, developed from a combination of self-categorisation theory (Turner, 1985) and social identity theory (Tajfel and Turner, 1979), proposes that the extent to which a leader is accepted or chosen by a group depends on the degree to which they are perceived as ‘prototypical’ group members (Haslam, 2004, van Knippenberg and Hogg, 2003). From this perspective, it is proposed, leaders must be ‘entrepreneurs of identity’ in which “leadership activity and leadership effectiveness largely revolves around the leader’s ability to create identity definitions and to engage people in the process of turning those definitions into practical realities” (Reicher et al., 2005, p. 556).

To this extent leadership can be conceived of as an identity project in which leaders endeavour to align follower identities to a shared and coherent ‘social identity’ as argued below:

“What this means in practice is that without a sense of shared organizational identity there can be no effective organizational communication, no heedful interrelating, no meaningful planning, no leadership. In fact, in the boldest terms, we would argue that *organizational identity makes organizational behaviour possible* (pace Turner, 1982, p. 21).” (Haslam et al., 2003, p. 365, initial emphasis)

### **b. Transformational and charismatic leadership**

In their attempts consider leadership in a systematic, rational and objective manner the models discussed section 2.3.1 tend to represent the leader as an instrumental rationalist, carefully weighing up the options and adapting his/her style accordingly – leadership is presented as a series of inputs and outputs that impact upon performance. In response to this rather dry and analytic representation James MacGregor Burns (1978) put forward the notion of ‘transforming’ leadership. For Burns what really matters is the moral and reciprocal relationship between leaders and followers, whereby “one or more persons engage with others in a way such that leaders and followers raise one another to higher levels of motivation and morality” (ibid, p. 20).

At the core of this approach is an emphasis both on the leader’s ability to motivate and empower followers, as well as the moral dimensions of leadership - in effect, the notion of ‘winning hearts as well as minds’. Burns’ notion of ‘transforming’ leadership continues to be highly influential, however, it has now largely been subsumed by the



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concept of ‘transformational’ leadership (e.g. Bass, 1985). Whilst Burns conceived of transforming leadership as a perspective that could be applied to a range of leadership styles and situations, subsequent work has generally presented transformational leadership, as a distinct style in its own right and as most applicable in times of change and uncertainty (Bass, 1985, Bass and Avolio, 1994). Covey (1992, p. 287), for example, argues:

“The goal of transformational leadership is to ‘transform’ people and organisations in a literal sense – to change them in mind and heart; enlarge vision, insight, and understanding; clarify purposes; make behaviour congruent with beliefs, principles, or values; and bring about changes that are permanent, self-perpetuating, and momentum building.”

The transformational approach has been widely embraced within all types of organisation as a way of enhancing employee motivation and commitment and is frequently contrasted with ‘transactional’ leadership. Transactional leaders, it is argued, guide or motivate their followers in the direction of established goals by clarifying role and task requirements (i.e. the more traditional work-reward relationship outlined in earlier models) whilst transformational leaders inspire followers to transcend their own self-interests for the good of the organization (i.e. inspirational motivation).

In their theory of transformational leadership Bass and Avolio (1994) developed a model featuring four I’s (Idealised influence, Inspirational motivation, Intellectual stimulation and Individual consideration) that distinguished this style from the transactional approach (with recognition and reward contingent on effort and position). Thus, it could be argued that transactional leadership caters predominantly to the lower level physiological and safety needs of Maslow’s (1968) hierarchy of needs (what Herzberg (1966) referred to as ‘hygiene factors’) whilst transformational leadership appeals to higher order needs such as belonging, esteem and self actualisation (Herzberg’s ‘motivating factors’).

The manner in which transactional and transformational leadership are contrasted with one another echoes the debate about ‘management’ versus ‘leadership’ discussed section 2.2.2, with ‘transactional leadership’ being largely synonymous with traditional views of management and ‘transformational leadership’ as inspirational interpersonal influence. As with the management-leadership debate however, as Bass (1985) argues, transactional and transformational leadership should not be considered as opposite ends of a spectrum but as two separate concepts that complement each another. Most

leaders, it is proposed will draw on both styles depending on the circumstances (Tavanti, 2008).

Alongside the interest in transformational leadership, has been an extensive focus on the role of charisma in leadership. In much the same way as transformational leadership, the concept of the 'charismatic leader', although introduced earlier (Weber, 1947, House, 1976), became popular in the 1980s and 90s when charismatic influence was viewed as an antidote to the demoralising effects of organisational restructuring, competition and redundancies dominant within many Western organisations at the time. The charismatic leader was seen as someone who could rebuild morale and offer a positive vision for the future (Bryman, 1992, Conger and Kanungo, 1998).

This approach, in effect, combines both notions of the transformational leader as well as earlier trait and 'great man' theories. Researchers have taken different positions, but overall four major characteristics of charismatic leaders can be identified: (1) a dominant personality, desire to influence others and self confidence; (2) strong role model behaviour and competence; (3) articulation of ideological goals with moral overtones; and (4) high expectation of followers and confidence that they will meet these expectations (Northouse, 2004, p. 171).

Despite the hype, confidence in this approach to leadership is rapidly declining. A number of high profile corporate scandals, plus the tendency of charismatic leaders to desert organisations after making their changes (often leaving even more significant challenges), has highlighted that this may not be a sustainable way to lead. Because of the way in which charismatic leadership presents the leader as a saviour, it is now often referred to as 'heroic leadership'<sup>14</sup>. There is a resistance to this view of the leader within many industries (particularly the public and voluntary sector) and organisations are seeking alternatives that develop quieter and more inclusive forms of leadership (see next section).

A further difficulty with the idea of charismatic leadership is where 'charisma' is seen to reside. Whilst some theories present charisma as a trait that can be possessed by leaders, others consider it as socially constructed and something that resides solely in the eye-of-the-beholder (e.g. Ladkin, 2006a, Marturano and Arsenault, 2008). Charismatic leadership theories draw attention to the importance of how leaders are perceived by followers and the potential role of rhetoric and oratory in achieving persuasive influence (Bligh and Kohles, 2009). They may also, however, result in a

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<sup>14</sup> See Mintzberg, 2004, p. 104 for a good critique of this approach.

tendency to be very selective in terms of what is classified as ‘leadership’ and of potentially mistaking it for celebrity (Guthey, 2005, Guthey et al., 2007).

More recent theorising on transformational leadership has extended the concept to notions of ‘nearby’ and ‘distant’ leadership (Alimo-Metcalfe and Alban-Metcalfe, 2005) and introduced the idea of ‘authenticity’ (e.g. Bass and Steidlmeier, 1999). Despite this, however, there remains a lack of conceptual clarity with regards to the relationship between transformational and transactional styles, the appropriateness of transformational leadership at middle and lower managerial levels, whether the traits associated with a transformational style are inborn or can be developed, and how to respond to abuses of transformational inspiration (Northouse, 2004).

With regard to charismatic leadership Howell and Shamir (2005) have recently called for a distinction between personalised and socialised charismatic leaders, whereby the latter can serve to embody important shared values, as outlined below.

“In the socialized relationship, followers have a clear sense of self and a clear set of values, and the charismatic relationship provides them with a means for expressing their important values within the framework of a collective action. Followers in this type of relationship derive their sense of direction and self-expression not from personal identification with the leader but from the leader’s message. In this relationship followers place constraints on the leader’s influence, play an active role in determining the values expressed by the leader, are less dependent on the leader, and are less open to manipulation by the leader.” (ibid, 2005, p. 100)

Such an approach may help to address concerns about narcissistic and toxic leadership which have become commonly associated with the ideas of charisma (Maccoby, 2000, Lipman-Blumen, 2005).

### **c. Servant and quiet leadership**

Whilst the move to transformational leadership described above went some way to recognising the need to engage followers in an inspiring and emotive way, through its emphasis on vision and charisma it may actually have done more to reinforce rather than challenge the image of the ‘heroic’ leader (Yukl, 1999). In contrast to such an image stand the ideas of ‘servant’ and ‘quiet’ leadership.

*Servant leadership* brings into focus the motives of leaders. The originator of this idea, Robert Greenleaf (2004), proposed that:

“... becoming a servant-leader begins with the natural feeling that one wants to serve... then conscious choice brings one to aspire to lead. He or she is sharply different from the person who is leader first, perhaps because of the need to assuage an unusual power drive or to acquire material possessions.” (ibid, p. 6)

Like Burn’s early conceptions of transforming leadership, the emphasis is on the moral and ethical dimensions of leadership, although this time the leader follows his/her path out of a desire to serve rather than out of a desire to lead. The focus on serving a greater purpose has made this approach popular within religious, community and non-profit organisations but has had limited impact with the commercial sector.

A related yet different concept is that of *quiet leadership*, which has been used to refer to the influence exerted by less visible leaders. Henry Mintzberg (1998) first utilised the notion of ‘covert leadership’ to refer to the subtle way in which the conductor of an orchestra can elicit certain types of performance from musicians, and built upon these ideas in his notion of ‘quiet management’<sup>15</sup>, which he describes as follows:

“Quiet management is about thoughtfulness rooted in experience. Words like wisdom, trust, dedication, and judgment apply. Leadership works because it is legitimate, meaning that it is an integral part of the organization and so has the respect of everyone there. Tomorrow is appreciated because yesterday is honoured. That makes today a pleasure [...] Indeed, the best managing of all may well be silent. That way people can say, ‘We did it ourselves.’ Because we did.” (Mintzberg, 1999)

Within this description Mintzberg clearly alludes to much earlier accounts of leadership, most notably that proffered by Lao Tzu in 6<sup>th</sup> Century BC (see 2.2.1). He also draws attention to the need for a careful balance between leadership and empowerment and argues that ‘too much leadership’ can be just as problematic as too little (Mintzberg, 2004a).

Another author who has called for greater appreciation of the role of quiet leaders is Joseph Badaracco (2001) who has extolled the virtues of putting things off until tomorrow; picking your battles; bending the rules (rather than breaking them); and finding a compromise. These are quite different from the usual list of attributes assigned to leaders and offer greater opportunities for leadership throughout the organisation, not just by people in formal positions of power.

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<sup>15</sup> Note that Mintzberg does not make a consistent distinction between management and leadership as he regards these as two facets of the same overall function (see Section 2.2.2 for further details).

Together these approaches place a focus the ethics of leadership and for whose purpose it is performed<sup>16</sup>. They challenge the degree to which we assume that in order to be a good leader one must be seen to dictating what goes on, and encourage us to reflect on the motivations of people when taking on leadership roles. They also, however, pose some serious challenges for leaders in the extent to which they are seen as ‘authentic’ (George, 2003) and/or that their contribution is recognised. Whilst leaders such as Nelson Mandela, Mahatma Gandhi and Martin Luther King Jr., for example, may be inspirational role models they are a hard and daunting act to emulate; in each case were regarded as revolutionaries or even terrorists by some; and may be styles that do not transfer well to an organisational context in the present day.

### **2.3.3 Leadership as a social process**

Together the theoretical perspectives outlined so far tend to represent leaders as somewhat exceptional individuals who, by virtue of their traits, expertise, adaptability, position, vision, charisma, and/or sense of purpose manage to elicit a positive response from their followers. Whilst such accounts undoubtedly enhance our understanding of leadership, they may also reinforce traditional stereotypes and say almost as much about those people making the assessment as the leaders themselves.

In his book *Great Leaders*, for example, John Adair (1989, p. 227) acknowledges that, whilst “undoubtedly there were men and women in the past, as there are today, who exhibited extraordinary courage, firmness, or greatness of soul, in the course of some journey or enterprise. We, as humans, also have a tendency to admire and venerate them for their achievements and noble qualities.” Such a tendency, he goes on to argue, can “even make a fairly ordinary leader into a hero simply because they need a hero to worship”.

To this extent, whilst ‘heroic’ accounts of leadership may possibly inspire us into action, they also have the potential to be misleading, paving the way to exclude particular people from leadership roles and/or enabling others to abuse their powers. In this section I will summarise a number of more recent perspectives that shift the focus from *leaders* to *leadership* – from a view of leadership as something done by leaders (either on their own or in relation to followers) to leadership as a shared social process to which many people contribute.

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<sup>16</sup> Although Gosling (2008b) also warns of a more sinister side and the potential of quiet leaders to silence the opposition.

It is the theories in this section (particularly those on distributed and discursive leadership) that will be explored in greatest depth through the remainder of this thesis.

### **a. Co, team and shared leadership**

Pearce and Conger (2003) trace the origins of shared leadership theory to a variety of studies that demonstrated the manner in which responsibility for leadership is shared between a number of different people and roles. A number of such models (e.g. LMX theory) have already been discussed in section 2.3.2 and demonstrate the integral relationship between leadership and followership.

It is only relatively recently, however, that such ideas have started to be taken more seriously in leadership theory and practice. Pearce and Conger (2003) offer a number of reasons for this recent shift, including the rise in cross-functional teams, along with speed of delivery, the availability of information and greater job complexity. Lipman-Blumen (1996) cites increasing global interdependence and demands for inclusion and diversity as driving factors that highlight the limitations of more individualistic understandings of leadership and organisation. In effect, the leader-centric approach worked well enough and offered a (perhaps illusory) promise of order and control that suited organisations (or their directors and shareholders at least) throughout much of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century but as we move into the 21<sup>st</sup> Century the cracks are beginning to show.

Some of the most compelling empirical accounts of shared leadership illustrate the manner in which leadership responsibility is divided between two or more people. Heenan and Bennis (1999), for example, describe evidence of ‘co-leadership’ in a number of successful organisations where two people work alongside one another to fulfil a job that is too big for one person. Klein et al. (2006) describe how emergency medical teams use ‘dynamic delegation’ to enable senior and junior staff to step in and out of leadership roles depending on the context.

Despite this the idea of the individual leader still dominates popular thought. As O’Toole et al. (2003, p. 251) argue: “shared leadership for most people is simply counterintuitive: leadership is obviously and manifestly an individual trait and activity”. They illustrate this point through reference to inspirational leaders such as Gandhi and Luther King, Jr., proposing that:

“We don’t immediately remember that, during the struggle for Indian independence, Gandhi was surrounded and supported by dozens of other great Indian leaders, including Nehru, Patel, and Jinnah, without whose joint efforts

Gandhi clearly would have failed. We also forget that, far from doing it all himself, King's disciples included such impressive leaders in their own right as Jesse Jackson, Andrew Young, Julian Bond, Coretta Scott King, and Ralph Abernathy. When the facts are fully assembled even the most fabled 'solitary' leaders relied on the support of a team of other effective leaders."

Such a deeply embedded tendency to underestimate the contribution of more than a few key figures, it is argued, "stems from thousands of years of cultural conditioning" (ibid, p. 251) and, as such remains incredibly difficult to challenge, even if much of the evidence points this way. The implications, however, are significant for how we go about studying, developing and practicing leadership.

Katzenbach and Smith (1993), for example, emphasise the importance of leaders knowing when to follow and the importance of the leader acting as a facilitator rather than commander. They propose that the leader should ask questions rather than giving answers; provide opportunities for others to lead them; do real work in support of others instead of only the reverse; become a matchmaker instead of a 'central switch'; and seek a common understanding instead of consensus.

Belbin (1993) presents an image of the 'team leader' as someone who chooses to delegate and share responsibility; builds on and appreciates diversity; seeks talented people; develops colleagues; and creates a sense of mission. His team roles model (Belbin, 1981) illustrates a variety of expertise and dispositions that together make for an effective management team – not a single style for the 'leader' but a number of complementary approaches.

Together these can be considered as forms of 'shared leadership', described as:

"... a dynamic, interactive influence process among individuals in groups for which the objective is to lead one another to the achievement of group or organisational goals or both. This influence process often involves peer, or lateral, influence and at other times involves upward or downward hierarchical influence." (Pearce and Conger, 2003, p. 1)

Pearce and Sims (2002, cited in Pearce, 2008, p. 623) propose that "shared leadership between peers accounts for more variance in team self-ratings, manager ratings, and customer ratings of change management team effectiveness than the leadership of formally designated team leaders".



At the heart of this approach lies the distinction between hierarchical and shared influence, with the former fitting most traditional views of leadership and the latter being the dimension brought by shared leadership (Pearce et al., 2008). Shared and emergent leadership has been identified in many different areas, including business start ups (Ensley et al., 2006), self-managed work teams (Elloy, 2005), emergency care teams (Klein et al., 2006), web design teams (Brown and Gioia, 2002), and jazz music and rowing groups (Pescosolido, 2002).

According to Pearce et al. (2008), in order to overcome the resistance to shared leadership theories as described earlier by O'Toole et al. (2003, p. 251), these models need to build upon rather than replace pre-existing research and understanding on leadership.

“We believe the crux of this issue is the challenge of integrating the view of leadership as a role performed by an individual with the view of leadership as a social process. Shared leadership theory is an explicit attempt at integrating these two important perspectives.” (ibid, p. 626)

### **b. Distributed leadership**

The concept of ‘distributed leadership’ is one particular form of shared leadership theory that has become popular in recent years and is becoming embedded in sectors such as school education (see, for example, Leithwood et al., 2006a). This approach argues for a more systemic perspective on leadership, whereby responsibility is dissociated from formal organisational roles, and people at all levels are given the opportunity to influence the overall direction and functioning of the organisation. Gronn (2002, p. 7) describes it as “emergent work-related influence”. Distributed leadership thus encourages a shift in focus from the traits and roles of ‘leaders’ to the shared activities and functions of ‘leadership’:

“Distributed leadership is not something ‘done’ by an individual ‘to’ others, or a set of individual actions through which people contribute to a group or organisation... Distributed leadership is a group activity that works through and within relationships, rather than individual action.” (Bennett et al., 2003, p. 3)

The call for a more collectively-embedded notion of leadership has arisen from research, theory and practice that highlights the limitations of the traditional ‘leader-follower’ dualism that places the responsibility for leadership firmly in the hands of the ‘leader’ and represents the ‘follower’ as passive and subservient. Instead, it is argued



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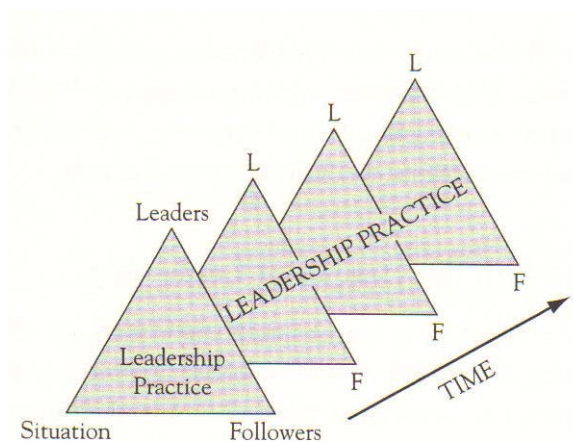
that: “leadership is probably best conceived as a group quality, as a set of functions which must be carried out by the group” (Gibb, 1954, cited in Gronn, 2000, p. 324). As such, this approach demands a dramatic reconsideration of the distribution of labour and power within organisations. It isn’t simply about creating more ‘leaders’ (a numerical/additive function) but facilitating ‘concertive action’ and pluralistic engagement (Gronn, 2000, 2002). In effect, distributed leadership is more than the sum of its parts.

“It may be that we need to understand leadership differently, not as something enacted by an individual or small group, but rather as the *volition* of an organization, and as such, outside the gift of any single individual or small group [...] It is not the gift of an individual, but created by the community, and as such offers opportunities for many to contribute.” (Lumby, 2003, p. 291-292)

Having said that, distributed leadership does not deny the key role played by people in formal leadership positions, but proposes that this is only the tip of the iceberg. Spillane et al. (2004, p. 5) argue that leadership is “stretched over the social and situational contexts” of the organisation and also extend the notion to include material and cultural ‘artefacts’ (language, organisational systems, physical environment, etc.), thereby drawing attention to the ‘situated’ nature of leadership.

“Situation or context does not simply ‘affect’ what [school] leaders do as some sort of independent or inter-dependent variable(s); it is *constitutive* of leadership practice.” (Spillane et al., 2004, p. 20-21)

Figure 2.4 below provides an illustration of how leadership practice emerges and evolves over time through the interaction of leaders, followers and their situations.



**Figure 2.4: Distributed Leadership Model**  
(Spillane, 2006, p. 3)

A distributed perspective on leadership draws heavily on process theory and locates leadership clearly beyond the individual ‘leader’ and within the relationships and interactions of multiple actors and the situations in which they find themselves. In a review of the literature Bennett *et al.* (2003) suggest that, despite some variations in definition, distributed leadership is based on three main premises: (1) that leadership is an emergent property of a group or network of interacting individuals; (2) that there is openness to the boundaries of leadership (i.e. who has a part to play both within and beyond the organisation); and (3) that varieties of expertise are distributed across the many, not the few. Thus, distributed leadership is represented as dynamic, relational, inclusive, collaborative and contextually-situated. It requires a system-wide perspective that not only transcends organisational levels and roles but also organisational boundaries. Thus, for example, in the field of school education, where distributed leadership is being actively promoted, one might consider the contribution of parents, students and the local community as well as teachers and governors in school leadership, as illustrated below.

“Taking this view, leadership is about learning together and constructing meaning and knowledge collectively and collaboratively. It involves opportunities to surface and mediate perceptions, values, beliefs, information and assumptions through continuing conversations. It means generating ideas together; seeking to reflect upon and make sense of work in the light of shared beliefs and new information; and creating actions that grow out of these new understandings. It implies that leadership is socially constructed and culturally sensitive. It does not imply a leader/follower divide, neither does it point towards the leadership potential of just one person.” (Harris, 2003, p. 314)

In addition to extending the boundaries of leadership the above quote indicates the centrality of dialogue and the construction of shared meaning within social groups. As such, the concept has much in common with notions such as of ‘democratic leadership’ (Woods, 2004) and is compatible with the ‘discursive’ (Fairhurst, 2007) and ‘constitutive’ (Grint, 1997) leadership perspectives described in the next section.

Of the authors who have attempted to develop a conceptual model of distributed leadership Gronn (2000, 2002) and Spillane *et al.* (2004) are perhaps the most comprehensive. In each case, they have used Activity Theory (Engestrom, 1999) as a theoretical tool to frame the idea of distributed leadership practice, using it as a bridge

between agency and structure (in Gronn's case) and distributed cognition and action (in Spillane et al.'s case).

“Activity theory emphasizes social life as a continuous flow of mediated activity; a process of ever-moving relationships between technologies, nature, ideas, persons and communities, in which the focus of action circulates to one person, then another according to the social and environmental context and the flow of action within this.” (Woods, 2004, p. 5-6)

From this perspective leadership is an integral part of the daily activities and interactions of everyone across the enterprise, irrespective of position. It is revealed equally within small, incremental, informal and emergent acts as within large-scale transformational interventions from the top. The more members across the organization exercise their influence, the greater the leadership distribution. This is not a zero sum equation where developing the agency of followers diminishes the power of formal leaders but one where each can mutually reinforce the other.

“Agency, according to this position, is not a limited resource to be distributed between followers and leaders. It is something that followers have because of their leaders and vice-versa.” (Reicher et al., 2005, p. 563)

In practice, there are many forms that distributed leadership can take and the literature does not generally prescribe one over the other. Within schools, for example, MacBeath (2005) identifies six forms of distributed leadership - formal, pragmatic, strategic, incremental, opportunistic, and cultural - but argues that the most appropriate and effective form will depend upon the situation. There are, however, some serious challenges to the practical implementation of distributed leadership. MacBeath (ibid) argues that distributed leadership is premised on trust, implies a mutual acceptance of one another's leadership potential, requires formal leaders to 'let go' some of their control and authority, and favours consultation and consensus over command and control. Each of these poses a serious challenge to traditional hierarchical models of organisation and can be quite stressful for designated managers.

There are also serious implications for leadership development. Whilst the majority of investment continues to be for individuals in formal leadership roles, a distributed perspective would argue for the development of leadership capacity throughout the organisation. The implications are captured in Day's (2000) distinction between 'leader' and 'leadership development' and call for far greater investment in the

development of interpersonal networks and shared understandings both within and beyond organisations.

By considering leadership practice as both thinking and activity that “emerges in the execution of leadership tasks in and through the interaction of leaders, followers and situation” (Spillane, 2004, p. 27) distributed leadership offers a powerful post-heroic representation of leadership well suited to complex, changing and inter-dependent environments. The challenge will be whether or not organisations and the holders of power will be sufficiently flexible to enable this to occur in practice.

“... if distributed leadership is not to join the large pile of redundant leadership theories it must engage teachers, headteachers, support staff and other professionals. It must be put to the test of practice. This can only be achieved with the cooperation of those keen to explore a different world-view of leadership and with the enthusiasm to redesign and reconfigure schooling.” (Harris and Spillane, 2008, p. 33)

### **c. Discursive and constitutive leadership**

The final perspectives that I will present in this chapter are those of ‘discursive leadership’ (Fairhurst, 2007) and ‘constitutive leadership’ (Grint, 1997, 2001).

A discursive perspective on leadership positions itself in contrast to more psychologically informed approaches (such as those discussed in sections 2.3.1 and 2.3.2 of this chapter) that seek to “understand the essence of leadership, whether it can be found in the individual leader, the situation, or some combination thereof” (Fairhurst, 2007, p. ix). “By contrast”, it is argued, “discursive leadership rejects essences because leadership is an attribution and, very likely, a contested one at that” (ibid, p. ix). Instead, it proposes that leadership is an organising process (Hosking, 1988) and that “leadership actors are knowledgeable agents, who reflexively monitor the ongoing character of social life as they continuously orientate to and position themselves vis-à-vis specific norms, rules, procedures, and values in interaction with others” (Fairhurst, 2007, p. 14).

A discursive perspective on leadership is grounded in a social constructivist ontology (see Chapter 3) in which the focus shifts from representing the ‘essence’ (or underlying nature) of leadership to exploring the processes by which leadership is accomplished (or perceived to have occurred) through discourse.

“Unconcerned with the search for essences or causal connections among variables, Discourse analysts want to know *how* a text functions pragmatically, *how* leadership is brought off in some here-and-now moment of localized interaction. In complementary fashion, Discourse analysts ask, *what* kind of leadership are we talking about and how have the forces of history and culture shaped it? Both types of analysts reject prediction and control as key functions of theory, while never viewing description as *mere* description or prelude to the real work of theory building.” (Fairhurst, 2007, p. 15, initial emphasis)

From a discursive perspective organisations and other social systems are never fully formed, but always in a state of ‘becoming’ (Tsoukas and Chia, 2002) and leadership is a form of organising activity that may influence this process, as illustrated below:

“... it is not enough to understand what leaders do. Rather it is essential to focus on leadership processes: processes in which influential ‘acts of organizing’ contribute to the structuring of interactions and relationships, activities and sentiments; processes in which definitions of social order are negotiated, found acceptable, implemented and renegotiated; processes in which interdependencies are organized in ways which, to a greater or lesser degree, promote the values and interests of the social order. In sum, leadership can be seen as a certain kind of organizing activity.” (Hosking, 1988, p. 147, cited in Fairhurst, 2007, p. 23)

According to Fairhurst (2007, p. 23) “Hosking’s view restores agency to leadership theorizing because the organization is in a constant state of becoming only through the actions of its agents, thus making it difficult to cast leadership study in isolationist or epiphenomenal terms”. The implications of such a perspective for leadership theory and research are explored further in Chapters 3, 6 and 7. The important contribution of a discursive perspective over and above that of broader process theories is the central role of language and discourse in shaping, framing and reconfiguring social realities (Fairhurst, 2005).

In addition to the work of Fairhurst on ‘discursive leadership’, a number of other leadership scholars have utilised a similar perspective. Grint (1997), for example, proposes a ‘constitutive’ approach in which accounts of leadership are considered as ‘linguistic reconstructions’.

“[This] approach suggests that what the situation and the leader actually are is a consequence of various accounts and interpretations, all of which vie for

domination. Thus we know what a leader or situation is actually like only because some particular version of him, her, or it has secured prominence. The relativism at the heart of the approach does not mean that all interpretations are equal – and that what the leader/context is, is wholly a matter of the whim of the observer – but that some interpretations appear to be more equal than others.” (ibid, p. 5)

According to Grint (1997, p. 5-6) “the critical issue for this approach, then, is not what the leader or the context is ‘really’ like, but what are the processes by which these phenomena are constituted into successes or failures, crises or periods of calm, and so on.” For Grint what is important are the processes by which accounts of leadership are generated, communicated and consumed within groups and societies and the manner in which issues of power, authority and experience influence these sensemaking processes.

A similar perspective is offered by Wilfred Drath in his book *The Deep Blue Sea: Rethinking the Source of Leadership* (2001) in which he describes leadership as a collective sensemaking process, as described below:

“So in the view being offered here, leadership is not something out there in the world that we come to know because it impresses itself on our minds, it is something we create with our minds by agreeing with other people that these thoughts, words, and actions - and not some others - will be known as leadership.” (ibid, p. 4-5)

Drath proposes that people may well be able to recognise leadership without being able to define it, and attributes this to a shared ‘organizing knowledge principle’ that people draw on in making sense of the world around them:

“We know leadership when we see it because we share an organizing knowledge principle in common with other people [...] It is a way of thinking and understanding that enables individuals and the group as a whole to recognize certain thoughts, words, and actions as being leadership.” (Drath, 2001, p. 4)

Together then, these perspectives offer a very different way of thinking about leadership than those discussed earlier in this chapter and bring into question the validity of endeavouring to ‘capture’ an accurate and/or generalisable representation of leadership. They draw attention to the need to explore the underlying sensemaking processes (Weick, 1995, Pye, 2005) by which certain things, and not others, are referred to as ‘leadership’ and to the potential of ‘leaders’ and other actors to intervene in shaping these sensemaking processes.

## ***2.4 Towards a definition of leadership***

In this chapter I have outlined some of the many ways in which the concept of leadership has been theorised and described. In doing so, a number of themes emerge, including the distinction between individual and relational perspectives, leadership and management, the significance of ethics, varying conceptions of performance and success, the role of language and culture, and the importance of context. Leadership has variously been presented as a ‘science’, ‘art’ or ‘craft’, and conceptual clarity has proved elusive.

In a recent review of leadership definitions Joseph Rost argued that it “may give a false impression that the majority of leadership scholars and commentators are moving away from the traditional heroic paradigm of leadership. That certainly is not true”. Instead he suggested that:

“The majority of leadership authors, both scholarly and practitioner-orientated, are ensconced in the industrial paradigm of leadership, which Rost defined as ‘great men and women with certain preferred traits who influence followers to do what the leaders wish in order to achieve group/organizational goals’ effectively (1991, p. 95). Shortened up, leadership is ‘good management’ (p.94).” (Rost, 2008, p. 98)

Despite these variations, in a extensive review of leadership theory Northouse (2004) identified four common themes in the way leadership now tends to be conceived: (1) it is a process; (2) involving influence; (3) that occurs in a group context; and (4) is directed towards goal attainment. He thus defines leadership as “a process whereby an individual influences a group of individuals to achieve a common goal” (ibid, p. 3). Yukl (2006, p. 3) similarly proposes that: “most definitions of leadership reflect the assumption that it involves a social influence process whereby intentional influence is exerted by one person over other people to guide, structure, and facilitate activities and relationships in a group or organisation.”

Uhl-Bien (2006, p. 668), in describing relational leadership theories offers a more collective definition where leadership is regarded as: “a social influence process through which emergent coordination (i.e. evolving social order) and change (i.e. new values, attitudes, approaches, behaviours, ideologies, etc.) are constructed and produced”.

In selecting an appropriate working definition of leadership for this book it is important to choose one that is capable of describing leadership as experienced in organisations. There is a need, therefore, to be wary of prescriptive models (particularly those that



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provide normative assessments of the moral and ethical requirements of leadership) and to choose one that is sufficiently broad to allow for a variety of forms of leadership practice. To this extent, the latter definition by Uhl-Bien, whilst fitting Rost's (2008) category of 'post-heroic' leadership, allows the possibility for leadership by individuals as well as that more widely dispersed within groups and thereby forms a good basis for a working definition of leadership.

In drawing out common and significant themes between this and other definitions leadership can be described as:

- (1) a process,
- (2) of social influence,
- (3) to guide, structure and/or facilitate
- (4) behaviours, activities and/or relationships,
- (5) towards the achievement of shared aims.

The notion of 'structuring' allows for both initiatives to transform or maintain social order as well as those arising from individuals, groups and/or organisations. Whilst it might be argued that this definition bears a close resemblance to many definitions of management, it is more open, is dissociated from formal organisational roles and hierarchies, and endeavours to offer a descriptive rather than prescriptive account of leadership.

According to this definition, the purpose of leadership is to mobilise people to work together in pursuit of some shared enterprise. As such, it offers a degree of flexibility in terms of the manner in which leadership is 'configured' (Gronn, 2009a) and accomplished – allowing the possibility that it is something done by 'leaders' as well as that it may be more widely distributed and/or socially constructed. It even fits with a discursive perspective for which a preferred definition cited by Fairhurst (2007) is as follows:

“Leadership is exercised when ideas expressed in talk or action are recognized by others as capable of progressing tasks or problems which are important to them.” (Robinson, 2001, p. 93, cited in Fairhurst, 2007, p. 6)

Thus, despite a wide diversity of views on leadership it is possible to arrive at a definition that more-or-less spans a range of theoretical positions. More problematic, however, is the extent to which any such definition is useful in terms of helping us understand *where* leadership resides and *how* it is accomplished. By glossing over



fundamental differences in how leadership is conceptualised a generic definition or description may constrain rather than enable us, and restrict our capacity to open up underlying assumptions and processes for scrutiny.

This is a point made by Joanne Ciulla (2002, p. 340), who proposes that “the scholars who worry about constructing the ultimate definition of leadership are asking the wrong question, but inadvertently trying to answer the right one”. To illustrate this point she cites Rost’s (1991) review of leadership definitions, proposing that:

“... all 221 definitions basically say the same thing – leadership is about one person getting other people to do something. Where the definitions differ is in *how* leaders motivate their followers and *who* has a say in the goals of the group or organization.” (Ciulla, 2002, p. 340)

She goes on to propose that “the real difference between the definitions rests on their normative assumptions. The underlying question is ‘how should leaders treat followers and how should followers treat leaders?’” (ibid, p. 340-341). For Ciulla it is these issues that need to be scrutinised and the answers to which offer the greatest potential for informing and enhancing leadership practice:

“The ultimate question about leadership is not ‘What is the definition of leadership?’ The whole point of studying leadership is, ‘What is good leadership?’ The use of the word *good* here has two senses, morally good and technically good or effective.” (Ciulla, 2002, p. 341)

Questions of ethics and effectiveness are implicit within much research on leadership studies but are rarely scrutinised in detail. They are problematic questions with no easy answers and are inextricably linked to the culture and context in which leadership is enacted. This is the messy business of Leadership Studies and seriously challenges any claims that can be made about the universality and prescriptive application of leadership models and/or approaches.

As Grey (2009) argues, the contribution of management education and the research on which it is based functions not through the illusion it may offer of a rational and objective approach to running organisations but through its potential to engage us in enquiry and pursuits that better enable us to achieve the ‘good life’ which, in turn, require us to reflect upon what it means to be human. Grey proposes: “I have taught many students over many years and my concern is that they are shortchanged. Many of

them are talented, intelligent, ethical and likeable people who are fed a form of education that does little justice to these attributes” (ibid, p. 152). He concludes:

“Business schools are a place where administration, politics, philosophy, ethics, psychology and much else of interest and importance can meet to contribute to the good life. My complaint is that by promoting a truncated version of organizational possibilities, these schools are currently constituted not only to fail to contribute to the good life, but actively impede it.” (ibid, p. 152)

Such concerns lie at the heart of this thesis and the endeavour to outline and consider the implications of shared and systemic perspectives on leadership.

### ***2.5 Chapter summary***

In this chapter I have outlined the many ways in which leadership has been represented over the years and the challenges of identifying a common definition. As can be seen, leadership is a highly contested construct with varying representations and definitions. In describing leadership, I have contrasted it with ‘management’ and concluded that the two concepts are highly interdependent, such that it is not meaningful to separate them out, especially when talking about leadership within organisations.

In presenting theories of leadership, I have grouped them into three main categories: (1) those that regard leadership as the property of ‘leaders’, (2) those that regard leadership as arising from the relationship between leaders and followers, and (3) those that regard leadership as a social process. Whilst these are not discrete or exclusive categories they do capture some of the range of views on what leadership is and where it resides. The main theoretical perspectives to be considered in the remainder of this thesis relate to those in the third of these categories.

Finally, the chapter concludes by considering how to define leadership. From reviewing the perspectives presented in this chapter it is proposed that leadership is “a process of social influence to guide, structure and facilitate behaviours, activities and/or relationships towards the achievement of shared aims”. Whilst this definition permits some flexibility in terms of the models to which it can be applied, however, it is proposed that there may be more fundamental issues to consider, in particular, the extent to which different perspectives on leadership embed different assumptions around ethics and effectiveness. Thus, it is proposed that a definition of leadership may not be particularly helpful and may actually limit our potential to challenge and explore leadership practice.

# **3. STUDYING LEADERSHIP IN ORGANISATIONS**

“I believe that we are more likely to secure responsible leadership in the future if we can demystify its constituent processes. In that sense, enhanced knowledge about leadership may go hand-in-hand with more morally desirable forms of leadership.”  
(Gardner and Laskin, 1996, p. 297)

### ***3.1 Overview***

In the previous chapter I reviewed a range of theories and perspectives on leadership, arguing that the manner in which leadership is represented impacts upon how it is recognised, developed and ultimately practiced within organisations and other social groups. In this chapter I now turn my attention to the manner in which leadership is researched and the implications of this for the sorts of things we find. I begin with a review of the field of leadership studies as an academic discipline, before considering approaches to the study of leadership, the ontology of leadership, and key conceptual pillars of the current leadership enquiry. The chapter concludes with some reflections on the challenges of researching leadership and of arbitrating between competing approaches.

### ***3.2 Leadership studies as a field of enquiry***

As discussed in Chapter 2 leadership has been a focus of scientific enquiry for some time. Indeed, as long as thirty years ago James Macgregor Burns remarked that "leadership is one of the most observed and least understood phenomena on earth" (Burns, 1978, p. 2). Despite this, however, there have been only limited advances in methodologies for its study, with the majority of researchers still depending on similar approaches to those employed in the days of trait, behavioural and situational studies. Thus, as John Storey remarks:

"The accumulation of weighty and extensive reports to date tends, in the main, to regurgitate a now familiar thesis – but it is a thesis which remains incomplete, insufficiently tested, inadequately debated and not properly scrutinised."  
(Storey, 2004, p. 6)

Whilst more recent theories may highlight the processual, relational and socially-constructed nature of leadership this remains difficult to research in a way that does not privilege the accounts and actions of formally recognised 'leaders' and retrospective analyses of past 'leadership' rather than emergent and future acts that may come to be regarded as examples of 'leadership'. The reasons for this are unsurprising to the extent that it is perhaps most expedient to go to 'leaders' when looking for evidence of 'leadership' and that we can be more time-efficient when exploring past leadership rather than waiting around for it to emerge. The problem is, of course, if we keep

looking in the same places we keep finding the same things and may keep missing other equally, if not more, important factors (Wood, 2005).

James Macgregor Burns in his introduction to the first issue of the journal *Leadership* noted two major recent developments in the field of leadership studies: internationalisation and interdisciplinarity. Such trends, he proposed, are important in how they extend the methodological and theoretical boundaries of the field yet still tend to embed certain assumptions about the nature of leadership. In particular, the notion of leadership tends to be used in a predominantly 'positive' sense that emphasises its potential for constructive rather than destructive outcomes.

“Leadership, in common parlance, is a ‘good’. When people call for leadership, or deplore the lack of leadership, they see it not as a needed spur to human progress but, as in itself, a moral and ethical entity and a necessary gauge of action. Leadership, in short, becomes an activity as well as an academic enterprise.” (Burns, 2005, p. 12)

Despite the tendency to focus on 'good' or 'ethical' leadership in studies thereof, however, this is only one side of the coin. Kellerman (2004a) and Lipman-Blumen (2005) propose that much can be learnt from studying 'bad' or 'toxic' leadership, not least the possibility of preventing it happening again, and authors such as Conger (1990), Maccoby (2000) and Dotlich and Cairo (2003) highlight how a degree of narcissism may be exactly what propels some people into significant leadership positions in the first place although, if left unchecked, it may cause them and/or their organisation to derail in the long term. Thus, the line between 'good' and 'bad' leadership is a difficult one to draw and brings to light deep ethical questions about means and ends.

A second common assumption (and hence challenge) embedded within the leadership literature is the need for theory to be grounded in and to inform practice. Where research is conducted in a contrived setting it may be difficult to generalise to an applied setting. Likewise, unless theory has directly practical implications for how leaders go about, or are supported in, their work it is likely to be considered by practicing leaders or those charged with their development, as irrelevant or impractical. This is one manifestation of the 'double dialectic' (Colville, 2008) mentioned in the introduction, whereby what is perceived as relevant and useful knowledge for academics looking to build theory is unlikely to be the same sort of knowledge that is

regarded as relevant and useful to leadership practitioners looking to resolve practical challenges.

The ethical and practical imperatives of leadership studies, as outlined above, lead to a tendency for theory and research to be applied in a normative fashion, whether or not this was the initial aim. The idea of ‘normative leadership’ (coined by Barrow, 1977) refers to approaches that endeavour to prescribe the most effective form of leadership intervention for a given situation. The label was initially applied to models such as behavioural and situational leadership, but can equally be applied to other approaches, including transformational, servant and distributed leadership. Whilst the intent to use theory to inform practice is admirable, it may well become misleading if generalisations transcend the contexts in which the theories were developed. Furthermore, whilst many of these models (e.g. transformational and distributed leadership) are based upon descriptions of leadership practice (or, to be more precise, the preferences of followers and/or leaders for different styles of leadership) rarely is any serious attention given to their relative effectiveness vis-à-vis other forms of leadership (i.e. desirability is given precedence over effectiveness)<sup>17</sup>. In consequence a lot of advice is given to those charged with leadership on the basis of fairly flimsy or contentious evidence – as Chester Barnard (1948, p. 80) famously said “leadership has been the subject of an extraordinary amount of dogmatically stated nonsense”.

A practical example of this challenge can be seen in the British National Health Service (NHS) Leadership Qualities Framework (NHS, 2002) which described a set of key characteristics, attitudes and behaviours that leaders in the National Health Service should aspire to in delivering the NHS Plan (DoH, 2000). This framework was a central pillar of the NHS Modernisation Agency (now disbanded) and their strategy to ‘modernize’ the NHS to cope with the demands of 21st Century healthcare. The framework had a number of applications and formed the foundation for setting leadership standards in the NHS, assessing and developing high performance in leadership, individual and organisational assessment, integrating leadership across the service and related agencies, adapting leadership to suit changing contexts and benchmarking of leadership capacity and capability. Despite its widespread application across the health service, however, the research on which it was based was derived simply from a number of self-report interviews with Chief Executives and Directors (NHS, 2003). The extent to which the ‘qualities’ identified through this research

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<sup>17</sup> Perhaps because, like leadership, ‘effectiveness’ is very hard to define and definitions may well be contested.

represent objective criteria that can be meaningfully applied to other job roles in different parts of the organisation, at different periods in time, is highly debatable, yet they are presented as a rational, evidence-based approach to leadership. A descriptive snapshot of a limited sample is hence applied prescriptively as if it were a general truth (see Bolden et al., 2006b for an extended critique of this framework).

The ‘rush to the normative’ (a topic of plenary debate at the 5<sup>th</sup> *International Conference on Studying Leadership* at Cranfield University in December 2006) is symptomatic of leadership research in general. In an edited book arising from this conference Turnbull James and Collins (2008, p. 3) propose:

“Perhaps more than any other field, leadership studies appears to be caught between studying and advising. Many studies do not restrict themselves to describing and analysing leadership phenomena, but instead draw implications from their research about who should be appointed to leadership roles, how organisations should distribute autonomy and the behaviours that should be rewarded.”

Throughout my years of researching leadership I have frequently experienced this tension from funders, participants and practicing managers pushing for practical recommendations from the earliest stages of research. It is a difficult balance to retain between description and prescription; analysis and prediction, and current pressures to measure and predict the economic and social impact of research may further reinforce this trend<sup>18</sup>. In order to maintain a sense of perspective it is, in my own experience, desirable to collaborate and share ideas with other academics, practitioners and policy makers before seeking to generalise and prescribe recommendations, although this carries its own difficulties in terms of balancing competing expectations, assumptions and discourses.

The expansion of disciplinary and contextual boundaries highlighted by Burns (2005) points to leadership enquiry as a collective pursuit, a point echoed by Grint (2005a) when warning against overdependence on particular individuals and/or theories.

“Leadership, then, is not just a theoretical arena but one with critical implications for us all and the limits of leadership – what leaders can do and

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<sup>18</sup> For example, ‘impact’ measures are now required for most funding applications to the UK Research Councils and are key criteria in the Research Excellence Framework (REF) being introduced to assess research quality in UK HE from 2013.

what followers should allow them to do – are foundational aspects of this arena.

Leadership, in effect, is too important to be left to leaders.” (ibid, p. 4)

Whilst leadership may offer the prospect of emancipation and empowerment it also carries the potential for alienation and control (Gemmill and Oakley, 1992); fantasy (Sveningsson and Larsson, 2006) and misdirection (Mintzberg, 2004a). Through an overdependence on particular methodologies and epistemologies, and a desire for the immediate application of findings, the same may also true of leadership research.

As indicated in the previous two chapters, we find ourselves in a time where traditional approaches to leadership theory, research and development have proven wanting. It is proposed that there is a need to reframe leadership studies in order to rebalance individual and collective accounts; to review how we recognise, reward and develop leadership; and to revise our methodologies and approaches to the study of leadership.

### ***3.3 Approaches to the study of leadership***

In their book about studying leadership, Jackson and Parry (2008, p. 3) propose that:

“There are broadly five ways that one can go about studying leadership. You can actually attempt to lead, you can observe leadership in action, you can talk about leadership, you can read about it and you can write about it.”

Given the nature of academic work it is not surprising that the preponderance of current literature is based on the latter three of these categories – i.e. talking to people about leadership (through interviews, teaching, etc.), reading about (and critiquing) previous accounts, and writing (and constructing) new accounts of leadership. Whilst several writers now acknowledge the value of studying leadership in action (e.g. Ladkin and Wood, 2006, Ospina and Sorenson, 2006) the practicalities of doing this whilst continuing to carry out the other activities expected of them within universities are very hard to manage, and the rigours of peer-review render reflections on one’s own leadership practice problematic in terms of disseminating and generalising findings<sup>19</sup>.

Like much of the rest of management and business studies, research into leadership remains “characterized by realist ontologies, positivistic epistemologies, and nomothetic methodologies” (Staber, 2006, p. 191). Such approaches are heavily informed by the

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<sup>19</sup> Thereby meaning that the majority of literature relating to the first two categories remains the domain of relatively uncritical biographical and autobiographical accounts of what particular leaders did and/or propose that others should do. Exceptions to this are studies based on a first person ethnographic methodology (e.g. Parker 2004, Kempster and Stewart, 2010) although these remain rare within mainstream literature on leadership.



history of the discipline and an endeavour to establish a systematic evidence base for management and leadership practice. A ‘scientific’ approach to the study of leadership, based upon quantitative methods and the identification of generalisable ‘truths’ has prevailed within many parts of the field (see, for example, Antonakis et al., 2004) yet, as Conger (1998) argues, leadership is a topic that lends itself well to qualitative-style investigations that enable a richer and more fluid engagement with the topic. To support this argument, he highlights the complexity of the concept in terms of:

1. *Levels*: an understanding of leadership requires consideration of multiple, nested units of analysis: psychological, behavioural, interpersonal, organizational, environmental, etc.;
2. *Dynamism*: the changing nature of leadership and how it is perceived over time and between contexts; and
3. *Social construction*: attributions of leadership do not exist in objective isolation but emerge through interpretation and interaction – they have a largely symbolic dimension.

He goes on to argue that:

“These three dimensions of leadership - multiple levels, dynamism, and social construction - make for a very complex research topic. As a result, the subject ultimately demands multiple research methods - regardless of the field’s stage of maturity. It also demands teams of researchers with diverse methodological and discipline backgrounds rather than individual researchers or research teams with similar backgrounds. As I have argued, quantitative methods in and of themselves are insufficient on the grounds that they capture relatively uni-dimensional and static perspectives on leadership. On the other hand, qualitative methods, when properly employed, offer the leadership field several distinct advantages over quantitative methods: 1) more opportunities to explore leadership phenomena in significant depth and to do so longitudinally (Bryman, 1992), 2) the flexibility to discern and detect unexpected phenomena during the research (Lundberg, 1976), 3) an ability to investigate processes more effectively, 4) greater chances to explore and to be sensitive to contextual factors, 5) and more effective means to investigate symbolic dimensions (Morgan and Smircich, 1980).” (Conger, 1998, p. 111)

As indicated above, Conger proposes a pluralistic approach to the study of leadership that enables some degree of triangulation between different forms of data collection and interpretation. Within qualitative research he warns against over-dependence on interviews except where they can be corroborated and supplemented with data gathered by other means, such as participant observation.

At the time this article was published, however, Conger gave reason to suspect that a rapid expansion in qualitative research was unlikely. Firstly he cites the increasing prevalence and power of statistical analysis software that renders quantitative data quick and efficient to analyse (in contrast to the somewhat laborious process of qualitative analysis). Similarly, he argues, quantitative analysis allows for much larger sample sizes that reinforces “a long-standing belief that scientific investigation was dependent upon the analysis of large samples to uncover ‘truths’” (ibid, p. 116) and points to a relative shortage of academic staff with qualitative research backgrounds. He also mentions the nature of academic work and the desire “to make complex phenomena understandable [... by] dissect[ing] phenomena into discrete elements and then search[ing] for casual links to determine how each element influences the other” (ibid, p. 116). This issue is compounded by systems for academic reward and recognition, whereby promotion is “based largely upon the volume of published articles and the stature of journal outlets” (ibid, p. 116).

There is little to indicate that much has changed with regard to any of these points in the 10 years since this article was published. For example, in the chapter by Antonakis et al. (2004) on ‘Methods for Studying Leadership’ despite brief reference to qualitative research it is largely dismissed as a scientific approach to the study of leadership. They propose that: “because the vast majority of research that is conducted in the leadership domain is quantitative in nature and because theory can be tested appropriately only with quantitative methods, we will focus the rest of the chapter on the quantitative paradigm and its associated methods” (ibid, p. 55). This is despite acknowledging Conger’s (1998) point that qualitative methods “[should be] the methodology of choice for topics as contextually rich as leadership” (ibid, cited in Antonakis et al., 2004, p. 54).

Nevertheless qualitative studies of leadership are becoming increasingly prevalent within more mainstream publications (Bryman, 2004) and there is increasing recognition of the contribution of this kind of research. Alvesson (1996), for example, has argued for a shift from ‘abstraction and procedure’ to ‘reflexivity and situation’ in

the study of leadership; Parry (1998) has called for greater use of grounded theory; and Gronn (2004) has called for more attention to be paid to issues of action and agency – all issues that would benefit from a qualitative approach.

### ***3.4 An ontology of leadership***

The *Concise Oxford English Dictionary* (2009) defines ontology as “the branch of metaphysics concerned with the nature of being”. Leinfeller et al. (1982, p. 18) describe it as an “interdiscipline involving both philosophy and science [...] which points out the problems of the foundations of the sciences as well as the borderline questions, and which further attempts to solve these problems and questions.” As such, ontology can be considered as a field of enquiry that spans philosophical and scientific concerns about the nature of existence and the extent to which physical and social phenomena can be considered to exist independently of one another and/or the contexts in which they occur. It is a field of study with a long and varied history and a wide diversity of views, a review of which is beyond the scope of the current thesis (see, instead, Corazzon, 2009, Jacquette, 2002). Despite this, some consideration of the ontological status of leadership is pertinent and remains one of the underlying concerns running throughout this thesis.

With regard to a possible ontology of leadership, in terms of its existence as a distinct phenomenon, there are three broad options:

1. Leadership has an essence beyond the actors involved that can be objectively analysed and measured;
2. Leadership is constructed through the interaction of social actors and hence can only be understood within the context in which it occurs;
3. “Leadership need not have existed, or need not be at all as it is. Leadership, or leadership as it is at present, is not determined by the nature of things; it is not inevitable.” (Hacking, 1999, paraphrased by Fairhurst, 2007, p. 4)

The first of these categories takes an *objectivist* view of leadership that “asserts that social phenomena and their meanings have an existence that is independent of social actors” (Bryman and Bell, 2007, p. 22). This is the approach espoused in much of the leadership theory presented in section 2.3.1 in which leadership is considered as something done by leaders to achieve particular outcomes.

The second category is more closely aligned to relational perspectives on leadership (such as those outlined in 2.3.2, and several of those in 2.3.3) in which it is seen as emerging from the relationship between leaders and followers. To this extent, proponents of this perspective may be sympathetic to a *constructivist* (or constructionist) approach “which asserts that social phenomena and their meanings are continually being accomplished by social actors [...and...] that they are in a constant state of revision” (Bryman and Bell, 2007, p. 23). Or, alternatively, they may take a *critical realist* stance that regards that “the social world is reproduced and transformed in daily life” (Bhaskar, 1989, p. 4, cited in Bryman and Bell, 2007, p. 628) and that “social phenomena are produced by mechanisms that are real, but that are not directly accessible through observation and are discernable only through their effects” (Bryman and Bell, 2007, p. 628).

The third category takes a somewhat more critical perspective (that is likely to be informed by a constructivist ontology) to draw attention to the political and discursive processes at work within organisations and the extent to which the concept of ‘leadership’ may not exist other than in its capacity to shape how people think about, talk about and allocate power and rewards within organisations. This perspective is perhaps most clearly evidenced in the work of authors such as Alvesson and Sveningsson (2003, p. 359) who propose that “thinking about leadership needs to take seriously the possibility of the non-existence of leadership as a distinct phenomenon” and Gemmill and Oakley (1992) who argue that leadership is “an alienating social myth”. Kerr and Jermier (1978) similarly propose that within certain environments other factors may act as ‘substitutes for leadership’, thereby removing the need for active leadership intervention. Whilst such approaches could be applied to notions such as distributed leadership they are generally not, and there is a tendency within most theories to assume that leadership exists albeit socially constructed.

The categories outlined above are inevitably somewhat simplistic but draw attention once more to the contested and elusive nature of leadership. What is more, they encourage us to be wary of accounts that make *a priori* assumptions about the existence of leadership as something discrete that can be captured and measured, and encourage us to reflect on the basis of the judgements on which we attribute the existence or not of leadership. Within this thesis I take a constructivist perspective on leadership that permits both the possibility that it is something that is constructed through social interaction as well as allowing that leadership may have no real existence other than in

its capacity to shape perceptions and discourse within social groups. The following quote illustrates the potential value of such an approach:

“When undertaking research in a school, for example, a more parsimonious approach (in keeping with the spirit of the leader substitute idea) might mean *not* taking the presence of leadership (or its absence, for that matter) for granted. Instead, it would be more helpful if researchers were to inquire of prospective informants: first, whether they perceive leadership to be manifest in the case study site; next, what they understand by ‘leadership’; then, what form that leadership takes (i.e. is there one leader, more than one leader or is leadership distributed between, say, couples?) and, finally, why leadership might take this form. In these ways, the aggregated raw material generated by a leadership researcher would comprise empirically grounded knowledge of contextualised perceptions and understandings, as well as some measure of the extent of informants’ agreement about those matters. This material would then provide a useful starting point from which to construct an analysis of the processes that have helped to determine these working assumptions and the causal contribution made by leadership in accomplishing organisational outcomes, relative to other candidate siblings in the family of terms.” (Gronn, 2003, p. 285-6)

Such an approach draws attention to the discursive nature of ‘leadership’ both in terms of how it is enacted through language as well as how its meaning is shaped through differing representations of the concept<sup>20</sup>. The discursive and constitutive approaches to leadership described in section 2.3.3.c pay particular attention to these issues and highlight the various ways in which language shapes both leadership action and perceptions (see Fairhurst, 2007 for further details).

In addition to questioning the nature of social phenomena such as leadership; ontology is also concerned with the building blocks of such concepts. In a recent article Drath et al. (2008, p. 635) describe the ontology of leadership as “the theory of the entities that are thought to be most basic and essential to any statement about leadership”. They propose that despite an apparent diversity and lack of integration between theories and definitions of leadership (as outlined in Chapter 2) they are:

“... actually unified and framed by an underlying ontology that is virtually beyond question within this field. That ontology has recently been articulated

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<sup>20</sup> What Alvesson and Kärreman (2000) term little ‘d’ discourse and big ‘D’ discourse respectively – see section 6.7 for further discussion.

by one of the leading scholars in the field as follows: ‘In its simplest form [leadership] is a tripod – a leader or leaders, followers, and a common goal they want to achieve’ (Bennis, 2007, p. 3). This is not a definition of leadership but something much more fundamental: it is an expression of commitment to the entities (leaders, followers, common goals) that are essential and indispensable to leadership and about which any theory of leadership must therefore speak.” (Drath et al., 2008, p. 635)

In drawing attention to the ‘tripod’ Drath and colleagues highlight some common assumptions that shape the ways in which we research, theorise and practice leadership and open up an opportunity to reframe how we go about these activities. Whilst Drath et al. agree that, in some circumstances, the ‘tripod’ of leader/s, follower/s and common goals is an appropriate account of how leadership occurs (for example in relatively formalised, hierarchical organisations) it is becoming increasingly problematic as a way of framing leadership in more collaborative environments where the identification and distinction of ‘leaders’ vis-à-vis ‘followers’ is challenging and potentially meaningless. By continuing to focus on the ‘tripod’, it is proposed, we unnecessarily limit the scope of leadership theory and practice.

Drath et al. (2008) offer an alternative to the dominant ontology of leadership in the form of, what they determine as, three essential leadership outcomes: direction, alignment and commitment. They propose that “whereas with the tripod ontology it is the presence of leaders and followers interacting around their shared goals that marks the occurrence of leadership, with the DAC ontology, it is the presence of direction, alignment, and commitment (DAC) that marks the occurrence of leadership” (ibid, p. 636). Such a shift in approach, it is argued, should drive a change in the questions we ask and which answers we look for when researching leadership. It is also proposed that an ontology such as this is far better suited to investigations of shared/distributed leadership, complexity leadership and relational approaches which bring into question the distinction between leaders and followers as well as the source of common goals.

Whilst helpful in dislodging the familiar leader, follower and shared goals narrative, however, the focus on outcomes in the DAC ontology may miss the actual processes by which leadership takes place. Thus, it could well be argued that by the time direction, alignment and commitment become observable leadership has already happened. DAC are not ‘leadership’ in themselves but the traces left by leadership and/or evidence that

leadership (or a similar process) may be occurring. To understand the processes that give rise to DAC becomes the renewed quest for leadership scholars.

To summarise, therefore, the emerging literature suggests a need to adopt a broader ontology of leadership that extends beyond individuals to the manner in which individual, organisational and social factors interact and (re)construct one another. Such an approach requires the adoption of a systemic approach in which close attention is played to role of language within this process. As Tsoukas (2003) suggests:

“A more rounded view of organizational life is possible when we discard ontological individualism and begin to appreciate that inter-subjective meanings, manifested in discursive practices, are constitutive of individuals; and, at a higher level of analysis, that societal self-understandings are constitutive of organizations.” (ibid, p. 613)

### ***3.5 Conceptual pillars of the current enquiry***

In this section I will outline a number of conceptual pillars that inform the empirical studies discussed in Chapters 4 and 5. These pillars can be considered as a series of inter-related concepts that have informed the manner in which I approached these investigations and which pave the way for the discussion and conclusions in Chapters 6 and 7. They are as follows: (1) the social construction of leadership; (2) a systemic perspective on leadership; (3) the interplay of theory and practice; (4) a critical perspective on leadership; and (5) leadership and identity.

Whilst a number of these have been mentioned in the introduction and review of leadership theory, in this section I will illustrate how they impact upon research methodology and philosophy. In section 3.6 I will reflect on the challenges of studying leadership and, in particular, the difficulties of balancing the potentially conflicting assumptions and implications of the concepts raised here.

#### **3.5.1 The social construction of leadership**

Whilst the shared and distributed leadership theories outlined in the previous chapter draw attention to the significance of the relational and processual dimensions of leadership and the interdependence of actors, they still tend to treat leadership as something relatively tangible and integrally linked to the contribution of ‘leaders’. Leithwood and colleagues (2006b), for example, identify four core leadership practices of successful school leaders: setting directions, developing people, redesigning the



organisation, and managing the teaching programme. Whilst a range of people may contribute towards the delivery of these outcomes, they are still largely regarded as something done by 'leaders' (albeit at various levels within the organisation). Spillane's (2006) conception of leadership practice as emerging from the interface between leaders, followers and situation, implies a similar assumption about the pivotal role of 'leaders' in accomplishing 'leadership'. Whilst leadership is considered socially constructed in so far as it emerges from collective effort, most articulations of these theories do not seriously challenge the dominant 'tripod' ontology of leadership (Drath et al., 2008) despite their tendency to highlight a more fluid relationship between leaders and followers.

A number of authors, however, have argued for a more explicitly constructivist approach to studying leadership (informed by post-structuralist thinking) that considers the centrality of shared dialogue and meaning making. Grint (1997, 2001), for example, uses the phrase 'constitutive leadership' to highlight how assessments of good or bad leadership from history are constructed through the accounts of various different actors/informants (see section 2.3.3c). Which of these is taken to be the most truthful or convincing account of the situation is determined by a range of factors, not least the power and influence of whoever is giving the account and the responsiveness of the audience to the message that is being conveyed. A prime example of this is given in Grint's (2005b) analysis of the representations of the 'War on Terror' in Iraq in the 2004 US presidential campaign. George W. Bush, he argued, presented the situation as a 'critical' problem demanding immediate and decisive action whilst his opponent, John Kerry, framed it as a 'wicked' problem with no immediate solution<sup>21</sup>. The outcome of this election, as we are aware, was decided by an American public, based on what they perceived to be the most convincing and engaging argument at the time.

From a constitutive leadership perspective, Grint (1997) argues, the key skills of a successful leader are rhetoric and storytelling – the ability to construct (either alone or in collaboration with others) a compelling account of their pivotal role as leader and then to promote this as widely as possible. From this perspective the context in which leadership occurs is socially constructed (see Fairhurst, 2009 for further elaboration on this argument).

Whilst Grint tends to focus on the implications of a constructivist approach for leaders Collinson (2006) explores the implications for followers. Notably, he highlights how

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<sup>21</sup> Drawing on Rittel and Webber's (1973) typology of wicked and tame problems.



the vast majority of people regarded as leaders within organisations also carry the role of follower and points to the importance of identity processes in framing how these roles are perceived. Drawing on post-structuralist theory (such as Giddens, 1979, Burkitt, 1991, and Foucault, 1977) he argues that leader and follower identities are much more closely intertwined than previously indicated and that followers may be as actively involved in constructing and refining these identities as leaders. He concludes as follows:

“In sum, post-structuralist perspectives argue that the identities of followers and leaders are frequently a condition and consequence of one another. This raises an interesting possibility, rarely considered in the literature, that followers might also impact on leaders’ identities. While some authors propose that we should concentrate exclusively on followers (Meindl, 1995), a post-structuralist analysis views the identities of followers and leaders as inextricably linked, mutually reinforcing, and shifting within specific contexts. The current interest in distributed and dispersed leadership and empowered and exemplary followership suggests that the traditional dichotomous identities of leader and follower are increasingly ambiguous and blurred. This challenge to dualistic thinking raises fundamental questions for the future of leadership both in theory and practice.” (Collinson, 2006, p. 187)

Ospina and Sorenson (2006) echo these considerations in their chapter entitled *A constructionist lens on leadership* to argue that “leadership is relational and systemic. It emerges and manifests itself through relations and in relationships, and it cannot exist outside of these relations” (ibid, p. 193). They propose the following implications for leadership research:

“First, viewing leadership as a social construct and as something that is relational, emergent and contextual suggests a research agenda that shifts attention away from the individual leader and toward the work of leadership; from leadership qualities to collective agreements and the actions that embody them; and from behaviours to practices and experiences. Second, a constructionist view poses that a participatory approach (involving those engaged in the work of leadership as co-inquirers rather than subjects) will yield deeper understanding of the experience of leadership as meaning-making for action. Third, because context is central, this perspective suggests that a participatory approach must be grounded in community. Fourth, from this view,

understanding the way leadership emerges in a particular community requires eliciting a range of perspectives within the community. Hence a multi-modal approach to research, one that engages diverse methodologies, is best suited to this task.” (ibid, p. 196-197)

Such concerns largely support the implications identified in the previous two sections of this chapter and, as far as possible, have been integrated into the methodology of the two studies reported in this thesis. They highlight the significance of factors such as identity, discourse and the dynamics of power and influence within organisations. Furthermore, they indicate a means for exploring one of the perennial questions running through this enquiry – that of the apparent tension between structure and agency within traditional accounts of leadership whereby leaders are charged with structuring organisations whilst, themselves, being defined by these very same structures. Barker (2001, p. 483) describes it thus:

“The relationship between action and structure must be mitigated by, what Giddens (1982) called, the duality of structure. Structural properties of social systems are both medium and outcomes of the practices and activities that comprise those systems. The complex, reciprocal relationships of people and institutions, then, must be the foci of the explanation of leadership. The duality of structure ultimately connects that which constitutes the leader and that which creates outcomes in a way that cannot be explained by defining the leader.”

A social constructionist perspective regards leadership as a social process that transcends the contribution of any single actor, in which both action and structure are mutually interdependent.

### **3.5.2 A systemic perspective on leadership**

The next conceptual pillar of the current enquiry follows on to a certain degree from the constructivist perspective outlined above, and proposes a systemic perspective whereby:

“Leadership should be seen not only as position and authority but also as an emergent, *interactive dynamic* – a complex interplay from which a collective impetus for action and change emerges when heterogeneous agents interact in networks in ways that produce new patterns of behaviour or new modes of operating.” (Uhl-Bien et al., 2007, p. 299, initial emphasis)

This perspective endeavours to take a holistic and embedded view of leadership where it is regarded as both an outcome and a constitutive element of the system in which it

occurs. Whilst a number of early leadership investigations (e.g. Katz and Kahn, 1978) were informed by General Systems Theory (GST) in which organisations were regarded as Open Systems, rather like those found in nature, a relatively mechanistic approach was often adopted which downplayed the importance of emergent and informal processes of influence (see Schneider and Somers, 2006 for a review of this literature). In more recent years there has been growing interest in the potential contribution of Complexity Theory (CT) to investigations of leadership (see, for example, Wheatley, 1994, Goldstein and Hazy, 2006, Uhl-Bien et al., 2007, Lichtenstein and Plowman, 2009) in which organisations are regarded as Complex Adaptive Systems (CAS). “The hallmark of this perspective”, as argued by Anderson (1999, p. 219), “is the notion that at any level of analysis, order is an emergent property of individual interactions at a lower level of aggregation”.

A CAS perspective on leadership implies a need to focus attention on the diversity of factors that influence how leadership occurs within a given situation and the possible contribution of seemingly small and inconsequential acts (rather like Tolstoy’s comments about the Russian Revolution in section 1.2.4). Whilst there remains some debate about the extent to which such an approach may be founded upon rationalist and instrumentalist assumptions in which “staff in organizations should operate by ‘simple rules’, and by doing so managers and consultants are capable of ‘unleashing’ the power of complexity applying it to ensure better results and more creativity” (Mowles et al., 2008, p. 810) within this research I adopt a more constructivist approach as advocated by authors such as Stacey et al. (2000) and Mowles et al. (2008) which “deny[s] a separation between subjective and objective experience of human action and draw[s] attention to the inherently paradoxical and transformative nature of everyday experience” (ibid, p. 810).

In adopting a systemic approach I aim, in particular, to acknowledge the centrality of context as outlined by Uhl-Bien et al. (2007) and to regard context “not [as] an antecedent, mediator, or moderator variable; rather, it is the ambiance that spawns a given system’s dynamic persona” (ibid, p. 299).

Context is increasingly cited as a key dimension within leadership research yet remains somewhat under represented in theoretical accounts other than in a relatively simplistic and uni-dimensional manner such as the significance of ‘task’ and ‘followers’ in situational leadership models. In a review of the literature Porter and McLaughlin (2006) found only 16% (373) of articles on leadership published between 1990-2005 in

21 leading journals took account of organisational context to at least a moderate extent as a factor affecting conclusions. They conclude that:

“In the field of organizational behavior generally, there has been a relative lack of attention to how the larger organization context affects specific areas of individual and group behavior. These areas would include, among others, motivation, communication, teams, and, as emphasized here, leadership.” (ibid, p. 559)

In considering contextual factors they highlight a number of dimensions that are likely to impact upon leadership, including: culture/climate, goals/purposes, people/composition, processes, state/condition, structure, and time. They conclude with the following three recommendations:

“(1) In the future, our understanding of leadership could be improved by making a concerted effort to focus directly on the nature of the organizational context as a primary object of interest, rather than treating it as almost an afterthought [...]

“(2) In the future, not only is there a need for increased emphasis on the organizational context of leadership, but there is also a need to study the effects of interactions among two or more components of that context [...]

“(3) In the future, we believe there is a strong need for the leadership field to focus on the dynamic aspects of organizational context relationships. In effect, there is a need to build more movies rather than just snapshots.” (ibid, p. 573)

The *Quest for a General Theory of Leadership* (Goethals and Sorenson, 2006) also identified context as a key factor in Leadership Studies, proposing that it offers a ‘framework for action’ that offers both opportunities and constraints for individual action; allows room for individual agency yet frames what is most likely to be successful; that both shapes and is shaped by individual actors; and combines elements of subjective perception and more concrete, observable factors (Wren and Faier, 2006, p. 218).

Like leadership, however, context can be hard to pin-down in that, whilst it is often presented as having an essence of its own, the very act of describing it is socially constructed. As Grint (2001, p. 3) argues:

“What counts as a ‘situation’ and what counts as the ‘appropriate’ way of leading in that situation are interpretive and contestable issues, not issues that can be decided by objective criteria.”

The illustration of the War in Iraq by the US presidential candidates described in the previous section is a good example of this, in that what matters is not so much the objective nature of the situation but rather the ‘story’ constructed by each candidate and how this is conveyed to and interpreted by others. Their accounts represent attempts at sensemaking that give meaning to the associated actions they propose. Indeed, as the historian E.H. Carr explains, an account of history (and/or context) is always a view from somewhere, as illustrated in the following quote.

“The facts of history never come to us ‘pure’, since they do not and can not exist in a pure form: they are always refracted through the mind of the recorder. The facts are not at all like fish on the fishmonger’s slab. They are like fish swimming about in a vast and sometimes inaccessible ocean; and what the historian catches will depend, partly on chance, but mainly on what part of the ocean he chooses to fish in and what tackle he chooses to use - these two factors being, of course, determined by the kind of fish he wants to catch. By and large, the historian will get the kind of facts he wants. History means interpretation.”  
(Carr, 2002, p. 19)

In a recent special issue of *Human Relations* on the context of leadership Gail Fairhurst (2009, p. 1611) goes one step further to highlight the sequential and temporal form of leadership (and other human interaction) to propose that “what is ‘text’ one moment becomes ‘con-text’ the very next”.

### **3.5.3 The interplay of theory and practice**

Alongside the relatively theoretical concerns outlined so far, as a field that garners much interest from practicing leaders/managers and those endeavouring to identify, support and develop them leadership studies, like the associated fields of organisational, management and business studies, is generally expected to have some practical or applied relevance. In the preface to Pedler et al.’s *The Manager’s Guide to Leadership* (2004), for example, Gerard Egan proposes that:

“Leadership is a doing thing; a performance art. It is not defined by any personal set of qualities or competencies, but by what we actually *do* when faced with challenging situations. These challenges come from life and work, from the wider world and from our own questions about ourselves. Leadership is what we do when we acknowledge and respond to these challenges.” (ibid, p. vii)

The focus and outputs of leadership research (in business schools, at least), therefore, are generally expected to have a practical application that somehow helps to shape the understanding and practice of leadership. Whilst such an assumption may not appear unreasonable at face value, it does contrast to fields such as the sociology of music which are not expected to have a direct impact on music composition or playing, and is a trend that is enhanced within UK higher education in preparation for the 2013 Research Excellence Framework. Indeed, as indicated in the introduction, the whole field of Business Studies is becoming increasingly alert to the need for relevance and practicality yet the demand for relevance and applicability places particular epistemological assumptions upon the nature of the knowledge produced and holds a number of methodological implications for how this knowledge is gathered.

From an epistemological point of view a preference for theory and research that has 'practical' implications drives a tendency towards positivist and realist approaches that purport to claims of 'truth' and the scientific basis of management and leadership enquiry. Such an approach is clearly evidenced through the preponderance of competency based approaches to leadership assessment and development as mentioned in the introduction that make a relatively unproblematic assumption that it is 'leaders' who 'lead'.

Much research on leadership, therefore, has a strong element of pragmatism which informs how the research is framed (in terms of which questions to ask), conducted (how and where to look for the answers) and disseminated (which messages are conveyed for which audiences)<sup>22</sup>. Cause-effect relationships and 'why' questions about leadership however are not the only line of enquiry open to leadership scholars. Instead, scholars adopting a more discursive and constructivist approach would be more inclined to ask questions about 'how' leadership is accomplished and 'what' does it achieve (Fairhurst, 2009).

To enhance the perceived relevance and applicability of leadership research there is a strong tendency towards applied studies in naturalistic settings (Levaccic, 2005). Experimental studies are largely considered inappropriate for understanding the contextualised nature of leadership and samples are often quite specific in terms of the populations they study.

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<sup>22</sup> This is particularly true of research that has been funded by corporate/organisational partners to address particular challenges/issues. When engaged in such work the researcher frequently becomes complicit in the knowledge production process and finds it difficult to challenge underlying assumptions about the nature of reality.

Authors such as Burgoyne and Turnbull-James (2006) refer to this as ‘Mode 2’ research and contrast it with more traditional ‘Mode 1’ management research largely based around theory building and theory testing. Like Pettigrew (1997), however, they recognise that the need to balance rigour with relevance can be challenging, concluding that:

“In practice, Mode 2 researchers can be torn between contributing to theory development and meeting the requirements of their practitioner partners.”  
(Burgoyne and Turnbull James, 2006, p. 314)

Despite a common tendency to represent theory and practice as separate areas of concern the two are integrally linked. Kurt Lewin is famously quoted as saying “there is nothing as practical as a good theory”<sup>23</sup> – a point widely taken as meaning that one of the main aims of theory is to enhance practice. On the other hand, it has also been argued that “bad management theories are destroying good management practices” (Ghoshal, 2005). Thus, we can see a dynamic inter-play between theory and practice, even when conceived of as distinct activities.

Despite the potential benefits and dangers of management theory, theory construction remains fairly exclusively the domain of the academic. In reflecting on the role and contribution of practitioners to management research, Irene Ng (2010, p.6) argues that “much of research into practice by practitioners looks towards contributing to the theory of practice (i.e. for better practice) but less towards the theory about practice (i.e. for better theories)”. Practitioners (including managers, consultants, policy makers, etc.), it would seem are concerned primarily with ‘practical knowledge’ (Jarvis, 1999) that can be directly applied to the challenges they face in the workplace. Such a situation is unfortunate in that it may serve to reinforce rather than break down the apparent divide between practice and theory. Academics have only limited exposure to work-based practice outside HE and often find themselves unable to gain sufficient access to the knowledge of practitioners to provide a sufficiently detailed appreciation of context. Practitioners, on the other hand, may become so immersed in the fine grain details of the context that they find it difficult to gain sufficient cognitive distance from the subject to generalise to other times and places (or may struggle to recognise the structural aspects of their ‘subjectivity’<sup>24</sup>). Furthermore, their apparent reluctance to

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<sup>23</sup> Although as Taylor (1998, p. 87, cited in Weick, 2003, p. 460) points out, the original quote was “a business man once stated that there is nothing as practical as a good theory”, thereby substantially changing the meaning.

<sup>24</sup> I.e. the extent to which they, themselves, are shaped by their contexts.



engage directly in theory creation means that they continue to only have access to the somewhat abstract and decontextualised theories created by academics, or their own rule-of-thumb observations (with little theoretical or empirical underpinning) . Ng (2010, p.5) concludes:

“This phenomenon is puzzling. It seems to suggest that academics are the ‘owners’ of original research and that only in academia can knowledge about practice be created and validated. There seems to be a line in the production of knowledge.”

Bartunek (2007) makes a similar point when arguing for a “relational scholarship of integration” in which she contemplates how we could create more dynamic and mutually beneficial dialogues between academics and practitioners. She proposes that whilst such an approach need not fundamentally change the ways in which academics conduct research and practitioners carry out management and leadership, it does require the introduction of structures that foster relationship building between both groups. The analogy of a bridge or ‘cross bar’ is invoked to indicate the need for both academics and practitioners to reach out towards one another and explore the ‘liminal space’<sup>25</sup> between theory and practice.

Only through a closer engagement with practitioners immersed within the everyday experience of their own contexts can we hope to gain a clearer understanding of (a) what they might consider to be ‘practical’ knowledge and (b) the manner in which they apply concepts such as ‘leadership’ within their work. Such an approach, it is argued, may be essential in order to avoid what Kelly (2008) terms the ‘categorical mistake’ of most leadership research – the tendency to look for ‘evidence’ of leadership rather than the logic upon which practitioners categorise and label certain phenomena, and not others, as ‘leadership’ – a shift from searching for the ‘essence’ of leadership to the symbolic sensemaking processes by which members of a ‘community of practice’ (Wenger, 1999) construct ‘leadership’. This idea is a central concern of Study 2.

### **3.5.4 A critical perspective on leadership**

A fourth key aspect of the approach that informs this thesis (alongside the theoretical frames of distributed leadership and leadership-as-practice) is the application of a

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<sup>25</sup> Defined as “a place where boundaries dissolve a little and we stand there, on the threshold, getting ourselves ready to move across the limits of what we were into what we are to be... a space of transformation between phases of separation and reincorporation” (URL: [http://parole.aporee.org/work/hier.php3?spec\_id=19650&words\_id=900], accessed, 18/08/09)



critical lens on leadership. Drawing on ideas from the field of critical management studies (CMS) I have endeavoured to remain alert to the dynamics of power and control within organisations and the possible non-existence of leadership as a distinct phenomenon (Alvesson and Sveningsson, 2003, Washbush, 2005).

In a recent review of the field Adler et al. (2006) identify five common themes in CMS literature:

1. *Challenging structures of domination*: CMS takes a somewhat radical view of the role of organisation in society and aims to reveal, challenge and destabilise the mechanisms of domination and control;
2. *Questioning the taken-for-granted*: CMS seeks to ask the inconvenient questions, to surface and challenge deeply embedded assumptions about issues such as gender, work and the purpose of organisations;
3. *Beyond instrumentalism*: CMS challenges the view that management and organisation are essentially instrumental pursuits to serve the ultimate goals of improved productivity and efficiency. It challenges assumptions and assertions about the supposed economic value and impact of both management practice and management research;
4. *Reflexivity and meaning*: CMS advocates the value of reflexivity in research (Alvesson and Sköldbberg, 2000). “Reflexivity here means the capacity to recognize how accounts of management -- whether by researchers or practitioners -- are influenced by their authors’ social position and by the associated use of power-invested language and convention in constructing and conveying the objects of their research. By such reflexivity, CMS aims to raise awareness of the conditions under which both mainstream and critical accounts are generated, and how these conditions influence the types of accounts produced.” (Adler et al., 2006, p. 10)
5. *Power-and-knowledge*: CMS aims to reveal how knowledge may be used within organisations to reinforce asymmetrical power-relations. In particular this field is influenced by the ideas of Foucault that highlights the deeply embedded nature of power within all social interactions and the indivisibility of the power/knowledge relationship (Foucault, 1980).

Together these principles offer a powerful toolset for getting behind accounts of leadership practice (acquired through leadership research or other means) and of exposing the claims and assumptions therein to scrutiny. In particular, a critical

approach to the study of leadership encourages consideration of the role of rhetoric in both the construction of leadership narratives by informants, as well as in their interpretation and dissemination by researchers and others (Bligh et al., 2004, Cuno, 2005, Western, 2008). As Alvesson (1996, p. 468) argues:

“Rhetoric is an unavoidable element in research publications (Astley, 1985, Brown, 1990). Writers’ conformism with dominant norms within the science community should not be confused with objectivity. Texts can thus not just mirror objective reality.”

In making this argument Alvesson presents a critique of quantitative approaches to the study of leadership, along with qualitative studies based on a similar ‘neo-empiricist’ methodology, that promote abstract generalisations somewhat devoid of meaning, and calls instead for “intimacy in relation to the phenomenon under study and depth of understanding at the expense of abstraction, generalizability and the artificial separation of theory and data” (ibid, p. 464). Such an approach is necessarily more collaborative and requires greater transparency over the content and interpretation of data “where the cultural and institutional context and meaning creation patterns [are] driven by participants-or jointly by these and researchers - rather than onesidedly, indeed authoritarianly decided, by the researcher” (ibid, p. 464).

A similar perspective is proposed by Simon Western (2008) in terms of his three key aspects of leadership research: depth analysis, emancipation and looking awry.

By taking a broadly critical stance to the research in this thesis I aim to remain sensitive to the influence of the researcher and am prepared to challenge dominant assumptions and beliefs about the nature, role and purpose of leadership within organisations. The broad scope of this work, however, does not allow for detailed analysis of particular issues, such as gender relations in leadership and mechanisms of domination and control but I do seek to employ a broadly reflexive stance and to remain alert to the possible adverse effects of leadership. Furthermore, whilst endeavouring to steer clear of moral judgements on the nature of ‘good’ or ‘bad’ leadership I endeavour to remain sensitive to the ethical dimensions of leadership and how it is perceived by different stakeholders.

### **3.5.5 Leadership and identity**

A final set of ideas that remain influential throughout this thesis is the idea of leadership as an identity project. This notion has been conveyed in some of the representations given in Chapter 2, particularly the social identity approach described in 2.3.2a, and is

alluded to in the discussion of constructivist and critical perspectives above. I will now, however, briefly introduce three other relevant concepts that will be explored further in the empirical research and subsequent discussion.

The first of these concepts is that of the '*relational self*'. For a good 50 years or more there has been growing scholarly interest in the field of self and identity yet:

“Despite the current literature’s recognition of the social embedding of self and identity, the abstract and independent individual is still a dominant image of the person.” (Foddy and Kashima, 2002, p. 4)

The separation and abstraction of the individual from the social world in which he/she operates has permeated most areas of psychological, social and organisational theory and is particularly evident within the dominant discourses on leadership. There has been a tendency for mainstream leadership theory to present leadership as the property of the ‘leader’ and to contrast this against the role of the ‘follower’ (who is invariably presented as someone who is, in some way, subservient and/or dependent). Even more inclusive models such as ‘servant leadership’ (Greenleaf, 1970) and LMX theory (Dansereau et al., 1975, Graen and Cashman, 1975) support this notion despite giving rather more attention to the role and importance of followers in the process. Such relatively static representations of leaders and followers mask the true nature of these relations and the dynamic processes by which roles are negotiated and constructed. In reality it is hard (nigh on impossible) to identify a leader who is not also in some respect a follower and vice versa. The nature of the dominant identity construct within a given situation is thus socially constructed and always in the process of ‘becoming’. As Miller and Rice (1967, p. 14) propose:

“...an individual cannot exist in isolation, but only in relation to other individuals and groups. Even when he is alone, what he is and what he does are in large part a product of past relationships and of anticipated relationships in the future.”

The temporal aspect of identity is further conveyed by Sartre (1956/2001) who states that:

“I am not the self I will be, because  
- I am separated from that self by time,  
- what I am now is not the foundation of what I will be, and

- there is nothing that can determine exactly what I will become.” (Sartre, 1956/2001, cited in Cunliffe, 2009, p. 90)

A relational perspective on identity calls for a fluid and evolving sense of being that challenges many of the simple binaries that dominate much of the management and leadership literature (Gergen, 1999). People are only who they are through their relationship with others, thereby blurring the distinction, for example, between leaders and followers, and requiring a post-structuralist understanding of organisations. Alvesson (2010, p. 3) proposes that:

“Many if not most contemporary texts on identity go beyond a view of individuals as unitary, coherent and autonomous and embrace a position somewhere in-between a ‘traditional’ and a postmodernist or ‘anti-essentialist’ view [...] we don’t have to choose between a mainly fixed and a predominantly fluid view, nor between a sovereign self and a decentred one.”

A second key identity construct is that of ‘*identity work*’, described by Sveningsson and Alvesson (2003) as:

“The ongoing struggle to create a sense of self and provide answers (albeit often temporary) to questions such as ‘who am I?’ and ‘what is my purpose?’”

Managerial, leadership and other identities, it is argued, do not arrive pre-formed but are continually constructed over time, only occasionally in a planned way. Rather like the social identities described in section 2.3.2a, different individual identities may be experienced ‘in tension’ with one another and may be welcomed by, accepted or imposed upon a person. Whilst identity regulation may be desired/desirable it can also be used as a form of organisational control (Alvesson and Willmott, 2002).

Within this thesis particular attention will be given to the manner in which the notion of ‘leadership’ may be used in place of ‘management’ to encourage a more responsive and proactive engagement of people across the organisation in activities linked to the successful achievement of organisational outcomes. It takes a discursive perspective on the manner in which identities can be shaped and constructed through sensemaking processes as indicated below:

“Identity work is not only how people categorize themselves and are categorized by others. It is also concerned with how the images and representations (physical, symbolic, verbal, textual and behavioural) become imbued with meaning and are taken as being part of one’s identity.” (Beech, 2008, p. 52)

The third key identity construct to be explored in this thesis is that of ‘*role*’ (Miller and Rice, 1967, Lawrence, 1977). Drawing particularly on the psychodynamic tradition as promoted by the Tavistock and Grubb Institutes, the notion of role complements those of relational identity and identity work through considering the means by which people conceive of and legitimise themselves in relation to a particular pursuit or endeavour. Whilst there may be some overlap with the idea of organisational role (i.e. the post that you hold within an organisation) the notion of role as used here is somewhat more open to negotiation and adaptation, as Reed (2001, p. 2) proposes:

“To take a role implies being able to formulate or discover, however intuitively, a regulating principle inside oneself which enables one, as a person, to manage what one does in relation to the requirements of the situation one is in.”

He argues that this involves three related concepts: role finding, role making and role taking, as indicated below:

“A role is defined (or ‘fashioned’):

- as a person identifies the aim of the system he or she belongs to
- takes ownership of that aim as a member of the system, and
- chooses the action and personal behavior which from their position best contributes to achieving the aim.” (ibid, p. 2)

The notion of role, therefore, connects identity to purpose and, as such, offers a means for considering how and why people may engage in leadership type activities on behalf of their organisation. These ideas will be explored further in the following chapters.

### ***3.6 Challenges of studying leadership***

This chapter has highlighted a number of significant challenges in researching leadership, including the pressure to produce normative outputs (Turnbull James and Collins, 2008), the inherent complexity and ambiguity of the concept (Conger, 1998), and a dominant yet restrictive ontology (Drath et al., 2008). In her book ‘*Rethinking Leadership*’ Ladkin (2010) goes further to suggest that leadership is a phenomenon that is largely unknowable. Drawing on concepts from phenomenology (Husserl, 1900 [2001]) she introduces the notion of the leadership ‘cube’ (Sokolowski, 2000) to illustrate the concepts of ‘sides’, ‘aspects’ and ‘identity’ of a phenomenon, proposing that:

“From a phenomenological perspective, an entity’s identity always remains elusive. As much as we can perceive the sides which make it up, as much as we

can be aware of the different aspects from which it can be viewed, as much as we can know about its internal workings, its history and its significance within human 'Lifeworlds', we can never know the totality of something which would constitute a definitive 'identity'. This is a key ontological assumption which underpins phenomenological investigations: that a 'thing's' identity will always be beyond the reach of human apprehension. In holding this position, phenomenology takes a radically different orientation to knowing from that assumed by logical positivism." (Ladkin, 2010, p. 24)

This insight is then used to explain the multitude of theories and definitions of leadership (as outlined in Chapter 2 of this thesis) in that "each theory provides another 'piece of the leadership puzzle'" (Ladkin, 2010, p. 32) by approaching leadership from a particular 'side' (e.g. a primary focus on 'leaders' or 'followers') and 'aspect' (e.g. a primary interest in organisational change, structures, performance, etc.). Whilst such an approach suggests that leadership "is not a phenomenon which lends itself to positivistic deconstruction, measurement and logical analysis" (ibid, p. 185) this does not mean that it cannot be studied, rather that "methods more suited to analysing entities which are materially present will have severe limitations when applied to the investigation of leadership" (ibid, p. 185).

The conceptual pillars outlined in section 3.5 offer some hope of resolving these issues through their capacity to act as 'sensitizing' concepts (Blumer, 1954) to inform the research process. Blumer (cited in Bryman and Bell, 2007, p. 408) argued against the use of 'definitive' concepts "fixed through the elaboration of indicators" within social research, in favour of 'sensitizing' concepts that provide "a general sense of reference and guidance in approaching empirical instances" (Blumer, 1954, p.7, cited in Bryman and Bell, 2007, p. 408). According to Bryman and Bell (2007, p. 408) "for Blumer, then, concepts should be employed in such a way that they give a very general sense of what to look for and act as a means for uncovering the variety of forms that the phenomena to which they refer can assume".

Clearly, however, not all concepts are compatible and one must remain alert to differences in their underlying epistemological and ontological assumptions. The concepts discussed in section 3.5, for example, are each associated with substantial bodies of literature and have been addressed in different ways by different authors. The notion of 'identity', for example, can be considered from an essentialist perspective (where it is assumed that a single and enduring 'identity' exists and simply needs to be

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‘discovered’ by the researcher) or an interpretivist perspective (where it is suggested that there is no such thing as a sovereign ‘identity’, rather it is transient, emergent and a concept largely used as a convenient means for classifying certain types of observation).

These competing perspectives are informed by the ‘paradigm’ (Kuhn, 1970) within which they have been conducted and embed assumptions about the nature of knowledge (‘objectivist’ or ‘subjectivist’) and the purpose of scientific enquiry (‘regulatory’ or ‘radical’) (Burrell and Morgan, 1979). Within organization studies four main paradigms can be identified, as illustrated in Table 3.1.

<b>Functionalist</b>	The dominant framework for the study of organizations, based on problem-solving orientation which leads to rational explanation.
<b>Interpretative</b>	Questions whether organizations exist in any real sense beyond the conceptions of social actors, so understanding must be based on the experience of those who work within them.
<b>Radical humanist</b>	Sees an organization as a social arrangement from which individuals need to be emancipated and research as guided by the need for change.
<b>Radical structuralist</b>	Views an organization as a product of structural power relationships, which result in conflict.

**Table 3.1: Paradigms in organisation studies**

(Bryman and Bell, 2007, p. 26, citing the work of Burrell and Morgan, 1979)

There has been much debate about whether research from different paradigms can be synthesized or should be considered as ‘incommensurable’, yet an increasing number of scholars highlight that different approaches can yield complementary insights given the different questions they ask and means they utilise for accessing this information (e.g. Reed, 1985, Hassard, 1991).

Della Porta and Keating (2008b) cite the work of Corbetta (2003) to suggest that competing approaches in the social sciences can be contrasted on three bases: ontological, epistemological and methodological. They go on to argue that the most fertile approach to researching organisations lies neither in a ‘paradigmatic, exclusive approach’ nor in an ‘anarchist hyper-pluralistic approach’, but rather in ‘the search for commensurable knowledge’ (Della Porta and Keating, 2008b, p. 32-33). Such a position does not pit one paradigm against another but rather recognises that, whilst not always fully compatible, each has its own strengths and weaknesses. From this perspective it may be necessary to “trade off one advantage against another [...] on the basis of the fundamental question the researcher is trying to answer” (ibid, p. 33).



Della Porta and Keating (2008b, p. 34) suggest four main ways of combining knowledge: synthesis, triangulation, multiple perspectives and cross-fertilization. The first of these, they argue, is most easy for techniques and methods as “many of them can be adapted to different research purposes” and methodologies as “they are not necessarily tied to specific epistemological assumptions” (ibid, p. 34). “Synthesizing different epistemologies”, however, it is argued “is virtually impossible, since they rest on different assumptions about social reality and knowledge” (ibid, p. 34). Triangulation, it is suggested, is similarly possible at the level of techniques and methods, and methodology, but difficult for competing epistemologies. The latter two approaches (multiple perspectives and cross-fertilization), it is proposed, can usefully draw on different paradigms as long as there is an awareness of the limits of commensurability. From such a perspective more open exchange between different research communities would be beneficial in terms of maintaining a dialogue that may inhibit the formation of silos that become unable or unwilling to communicate with one another.

Within the research in this thesis a moderate pluralism has been adopted both in terms of the methodologies (and associated techniques and methods) employed as well as the concepts that have been used to frame and make sense of them. Whilst this may be regarded as an extreme case of ‘eclecticism’ (Sil, 2004), endeavours have been made to retain a consistently interpretivist epistemological approach, informed by those aspects of critical theory, systems thinking, etc., that are commensurable with such an approach and comply with methodological norms<sup>26</sup>. Whilst this is not always easy, it has been supported through a degree for reflexivity (both on an individual level, as well as in collaboration with co-researchers, other academics and practicing managers) and triangulation (within cases and between methods) as advocated by Alvesson and Sköldböck (2000), Bryman and Bell (2007) and Myers (2009) amongst others.

### ***3.7 Chapter summary***

In this chapter I have reviewed the various ways in which leadership tends to be researched, the ontological and epistemological bases of these approaches, and a number of key concepts/themes that inform the research and analyses within this thesis. It is argued that the majority of mainstream leadership research is based on positivist or

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<sup>26</sup> Myers (2009, p. 42), for example, whilst noting that interpretivism and critical research are distinct paradigms, acknowledges they are similar in many ways and share many of the same epistemological assumptions.



realist assumptions that seek to identify the underlying ‘essence’ of leadership and propose practical recommendations for action. Whilst such an approach has been helpful in raising the profile of the field of leadership studies, it is proposed that a number of assumptions are embedded that may well limit our understanding of the concept and fail to address some fundamental questions. In particular, it is identified that nearly all theories of leadership are based on a tripod ontology of ‘leader, follower and situation’ that may not translate well to more collective and emergent leadership contexts. An alternative ontology (proposed by Drath et al., 2008) is that of ‘direction, alignment and commitment’ although this may still miss the processes by which these factors arise and/or are recognised.

In terms of the methodological basis for the current thesis, a qualitative approach is proposed, that is informed by five key themes. In particular, I propose to apply an interpretivist approach, informed by a social constructivist perspective on leadership that recognises the systemic and contextually-dependent nature of human interaction, the importance of critique (particularly with regards to issues of power and influence), and the relational and interdependent nature of identity. I will also endeavour to explore the interface between leadership theory and practice and to consider the perspectives of, and implications for, different stakeholder groups. These principles offer a number of ‘sensitizing’ concepts that inform the approaches to the studies described in chapters 4 and 5.

# 4. THE DISTRIBUTION OF LEADERSHIP

“There are many leaders, not just one. Leadership is distributed. It resides not solely in the individual at the top, but in every person at entry level who, in one way or another, acts as a leader.” (Goleman, 2002, p. 14)

## ***4.1 Overview***

This chapter presents the methodology, findings and interpretation of the first of the studies incorporated in this thesis – an investigation into perceptions and experiences of leadership in UK higher education (HE)<sup>27</sup>. It begins with an overview of the research question and research context, followed by an account of the research method. An interview-based case study approach was utilised, including 152 in-depth interviews in 12 UK universities.

Findings are presented in three subsections: leadership strategy and approach, taking up a leadership role, and sharing leadership. The discussion considers the implications of these findings for the notion of distributed leadership within HE, concluding that in addition to its descriptive capacity this approach holds a significant rhetorical function in shaping perceptions and understandings of leadership.

## ***4.2 Introduction***

### **4.2.1 The research question**

As discussed in section 1.3.2, this research question was largely shaped through my earlier work on community leadership development in Africa (Bolden and Kirk, 2006) and an interest in the growing literature on ‘distributed leadership’ in schools (e.g. Bennett et al., 2003, Gronn, 2000, Spillane et al., 2004). In each of these instances it was observed that leadership, as a process, could be widely dispersed within organisations and communities, drawing on the contributions of numerous people and largely shaped by the cultures and structures in which they operated.

The notion of distributed leadership has emerged in recent years as one of the main strands of theory into relational and shared forms of leadership (see section 2.3.3b for a review of this literature) and has been particularly embraced within the school education sector, with its proponents proposing that effective leadership goes beyond the contribution of specific individuals. Spillane et al. (2004) refer to this as the ‘person-plus’ dimension, Gronn (2000) calls it ‘concertive action’ and Lumby (2003, p. 291)

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<sup>27</sup> Please note that this project was completed in conjunction with Professor Jonathan Gosling and Dr Georgy Petrov at the Centre for Leadership Studies. During this time I took the role of principal investigator and played a central role in framing the conceptual and theoretical approach utilised as well as conducting a substantial proportion of the fieldwork, data analysis and writing up. The main findings of this research are reported in two LFHE publications and a number of published papers. What follows in this chapter, therefore, are the fruits of a joint endeavour although the main focus, will be on those aspects of the work where I took the lead. Where this is not the case, this will be highlighted within the text.

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describes it as the “*volition* of an organisation” (initial emphasis). In each case, leadership is regarded as more than the sum of its parts (the contributions of individual ‘leaders’) – a collective capacity of groups and organisations.

Although such accounts offer a compelling alternative to individualistic accounts of leadership which focus almost exclusively on the traits, qualities and behaviours of formal ‘leaders’, they can appear somewhat abstract and hard to pin down in practice. Whilst alluding to the importance of collective capacity, for example many empirical studies continue to highlight the key role of formal leaders in fostering a culture of distributed leadership (e.g. Harris, 2004, Spillane and Diamond, 2007, Gronn, 2008, Leithwood et al., 2009). Together, these issues can make it difficult to distinguish ‘distributed’ leadership from more traditional forms of devolution, delegation or participative decision-making, or where structural and cultural factors act as ‘substitutes for leadership’ (Kerr and Jermier, 1978).

Another issue with more inclusive accounts such as this is that they are most often treated as normative rather than descriptive, representing an idealised view of how leadership *should* occur rather than necessarily how it *actually* does occur (Leithwood et al., 2009). Indeed, it has become somewhat common practice to equate ‘distributed’ with ‘democratic’ leadership despite the two ideas not being synonymous (see Woods, 2004, Gronn, 2009b for a discussion of the differences). Whilst many organisations now advocate a ‘distributed’ approach to leadership in most cases this is not reflected in their recognition and reward structures. There continues to be a large differential between the financial reward and public recognition of people at different levels within organisations and opportunities for leadership development and significant influence at the organisational level tend to remain limited for junior and informal leaders.

In planning for the current research project we were struck that despite all the talk about it, it remained difficult to produce a convincing account of what ‘distributed leadership’ actually looks like, how it operates, and how it could be developed. These, then were the questions that informed and shaped the study proposed to the Leadership Foundation for Higher Education (LFHE) in 2004. In particular we proposed to look at the implications for leadership development in the sector in the light of Burgoyne et al.’s (2004) review of the contribution of management and leadership development (MLD) to organisational performance, which concluded that whilst there is evidence that MLD leads to enhanced performance for economic and social benefit, it currently

does not do so to its full potential and that significant benefits could arise from increasing the *precision* rather than *scale* of investment.

Although the initial proposal placed a high emphasis on exploring MLD processes as we began to proceed with the research we soon discovered that more emphasis was needed on the actual nature of leadership in HE (or how it was being made sense of). In keeping with Barker's (1997) article entitled '*How can we train leaders if we don't know what leadership is?*' we realised that in order to propose recommendations for leadership development we first needed a clearer understanding of how leadership is perceived and enacted within higher education institutions (HEIs). The research aims, therefore, were revised as follows:

1. To explore the processes by which leadership is distributed within universities;
2. To identify factors that support or inhibit the distribution of leadership; and
3. To discover how distributed forms of leadership interface with formal organisational systems and structures.

Within this research the notion of distributed leadership was used as "a framework for thinking about and framing investigations of leadership practice" (Spillane, 2006, p. 102).

### **4.2.2 The research context**

The data for this study was collected from UK HEIs, in particular medium-large universities offering a full range of activities and subjects. In this section, I will briefly explain why this was believed to be an appropriate context for this study, and will provide some background on current issues and trends in this area (for a more comprehensive review see Bolden et al., 2006a, 2008b, Bryman, 2007).

#### **a. Why study distributed leadership in HE?**

As indicated in earlier sections, much of the research on distributed leadership has been conducted in a school environment. Key authors, including Peter Gronn, James Spillane, Alma Harris, Kenneth Leithwood, John McBeath, Mark McBeth and John Diamond, have all conducted the majority of their research within schools, primarily within North America, the UK and Australasia. Each of these authors describe distributed leadership as contextually appropriate to this sector and, together, provide compelling evidence that it impacts strongly on school performance and student learning (e.g. Leithwood et al., 2006a, b, NCSL, 2007).

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At the time when the study reported in this thesis was commissioned, however, very little explicit research had been conducted on distributed leadership in the further and higher education sectors. This appeared to be a rather major omission in the research, given that both the Centre for Excellence in Leadership<sup>28</sup> (CEL) and the LFHE had incorporated learning from their sister organisation, the National College for School Leadership (NCSL), to call for a ‘distributed’ approach to leadership within their respective sectors (CEL, 2004, LFHE, 2004).

There are many clear parallels and connections between these parts of the education sector, including common links to government policy<sup>29</sup>, comparable career pathways (including a balancing of teaching and managerial responsibilities), and a transfer of learners between them. Despite these similarities, however, there are also some major differences, particularly in regard to the size of organisations (with universities usually the largest, followed by colleges and then schools<sup>30</sup>), professional identities, and organisational objectives. One major difference between the HE sector and both schools and FE, is the strong research culture and focus within most universities. Whilst this is usually framed as contributing positively towards teaching it places somewhat different demands on resources and is largely targeted towards different audiences. Universities also operate as autonomous organisations which, whilst largely dependent on public funding, can not be classified as ‘public sector’ (Sastry and Bekhradnia, 2007) unlike schools and colleges under direct local education authority (LEA) control<sup>31</sup>. HE, therefore, whilst bearing some surface similarities to schools and colleges is not directly comparable and is likely to be quite different in terms of how leadership is perceived and enacted.

### **b. Changing perspectives on leadership in UK HE**

HE in the UK is undergoing a major transition - changing funding mechanisms, regulation and audit, increasing customer demands, competition and internationalisation all parts of the shifting landscape (Deem et al., 2007, Bolden et al., 2009d, Fullan and Scott, 2009). Combined with a need to deliver high quality teaching and research and to engage more actively with business and community it is, perhaps, unsurprising that

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<sup>28</sup> The UK leadership body for the further education (FE) sector.

<sup>29</sup> At the time of this study, all three sectors in England were under the direction of the Department for Education and Skills, although this has subsequently changed with restructuring and universities now report to a different department than schools and FE.

<sup>30</sup> Although there are some notable exceptions such as Newcastle College, which for the first time received more money from HEFCE in 2009-10 for its provision of HE than some universities.

<sup>31</sup> Although there is a trend for colleges and schools to be moving in this direction with the introduction of Academies.

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'good leadership' is increasingly espoused as a strategic and operational imperative (HEFCE, 2004). The structure and nature of HEIs, however, is not generally well suited to managerialism or 'top-down' leadership. It is commonly argued that there remains a deep-seated desire for collegiality, consultation and academic freedom (Middlehurst, 1993, Deem, 2001, Bryman, 2007).

The government white paper on *The Future of Higher Education* (DfES, 2003, p. 76) cites the necessity for "strong leadership and management" as an essential driver for change in the sector; the Higher Education Funding Council for England (HEFCE, 2004, p. 34) identifies "developing leadership, management and governance" as one of its eight strategic aims; and in 2004 the LFHE was established to support and develop leadership in the sector. In setting out their strategic plan HEFCE (2004, p. 35) defined leadership as:

"Agreeing strategic direction in discussion with others and communicating this within the organisation; ensuring that there is the capability, capacity and resources to deliver planned strategic outcomes; and supporting and monitoring delivery. As such this embraces elements of governance and elements of management."

In this definition we can see a relatively functionalist description of leadership as a means for achieving organisational objectives that is closely allied to notions of management, governance and performance.

Despite high aspirations for enhanced leadership to improve inclusion, participation and engagement across organisations many of the principles on which initiatives are founded tend to take a somewhat individualistic and/or managerialist approach (as illustrated in the HEFCE quote) that exacerbates a number of tensions, including individual versus collective performance, centralized versus decentralized control and economic versus social objectives (Broussine and Miller, 2005, Fergusson, 2000). The reform of UK HE can be seen as part of a wider reform of public services, begun by the Conservatives in the mid-1980s and accelerated by the Blair Labour Government in the late 1990s, which seeks to achieve efficiency gains across health, education and other public services. The idea of 'leadership' is a central pillar of such change (Brooks, 2000, Hartley and Allison, 2000) and at the heart of reform across all parts of the education sector (Currie et al., 2005, Deem and Parker, 2007, Deem et al., 2007, Gleeson and Knights, 2008). As such, a degree of critical scepticism is advised when reflecting on the political motivations for enhancing leadership in HE. In particular, it

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is proposed that narratives of leadership embed a number of assumptions about the purpose and role of HE in society that may not be widely shared within the sector.

A number of authors, for example, have distinguished between different cultures in HE, including 'collegiality', 'bureaucracy', 'corporation' and 'enterprise' (e.g. Becher and Kogan, 1992) and the tendency for universities to be moving away from collegial and bureaucratic approaches towards more corporate and enterprise approaches (McNay, 1995, Clark, 1998). Such changes are regarded as driven, in large part, by the changing market for HE, including massification of provision (as more students are encouraged to study at HE level) and increased competition between institutions both nationally and internationally (see Bolden et al., 2008b for further elaboration on these arguments). Undoubtedly government policy over the past decade has accelerated these trends within the UK as will the proposed public funding cuts following the current recession.

With regard to how leadership occurs within universities, a detailed literature review by Bryman (2007) identified just 20 robust empirical studies for the period 1985-2005, from which he identified 13 leader behaviours associated with departmental effectiveness, as illustrated in Table 4.1.

- Clear sense of direction/strategic vision
- Preparing department arrangements to facilitate the direction set
- Being considerate
- Treating academic staff fairly and with integrity
- Being trustworthy and having personal integrity
- Allowing the opportunity to participate in key decisions/encouraging open communication
- Communicating well about the direction the department is going
- Acting as a role model/having credibility
- Creating a positive/collegial work atmosphere in the department
- Advancing the department's cause with respect to constituencies internal and external to the university and being proactive in doing so
- Providing feedback on performance
- Providing resources for and adjusting workloads to stimulate scholarship and research
- Making academic appointments that enhance department's reputation

**Table 4.1: Factors associated with effective departmental leadership**  
(Bryman, 2007, p. 697)



Such factors bear a close resemblance to those found within the leadership literature more widely (e.g. Kouzes and Posner, 1993). On the subject of collegiality, commonly described as a key feature of HE leadership, Bryman (2007, p. 702) argues:

“Unfortunately, the term is used in the literature in two distinct ways: sometimes it refers to a system of governance driven by consensual decision making and on other occasions it refers to mutual supportiveness among staff.”

The current study will endeavour to identify the extent to which the HE context informs and shapes conceptions of distributed leadership and the extent to which these may or may not resonate with notions of collegiality, in the second sense outlined by Bryman.

### ***4.3 Methodology and approach***

In line with the arguments presented in Chapter 3 the research team opted for an interpretivist and qualitative approach to this investigation. The aim of such an approach was to reveal insights into how various actors interpret and make sense of leadership, highlighting some of the contextual variables at work, and offering varying accounts of how leadership is perceived and enacted within universities. The intention was not to provide a comprehensive or definitive account of the current state of leadership in HE nor empirical confirmation of the effectiveness, or otherwise, of specific leadership and leadership development approaches and interventions, but instead to capture a range of perspectives on leadership and leadership development in order to identify common and competing experiences and accounts within and between institutions, as well as tensions within leadership narratives<sup>32</sup>.

In order to achieve this aim we chose to focus the investigation on a sample of universities representing a broad cross-section of UK HEIs and opted for a semi-structured, face-to-face, qualitative interview-based case study approach. An interview approach was considered appropriate for a number of reasons, including those outlined in Table 4.2. A case-orientation was selected due to its ability to capture rather more of the context and complexity of outcomes than would be achieved through a variable-

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<sup>32</sup> Myers (2009, p. 38) suggests that “interpretive researchers assume that access to reality (given or socially constructed) is only through social constructions such as language, consciousness, shared meanings, and instruments. Interpretive researchers do not predefine dependent and independent variables, but focus instead on the complexity of human sense-making as the situation emerges (Kaplan & Maxwell, 1994); they attempt to understand phenomena through the meanings that people assign to them (Boland, 1991; Orlikowski & Baroudi, 1991).” He also suggests that “qualitative research is best if you want to study a particular subject in depth (e.g. in one or a few organizations). It is good for exploratory research, when the particular topic is new and there is not much previously published research on that topic. It is also ideal for studying the social, cultural, and political aspects of people and organizations.” (ibid, p. 9)

orientated approach (Della Porta, 2008) and because of the opportunities it affords for contrasting findings between institutions.

- Offers insights into respondents' thoughts and attitudes
- Enables them to express views in their own terms
- Offers the potential for clarification of questions and/or responses
- Offers flexibility to pursue emergent themes whilst retaining a degree of comparability between interviews
- Enables the capture of rich descriptions, examples and stories (narratives)
- Enables the researcher first-hand experience of the research context
- Is well suited to the collection of data on complex and potentially sensitive issues, and with busy/senior managers

**Table 4.2: Benefits of a face-to-face qualitative interview approach**

(Table informed by Bryman and Bell, 2007, Myers, 2009)

There are clearly some limitations to this approach, which are discussed in section 4.3.4, however, a degree of 'within-method triangulation' (Denzin, 1970) was employed in order to construct as robust an account as possible. In order to build up a picture of how leadership is enacted and perceived within each HEI we interviewed a range of informants from different levels and parts of the organisation. Further support was obtained where possible from institutional documentation such as strategic plans, mission statements, and learning and development frameworks, and findings and conclusions were verified where possible with key institutional actors<sup>33</sup>, and representatives of the LFHE and partners organisations, as will be discussed in due course.

A final way in which findings were checked for accuracy and meaningfulness was through reference to the research team's own experiences of working in HE. Professor Gosling was able to draw on extensive experience at mid-level academic management/leadership within two research-led UK universities as well as extensive experience of collaborating with other HEIs internationally; Dr Petrov brought experience of working in and researching HE in the former Soviet Union; and I had experience of working and running research projects in two UK universities, as well as a peripheral involvement with HE in France. Furthermore, we each brought diversity to the team through being at different stages in our academic careers; coming from

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<sup>33</sup> Indeed, in line with recommended good practice for case study research (see, for example, Bryman and Bell, 2007; Myers, 2009) we sought both a 'key informant' (usually the person responsible for leadership and/or organisational development) and senior level endorsement (in each case from the Vice Chancellor or equivalent).

different disciplinary backgrounds; and, to some extent, different cultural backgrounds. Together this meant that in our discussions about the research and our interpretation of findings we were able to bring to bear a range of perspectives that enabled a degree of ‘investigator’ and ‘theoretical’ triangulation (Denzin, 1970).

### **4.3.1 Research focus**

Due to the qualitative nature of the research and complexity of the topic it was not possible to collect data in all UK HEIs or to interview individuals at all levels and parts of the selected institutions. To this extent, a number of choices needed to be made as to where resources would be directed. In particular, two strategic decisions were taken as to how to focus the project:

1. We chose to limit the study to a selected group of UK universities, offering a broad cross section of location, type (research and/or teaching focus, old or new), size, disciplinary mix and ranking.
2. Whilst seeking inputs from a cross-section of staff we decided to focus primarily on academic leadership at the school/department level.

By treating institutions as case studies, rather than aggregating views from across the sector, we hoped to remain sensitive to contextual variations in how leadership is structured and reported. Whilst the reasons for limiting the sample of institutions are probably rather obvious further detail on the sampling strategy and manner in which organisations were approached is described later. With regard to the decision to focus specifically on the school/department level there were four main reasons (Bolden et al., 2006a, p. 11):

1. Academic schools and departments make up the very fabric of HE institutions and are critical to organisational well-being and success (Knight and Trowler, 2001, Shattock, 2003). They are the main points of delivery for core institutional activities of teaching, research and knowledge exchange.
2. The notion of collective or ‘distributed’ leadership itself implies that leadership should lie at different levels within organisation and exist throughout the organisation; therefore, when exploring processes and practices of collective leadership, it is pertinent to look at lower levels of the organisational hierarchy. Moreover, succession to the senior institutional roles of Deputy/Pro-Vice-Chancellor comes from the middle level.

3. Studies of leadership in HE mainly deal with the institutional level and are conducted from the perspective of senior institutional managers, whilst studies of leadership from the perspective of middle-level managers remain somewhat patchy (Bryman, 2007, de Boer and Goedegebuure, 2009). As for our study, middle-level leaders can be argued to be pivotal to any strategy that aims at distributing leadership.
4. By focussing on this level we hoped to avoid overlap with other LFHE-funded research projects as several others were focussing specifically at the top institutional level (e.g. Breakwell and Tytherleigh, 2008, Kennie and Woodfield, 2008, Smith et al., 2007). This is not to say that the institutional perspective was not taken into account, however, even when interviewing senior managers our concern was primarily how institutional strategies and perspectives might impact upon leadership at the school/department level.

The main focus of this research, therefore, was on the *leadership of the academic work of the university* including teaching, research and ‘third stream’ (business and community) activities. Within this, we were particularly interested in the leadership of schools/departments in terms of how it is experienced at this level and how it interacts with other parts of the organisation. Notably we were looking to explore *how strategic direction emerges and is negotiated between different actors*.

### **4.3.2 Research procedure**

The research process included four main phases as outlined below.

#### **a. Scoping and literature review**

From September 2005-January 2006 the main emphasis was on reviewing relevant literature, negotiating access to institutions and consulting with stakeholders (at the LFHE and within HEIs) to define a sharper focus for the project. During this period we also identified draft research questions and piloted the interview procedure within one university. The literature review focussed on three main sources of evidence:

1. Theory and research on ‘distributed leadership’ (mainly from the school sector);
2. Research and analysis of leadership and management roles of middle managers in universities (as structures and terminology varies between institutions we focussed particularly on Heads of Schools and Departments); and
3. Evidence on leadership and management development in HE and elsewhere.

Sources were identified through an extensive search of online bibliographic databases such as EBSCO and Business Source Premier, as well as a search of the internet via Google. A number of publications were also highlighted by partners at the LFHE and associated organisations. The key themes of this literature review are highlighted in the introduction to this chapter and summarised more fully in Bolden et al. (2006a, 2008b).

### **b. Fieldwork**

From February-September 2006 the main task was organising and conducting the fieldwork. During this period a total of 152 face-to-face interviews were conducted, all but two of which (where participants requested that only written notes be taken), were electronically recorded and transcribed in full<sup>34</sup>. A total of 12 universities were included in the study and, within each 2-3 faculties (or equivalent) were selected and 2-3 schools/departments within them. We included a range of disciplines in each university as other studies have noted not only the centrality of disciplines to academic identity, but also their impact on perception of leadership among academics (e.g. Becher and Trowler, 2001, Kekäle, 1999, Shattock, 2003). Further details on sampling are given in the next section.

The main source of data collection was semi-structured interviews with institutional actors in case-study universities. Three interview schedules were prepared for three different groups of interviewees:

1. *Senior Executive*: members of the senior university management group and university-wide services on their perceptions about leadership within the university; issues they face in selecting/appointing heads of school and department; and institutional strategies for succession planning.
2. *Middle Manager-Academics*: heads of schools and departments (HOS/HODs) on their perceptions about leadership within their units; tensions and challenges; the processes by which leadership is distributed; and their experience of leadership development and taking on a leadership role.

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<sup>34</sup> Heritage (1984, cited in Bryman and Bell, 2007, p. 489) identifies a number of benefits of recording and transcribing interviews, including helping to reduce interviewer bias in the recording of interview notes, the opportunity to revisit and scrutinise responses at a later date, and the opportunity to cite verbatim quotes. There are also some challenges, however, such as the time required for transcription and managing the volume of material produced (Bryman and Bell, 2007). These challenges were resolved in this study by contracting out the majority of transcription work and utilising software such as QSR Nvivo and MS Word to manage the electronic data files.

3. *Professional Managers and Administrators*: professional managers and senior administrators within faculties, schools and departments on their perceptions about the interface between academic and administrative leadership.

Due to variations in structures and terminology between institutions there were significant differences between the names of roles and allocation of responsibilities within each of these categories. Throughout the discussion of findings the most common titles will be utilised.

The three interview schedules covered common ground wherever possible in order to allow within method triangulation. Interviews generally lasted 45 minutes to one hour and covered the five areas outlined below with some variation depending on nature of role (see Appendix 1a for further details).

1. Leadership strategy and approach
2. Taking up a leadership role
3. Leadership development
4. Sharing leadership
5. Future trends and challenges

Interviews were arranged by representatives within the Staff Development Unit of each participating university. An informed consent form was completed by all interviewees and data collected according to a strict ethical protocol, including individual and organisational confidentiality<sup>35</sup> (see Appendix 1b).

The interview schedules were piloted between December 2005 and February 2006. At the pilot stage of the project interviews were held with 10 leaders and managers at different levels within one university. The pilot study served to define a clearer research focus, elicit relevant themes and issues, to refine research questions and to enable the research team to develop a consistent approach. It was also useful in getting a better idea of the most pressing current concerns regarding leadership and management in an HE context. Broadly, themes and issues raised during the pilot interviews matched those identified during the literature review and project scoping and so only minor changes

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<sup>35</sup> One of the main challenges of qualitative interviewing is to ensure that the interviewee feels able to give open and honest responses. Within the current study this was facilitated both through the use of signed consent forms (informing them of the purpose of the study and the manner in which data would be stored and used), as well as ensuring that the principles of good interview practice were followed (see, for example, Bryman and Bell, 2007; Myers, 2009). These included interviewing people in a quiet and private location (usually their own office), building a degree of rapport and reciprocity between the interviewer and interviewee, and ensuring a degree of consistency between interviewers.

were required to the interview content and process. In the light of this a decision was made to retain the pilot institution within the main body of research findings.

Additional triangulation and verification of interview findings was gathered through two focus groups<sup>36</sup>: the first with 10 representatives from 10 universities before data collection and the second with six representatives from six universities after data collection. Within universities relevant documents (including university structures, strategic plans, HR policies, and leadership and staff development resources) were also collected and analysed.

### **c. Initial data analysis and interpretation**

From September-November 2006 the primary activity was initial data analysis and interpretation. At first this was focussed on producing summary reports for each of the case institutions, based on inductive thematic analysis of interview transcripts (Boyatzis, 1998), from which we identified key findings and implications for an interim feedback report for the LFHE (Bolden et al., 2006a). These two sets of reports provided a framework for subsequent analysis of the full data set and production of the final report.

As indicated earlier, the interview schedule comprised five main sets of questions - these themes were used to categorise and organise findings for the final report and as a basis for coding responses from individual interview transcripts.

All except two of the 152 interviews were fully transcribed (producing 1266 pages of transcripts (Times Roman 12pt, single space A4) and 711,829 words of text) and the research staff (Georgy and I) divided them between us on a roughly 50:50 basis for coding and analysis. Initially this was done on an institution by institution basis and used to produce the institutional reports, which were then sent to the VC/Principal and leadership/staff development manager to be verified for accuracy<sup>37</sup> (see Appendix 1c for an anonymous sample report). In only two instances (out of 12) were objections raised about the content of the institutional report, in each case by the VC/Principal, with concerns about the factual accuracy of certain points and the overall image portrayed. In each of these instances we were reassured by our contacts in the leadership/staff

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<sup>36</sup> See Bryman and Bell, 2007, Chapter 19, for a discussion of this approach.

<sup>37</sup> Please note that the production of institutional reports was only a first stage in the analysis process and used principally as a mechanism for maintaining reciprocity with research participants, as well as verifying the factual accuracy of our findings on organisational structures and processes. Problems of respondent confidentiality and the potential skewing of findings to meet the expectations/perceptions of senior institutional actors were resolved through a further, more detailed, series of analyses of the full corpus of interview transcripts.



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development units that the impression conveyed in our report matched their own experience of the range of views within the organisation but may not reflect the message that senior management wished to promote. In each case an agreement was finally reached through a mixture of minor revisions (to wording and facts rather than the overall message) and, in one case, a further interview was conducted with the VC who had been unavailable at the time of the study.

Although the production and approval of institutional reports was a time consuming and occasionally politically sensitive exercise it proved incredibly useful in terms of working through and making sense of the large volume of data generated through the interview transcripts, as well as checking our own interpretations with other people within institutions. A similar experience came from production of the interim report. Whilst the analysis was conducted before the completion of all interviews it gave a good opportunity to work through and begin to process and order findings and interpretations. It also gave us, as researchers, the opportunity to reflect on our own experiences of having conducted quite such a large number of interviews in so many universities and to identify the main issues that seem to be arising from them.

Following these two sets of activity, yet prior to final analysis and preparation of the final report, a conceptual framework was developed to link the presentation of research findings to the theoretical and practical ideas informing the research. This framework is presented in Appendix 1d and is described in further detail in Bolden et al. (2008c).

### **d. Further analysis, reporting and dissemination**

The remainder of the project, November 2006-March 2007, was dedicated to the preparation of the final report and sharing findings with various audiences<sup>38</sup>.

As indicated previously, the interview structure was used as a template for the presentation and discussion of findings for the final report. The report writing process was undertaken by Georgy Petrov and I, with critical comments and feedback by Jonathan Gosling. Chapters/themes were divided between us such that I took the initial lead on chapters 5, 7 and 8 (leadership strategies and approaches, sharing leadership and future trends and challenges) and Georgy led on chapters 6 and 9 (taking up a leadership role, and leadership development). I also took overall editorial control and wrote the predominant part of the introduction, discussion, conclusion and recommendations (with the support of my colleagues).

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<sup>38</sup> In the end, due to delays in printing and reviewing, the report was not finally published by the LFHE until February 2008.



The report was initially written in prose format, with illustrative quotes extracted from transcripts either manually (where the authors could recall particular comments from an interview) or via searching for key terms in Nvivo and Microsoft Word<sup>39</sup>. During the period in which the final report was being developed we took a number of opportunities to present findings to different audiences in order to receive feedback and further reflections. The main forums for sharing findings during this period are outlined in Appendix 1e (items 1-8).

Each of these forums gave useful insights that helped to inform and shape how we presented and framed findings. In particular, the workshop with representatives from the participating institutions (item 4) indicated an agreement with the accuracy of what we had found, along with a desire for practical recommendations on what to do about it. The ICSL conference at Cranfield (item 7) gave the opportunity to discuss findings with other academics who were involved with the CEL research into leadership in FE and found a similar tension between individual and collective accounts of distributed leadership (see, for example, Collinson and Collinson, 2006, 2009).

Other informative feedback came a little later at conferences (items 9-11) showcasing the overall LFHE research outputs. Such events provided an important focus for the preparation and presentation of ideas and led to the publication of a number of journal articles and an edited special issue of the journal *Leadership* (see Bolden et al., 2009d).

### 4.3.3 Sampling and gaining access

Institutions for our study were selected to give a breadth of HE provision in the UK on a number of criteria, including:

1. geographic location (spread across the UK);
2. duration of university status (pre-1992 and post-1992)<sup>40</sup>;
3. type of campus (urban, green, multi-campus, etc.);
4. institutional mission (Russell Group, 1994 Group, Million +, etc.)<sup>41</sup>;
5. disciplinary mix (academic subjects and other specialisms).

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<sup>39</sup> Although interviews were not systematically coded using Nvivo software, it was used as a system for managing and sorting interview extracts for the final report and subsequent articles and presentations. Alongside this, transcripts were combined into a single MS Word document for searching, and written notes made on printed transcripts.

<sup>40</sup> In 1992 polytechnics were released from the control of Local Education Authorities (LEAs) to acquire university status. These institutions tended to have a more vocational orientation than traditional universities and were more focussed on teaching and applied, rather than theoretical, research.

<sup>41</sup> Each of these bodies represents the interests of a group of universities with a broadly similar mission. Russell group universities are generally traditional institutions with a strong research focus; 1994 group universities are generally smaller, research-focussed institutions; and Million + represents the interests of many post-1992 universities with a predominantly teaching focus.

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Invitation letters, along with the project synopsis, were sent to VCs/Principals of 20 HEIs, whilst the interviewees in the pilot university were contacted directly either by e-mail or phone (following agreement by the VC). The number of letters sent was deliberately larger than the intended final sample size because we expected that some institutions would refuse to take part in the study or would already be involved in other LFHE-funded research projects and would be unable to commit further resource. Our initial intention was to have a sample of 8 to 10 universities as outlined in our proposal to the LFHE, but the interest in the study was higher than anticipated and we ended up with a sample of 12 institutions including the pilot<sup>42</sup>.

Sample institutions were spread across all regions of the UK, except Northern Ireland where we were unable to secure any participants. In terms of the type of the institutions chosen, nine out of 12 were pre-1992 universities with an extensive research focus. Although post-1992 universities (predominantly ex-polytechnics) were under-represented, they were representative of a range of contexts: one in a metropolitan centre, one green campus, and one in an industrialised region of the UK.

From 10-17 interviews were conducted within each institution. In each university a member of university staff was identified by the VC/Principal as a contact person (usually Head of Staff or Organisational/Management Development) to act as a conduit between the research team and institutions and to be responsible for identifying potential interviewees and for setting up interviews in liaison with the research team. The contact person from each location was invited to a workshop in London in February 2006 to explore aspects of leadership in HE and to inform the overall direction of research. Representatives from 10 of the 12 institutions attended and the relationships established formed a strong and valuable basis for subsequent activity. They were advised to select participants to give a broad range of roles, responsibilities and perspectives on leadership. Table 4.3 gives the proportions of interviewees by job role and level. Of the total sample, only 52 interviewees were female (34%) which, whilst low, is fairly typical of the gender mix within these roles.

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<sup>42</sup> Of those that did not participate five did not reply, three refused on the grounds of it being inconvenient due to other research and consultations at the same time, and one agreed to take part but was declined by us as we had already reached our threshold number of institutions.

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Job Role/Level	Number	Percent
Senior Executive/Central Administration	61	40.1
Vice Chancellor (VC)/Principal	12	7.9
Deputy Vice Chancellor (DVC)/Pro Vice Chancellor (PVC)	17	11.2
Registrar/Senior Exec Officer	9	5.9
Director of Human Resources (HR)	12	7.9
Director of Other Professional Service	3	2.0
Head of Staff Development	8	5.3
Faculty/Large School	43	28.3
Dean of Faculty/School	28	18.4
Faculty/School Manager/Senior Administrator	15	9.9
School/Department	48	31.6
Head of Department (HOD)/Research Centre	41	27.0
School/Department Administrator	7	4.6
<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>152</b>	<b>100.0</b>

**Table 4.3: Sample of interviewees by role and level**

### 4.3.4 Limitations and potential bias

There are a number limitations and potential biases that need to be considered when interpreting the findings from this study although, as indicated below attempts have been made to ameliorate these where possible

A first limitation of the chosen approach is that all interviews were conducted with holders of formal academic or administrative management posts. In effect, therefore, there is a layer of leadership that has not been engaged with - that which occurs below formal leadership at the School/departmental level. However, as most academic leaders will have spent time working at this level, and in the case of rotating headships may expect to return to it, we have gathered considerable material relevant to this.

Another limitation is the fact that the research is based almost entirely on self-report data. As such, the accounts may not correspond with the perceptions of other actors and may not be an accurate depiction of what interviewees actually do due to intentional or unintentional distortion in what is reported. This is a potentially problematic issue and one that will be returned to in the results and discussion sections where consideration is given to the role of discourse in constructing narratives of leadership. It is also addressed in part, however, through triangulation between interviews and reference to

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the researchers' own experiences and observations of leadership in HE as outlined below.

As indicated above, despite our primary focus on interview data, some triangulation was possible. Through conducting multiple interviews within each institution we were able to obtain some within-case triangulation of responses. Where interviewees gave similar responses to particular questions we could regard this information as more robust than where there were differences. As will be clear within the results section, areas of difference were explored as offering potential insights into contested and variable perceptions of leadership. Additional within-case triangulation was possible through reference to documentary sources (such as strategic plans, websites, learning and development frameworks) and the ability to work alongside a trusted insider, in terms of our institutional representatives, was also a great help in getting to know institutions and of checking the accuracy of our understanding of the data<sup>43</sup>. Furthermore, the numerous site visits comprising on average 2-3 days at each institution (often with more than one researcher present) enabled us to immerse ourselves in a small way within each university, thereby adding an observational aspect to the research. Finally, as members of the academic community ourselves, we were able to draw on our own experiences and knowledge of the HE sector, in a range of universities, when interpreting and appreciating the intricacies of the findings<sup>44</sup>.

Thirdly, there were some peculiarities of the institutions studied (see previous section). Despite attempts to gain a balanced sample, our study population was strongly weighted towards research intensive 'old' universities, comprising five Russell Group universities, four 1994-Group universities and only three post-1992 universities. This is likely to mean that there is a stronger emphasis on scholarly research activities across our sample than would be expected across the sector as a whole. Furthermore, the sample was biased towards English universities, with only one from Scotland, one from Wales and none from Northern Ireland. This means that the policy context across our institutions is most strongly influenced by English bodies such as HEFCE and the government department for HE<sup>45</sup> and does not allow for cross-nation comparisons.

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<sup>43</sup> In many cases these individuals acted as 'key informants' due to their knowledge of the organisation and the individuals within in it (see, for example, Bryman and Bell, 2007, p. 453; Myers, 2009, p. 144). Their inside knowledge of leadership and organisational development made them particularly well suited to selecting an appropriate cross-section of respondents for the research as well as verifying the accuracy of our findings and interpretations in relation to organisational systems and processes..

<sup>44</sup> These last two points greatly enhanced our capacity to engage in a personally reflexive manner with the findings (Alvesson and Sköldbberg, 2000).

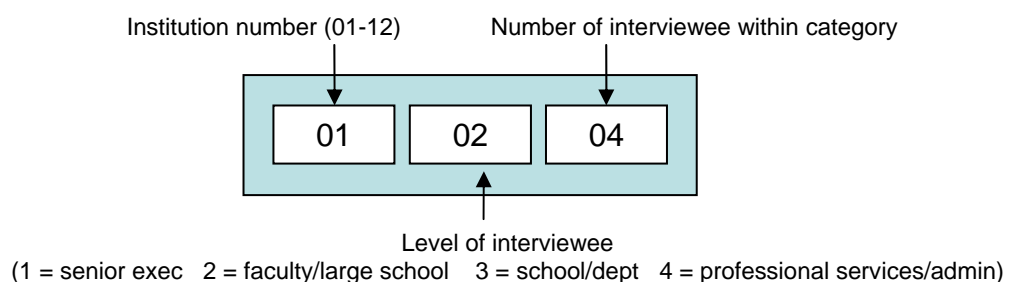
<sup>45</sup> DfES at the time of our study, but subsequently DIUS and now BIS.

Finally, there are a number of possible distortions from the research process itself, including the fact that the researchers were all male, research-active academics, representatives of the University of Exeter, assisted by members of the staff development functions within participating institutions (with endorsement by the VC), and funded by the LFHE. The impact of such issues on the data collection and analysis process are hard to predict yet may well have had an influence on the degree to which we were able to challenge dominant masculine and managerial discourses of leadership (Ford, 2006). We endeavoured to minimise these risks through incorporating a degree of reciprocity (as advocated by Bell and Bryman, 2007) in which we made an explicit commitment to disseminate research findings to participants and to engage with institutional representatives in verifying our interpretations.

### ***4.4 Research findings***

When conducting and writing up the research, findings were initially divided into five main themes as explored within the interviews. Within this section I will focus on those relating to ‘leadership strategies and approaches’, ‘taking up a leadership role’ and ‘sharing leadership’ as these offer the greatest insights into the notion of distributed leadership. Findings on ‘leadership development’ and ‘future trends and challenges’ can be found in Bolden et al. (2008b).

Where appropriate, quotations are given to illustrate the argument. In each case, the role of the interviewee is given, along with the type of institution (pre or post-1992 university), and an interview identifier code constructed as illustrated in Figure 4.1.



**Figure 4.1: Respondent codes**

#### **4.4.1 Leadership Strategies and Approaches**

The questions on leadership strategies and approaches explored how the institution as a whole was configured in relation to leadership and management roles responsibilities and priorities. Findings were grouped into five sub-headings as follows: (1) changing university structures and systems; (2) institutional approaches to leadership; (3)

institutional roles, processes and systems; (4) formal and informal networks; and (5) leadership of professional and support services. A brief summary of findings is given in section 4.4.1f.

### **a. Changing university structures and systems**

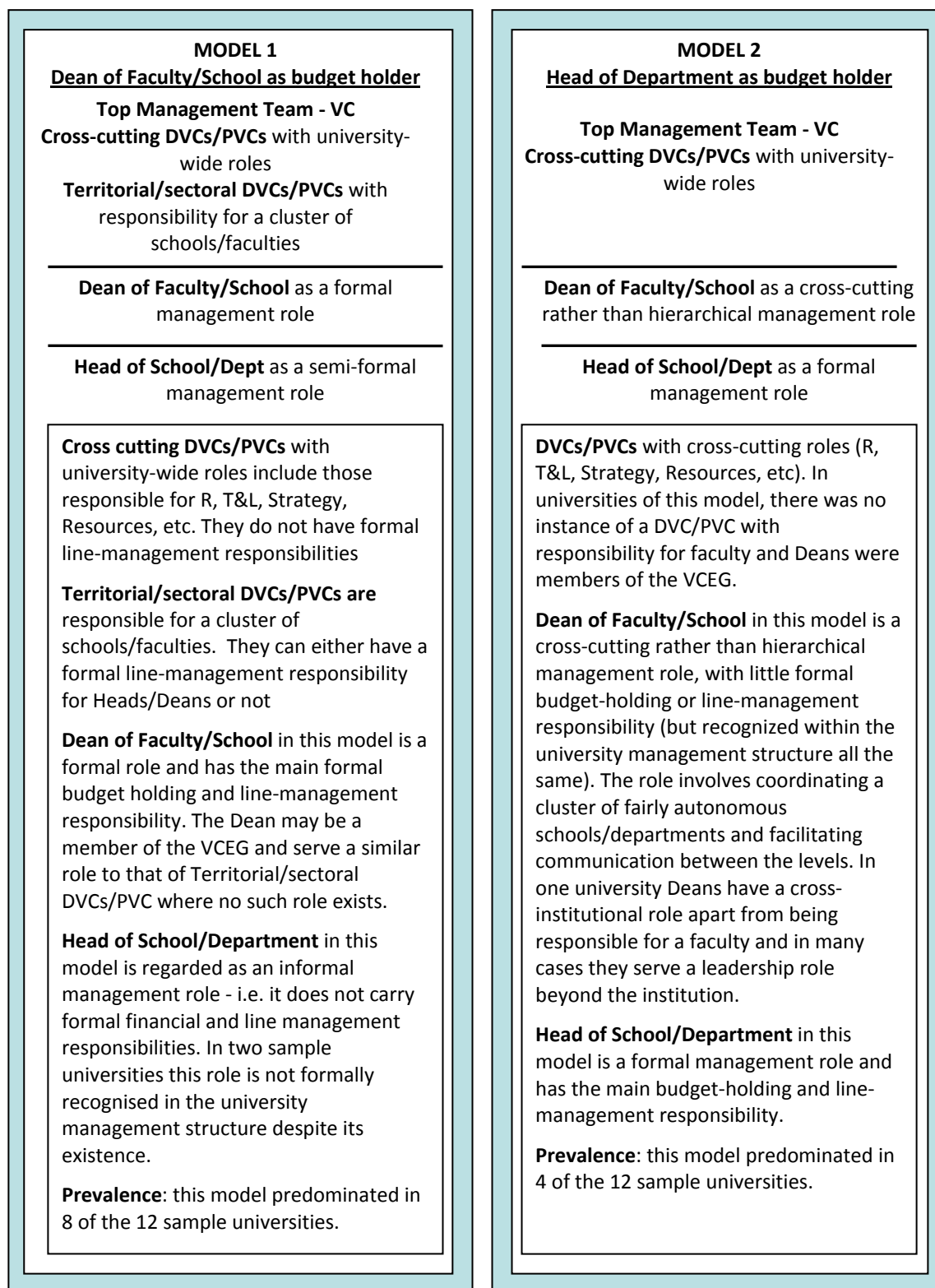
Overall, findings point towards significant change within the HE sector as a whole. All universities in our sample had undergone substantial restructuring within the last five years, including the rationalisation of organisational structures including faculties, schools and departments; committees; professional and support services and the senior executive group. In most cases, this had been conducted with the intent of flattening organisational hierarchies and devolving greater autonomy to academic units. These trends had been accompanied by the expansion, merging, and occasionally closure, of schools/departments to create larger 'business units' reporting directly to senior university management.

Despite variations in the structures and their names between the HEIs in our sample we generally identified three levels within each. The first was the institutional level represented by the Senior Executive Team (often referred to as the Vice-Chancellor's Executive Group (VCEG)) as well as 'central' functions offering university-wide services (e.g. HR, finance and estates), the second a cluster of disciplines (i.e. faculty or large school), and the third a single or limited group of disciplines (i.e. department or small school)<sup>46</sup>. In three of the sample universities there was no formal faculty-level although in each case schools were large and multidisciplinary and HOSs in effect acted like Deans of Faculty managing large units with clear internal sub-divisions.

Within our sample broadly two primary models of organisation could be identified, as illustrated in Figure 4.2.

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<sup>46</sup> Within this document 'executive', 'top' or 'central' university relates to the first level, 'faculty/school' to the second and 'school/department' to the third. Whilst there may well be sub-divisions below the third level (e.g. subject and research groups) these tend to be more fluid and are rarely recognised as formal reporting channels within the wider university structure.



**Figure 4.2: University structures**

In Model 1, identified in 8 of the 12 HEIs, financial and line-management responsibility was devolved to the second level of the hierarchy (i.e. faculty or large school). Whilst there may be some variations across the institution as to the involvement of schools/departments below this level in budgetary and resourcing matters, formal accountability lay primarily at the second level, with occasional exceptions for



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particularly large or economically significant units such as medical and/or business schools.

In Model 2, identified in 4 of the 12 HEIs, financial and line-management responsibility was devolved to the third level (i.e. school or department). Within this model, the Dean of Faculty/School served a primarily connecting role of facilitating, coordinating and communicating between disciplines and levels rather than a vertical line-management function. Within this model, the Dean's power is largely vested in interpersonal relationships and their representation on the VCEG rather than via formal control of resources.

Within each of the universities visited there were some variations within these models; with different approaches sometimes being taken for different parts of the university. Thus, for example, in one new (post-92) university there were some Deans of Faculty who served a cross-cutting university-wide role as well as being responsible for their group of schools/departments, whilst others did not. In other universities DVCs/PVCs held both territorial and cross-cutting responsibilities<sup>47</sup>, with not all faculties/schools being overseen/supported by someone at this level.

Broadly, however, the findings point towards a tendency within all institutions to devolve financial and staff management responsibility down the line and to encourage both 'vertical' and 'horizontal' management and leadership. Although the precise reasoning for such changes differed between institutions, it generally appeared to be largely driven by external factors such as changing funding mechanisms (from central government, research councils and students); external regulation, legislation and assessments of organisational performance (including teaching, research, employer engagement, etc.); increasing competition (through the internationalisation of HE and greater mobility within the academic community); and the merging and/or downsizing of separate institutions. Together these factors point towards greater marketisation of the sector and the requirement to become more commercially responsive and politically sensitive, as illustrated in the following quote.

“I tell everyone that they're marketers now. Everything they say and do represents this institution and can have an impact on our marketing. For example, who is going to do school visits? Who is going to do outreach work?”

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<sup>47</sup> Holders of 'territorial' roles have responsibility for particular schools/faculties, whilst 'cross cutting' roles have responsibility for issues across the university, such as teaching & learning, research, internationalisation and employer engagement.



You pick those people out who have political skills and that's how they begin to get onto the management ladder.” (PVC, post-1992 university, 030101)

Within this context, effective leadership is seen as a strategic and operational priority. Talk of ‘leadership’, as opposed to ‘management’ and/or ‘administration’, however, appears to have been a relatively recent trend within HE and the degree to which it was mentioned varied between institutions. Whilst some universities used the notion of ‘leadership’ to encourage active engagement with strategic and operational decision-making (without necessarily implying an administrative and/or managerial load) others felt more comfortable with the concepts of ‘management’ and/or ‘administration’ as, particularly the latter, was already perceived to be part of the agreed academic workload. To this extent, from the evidence gathered within this study, ‘leadership’ appears to carry a powerful rhetorical function that may help in reframing traditional conceptions of academic work and/or may be perceived as a managerial device to enhance commitment to institutional aims. Either way, the language used seems to be an important aspect of how the need for change is communicated within universities, as indicated in the following quote from a head of department which highlights the need to adapt one’s language according to the audience.

“There’s a certain amelioration between the kinds of attitudes expressed by central management and a general perception across the university that there’s a clash between a business culture and an academic culture and I think heads of department are caught in the midst of that. There's a certain amount of translation again in terms of perception as well as language. You try to convert some of the statements into something a bit more palatable for the perhaps more old school academics. A classic example is referring to the students as customers and all that kind of thing. It doesn’t go down well in departments but it’s clearly the way that people in the centre perceive it. That same sort of idea will roll down to a number of different areas as well. I don’t think there's necessarily anything wrong with it but it’s not the language you wish to use with colleagues.” (HOD, pre-1992 University, 070305)

The current study appears to have been conducted during a period of intense change in UK HE, where institutions have been forced to become more commercially aware and responsive to their markets. It is unclear whether or not this is an unprecedented period of change for the sector and/or whether the rate of change is now slowing. However, within most of the institutions visited there was a sense of having completed the most

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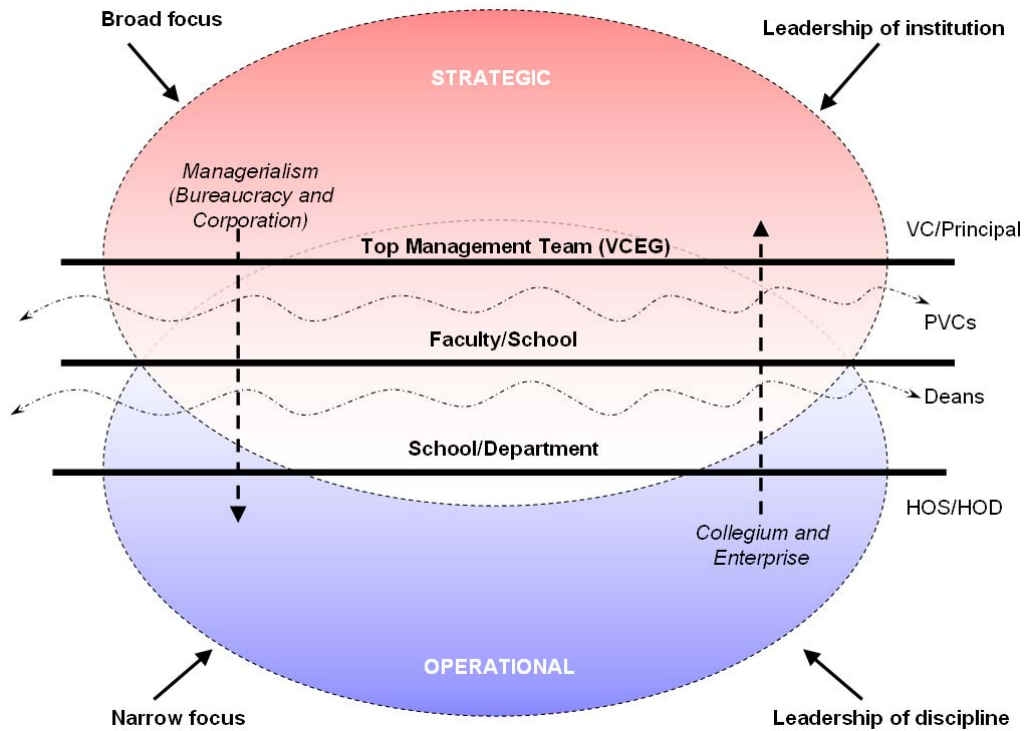
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substantial structural changes and a need to now consolidate the new structures. Indeed leaders, particularly at the school/department level, appeared weary of change and were looking for a period of greater stability although many were unsure of whether this would occur.

### **b. Institutional approaches to leadership**

The changes highlighted above point to an increasing tendency to devolve operational leadership to academic units. Indeed, within all of the universities studied, there was a sense that the management and leadership of the discipline (i.e. what should be taught and researched) was best placed in the hands of those with the subject expertise. Within this changing context, the role of the VCEG was increasingly considered to be one of strategic oversight – providing broad strategic vision and objectives within which academic schools and disciplines can agree on their own goals and priorities. Thus, crudely, the role of the VCEG was seen as ensuring leadership of the ‘institution’ whilst that of academic leaders was leadership of the ‘discipline’. PVCs and other cross-cutting roles were primarily in place to ensure an alignment and integration of institutional and disciplinary leadership (see Figure 4.3 for an illustration).

In achieving these aims there was considerable variation between and within institutions as to the preferred leadership approach. What was clear, however, is that some form of balance between ‘top-down’ and ‘bottom-up’ leadership is required. Whilst ideally these should be complementary processes, supporting and reinforcing one another, in reality a tension was often experienced between these approaches by our interviewees (see section 4.4.2d).



**Figure 4.3: Leadership roles and approaches in higher education**

A further important dimension recognised yet difficult to achieve in practice was ‘horizontal’ (or ‘lateral’) leadership in terms of ensuring coordination, communication and collaboration between different parts of the institution. In most institutions there was at least some reference to the danger of ‘silos’ forming that may inhibit effective cross-institutional initiatives and the need for cross-cutting roles to facilitate engagement across departments, schools and faculties, as indicated below.

“I think we’re beginning to see that the way to counter that silo mentality and competitiveness is to have project managers and I think you see a lot more of that in universities. That generates another kind of leader. It’s not a hierarchical leadership role; they have a kind of cross cutting role across the departments and you’re investing project manager skills in that individual in a way that that leadership role will appear and then disappear.” (DVC, post-1992 university, 050101)

In universities with a Model 1 structure, as described in Figure 4.2, hierarchical roles include VC/Principal and Dean of Faculty/School, whilst DVC/PVCs and HOS/HODs tend to be more concerned with horizontal influence. In Model 2, the VC/Principal and HOS/HOD are key hierarchical roles, whilst DVC/PVCs and Deans of Faculty/School fulfil a largely horizontal leadership role. Whilst there are clearly differences between

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each of the institutions studied as to how leadership and management roles are structured, what is clear is that as individuals move through the organisation they are faced with different priorities, associations and expectations. Of particular interest, in terms of the nature of implications for leadership practice and development, is the requirement for post-holders to alternate between hierarchical (vertical) and horizontal (lateral) leadership roles as they progress through the organisation.

In the majority of universities we visited, organisational strategies and policies tended to originate from the most senior level, whilst the operationalisation of these was devolved to faculties, schools or departments. The majority of interviewees agreed that a degree of top-down leadership and direction was inevitable given the current competitive context of HE, but that the importance of collegial and bottom-up leadership should not be underestimated. Without this dimension of engagement it would be both impossible to manage the complexity of university work or to gain the commitment of professional academics, as indicated by the following elected HOS.

“I feel that a lot of my authority and capacity to lead arises out of the fact that my colleagues chose me to do it and did not want to do it themselves, which is both a negative and positive point. And ultimately, there is actually a way of doing things collegially which gives you great powers of leadership, therefore, I have been always resistant to adopt a managerial role like ‘I am a HOS and the VC made me run the school’, because I think it would be much harder to run the school if I was like that. I don’t have to do it, but it’s lurking in their minds that they gave me the job and I am getting on with it and they don’t want to do it. If we were in a different structure, where clearly there was a top-down thing and/or my job was a managerial one for life and I was just their head, I actually think that I would be in a weaker leadership position, not a stronger one... I think although I might have some of the managerial style, but I am a part of the collegial culture.” (HOS, pre-1992 university, 010203)

In institutions where a predominantly top-down approach to leadership dominated (Model 1 in Figure 4.2), senior university managers were often perceived, at the school/department level, to be micro-managing and interfering unnecessarily in academic affairs. In these institutions middle-level academic managers often expressed a desire for greater devolution of decisions on academic matters.

By contrast, interviewees in universities with highly devolved decision-making structures (Model 2 in Figure 4.2) frequently expressed a desire for stronger direction

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and greater clarity of organisational priorities (usually from the VC/Principal) to help guide their activities. In these instances, manager-academics at the lower levels often felt frustrated by what they saw as indecisiveness or evasiveness from the VCEG and indicated a need for greater support and recognition of their contribution to the organisation.

In most institutions the need to align and connect top-down and bottom-up leadership appeared to arise from an intent to become more 'corporate' (in terms of achieving an efficient business model) and/or 'entrepreneurial' (in terms of innovation in products and services) and in both pre and post-1992 universities most VCs/Principals interviewed saw themselves as the 'CEO' – accountable to the University Council/Board for running a financially sustainable organisation, as well as acting as a figurehead and visionary for the university, as illustrated below.

“I am the CEO and the buck stops here. I have to make sure decisions get made in the university. To make sure the processes are in place in a way that would involve appropriate measures but on the other hand, increasingly for VCs in universities is an external role not just serving government committees but the voice of the university with business, commerce, the region or whatever. Most people really want the VC to be the representative of the institution; it's very time-consuming but very important. The other thing that the VC has to do is to try to be the visionary for the institution, often it is copying colleagues or stealing views from other people.” (VC, pre-1992 university, 080105)

### c. Institutional roles, systems and processes

During interviews, respondents were asked to describe their roles and how they saw leadership occurring within the institution. They were also invited to identify the key leadership roles and processes within the organisation.

It has already been remarked that the VC/Principal generally saw him/herself as the CEO and ultimately where 'the buck stops'. S/he operated, however, within a complex structure, needing to work effectively with a wide range of groups and individuals and reporting to a variety of stakeholders including the University Council.

In universities with a somewhat top-down approach to decision-making, leadership was said to be embodied very much in and around the office of the VC/Principal. In a number of universities, other senior managers, such as the DVC, Registrar, Director of

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Finance and/or Director of Strategic Planning, were also seen as providing substantial strategic leadership and direction.

When responsibilities were split between multiple roles (e.g. VC and DVC, Dean and Deputy Dean, and Head and Deputy Head) this was often done on the basis of external (acting as a figurehead and liaising with key stakeholders outside the institution) and internal focus (dealing with ‘hands on’ strategy and operations within the institution). The decision as to who took on which responsibilities largely arose out of one-to-one negotiation and a response to personal preferences (although in most cases the more senior person took on the external-facing role).

There were also many instances where there was a lack of clarity over the division of roles and plenty of opportunity for confusion and competition. This situation tended to be most strongly felt for cross-cutting roles at the university, faculty or school level. Thus, for example, there was some confusion over the relative roles and responsibilities of the PVC of Research (university-level), Dean of Research (faculty-level) and Head of Research (school-level). Role ambiguity was particularly keenly experienced in universities with a devolved resource management structure (Model 2 in Figure 4.2) in which case faculty and university level roles (especially PVC/Dean) held significantly less budgetary and line-management responsibility than Heads of School/Department. In this case, although nominally lines of accountability ran between the Head and VC via the PVC/Dean there was ample opportunity to bypass the formal channels and, in effect, cut the PVC/Dean out of the loop.

From a command and control perspective whilst it might seem advisable to place more direct power in the hands of the PVC/Dean a number of universities expressed benefits from having a less formal chain of command. In these instances, significant benefits accrued from having someone at the PVC/Dean level who could act as an impartial advisor, arbitrator or advocate. By virtue of their need to influence through more informal means, such roles acted as valuable facilitators, both for encouraging inter-disciplinary dialogue and activity and for representing the needs of the schools to the central university and vice-versa, as indicated in the following quote from a Dean in a Model 2 university.

“[HODs] are strongly autonomous because they’re the budget holders and they have to make the case. What I can do is facilitate the process when it comes to its progression through the university machine. Eventually it will come up to a Senior Management Group and more likely than not I’ll be on it... The HODs

will be invited to come and make their case. They then leave and the first thing that happens is the chair of that committee asks what the [Dean] of the faculty thinks. So if they've discussed it with me and convinced me that the case is strong then they're going to get a much smoother ride at that sort of level than if they come in cold and haven't primed me with the right information to help them with their case. I champion their cause but at the same time, because I have an overview of the whole faculty, I can make more of a fair judgement. The HODs job is to do the best for their department but of course across the faculty and the university there has to be more balance than that because if department 'x' is always the one that gets it then that's going to have a detrimental effect on other areas. There should be a check and balance and you're almost a collective memory and you have to carefully consider the balance." (Non-budget holding Dean of Faculty, pre-1992 University, 080202)

As this quote indicates, cross-cutting roles such as this can facilitate a sense of coherence across larger, multi-dimensional units – articulating a sense of common direction and acting as a conduit to the senior executive group. Rather than diminishing their influence, the lack of direct line management/budgetary responsibility may enhance their credibility in the eyes of their academic colleagues, enabling them act as a spokesperson/representative for senior management without appearing 'managerialist'.

In terms of the key decision-making bodies within universities, as a rule, the main decision-making body for the institution as a whole was the VCEG comprising, amongst others the VC/Principal, DVC, PVCs and/or Deans of Faculty, Registrar and Director of Finance. Similar groups were present at the faculty and school level which, likewise, had a significant strategic remit within universities with a devolved structure. In all cases these groups comprised a mix of academic and professional service staff and were concerned with the practical delivery of services and achievement of objectives. These groups highlight the blurring of the distinction between academic and administrative leadership and the merging of managerial and academic priorities.

"I think at the senior level [academic-administrative boundaries have] always been blurred... One of the good things about universities is when you get round the senior management table you have PVCs who are very senior academics and very good at their jobs and you get people like me who have no academic pedigree and have come up entirely through the administrative track. When we discuss issues, and I'm sure it's the same in most places, there's not a great deal



of differentiation. The academics know so much about how the university is run, having been deans and PVCs, in terms of its management and things. Equally we've been so immersed in running the academic side of the institution to a degree that when we talk we don't make allowances. If I want to talk about something in the academic area, I'll get listened to just as much as the academic, and vice versa. The blurring does become very considerable at that level, and in my experience that has been the case for a long time." (Registrar, pre-1992 university, 020101)

In addition to the VCEG there was invariably an extended Senior Management Group (SMG), comprising members of the VCEG, all other academic and professional services Heads, and a range of other stakeholder representatives (including student representatives). Such groups were relatively large as decision-making bodies (usually 12 or more members) but were regarded as essential forums for communication and debate. In addition to this, there were a number of influential committees focused on particular aspects of university management/administration. Of these, those concerned with resource allocation and strategic planning were reported to be particularly influential, and frequently chaired by members of the VCEG, with a select membership drawn from senior roles across the university. To this extent, whilst some may still carry the title of 'committee' most of the key decision-making groups within institutions can now be considered as principally executive rather than collegial. The following two quotes, from a Registrar and VC/Principal respectively, express why this is considered necessary.

"You know, collegiality as an old organisational construct is dead now really. We all want to be collegial and work in a collegial way, but you can't run a £[XXX] million corporation in a very fast changing world in a collegial way. So, we have to be managerial, but hopefully, in a way that takes people along with us. It's not about telling people what to do, but you do talk to people and then you form a view – this is what we are going to do." (Registrar, pre-1992 university, 010103)

"[Collegiality] is important in terms of the culture but I think it's probably problematic in terms of management because it's fine when you're spending money but it's useless when you're trying to save money. A classic example is what has happened in [University Y]. The VC and his team there suddenly announced that they were going to close [x department]. It was then halted in its



tracks by the senate who then referred it to the board of governors who then asked for a review. That may be wonderful as a collegial example, but if you've already worked out that that's the only choice you've got then where does that leave the management? It's a hopeless way of managing anything. I feel very sorry for the senior management team down there." (VC, post-1992 university, 040102)

Indeed, the overall evidence from our interviews was that despite the continued symbolic significance of committees within a 'collegial' approach to leadership and management within universities, their principal role has now become one of consultation, communication and occasionally ratification of decisions, rather than as forums for strategic decision making in their own right. Within all universities in our study, there had been substantial streamlining of committee structures in recent years, both to free up the time spent by academics in largely unproductive meetings, and to speed up and professionalise decision making across the institution. The following quote from a HOS sums up conceptions across many institutions.

"I think [the committees are] there as a pseudo-consultation exercise so people think they're involved in the decision-making but decisions go round and round. I've only been here six months but in that time the school learning and teaching committee hasn't made a single decision. Stuff gets passed up and passed down, so I'll be in one group and they'll say 'this has to go to there' or I'll be somewhere else and they'll say 'we can't make that decision, it has to go up there'." (HOS, post-1992 University, 030302)

To replace committees schools and faculties are developing their own management teams to mirror those at a more senior level. These are joint academic-administrative groups that report back to the central university as well as coordinating and monitoring activities within their own areas, with membership and comprise, amongst others, the HOS, Deputy HOS, School Manager and School Finance Manager. Where budgets have been devolved to schools they can have quite a large degree of discretion in their approach and how they invest any surplus. In terms of aligning school/department direction with university strategy, the annual strategic planning cycle remains the key process within most universities, which gives academic units the opportunity to devise a business plan and set out their goals and priorities within the wider remit of the university strategy within our study. Frequently the annual strategic review was cited as the only time where schools/departments formally liaised with the central university

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about planned initiatives and the only opportunity for the university as a whole to ensure an integrated and coherent approach across the varying units.

A further factor relating to the manner in which roles are structured is the number of direct reports to different managers. In organisations with a highly devolved structure there may well be large numbers of people reporting to the same person thus putting great pressure on their time and availability. On the other hand, putting in place reporting structures that did not meet the actual needs of the principal actors was regarded as counter-productive and occasionally led to decisions being taken via the 'backdoor' (e.g. the HOS bypassing the PVC if they did not have executive authority). In most cases, interviewees discussed the need to identify the way in which decisions were actually made within the university, locating the key decision-makers rather than depending on the formal channels as represented in organisational charts.

### d. Formal and informal networks

Within universities, like most large organisations, great emphasis is placed on formal mechanisms for leadership and management. Our research also reveals, however, the importance of informal networks and relationships in accomplishing leadership.

At inter-school level, informal networks such as the HOS email group, monthly lunches, etc. were identified as important channels of communication, influence and support. Such forums offered Heads (or peer groups at other levels within the university) the potential to discuss university policies and practices; to provide support and mentoring; to 'sound out' opinions; and to learn about what was going on in other parts of the organisation. Significantly, too, such forums offered the opportunity for post holders to develop a sense of 'shared identity' as members of the university management team and, where necessary, to collectively join forces and challenge senior level decisions. Such networks appeared to be particularly valuable where members did not have a formal forum in which to meet. Similar groups were observed amongst both academic and professional/functional staff groups at varying levels within the organisation and were deemed to constitute an essential part of the social fabric of the organisation. The following two quotes, indicate how informal networking is used to complement (or potentially subvert) more formal decision-making processes.

"I use networks. If I used the formal channels I'd never get anywhere because all the formal channels are the teaching and learning committee, and the senate... they're all academics. One of the most influential groups in the university is the

planning resources group, who divert resources and make decisions. I've had things going via other people to the planning resources group and I'll just go around and lobby. I'll go round to lots of people and make sure they understand it before they see it. A paper isn't worth anything until you've been around to make sure they understand your position." (PVC, post-1992 University, 030402)

"There's also an informal grouping of the academic members of that committee and that's used for debate and consultation prior to more formal processes. I think the risk is that more decision making flows to that informal body and not so much to the other. That's not unusual in the organisation and there's a sort of cyclical nature to these structures in terms of how well they're working." (HR Director, pre-1992 University, 100101)

Within the universities visited, as executive authority was increased for HOS/HODs and/or Deans of Faculty/School there was a tendency to increase representation by all members on the Senior Management Group, thus giving them a greater ownership and awareness of senior-level decisions. In addition to formal meetings and committees, however, at several of the universities in our sample the VC and other members of the VCEG held regular informal meetings (usually lunches or coffee mornings) where they interacted with staff from across the institution. These events served as important channels for upwards communication and influence from people at lower organisational levels as well as enabling senior leaders to 'keep in touch'.

Within our study there was evidence of considerable leadership influence being exerted by individuals outside the formal university hierarchy. These were most frequently senior academics with a well established research record and the ability to attract high-quality staff, students and research funding to the institution. Whilst such people may well lead research centres, manage research budgets and/or sit on key committees, their influence appeared to be largely a consequence of their role within the wider academic, practitioner and policy community than their membership of a specific institution itself. Such people have the potential to be highly sought-after and mobile within the sector and universities may have to work hard to retain them. Losing a person in such a role may result in the departure of a significant number of other staff who are in their jobs not because of the institution per se, but because of who they are working with. In such cases, although not formally part of the university management structure their influence is felt far and wide across and beyond the institution.

### **e. Leadership of professional and support services**

The discussion so far has focused primarily on the leadership of academic work. Another essential dimension, however, is the leadership of professional and support services. A key element of the restructuring of universities in recent years has involved a revision and reframing of services, including the registry, HR, finances, hospitality, estates, IT and student affairs. Such services, whilst not directly involved in academic provision, are central components of the university infrastructure and are essential to the effective delivery of teaching, research and business/community engagement.

Within all of the universities visited there has been a trend towards the 'professionalisation' of these services to render them more commercially orientated, customer focused (both internal and external) and recognised as partners rather than subservient to academic faculty. This trend has sought to breakdown the old academic-administrative divide experienced within many institutions and to replace it with a more integrated approach.

Associated with this trend, and the devolution of greater operational and strategic authority to faculties, schools and departments, was a tendency to decentralise services such as HR. To this extent, rather than remaining within a centralised area, HR specialists were being moved out into schools so as to provide a more direct, hands-on response. Despite the risk of duplication and variation of provision this was generally perceived to enhance the quality of support through a greater emphasis on customer focus as illustrated below.

“The most popular part of the administrative service is the service which is delivered locally in the faculties - we get a lot of support for that. The Heads of Administration report to me but they work for the faculty and I've got no problem with that as a structure, indeed I think it's quite a good little understanding, that the reporting line is one way, but the working arrangements are that way. Great - that relieves the [Deans] of one of the difficulties caused by absenteeism or maternity leave or anything, I have to cover, but they have to enjoy the service and that's how it works. The downsides to it are obvious ones really. It is more expensive than either a fully devolved or fully centralized model. There is an element of duplication. There is a difficulty of taking advantage of scale of activity. There is a tendency, although I have to say I think our staff manages very well, there is a tendency towards the 'Go Native' issue, which is a very central perspective on life. I don't think that's been particularly

noticeable here. I mean if 'Go Native' means supporting the faculty then good."  
(Registrar, Pre-1992 University, 100105)

Universities within the UK still generally operate with a high ratio of academics to support staff however there is some evidence of a shift. This was most evident within schools/departments with a high external focus and engagement with businesses and professionals (such as Business Schools) that often had higher numbers of professional/support staff involved in student and employer liaison. With the intention of many university departments to grow their postgraduate numbers as well as international students (both of which generally demand greater support) it is likely that this trend may spread.

Focusing on how professional and support services are delivered is an essential element of university leadership. Many organisations were starting to recruit high-profile professional managers (e.g. for IT, HR, finance, marketing) from outside the HE sector, paying competitive rates for their expertise, and offering representation on senior university groups.

Another feature of the professionalisation of leadership and management, present within many of the universities visited was the recruitment of School/Faculty Managers to work alongside Deans and Heads in the strategic and operational management of the Faculty/School. Such roles are quite different from the traditional 'administrator' who was viewed as a secretarial assistant for the Dean/Head and school management group. The intention is that such staff will increasingly take on responsibility for the financial and administrative leadership of the school, freeing up the formal Dean/Head to focus, at a more strategic level, on academic leadership. This is quite a change from traditional academic working arrangements and appears to be a general trend within the sector. The extension of the School Manager role to incorporate a wider range of activities, including those centrally linked to the academic work of the university, is a good example of the emergence of 'blended' and 'unbounded' professionals within HE that span academic and administrative functions (Whitchurch, 2008).

The approach to the professionalisation of services has also varied between institutions, with some pushing strongly from the top and others leaving it to the discretion of individual faculties and/or schools. Despite this, there remained an expectation of consultation and participatory decision making amongst academics and the sense that full 'professionalisation' of academic leadership through the introduction of senior

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managers with no academic experience (rather like the introduction of non-clinical managers in the NHS) would be both undesirable and unworkable.

“I think to be a VC you do have to have academic credibility. They have to have lived and breathed and understood what academia is about. I think it would be a big step to take that away and put in somebody from outside the sector. The NHS and HEIs are different in that respect. There are a lot of people in senior positions in the NHS who are not from clinical backgrounds and I don't think it matters. In academia it matters more. I don't think clinicians in the NHS would necessarily have as strong a view as academics have in terms of who is leading them. They're not going to be asking people about their research backgrounds.”  
(Head of Staff Development, post-1992 university, 030104)

As this quote indicates, ‘academic credibility’ is still regarded as a prerequisite for leadership of the academic work of the university, even in less research-focussed institutions. Whilst this situation may be changing, whereby a small number VCs and other senior roles have come in from outside the sector, the interviewees in our sample did not expect this to change substantially within their own careers.

### f. Summary

In this section I have presented findings about institutional strategies and approaches to leadership. Key points are summarised below.

- All universities in our sample reported extensive restructuring over recent years in response to market pressures and changing funding mechanisms.
- Each institution was trying to become more ‘corporate’ and/or ‘entrepreneurial’ through devolving financial and administrative autonomy to faculties and/or schools.
- In most HEIs in our sample authority was devolved to the faculty-level which, whilst enabling a greater degree of alignment between the ‘centre’ and departments, was sometimes perceived as ‘managerialist’ and overly controlling.
- In a minority of HEIs authority was devolved to the school/department-level which, whilst offering a greater sense of autonomy, sometimes led to the formation of ‘silos’ and a lack of clarity about overall organisational mission.
- In each case, accounts indicated the value of balancing top-down leadership, with cross-cutting ‘horizontal’ and emergent ‘bottom-up’ leadership. To some

extent these forms complement one another although they do demand leaders and managers to alter styles/approaches as they move through the organisational structure.

- Alongside formal leadership and management systems, a powerful social network could be identified within each institution that influenced decision-making processes and enabled leaders to ‘keep in touch’, although could also potentially subvert or by-pass formal procedures.
- All institutions reported a move away from traditional ‘collegial’ ways of operating to a more ‘professional’ or ‘business-like’ approach. This was evidenced through the ‘streamlining’ of the committee structure and, where they remained, the direct input of executive members of the university.
- In addition to the changes in academic leadership there has been a ‘professionalization’ of administrative functions, greatly enhancing their input to and influence over operational and strategic activities.

### **4.4.2 Taking up a leadership role**

This section summarises findings about taking up a leadership role and is structured into four sub-sections: (1) routes into leadership; (2) recruitment and selection of academic leaders; (3) challenges and barriers to taking on an academic leadership role; and (4) role tensions and conflicts. These findings relate particularly to the experiences and expectations of academics except where noted. A summary of key points is given in section 4.4.2e.

#### **a. Routes into leadership**

In terms of motivations for taking up a leadership role these broadly mapped onto Deem’s (2001) three tracks: ‘career-route’, ‘reluctant-manager’ and ‘good citizen’.

*Career-route* manager-academics make a conscious decision to pursue an academic management career path. Like Deem, we found this to be most prevalent in post-1992 universities where research opportunities are somewhat more limited, as illustrated in the following quote:

“When I moved into the management line it was when I was at [University X]. It became clear that you were going to have universities that had research and those that didn’t reach the same level, and I think that changed people’s minds in terms of where they saw themselves going. I think that’s probably true across the



post '92s more than the pre '92s. There's more incentive to become a HOD or dean in the post '92s because the research opportunities are closed down.”  
(PVC, post-1992 University, 030101)

Despite distinctions between these two parts of the sector our findings also revealed a number of people following a managerial career-track route within pre-1992 universities. From an early stage in their career, academics pursuing this route (often younger members of our sample) actively sought out opportunities for influencing management and leadership within their institutions. These interviewees reported a substantial interest in academic management and leadership; a wish to influence what went on around them; a desire to progress to more senior managerial levels; and an enjoyment of supporting, facilitating and leading activities within their area of influence. On occasion, however, such people found themselves moving to post-1992 institutions to take advantage of the opportunities within this part of the sector.

Within the '*reluctant manager*' route an academic leadership/management role was taken on due to a sense of obligation rather than out of personal ambition. Deem's (2001) research indicated this route to be highly prevalent within pre-1992 universities with fixed-term rotating roles, and regarded, by incumbents, as largely a distraction to a predominantly research-focussed career. Our research supports these findings to a certain degree with many interviewees, even at the most senior levels, expressing an initial reluctance to take on a formal management/leadership role, as illustrated in the following quote from a DVC.

“I was asked to do a job [HOD/HOS] with the inception of a new [school]. I was given a carrot, in that OK if you do the job well, the university will be committed to [my academic discipline]. I thought OK, I would do my bit and then go back to be a professor again. Then I was asked to become DVC. I did not aspire to become a DVC, I was resistant, but I was persuaded by others DVCs, registrar and VC that this would be an interesting thing to do. In my own case it was not a career structure, just these things just came up. Maybe, I am weak-willed, but I was sort of persuaded to take on these particular roles.”  
(DVC, pre-1992 university, 010105)

Despite many respondents confessing an initial resistance to taking on these roles their institutions recognised that a 'buggins turn' approach is not tenable in the long term and needs to be replaced by a more 'professional' approach to talent spotting, recruitment and promotion.



“The creation of a smaller number of large units I think is a fairly general trend. When you couple it with vast increases in student numbers over the last twenty or so years and not so large but significant increases in staff numbers and financial responsibility, coupled with a viciously increased set of regulations and expectations on virtually anything you care to name... it produces an atmosphere where the first amongst equals HOD buggins turn approach, that characterised certainly the pre-92 university sector in the mid 80’s, has given way to an appointment of a HOS as a recognised managerial post, perhaps for a fixed term... with an expectation that that person is leading the school in a way which would have been unrecognisable twenty years ago.” (Registrar, Pre-1992 University, 010103)

Deem’s (2001) third route into academic management was that of the ‘*good citizen*’, taking on the role in order to ‘give something back’ or to fulfil a sense of duty to their colleagues, discipline and/or institution. Our findings also indicated some support for this pathway as the following quotes indicates.

“[Q. If the opportunity arose would you consider applying to be dean of the faculty?] Yes I would. It’s not just an opportunity; it’s a duty. The longer this goes on the more likely I am to be the longest serving HOD and the more I would be expected to make myself available, even if I did have a lot of doubts as to my usefulness as a dean, especially as I’m getting older. I’ll do my best.” (HOD, post-1992 university, 040301)

Deem commented, however, that this route into academic management may be declining and our findings provide support for this. Several interviewees stressed how all three traditional strands of academic work (teaching, research and administration) had grown in scale, complexity and importance such that they may be difficult to balance. For junior academics it was stressed that due to the importance of research excellence in many institutions they may be advised to steer clear of a heavy administrative/managerial responsibility until they had established a solid academic reputation.

“I think it’s becoming less easy [for junior academics to take on management roles]... it is becoming less easy because of the pressures on those young academics to establish a research profile in a research-driven organisation – very hard, and therefore, research and teaching have to be the primary foci. And so I

think your contribution to citizenship, as it were, is bound to be under pressure.”  
(Registrar, pre-1992 university, 080104)

Whilst Deem’s (2001) routes usefully indicate some of the diversity of reasons why people may choose initially to take on a management/leadership role within HE they are overly simplistic in terms of illustrating how motivations and ambitions may change over time and/or may operate simultaneously. Thus, for example, a number of people in our sample cited an aim of ‘damage limitation’ whereby, in taking on these roles they could reduce risks to their own departments, careers and colleagues. To this extent they could be regarded as both ‘good citizen’ and ‘reluctant’ leaders/managers; as the following quotes indicates.

“The department was really in deep trouble and I didn’t think the person who put himself forward as successor would be able to do the job. So I threw my hat in the ring and thought if I felt that strongly I had to be prepared to try to do it myself. It was a conscious decision. I did see it as a duty because I saw the department as having a problem and you can’t just sit and complain – you have to do things. I nominated myself but I was under some pressure from the dean.”  
(HOD, pre-1992 university, 070302)

Others, whilst seeing it as a duty, also considered that it might be an interesting role that also offered career progression opportunities and the chance to influence things that they had an opinion about (a combination of ‘good citizen’ and ‘career’ leader/manager); whilst others indicated moving from one path to another over time, as illustrated in the following quote from a VC (from ‘good citizen’ to ‘career manager’).

“I spent my time working my way up through [University Z] but I never saw it as a career path, and I think most of my fellow VCs would say the same thing. I joined university as an academic – a researcher and teacher – and that’s what I remained for a long time... Due to a number of circumstances that were really only marginally to do with me I found myself elected to a dean of school position quite early on in my career. I completed that term of office and then went back and took some research leave and re-established myself as a researcher and teacher. Then another set of circumstances came up and so I signed on for a second term. At the end of that the VC asked me to become one of his PVCs. I served one term as PVC and then went on leave. I went to the US to work in a university there for a year and the VC asked me to come back as DVC at the end of my period of leave, which is what I did. I did that for three or

four years and then started looking for VC positions... So the synopsis of my career is there were several forks in the road and choices made along the way but no grand design. I think if you'd asked me when I joined the profession I would have said I'd hope to end up as a professor of my subject." (VC, post-1992 university, 030102)

In interpreting these various accounts it may be better to consider Deem's routes as alternative narratives through which people endeavour to articulate how they came to be in the roles in which they find themselves rather than as an accurate description of the true reasoning behind their decisions. The 'reluctant manager' and 'good citizen' narratives, in particular, offer a means by which academics can defend their choice to take on managerial responsibilities to their colleagues. Most academics remain perhaps rightly wary of people who take on leadership/management roles solely for their own career progression and may regard reluctance and good citizenship as more convincing, credible and/or legitimate reasons.

The comments of interviewees about their motivations to take on such roles go some way to meeting the desire expressed by all institutions in our study to adopt a more professional and business-like approach to leadership and management. The language utilised, however, is generally not one of managerialism but of seeing academic management and leadership as a way of effectively supporting the academic mission of the university and something that may be pursued somewhat opportunistically. In contrast to Deem's (2001) study we noted a somewhat more fluid and emergent progression into career routes in academic management. Respondents often took on their first formal responsibilities for budgets, line management and administration through membership of academic committees and/or their involvement in research and teaching. Over time, a desire to influence decisions and to support their colleagues and departments might lead to the decision to run for election or appointment to a more formal role, which in turn began a route from pure academic to academic manager/leader.

We also found that the majority of interviewees who had reached the level of dean or above, even in pre-1992 universities, expressed a desire to progress to a more senior role if the opportunity arose. Where this was not the case it was generally where people were nearing retirement and/or intended staying at the same level. No one expressed an intention to leave their management role entirely to become a traditional academic although several sounded rather wistful about the idea. The main reason our

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interviewees gave for remaining in an academic leadership/management role, however, was that there were aspects of the job they genuinely enjoyed – particularly the ability for influence and to support the work of their academic colleagues, as illustrated in the following quotes.

“I should say the reason I am doing this job is because I enjoy doing it. There has to be a competitive advantage, in a sense that I am a perfectly good [academic], but I am not better than a lot of the other people, but I am probably better at doing this [HOS role] than most of the other people. I get satisfaction out of it, I feel other people appreciate me a lot. My colleagues are very good to me and are very supportive. I feel most people are very backing of what I am doing and are happy that I am doing it. I get a lot of pleasure and enjoy many of the activities. I also think I am not somebody who believes this is a more difficult task than research, it’s just different. I don’t claim that I am doing something, which is superior to what a lot of other people are doing. I am just doing it, because I am reasonably good at doing it. I enjoy doing it, whereas most people would hate it, so I will do it.” (HOS Pre-1992 university, 010203)

“What I enjoyed were several things: actually getting an overview of the University, rather than being involved in a department and that department’s activities, and actually getting an overview of what the university was like. And quite frankly, I rather enjoyed meeting people from other parts of the University as well. Don’t get me wrong here, I’m not saying it is all milk and honey, what I am saying is that in any of these things there is a balance, but the balance I found came down on the right side... So when the prospect of becoming PVC came up, I thought about it, and had to think about it seriously and talk to other people, but I felt I wanted to do it.” (PVC, pre-1992 university, 080101)

Together these findings indicate that despite the challenges of these roles and a possible reluctance to accept the decline in research activity that they tend to require, they do carry some tangible rewards. Dean and Head roles were reported to have become more empowered over recent years, with greater opportunities to influence the overall direction of the university. As managerial power is very much tied to budget-holding positions within the university, some interviewees were quite frank in saying that they enjoyed the power and influence the deanship/headship gives them. Also, with the introduction of professional managers working alongside Deans/Heads in most

institutions, they were able to concentrate more effort on strategic and longer-term priorities than on day-to-day running of their faculties/ departments.

### **b. Recruitment and selection of academic leaders**

The previous section outlined how participants within our study described the route by which they entered into a formal leadership/management role. In this section I will concentrate on the attributes, qualities and abilities that were perceived to be most important when recruiting/selecting such people. Throughout this section most attention will be paid to the recruitment and appointment of middle-level academic leaders (HOS/HOD level).

Through the interviews we were presented with a large number of accounts of what makes a good academic leader. Whilst in a number of institutions these views were based on an agreed organisational competency framework, in most cases they were based on personal experience in the sector and reflections on personal and sector-wide preferences. Together these accounts indicate a range of qualities and characteristics that are perceived to increase the likelihood of someone successfully taking on an academic leadership role, however due to the nature of the data any connection to performance outcomes is only anecdotal. We did not note any significant differences between institutions on these accounts other than, perhaps, a greater emphasis on previous research track-record in research-intensive pre-1992 universities. To facilitate presentation of these qualities I will group them according to the 'Four C Leadership Model' (Munro, 2005) as used by the Leadership Foundation's Top Management Programme (TMP) 360° feedback process.

#### **1. Credibility**

Interviewees talked a great deal about the importance of earning the respect of colleagues to be successful as a leader at all levels. Crucial to gaining this respect, especially when asking colleagues to improve their own practice, appears to be credibility, which comes from a variety of sources. Most importantly many interviewees talked of the need for 'academic credibility', based on a proven track record in research and teaching, for academic leaders at all levels from HOD to VC as the following quotes indicate.

“[A HOD's] got to have the academic credibility to get the support of other staff. It would be very difficult if we appointed someone and the staff in the

department felt they didn't have the academic strength to justify their appointment." (Director of HR, pre-1992 university, 020104)

"I think to be a VC you do have to have academic credibility. They have to have lived and breathed and understood what academia is about." (Head of Staff Development, post-1992 university, 030104)

In a number of cases, especially where leaders were recruited from outside the HE sector, professional experience acted as a substitute for research track-record although incumbents still needed to demonstrate a sensitivity and understanding of academic life. This appeared particularly significant within institutions and disciplines with a more vocational/professional orientation.

"People who have professional lives in the industry do tend to come in as well as those people who've worked in a more scholarly route through academia. Obviously I don't think anyone would be appointed if they hadn't understood teaching, learning, research, and academic life. I was tested very hard on that, and I've spent my life engaging with that, but I'm not a straightforward scholarly researcher. I'm different." (Dean of Faculty, pre-1992 university, 060202)

The ability to demonstrate a successful reputation as assessed against academically recognisable criteria is widely regarded as an important prerequisite for taking on a formal academic leadership role, although the nature of the discipline in which this credibility is based is perhaps less significant. As leaders are promoted through the institution they become increasingly responsible for overseeing the work of academics in disciplines other than their own, and for brokering collaboration between academics in different schools and faculties.

### 2. Capability

Despite the importance placed on credibility, as perceived by academic colleagues, many interviewees stressed that on its own this is insufficient and that there is a need for a high degree of management and leadership capability in terms of developing and implementing a strategic vision, and motivating and mobilising staff to work towards this.

"[Q. What kind of qualities do you look for when you appoint deans?] You look for academic credibility of a high order and you're looking for somebody that can project a vision of the faculty based on a credible understanding of what the

academic stream is. But you're also looking for somebody who will have some kind of ability to run the thing, to spot opportunities, to spot good people and to occasionally be a bit brave with decisions." (Principal, pre-1992 university, 070102)

Indeed, within both pre and post-1992 universities, there was a sense that such abilities, combined with an energy, enthusiasm and ambition to move things forward, were even more important than academic track-record, as indicated in the following quotes.

"I look for people who will match the culture of this institution largely. Also people who have produced results, people that are outcome focused and people that are ambitious. I don't put a premium on being excellent academics. I need leaders that are credible but not excellent. I've made a few mistakes of putting very credible academics in management positions and not one of them has worked. None of them have been able to cope. The ability to manage and motivate, and they are leadership skills, is what you're looking for." (VC, post-1992 university, 050102)

"I'm looking for a manager and a leader. Someone who is going to be enthused with taking forward a big academic entity and has a view of what its strengths and weaknesses are and what realistically it can aim to achieve. As a necessary part of that I'm looking for someone who has the academic credibility to lead a team of, in some cases, very successful academics. I think that academic standing is important but I put it that way round. I'm not looking for someone who is a Nobel scientist who people will think highly of so maybe they'll be seen as a leadership figure. It has to be someone whose enthusiasm is to be a dean and be a leader. That has to be the case for all our appointments in the future but it hasn't always been in the past." (Registrar, pre-1992 university, 070101)

Additional capabilities sought of academic leaders at all levels included the following:

- *Strategic awareness*: the ability to see and contribute to the 'big picture', to be strategically focused and identify opportunities for enhancing the reputation of department/faculty/university by seeing beyond the internal context;
- *Problem solving*: the ability to identify and effectively manage complex problems and issues relating to all areas of academic activity;



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- *Understanding finances*: the ability to manage finances and resources and identify opportunities for enhancing financial security of the department/school/university;
- *Prioritisation*: the ability to clarify competing priorities by focusing individual and team energies on what matters most;
- *Communication*: the ability to communicate effectively with people in all parts of the university and to listen to and respond to feedback;
- *Decisiveness*: the ability to take responsibility and control to ensure that individual/department/faculty/university's objectives are met.

From this list it can be seen that academic managers/leaders are expected to demonstrate a wide range of abilities, many of which differ from those traditionally sought within recruitment to teaching and research roles. In all cases respondents claimed to have developed these capabilities through experience, although several also referred to the value of professional training and development.

### 3. Character

The demonstration of credibility and capability amongst academic leaders was perceived in many cases to be dependent upon a number of more deeply embedded personal characteristics. Rather than being presented as conforming to a set of pre-defined competencies most academic leaders were described as somewhat idiosyncratic and that this enhanced both their credibility and their ability to get things done.

Although these characteristics clearly varied between individuals and may be hard to capture many respondents expressed a need for the following attributes:

- *Integrity*: this relates to a leader giving his/her full respect to others, regardless of their status or standing, treating all staff fairly and equally and with dignity and acting as a personal role model of the leadership behaviours;
- *Creativity*: this characteristic relates to a leader bringing a real sense of energy, passion and excitement to the workplace in order to create a stimulating environment for people to think creatively and use their abilities and imagination to develop and implement new ideas that add value to the organisation;
- *Resilience*: this concerns the ability of a leader to bounce back in the face of setbacks and remain positive by putting his/her personal feelings to one side, especially in emotionally charged situations;



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- *Drive*: associated to the notion of resilience, leaders are seen to need a high level of energy, drive and commitment to seeing things through;
- *Adaptability*: this characteristic relates to a leader being flexible and adapting his/her style and approach to respond to the demands of different contexts, situations and audiences.

The following quote indicates how these characteristics may interface with credibility and capability.

“[Q. What are the indicators of effective leadership at the institutional level?] There are several I suppose. The idea of drive and being able to see that you’re focused, not to the extent that one is desensitised to the fact that there are obstacles that have to be handled in a certain way, but having a focus and being resilient. Resilience is a key aspect. Most of the problems that occur are that the institutional mechanisms assume that you’ll fall off or stop. But you keep knocking and keep repeating and keep doing the same thing [...] To capture a vision or a dream or a concept is very important and being able to communicate that while not being totally inflexible about its operational aspects. There are things where I look back and realise that I should have but didn’t make decisions on things that would have made life easier for several people including me. Now I’m willing to be a bit more reflective about that and hold that couple of milliseconds off the final commitment or look for a stalling action to give me the opportunity to perhaps come up with a better judgement. In the past I’ve been a bit more gung ho and I’ll almost stick with something to the point of absurdity. I back away from that pretty easily now because I can see the very quick bad return that has. The idea of closure and being able to see vision and the means by which you’re doing it and keeping very focused on it and achieving an end point that is deliverable. Seeing that through to the end. I think it’s the idea of stubbornness to some extent. Lesser mortals could easily give up on some of those things when the going gets tough. So they would be some of the aspects that I think I would look for in others to be considered effective, but by no means have I made any study of that in any formal sense.” (Director of Research Centre, pre-1992 university, 110303)

### 4. Career Management

This final category relates to how academic leaders see their careers developing. Whilst, as indicated earlier, many academic leaders initially enter the role somewhat

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reluctantly or opportunistically as they progress through the organisation they generally come to regard academic leadership/management as a legitimate and desirable career pathway. When asked about the qualities and characteristics of successful academic leaders, despite a degree of scepticism about people who actively seek out such roles from the start, there was a sense that people need to be somewhat proactive in taking opportunities for management and leadership influence as the following quote indicates.

“I think that there does need to be a certain amount of willingness [to take on the role of HOS]. I think people who are very reluctant to do it will not do it well. So credibility, an acceptance that the job needs to be done, bordering on willingness. A commitment to the success of the enterprise, be it school or faculty or whatever, is important. The person has got to want to do well in the role. You’ve got to want to make the school successful. Those I worry about most are those that regard it as a prison sentence, the best thing that can happen is the sentence comes very quickly.” (Registrar, pre-1992 university, 100105)

Additional aspects relating to career management included the following:

- *Having ambition to progress*: many interviewees commented that being asked to be a formal leader was a sign of recognition and respect and indicated a desire to remain in such a role as long as it was deemed useful by their colleagues;
- *Coming to the role at the right time*: there was a sense conveyed that timing is an important aspect of taking on a leadership role. If done too early in one’s career it may have a negative impact on research profile (and hence academic credibility) whilst if done too late there may be insufficient time to progress to more senior levels. Female respondents, in particular, also noted the need to choose an appropriate time in relation to family commitments and academics from research-intensive institutions talked of the need to balance it against research commitments. As senior academic leadership roles do not become available that often there is a certain degree of good fortune required in being in the right place at the right time;
- *Managing time effectively*: all interviewees noted that one of the major problems for formal leaders is finding time to do the myriad of tasks and activities that a leadership role requires. There is a need for leaders to demonstrate excellent self-management skills and an ability to prioritise and manage their time effectively.

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In summary, whilst this list is certainly not exhaustive and each leadership appointment is decided on an individual basis there do seem to be some common experiences and expectations shared across institutions and roles. The following quote by a VC talking about the role of HOS captures much of what has been discussed.

“I’m looking for somebody who’s able to understand all the pressures that are on an institution and has an ability to lead in their area. I think they must be credible in their delivery and they must have appropriate networks internally and externally. They must have the personal qualities to be able to explain things and bring people on board, and they must have durability because these central roles can grind you down so they’ve got to have grit. They’ve got to have a sense of humour and be able to get on with the rest of the team. I believe you’re not making the appointment of an individual but of a person who has to fit the profile of the team.” (VC, pre-1992 university, 020105)

### **c. Barriers to taking on an academic leadership role**

Despite increasing interest and a shift in attitudes towards leadership and management in the universities studied, it was reported that academics in general remain a challenging group to engage. The barriers identified by the interviewees were arguably less significant in post-1992 universities where, as noted previously, formal leadership positions were clearly seen as career progression and a real alternative to research careers. Within all institutions there was, to some extent however, the perception that academics were generally hesitant to take on a formal leadership/management role, especially where this is equated with acquiring a large administrative workload, as illustrated in the following quote.

“It’s often very difficult to know why on earth a successful academic would want to become a head of department. The financial rewards are minimal and there’s the stress of trying to combine an academic career with the administrative burden involved.” (Registrar, pre-1992 university, 020101)

The principal challenge, it would seem in academics taking on managerial responsibilities is their ability to balance this alongside academic responsibilities. Whilst institutions may make some allowance, such as a reduced teaching load, the long term impact on one’s research profile can be much harder to resolve.

“In academic performance it’s about publications and research; it’s a very clear progression. There’s no progression in terms of management. You don’t get

rewarded for demonstrating administrative skills or prowess. There's none of that." (Dean of Faculty, pre-1992 university, 020103)

Given the challenges of maintaining an active research profile once in post, a number of interviewees expressed the view that it may be inadvisable to take on extensive management and leadership responsibilities too early in one's career, as discussed earlier.

To support HOS/HODs in dealing with these pressures, as mentioned in 4.4.1e, most of the institutions within our sample had recently put in place (or were recruiting) schools managers to assist in the day-to-day running of the school/department. This was a strategic initiative within institutions and one aimed both to free-up time of the HOS/HOD to focus on strategic issues and also to improve the professionalism of management and leadership within schools as indicated below.

"There is another movement, which was encouraged, indeed enforced by the VCEG, is to have school managers in every school, which takes the weight for finance and administration off the head of school. I see HOS making strategic decisions, and not doing things like moving this bit of money from here to there. School managers fit quite well within big schools. You don't want a head of school sitting there and doing financial things. This is the responsibility of school managers, and the heads would just tell the manager this where the school wants to move, you sort out the finance and budget." (DVC, pre-1992 university, 010105)

Academic management and leadership roles are also increasingly recognised and, through the extension of terms of office and increasing executive powers, may be becoming more appealing. The situation in which a HOD/HOS was elected to the role for a fixed term (usually three years) and academics effectively took turns to act as a steward for the school/department is becoming rarer. Most formal appointments now involve at least some input from the senior executive group, many are advertised externally as well as internally, greater financial and career incentives are offered, and, even where posts remain rotational, the term of office has generally been extended from three to five years with the option of re-appointment. This shifting approach is illustrated in the following quote from a DVC.

"I think DVC would be seen more as a career structure post, as it is a five-year post now and it is also renewable. So you could become DVC and if you became DVC in a fairly early point in your career you can think of that as a stepping

stone to the VC-ship elsewhere... But I don't think DVCs were seen like that before, you became a DVC for three years and then went back to your school. It was a rotating role. If it was still the case, perhaps, I would just think that I'd do that for three years and do my turn. It was seen very much as an administrative role, chairing committees. There was not much executive role involved whereas now DVCs have an executive role. For example, I approve new appointments in my schools. I approve even honorary appointments, and oversee the budgets. That was never the case before. So there is a much more executive role there.”  
(DVC, pre-1992 university, 010105)

Once people have committed themselves to a career in academic management/leadership it seems to be far less difficult to persuade them to remain in this role. Hence, the main challenge for universities in our sample remains identifying and recruiting appropriate HOD/HOSs rather than more senior level leaders.

### **d. Role tensions and conflicts**

Perhaps somewhat unsurprisingly given the account provided so far, academic leaders often find themselves experiencing a sense of role tension and/or a conflict of interests upon taking up a leadership role such as HOD/HOS.

The ability to retain a sense of collegiality whilst delivering the corporate objectives of the institution was a particularly significant issue at the HOD/HOS level. Here interviewees highlighted a sense of tension between being a peer to academic colleagues and also being their line-manager. Many interviewees at this level expressed feeling torn between the demands of the institution and those of their own academic unit. This was particularly significant in pre-1992 universities with rotating headships where there was an expectation for the HOD/HOS to return to the ranks of their colleagues once their term was up. For several, the Association of University Teachers (AUT) industrial action<sup>48</sup>, which occurred during the period of our research, was a particularly evident test of their allegiances and one where it became clear that their role carried a responsibility to the institution even if they felt sympathetic to the cause of those taking

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<sup>48</sup> In March 2006 the AUT (now part of the University and College Union) called on its members to take ‘action short of a strike’ in protest against lower than demanded pay rises. Members were requested to boycott the assessment of coursework and examinations such that students would be unable to graduate in July. Universities rejected these calls as untenable given the economic climate in HE and in May, as the exam period commenced and an agreement had still not been reached, many threatened staff with disciplinary procedures should they continue with the boycott. This led to a situation where Heads of School in a number of institutions (including the one cited here) found themselves compelled to request staff to resume marking or to have their salaries stopped for breach of contract. The situation came to a head during the week of interviews at the 10<sup>th</sup> of our 12 sample institutions.

action. This was a particularly interesting incident to encounter during our research and revealed some striking tensions such as that described below.

“That’s the other thing that is quite a strange thing because throughout the dispute on both sides there has been a tendency for there to be a ‘them and us’ and in my situation as a HOS I’m part of ‘them’ and I’m part of ‘us’. I go to meetings where I’m told by management ‘you must do this to them’ where ‘them’ is my colleagues and in fact myself. That’s probably true for everything in the HOS role. We are perceived to be part of management by the management and we are perceived to be part of the team by the team. There isn’t a clear divide.” (HOS, Pre-1992 university, 100303)

Another HOS in the same institution mentioned how s/he had felt compelled to relinquish his/her membership of the union in order to resolve this tension but, in so doing found him/herself somewhat distanced from his/her academic colleagues.

“[The strike] has made me very isolated because [my academic colleagues] are all Union members... there was a wall of silence, they have not been able to talk to me about... I had to resign [from the union]. It got to a point where my position was just untenable. I couldn’t be seen in their eyes to be undermining my colleagues, which is what I was effectively having to do trying to protect the students. I found the situation just simply untenable so I publicly told them I was resigning, and have done so. That was much more liberating then because I felt freer to take actions that I felt as a HOS I have to take... But I didn’t go into this with a view to seek a career in management, which others might have done... so it puts me in the slightly odd position where yes I am management, but no I’m not. You’re slightly caught between the two, and the strike has made me feel that very acutely.” (HOS, pre-1992 university, 100304)

The AUT industrial action was met with a strong and relatively consistent response from senior executive groups across the HE sector once it became evident that it would impact directly on the ability for students to graduate as planned. There were differences between institutions in the speed and severity of the response but many took it as an opportunity to place their stamp of authority over the situation - perhaps encouraged that only a minority of academic staff were taking action and the very real implications of the demanded pay rise for future staffing budgets. As often, the tension between collegiality and managerialism in this situation was perhaps most acutely

experienced by HOD/HOSs although some found themselves agreeing with the senior management perspective as the following quote, from a different institution, indicates.

“With this particular case, I felt much less conflicted because actually I didn’t approve of the way the union stepped in even before the offer had been made. I really don’t think academics have had as bad a run as they think they have. But I have kept that very much to myself within the school. On the day of strike, I did ask everyone to respect everyone else’s opinion, not to allow it to be divisive. The staff have been remarkably supportive and loyal wherever they could be, whilst sticking to their guns. I have had one young staff member who has done the marking, and said ‘if you would like me to give you those marks I will’. I try and accommodate them, nobody has stopped supervising students, nobody failed to set exam papers. They have gone as far as they could, I understand they would like more money but I also understand what the increases would do to budgets and that is not good!” (HOS, pre-1992 university, 110202)

In this quote, the interviewee indicates having made a personal judgement on the legitimacy of the industrial action and compares it to a previous situation in which s/he found him/herself in which s/he experienced a greater sense of inner conflict.

“The last time this happened, I was much more with the staff and felt conflicted myself and in fact I didn’t report anybody last time. We were asked and I did it this time because I couldn’t agree with the action. It has varied with different sort of strike action... I was much more conflicted at [University K], where I was instructed by a VC to sack 55 staff. I could also see the budget figures, in the end I found myself arguing we had to do it to preserve the faculty. With this one I felt I was much more convinced and the demands were just greed and that everybody would have done well without the action. I do follow my own lights on this one. I have felt anxiety about keeping things on an even keel in the school and not allow things to get out of hand. I have held off and held off. I do respect their right to strike even though I don’t agree with it.” (HOS, pre-1992 university, 110202)

Whilst the AUT industrial action gives some important insights into the potential tension between one’s sense of identity as a colleague and a manager to one’s academic peers, a number of other tensions emerge from the research findings, as indicated in the following quotes.



“You have all the responsibilities of running a small business but you have no authority or control. The budgets are there but they’re fixed and you have to work within them [...] There’s a strong sense that you have all the responsibility but you don’t have the control. Whilst I’m not necessarily saying that if the level of responsibility came with the level of power it would be a good thing, at least you would be a bit more in control of your destiny.” (HOD, pre-1992 university, 070305)

Here we see the respondent highlighting a tension between responsibility and power whereby s/he is constrained through a lack of ability to directly influence budgets. A similar tension, this time between the accountability and autonomy of universities in relation to government, is illustrated below.

“All the time there is pressure on universities to be accountable. There's a lot of undue interference and red tape to be satisfied, which is imposed upon us externally, and from time to time the university generates quite a bit of red tape of its own. This university is run fairly tightly financially, and there's a lot of monitoring, checking and reporting when it comes to financial performance.” (Registrar, pre-1992 university, 020101)

A further tension, frequently noted by respondents was between different staff groups within the university, particularly ‘academic’ and ‘administrative’ staff although there is some evidence that this situation is slowly changing (as discussed in section 4.4.1e).

“I would observe having worked in an old, very research-intensive University often where there is a real friction between so-called administrative staff, and so called academic staff. That’s remarkably not the case at this university. There is tension, functionally, from time to time, but remarkably little friction of the ‘them and us’ variety that you often get in organisations like universities and police forces.” (Registrar, pre-1992 university, 060101)

### **e. Summary**

In this section I have presented findings about how interviewees have experienced taking on a leadership role in HE and their perceptions of which characteristics and qualities are required of academic leaders. Key findings are as follows:

- Interviewees reported a variety of routes into formal leadership roles which can be broadly grouped under Deem’s (2001) typology of: (1) the ‘career-route’, (2) the ‘reluctant manager’, and (3) the ‘good citizen’. Career-route academic-



managers were most prevalent within post-1992 universities whilst those in older universities tended to express an initial reluctance to take on such roles and/or a sense of duty/obligation.

- Such an analysis, however, disguises a level of complexity to the findings in which it could be noticed that motivations change over time and often co-exist alongside one another. In particular it was noted that few individuals expressed a desire to leave the management route altogether and that even reluctant managers found aspects of the job that they enjoyed. It was suggested, therefore, that rather than being discrete pathways these routes should be considered as alternative narratives through which leaders endeavour to legitimise and explain their motives.
- With regard to the recruitment and selection of academic leaders, findings were grouped according to the ‘Four C Leadership Model’ (Munro, 2005) utilised on the LFHE Top Management Programme.
  - a) *Credibility* was considered particularly important and largely determined by academic (and/or professional) reputation.
  - b) *Capability* focussed on developing and implementing a strategic vision and motivating and mobilising staff to achieve this; along with strategic awareness, problem solving, financial awareness, prioritisation and communication.
  - c) *Character* attributes varied between individuals but included integrity, creativity, resilience, drive and adaptability.
  - d) *Career management* was also considered important, such that leaders need to be proactive in seeking out and/or exploiting opportunities that arise and to have a degree of good fortune in coming to the role at the right time.
- The main barriers to taking on a formal academic leadership role were considered to be the substantial administrative load associated with such posts and the resultant impact on research outputs. These issues were considered most significant for younger staff within research-intensive institutions and those in HOS/HOD roles. The introduction of professional school managers within many institutions sought to alleviate some of these pressures although HOS/HOD roles were still regarded as unappealing in many cases.

- Role tensions and conflicts were also most evident for HOS/HODs and largely related to competing academic and managerial identities. A period of industrial action that occurred during the research brought these issues to the fore for a number of interviewees and demonstrated how they endeavoured to align their own values with the work they were being asked to do.

### **4.4.3 Sharing leadership**

This final section of the results presents the main findings on ‘sharing leadership’. It is structured into four sections: (1) perceptions of leadership distribution; (2) processes of leadership distribution; (3) benefits and challenges of distributing leadership; and (4) experiences of distributed leadership. A summary of findings is given in section 4.4.3e.

#### **a. Perceptions of leadership distribution**

In general, there was a great degree of support amongst all interviewees for a leadership approach which is distributed across the institution. It was interesting to note that even though the researchers deliberately did not provide the interviewees with a strict definition of the concept of ‘distributed leadership’ (in order to let them generate their own accounts) there was a considerable degree of commonality in the views and perceptions expressed about the idea. The majority of interviewees considered that distributed leadership was not just conceivable within the HE context, but a necessity – that it is a function that is too complex and important to leave to a small group of individuals in formal roles. Despite this, however, analysis of responses revealed a number of variations in the way in which distributed leadership was being conceived, largely dependent on the context, task, structures and personalities of significant individuals. These classifications broadly match those identified by MacBeath et al. (2004) in schools as indicated below.

1. *Formal*: e.g. devolution of financial and administrative authority to academic schools and/or departments.
2. *Pragmatic*: e.g. negotiating the division of responsibilities between roles such as VC and DVC or HOS and Deputy HOS (often with one becoming external facing and the other internal facing).
3. *Strategic*: e.g. the appointment of people from outside the university to bring in new skills, knowledge and contacts (particularly in the case of the appointment of professional managers from outside the sector).

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4. *Incremental*: e.g. progressive opportunities for experience and responsibility such as sitting on and chairing committees; leading modules, programmes and projects; serving as a deputy.
5. *Opportunistic*: e.g. people willingly taking on additional responsibilities within and outside the university (such as heading up project teams; sitting on academic, professional and/or editorial boards; consulting and liaising with business and policy makers).
6. *Cultural*: e.g. leadership is assumed and shared organically such as in the development of a collaborative research bid.

Whilst recognising these dimensions, however, we gathered no evidence to imply a continuum of progression from formal to cultural distribution; rather these forms appeared to complement one another as different manifestations of distributed leadership (for example, formal distribution serving to facilitate cultural and opportunistic distribution). Leadership was generally seen to be distributed but within certain boundaries as indicated in the following quotes.

“I think there is a perception that [leadership] is distributed based on the business plans. When the idea came in the HOSs thought they’d be able to do whatever they want and to an extent they can, but it’s within a very strict framework. [...] The structure is quite inflexible because of the way [the VC] manages so there’s a perception that you can do what you want but actually you can’t. There has to be some control at the top or people will go spiralling off in all directions and things become less cohesive.” (School Manager, post-1992 university, 050401)

“There is an element at which leadership is devolved but it’s to manage local issues. A department cannot go outside the university guidelines on its admissions policy or bid for research funding that doesn’t meet the university requirements for the funding model. The big, corporate decisions are from the very top, however, the way they are implemented locally is led by a local management. There is flexibility within the structures. I say that but of course these days we’re ever more scrutinised about what we do.” (Dean of Faculty, pre-1992 university, 080202)

In both of these quotes there is evidence of ‘formal’ distribution where leadership is delegated, monitored and controlled centrally. Formal distribution of leadership was reported to be most evident in the area of governance and management. For instance,

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when asked about how distributed leadership worked in practice interviewees frequently referred to formal organisational systems and structures whereby decision-making authority is devolved or delegated via formally designated channels. Accountability for such activities is vested in the holders of formal positions such as HOD, HOS or Dean whether or not they choose to execute the activity alone or in collaboration with others.

Committees were also seen as a systematic means for distributing leadership, whereby academics and managers are brought together to make joint decisions, although the increasing tendency for such groups to be chaired by members of the senior executive group (VCEG), with carefully selected membership, implies a shift towards more executive/managerial control (see section 4.4.1c). Indeed, we noted a steady decline in the traditional collegial committee structure across all sample institutions, with many committees being merged and/or replaced by more 'executive' decision-making groups.

Although some authors argue that delegation and devolution should not be confused with distributed leadership because they imply top-down rather than bottom-up influence, we found that these were by far the most frequently cited mechanisms through which leadership is shared within sample institutions. Whilst this finding may partly be a consequence of our methodology, whereby only holders of formal leadership roles were interviewed, it points towards the ways in which such concepts are being applied within HE.

In terms of devolution, the location of financial control (in particular control of any surpluses) was widely viewed as the most important, if not decisive, feature in the distribution of leadership. Thus, whilst it may often be the case that administration and workload are devolved rather than power and authority, financial devolution to the school/departmental level is considered central to the empowerment of HOS/HODs and financial transparency was regarded as a key factor in the development of a more entrepreneurial culture. In effect, without devolution of financial control it was thought unlikely that a culture of shared or 'distributed' leadership would flourish – it would appear that collaborative behaviour is correlated with control of resources.

Remaining with MacBeath et al.'s (2004) taxonomy, the area where leadership is most likely to be 'cultural' (i.e. where academics willingly take the initiative to lead and where leadership is assumed rather than given) is research. The opportunities to lead in this area are numerous. In research, academics who are not necessarily in formal management positions can have considerable leadership influence by virtue of their academic credibility and enthusiasm and anyone who is willing and able to carry out the

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initiative can do so. Leadership in this area was represented by the interviewees as spontaneous, opportunistic and emergent rather than formally ‘devolved’, as indicated below.

“I think academics demonstrate leadership in developing their own area of research. That’s part of creating an environment where you allow innovation to happen, and higher education is a very good example. That’s what we live by.”  
(VC, pre-1992 university, 020105)

Despite a somewhat natural tendency for academics to assume leadership of research it was reported that many universities are trying to formalise this process to ensure alignment of research with the overall strategic direction of the institution and the funding model.

“These days we’re ever more scrutinised about what we do whether it be by the RAE or whatever and if Professor Y down the corridor is doing some research that hasn’t generated any research income in the last three or four years. [...] You’re getting on very dangerous territory here because people get very uptight about academic freedom, but from a management point of view there would have to be questions asked. You’d have to say ‘you can research that if you want but I really need to see you earning some money doing it’. I think that has changed. [...] Even ten or fifteen years ago you just got on with what you wanted to do and you weren’t looked at as regularly to see what your grant income was.” (Dean of Faculty, pre-1992 university, 080202)

Research, however, remains an area where academics willingly take on leadership and management responsibilities such as managing budgets and people, often for the first time. Whilst part of the reason for this clearly lies within the organisational processes and personal dispositions, our findings would lead us to believe that another significant dimension is that of ‘social identity’ (Haslam, 2004). It would appear that within the field of research, at least, it is possible for academics to take on management and leadership responsibilities without sensing a tension between their identities as an ‘academic’ (i.e. member of a peer group allied to a specific discipline) and as a ‘manager’ (i.e. member of a group with responsibilities allied to a specific organisation and the achievement of particular tasks). This contrasts to the tensions described in section 4.4.2d.

### **b. Processes of distributing leadership**

In terms of the processes for distributing leadership within a particular area, in most universities members of the senior/middle management team have well-defined portfolios and responsibilities, and in this sense formal responsibilities are perceived to be distributed amongst team members. As for promoting and trying to achieve ‘concertive action’ (Gronn, 2000) or a ‘person plus’ approach (Spillane et al., 2004), several senior executive groups in our sample reported that they have tried to establish a ‘team leadership’ approach at the centre/top with the explicit intent of providing a model that can be cascaded to other parts of the organisation, as illustrated below.

“I’m trying to start by developing a well functioning team at the top and if you show by example how a team can work and develop that team by having people in it who have different strengths and different capabilities so that we actually together have all the skills we need. And then each member of that team is the Chair or leader of another team so you cascade it down.” (VC, pre-1992 university, 020105)

Whilst members may recognise the value of working as a team, some may decide to opt out when it does not suit them. A PVC at University 4, for example, commented that when roles are tightly defined it may be difficult to get ownership from across the team as responsibilities are seen to lie at an individual rather than group level. In this sense, when responsibilities are strongly segmented there is reported to be a tendency for people to start building rivalries and a ‘silo-approach’ to management and leadership as indicated in the following quote.

“You are conscious of being in a team and there’s a team approach but it’s a bit like we’re a team when it suits us and when it doesn’t we’re not part of a team. Sometimes that can be problematic. I think the difficulty is getting ownership from everybody around the table. If it’s about the teaching and learning strategy they’ll look at me and say that because I’ve been developing the university’s values then they’re my values. They’re not; they’re our values because we had a debate about it. If you’re the first writer of these things they end up being regarded as your domain. Diversity is a good example. I had lots of ideas and thought we should go forward with lots of stuff but I want them to pick up the baton and run with it, and that’s been very hard. I’m not sure how we’ll crack it actually.” (PVC, post-1992 university, 040101)

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In contrast to this would be the senior management team of another university where roles are ‘fuzzy’ and not tightly defined. This allows the VC and his/her team to be engaged in all activities and to gain a broader understanding of what is happening throughout the university. Responsibilities are delegated rather than permanently devolved depending on the context, situation and project. Developing a vision for a particular area becomes the responsibility for the whole team rather than one individual. Overall, however, it would seem that building a well-functioning top team is seen as one of the ways of embedding a culture of distributed leadership.

Whilst senior university managers may formally devolve leadership further down the organisation, whether distribution penetrates below the HOS or HOD level remains largely dependent on the leadership style of the Head and the culture of the unit. Whilst the majority of HOS/HODs in our study were happy to devolve responsibilities, several found it difficult to ‘let go’ of control, power and responsibility - sometimes due to concerns about trust and accountability and other times to protect colleagues from distractions.

“There are some things, which are difficult to give up because they are personal responsibilities. I’m also reluctant to distribute work to other people – I’d rather see them spend all their time on their primary jobs.” (HOD, pre-1992 university, 020203)

Similar sentiments were also evident in a number of instances where professional managers/administrators (e.g. School Managers) were appointed to work alongside Heads. In the case of such co-leadership the division of work and responsibilities was generally negotiated on a personal basis, as illustrated below.

“The strongest role [that I work with] is the school manager/ administrator person. It’s crucial [we] work together. How [we] distribute responsibilities is varied and what [we] are trying to achieve is variable as well... The manager role is not that new to me. I had a school administrator since 1998, who is now a manager at [name of school]. He grew into a school manager essentially with me. When he worked with me technically he was not a school manager, but essentially he was a school manager and we did a lot of things together. With my school manager, we’ve negotiated distribution of responsibilities, and obviously we took into account the areas of her interests and strengths.” (HOS, pre-1992 university, 010203)



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Despite widespread recognition of the value of a distributed approach to leadership, however, the majority of interviewees still expressed the need for formally recognised leaders who provide a clear vision and direction and monitor progress. Having inspirational or visionary leadership at the top of the organisation, in the words of many interviewees, is as important as cultivating a culture of distributed leadership lower down. Clear vision and direction coming from a formal leader or senior team are seen as one of the main pre-requisites for distributed leadership to work in practice. It gives people the confidence to explore new opportunities whilst being assured that they are going in the same direction as the rest of the university as indicated below.

“We have some very exciting people at the senior level and in turn that means we stretch ourselves. For me, I look at where the university is going and where the main thrusts are that we need to develop.” (HOD, post-1992 university, 050103)

“[The senior leaders] all have a high drive of personal commitment, not only knowing how things get done, but a personal commitment to getting things done. That’s very important. They have a clear sense of purpose and know where they are going and how they are going to get there. I think, also they all have got a good set of people skills that enables them to communicate that vision and bring other people along with them to energise people around them, to make other people feel that the vision is achievable. This is the vision I can share in and this is the vision I can see as achievable.” (Director of HR, pre-1992 university, 010101)

Alongside this desire for communication of a clear and inspiring sense of purpose were more pragmatic concerns about people taking responsibility, at all levels, to getting things done.

“I think in this department it would be that you can have all those nice, friendly, collegial discussions bouncing ideas around with people coming up with really good plans but ultimately you need someone to work out how to make it happen and delegate some responsibilities and make sure they’re followed up.” (HOD, pre-1992 university, 070305)

Ultimately the respondents indicate that a distributed approach to leadership offers a practical means for the division of labour such that people are empowered by their colleagues to take personal initiative on particular issues. The view of distributed leadership as complementary rather than an alternative to traditional



hierarchical/individual leadership is echoed in similar research conducted in the FE and school sectors whereby it was concluded that there is a preference for a 'blended' (Collinson and Collinson, 2006) or 'hybrid' (Gronn, 2008) approach that combines elements of both forms. The following quote from our study indicates this interplay between shared and individual leadership.

“[Q. How does leadership happen here?] It's a very devolved system and leadership is dispersed across the VC and PVCs, and the deans and directors. They all pursue leadership in their own areas fairly independently. The role of the dean is key within each school and the role of the PVCs is thematic across the university but is relatively low key in a general sense. Having said that, the PVC for external relations is also head of the external relations group so he has a role as a PVC across the university, but also a line management responsibility to the staff that are primarily delivering in that area. The PVC for academic affairs has a similar dual role as she has a reasonably large influence over the day-to-day operations of the quality staff within the registry. [The PVC for Planning and Resources] has no staff reporting directly to him but his influence is through the writing of documents, negotiating with people and the responsibilities that he is given. In some senses his leadership role is more akin to the VC in that it's about creating a vision and bringing people on board. The VC's role is external and internal. He spends a considerable amount of time promoting and representing the university outside. He also provides a broad strategic input, for example into the plans for setting up the other two university campuses.”  
(Registrar, post-1992 university, 030103)

Here we see how there are a range of leadership roles that together contribute towards the accomplishment of leadership within this institution. Each role draws on slightly different expertise and sources of power to influence the overall direction of the university.

### **c. Benefits and challenges of distributing leadership**

Gronn (2002) expresses a concern that as distributed leadership becomes a preferred approach to leadership in organisations attention to the potential benefits and disadvantages may be neglected. We therefore asked the interviewees in our sample about what they saw as the main benefits and challenges of this approach.

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With regard to benefits, interviewees generally believed that a well managed distributed approach to leadership can bring many benefits to the academic/professional unit and the institution. These benefits are closely connected and one often cannot happen without the other. What follows is not an exhaustive list, as the benefits of distributed leadership depended on the particular organisational culture and context, but these four benefits were most frequently cited by our interviewees.

1. *Responsiveness*: it was argued that by distributing leadership to lower levels of the organisation, decision-making becomes more responsive and ‘in-tune’ with the needs and expectations of both customers (students, business, etc.) and staff. Furthermore, as greater responsibility and accountability is devolved, increasing ownership and consideration is given to issues affecting schools and departments.
2. *Financial transparency*: another benefit reported by interviewees has been an increase in financial transparency whereby it is far clearer how income is earned and spent. Such a shift is seen as central to enhancing levels of innovation and entrepreneurship within schools and departments so that those responsible can reap the benefits of their efforts.
3. *Convenience*: distributed leadership is also said to bring ‘managerial convenience’. As previously discussed, over recent years, universities have become much more complex as organisations and their activities more varied and diverse. For this reason, distributed leadership offers a means for sharing the load.
4. *Teamwork*: distributed leadership can also facilitate better teamwork and relationships between academics and professional managers/administrators. From a distributed perspective, it is not only academics who are involved in decision-making but all staff groups across the institution. It can also enhance communication throughout the organisation as interaction stops being only top-down and occurs in all directions (vertical and horizontal).

With regard to challenges and disadvantages, in the view of the interviewees, distributed leadership should not present many problems provided that it is managed well and in a transparent way. With regard to the potential disadvantages, however, the following issues were raised:

1. *Fragmentation*: most frequently cited was the potential for the creation of ‘silos’, with different parts of the university going in their own direction.

Without an overarching organisational structure, shared vision that is actively communicated and enacted by the centre, and coherent and integrated organisational procedures, distributed leadership may result in faculties, schools, departments and/or individuals doing completely different things, and so exacerbating organisational fragmentation.

2. *Lack of role clarity*: distributed leadership may also result in a lack of clarity over the division of roles and create opportunities for confusion and competition. This situation in our sample universities tended to be most strongly felt for cross-cutting roles at the university, faculty or school level as discussed in section 4.4.1c.
3. *Slow decision-making*: as distributed leadership implies that more people should be involved in the leadership process, decision making in the organisation may slow down. Most universities in our sample were counteracting this through ensuring executive representation on decision making groups and streamlining the committee structure.
4. *Variations in individual capability*: distributed leadership may also underestimate individual differences in ability, leading to unrealistic expectations of performance and the risk of leadership failures where people fail to take on responsibility/ownership and/or perform effectively.

Interestingly these benefits and challenges imply a somewhat ‘managerialist’, top-down, approach to the distribution of leadership whereby organisational interests dominate the discourse. Whilst this is perhaps unsurprising, given the fact that all interviewees were holders of formal management roles, it gives strong clues as to how the discourse is being framed within the HE arena. This is particularly true of the potential disadvantages identified. Thus, rather than fragmentation, advocates of the ‘concertive action’ approach (e.g. Gronn, 2000, 2002) argue that distributed leadership should lead to greater cohesion and a sense of common purpose, rather than lack of clarity, individuals should be better enabled to negotiate and agree their roles so as to minimise overlap and maximise personal fit; rather than slowing down decision making, such an approach should enable decisions to be made more rapidly, at the point of contact rather than further up the hierarchy; and with regard to capability, distributed leadership should assume a differentiation rather than commonality of expertise, drawing on individual strengths rather than depending solely on formal ‘leaders’.

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For leadership to be truly distributed there needs to be a commitment from senior management to devolving power and resources along with responsibility as indicated in the quote below.

“[Q. Do you see any disadvantages in distributed leadership?] It’s hard work. It’s much easier to give instructions. It means you invest a lot of time in people and spend a lot of time encouraging them to take it seriously. You’ve got to negotiate sometimes. It requires that you’ve trained and that you’ve got people that can take full responsibility and it’s always difficult. The tendency to pass the buck to somebody else is inherent in all of us. I don’t have that choice but everybody else does. Distributed leadership in that sense, provided it’s all gathered back together, is fine, but I personally don’t believe it can work if you want to achieve change management. It’s fine if you’ve got what you want or if you’re going to change very slowly and you’ve got an established history and secure business case. But if you’re in a more volatile marketplace where changes in student demand are much more abrupt then you’ve got to be in a position to move much more rapidly.” (VC, post-1992 university, 040102)

The evidence from our findings implies that even within a distributed approach to leadership there is also a need for strong individual leadership.

### **d. Experiences of distributed leadership**

As indicated in sections 4.4.2c and d, during the course of our interviews we noticed a number of tensions within university leadership and some clear pressure points where this is most strongly experienced, particularly at the HOS/HOD level. These tensions include collegiality versus managerialism, individual autonomy and collective engagement, leadership of the discipline and the institution, academic versus administrative authority, informality and formality, inclusivity and professionalisation, and stability and change

Furthermore, we were presented with a range of descriptions of leadership that appear to arise largely from these tensions and the manner in which leadership is experienced across the organisation. These accounts (summarised in Table 4.4) offer competing

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images to ‘distributed’ or ‘dispersed’ leadership that, perhaps, give a more graphic insight into leadership practice in universities<sup>49</sup>.

<b>Form</b>	<b>Description</b>	<b>Example</b>
<i>Dislocated</i>	Top-down and bottom-up systems don’t match up; leadership doesn’t occur where it is needed.	Weakened central leadership where budgets are devolved to schools or faculties that make it difficult to initiate and sustain institution-wide initiatives such as corporate branding and IT.
<i>Disconnected</i>	Different parts of the institution pulling in different directions; lack of consistent/coherent direction/vision; competing agendas.	Formation of a ‘silo mentality’ within schools, with holders of devolved budgets pursuing their own objectives, not aligned with (or even counter to) the overall university mission and objectives.
<i>Disengaged</i>	Staff avoid becoming involved in leadership and management of the institution; leadership is seen as unappealing, unrewarding or unnecessary.	Leadership viewed as administration/bureaucracy rather than strategic and inter-personal – e.g. leadership and management of school/university versus academic leadership of research or discipline.
<i>Dissipated</i>	Leadership is too broadly diffused across groups with little accountability or responsibility for implementing decisions and actions.	This was a frequent criticism of the committee structure as a mechanism by which decisions go round and round remaining unresolved and disowned.
<i>Distant</i>	Leadership is felt to be removed from the operational level of the organisation; inaccessible, imposed; not necessarily ‘in our best interests’.	Decisions taken at senior management level and imposed with limited consultation. This situation seems to be amplified where senior managers are physically distant from academic departments.
<i>Dysfunctional</i>	Leadership fails to achieve its intentions; results in unexpected/undesirable outcomes; misalignment of performance measures.	Negative reaction to performance review and appraisal process by senior academic staff; performance measures driving individual rather than team behaviour; risk aversion and dysfunctional systems arising from failures of senior leadership.

**Table 4.4: Dissing leadership**

Whilst it should be noted that these represent only a small minority of the accounts from our interviews, they offer a number of alternative narratives of leadership that indicate

<sup>49</sup> Indeed, at an LFHE dissemination event in February 2008 the VC of one university claimed that our account thus far was rather too ‘sanitised’ and that most people’s experience of leadership in HE was one of being ‘shafted’.

where and how such processes can break down. We have termed them ‘dissing’,<sup>50</sup> leadership due to the common prefix and the allusion to critique. In presenting these findings I in no way wish to imply a paucity of leadership within the universities studied, but rather to reveal the tensions and complexities inherent when exploring leadership within large, complex organisations such as these. The descriptions given in this table may offer an alternative and perhaps more evocative account of the lived experience of managers and academics in UK universities than the idealised notion of ‘distributed leadership’ as an inclusive and collective endeavour. They reflect the frustrations where leadership is felt to be inappropriate or ineffective and also point to differences in the ways in which leadership is represented and discussed in different parts of the institution. Indeed, it may well be that multiple interpretations coexist even within the minds of the same individuals, surfacing or receding according to the context. The following series of quotes from academic leaders at three different levels within the same post-92 institution highlight awareness of how perceptions of leadership will vary depending on where you are within the organisation. In each case the interviewees (a VC, PVC and HOS) reflect on the inherent difficulties and tensions of balancing devolution and centralisation of control. We will begin with the VC.

“One of the most difficult things a VC has to do is to balance the business of central direction and control with devolving responsibility, and getting that balance right. I suspect some of the Deans here would say the balance is tipped slightly too far towards devolved responsibility and not enough towards strong central leadership. They would, however, only agree with that if the central leadership was in the direction that they wanted to go in. [...] I think that exemplifies the difficulty of getting the balance right, and it’s a constant trade-off. [...] That is a constant juggling act for a VC in a university and it’s more difficult to do that in a university than in many other sorts of organisations because our reputation doesn’t depend on a particular product, it depends on all the individual staff and they have to be empowered to develop that reputation and share it with the university.” (VC, post-1992 university, 030102)

Here the VC refers to the need for compromise and portrays a sense of resignation to the fact that no ideal solution can be found. An alternative, yet complementary, account is given by a PVC who indicates how organisational history has shaped decision-making

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<sup>50</sup> “*Diss*: (US, UK, slang) to put (someone) down, or show disrespect by the use of insulting language or dismissive behaviour.” Wiktionary, URL: [<http://en.wiktionary.org/wiki/diss>], accessed 16/03/09.

structures such that communication between the centre and the schools is severely restricted, thereby reinforcing a sense of disengagement between groups.

“The point about leadership and my perception of it is that I think it’s quite dislocated, and I think that goes back to the difficulties that they had. The previous VC has left his mark on this institution [...] Universities have long memories and I think that has influenced how things are set up here. There is a good example of a leader in the VC [...] but I don’t think the structures affect clear lines of communication or decision-making. The university presents itself at one level as very devolved, so its budget is based on a devolved method and the Deans in schools are perceived at one level to have a lot of autonomy, but because they’re not engaged in decision-making at the higher level they’re also slightly disenfranchised from the corporate side of the university.” (PVC, post-1992 university, 030101)

There is less of a sense of fatalism here, but a view that organisational structures are no longer fit for purpose and could do with being revised. In referring to the legacy of the previous VC, s/he highlights how organisational structures can emerge in response to the personal dispositions of key figures within the hierarchy, and may well remain in place long after they have left or changed role. S/he concludes that if this situation is not addressed it will become increasingly dysfunctional.

The final quote in this series is from a HOS at the same institution who echoes a sense of disconnection between how the school and the central university, more generally, are run. From his/her perspective, the Dean of Faculty acts as a buffer between these competing approaches and shields him/her from what s/he perceives as excessive managerialism.

“The school is very much led in a consensual fashion, but the university isn’t. The leadership style of the university is non-consensual, hierarchical and bureaucratic. It doesn’t build consensus and it’s largely insensitive and distant. Some of them are really nice people and if they came down from on high and talked to people every now and then I think they’d get on a lot better and build a better consensus. They don’t know, or appear to want to understand sometimes, and that’s very sad. It’s a huge distinguishing difference between the two and it’s partly why I’m quite happy here. I’m sort of shielded by the Dean from that next level and I don’t really want to be open to it; I think I’d rather stay shielded.” (HOS, post-1992 university, 030402)



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Thus, it can be seen from these examples that the image of leadership can appear very different from where one stands within the organisation. This is not just an issue of poor communication, but more fundamentally linked to differences of role identity, personality and the dynamics of power and social influence. There is little reason to challenge the veracity of these accounts in terms of the accuracy with which interviewees reported what they believed, but rather a need to accept that multiple narratives co-exist alongside one another.

The absence of a shared narrative on leadership, however, should not necessarily be taken as evidence of a leadership failure but perhaps just a fact of organisational life. Within the university described here there was no indication that these tensions gave rise to particularly adverse organisational performance or staff morale, on the contrary, of the 12 universities visited during our research this one seemed to have a particularly strong and positive culture, happy and satisfied staff, and sense of place and purpose as an HE provider within its particular context.

Together the observations in this section indicate a multiplicity of narratives on leadership that have the potential to both describe and/or construct organisational realities. By exploring the points of convergence and divergence between these narratives we may gain a clearer understanding of how they are utilised by different actors to achieve personal and organisational outcomes.

### e. Summary

This section has presented findings relating to the manner in which leadership is shared and/or distributed within HEIs. Key findings include:

- There was a strong agreement amongst interviewees that leadership is widely distributed albeit often within quite tight confines.
- A variety of forms of distribution could be identified, including those recognised by MacBeath et al. (2004) in schools (i.e. formal, pragmatic, strategic, incremental, opportunistic and cultural). Unlike MacBeath et al. though, our findings did not point towards a continuum of progression but rather a variety of co-existing forms that may complement and/or compete with one another.
- *Formal distribution* was most common for governance and management issues (including finances and resources), with accountability vested in the holders of formal managerial roles. This was evident too for issues that had previously been the responsibility of committees and indicated a degree of managerialism



and the erosion of collegiality. The delegation of financial control (and particularly discretion over the use of any surpluses) was considered as a decisive factor in the degree of autonomy experienced by departments and sub-groups and, to a large extent, as a prerequisite for collaborative and entrepreneurial behaviour at this level.

- *Cultural distribution* was most likely to occur in the area of research, with academics experiencing a fair degree of discretion over the research they do and who they collaborate with. The increasing emphasis on securing research income and high quality publications, however, is likely to introduce a greater degree of formality and control within this domain although the centrality of such activities to academic identity means that most academics are likely to continue engaging with leadership in this field.
- With regard to the processes of distributing leadership within universities a number of senior executive groups sought to cascade a team-based approach throughout the organisation. Experiences of team working varied, however, with some tensions around overlapping roles and/or accountability for particular issues.
- Group working arrangements were also evident for roles such as VC and DVC, or HOS and School Manager, who would often develop a co-leadership relationship, dividing responsibilities according to personal preferences and status (often with the more senior person becoming the external figurehead and the other taking responsibility for internal operational issues).
- Where people felt some discretion over their work activities they often sought a degree of clarity from higher up the institution to indicate the overall direction in which they should be headed. A fine balance was required between sufficient guidance and support from senior colleagues, and sufficient flexibility to determine priorities and ways of working. A desire was often expressed for a ‘blended’ (Collinson and Collinson, 2006, 2009) approach that combined both individual and shared leadership.
- The main benefits of a distributed approach to leadership were considered to be increased responsiveness, financial transparency, convenience and teamwork. Challenges were considered to include organisational fragmentation, lack of role clarity, slow decision making and variations in individual capability. It is

suggested that these findings may imply a somewhat ‘managerialist’ approach whereby organisational outcomes dominate the discourse in a way that differs from many of the representations of distributed leadership within the academic literature.

- Accounts of experiences of leadership in HE indicate a number of tensions such as collegiality vs. managerialism, individual autonomy vs. collective engagement, leadership of the discipline vs. leadership of the institution, academic vs. administrative authority, informality and formality, inclusivity and professionalism, and stability and change.
- From the interviews a number of competing narratives to that of ‘distributed’ leadership could be identified, including ‘dislocated’, ‘disconnected’, ‘disengaged’, ‘dissipated’, ‘distant’ and ‘dysfunctional’. Together these suggest a somewhat inevitable plurality of narratives that differ depending on where people find themselves within the organisation and the context to which they are exposed. An appreciation of this pluralism may be valuable in gaining a deeper appreciation of how people within universities make sense of their predicament and endeavour to influence those around them.

### ***4.5 Discussion***

The findings outlined above indicate some of the key features of leadership within UK universities and a number of ways in which this might be changing. In particular, there appears to be a higher degree of acceptance of the need for effective leadership and management than demonstrated in some earlier studies and, with this, a greater tendency towards more ‘managerial’ ways of running universities (supporting the findings of Deem et al., 2007). For individuals looking to progress within their careers academic management and leadership is becoming an increasingly viable (and potentially desirable) route to follow. Similarly, leadership within ‘professional services’ has become a recognised career pathway. Yet, despite the powerful bureaucracies that still exist and the recognised need to balance centralised and decentralised control, there is a general resistance or scepticism towards purely ‘managerial’ approaches to leadership in HE. Within this context the concept of ‘distributed leadership’, however defined, has a powerful descriptive and symbolic significance. Whilst we noticed a general acceptance of the notion amongst interviewees there were a wide variety of interpretations, and still more diverse experiences, of the ways in which leadership is actually distributed. In

this discussion I will reflect further on the nature of leadership in HE and the degree to which it can be considered as ‘distributed’.

### 4.5.1 Conceptions of distributed leadership in HE

Despite some enthusiasm for a ‘distributed’ approach to leadership, interviewees in all of the institutions in our sample reported significant tensions between top-down and bottom-up processes of influence. In effect, all the institutions sampled are struggling with the tension between collegiality and managerialism, individual autonomy and collective engagement, loyalty to the discipline and loyalty to the institution, academic versus administrative authority, informality and formality, and inclusivity and professionalisation.

Each institution has developed its own structures, systems and processes to respond to these tensions – some incrementally over time and others through adaptive or transformational change. What is evident, however, is that the nature of these structures and how they operate are largely dependent on the holders of formal leadership positions. Thus, for example, the VC or Principal will structure the senior management team to suit his/her personal style and preferences, and HOSs and HODs will develop their own management structures according to how they identify with the role. The distribution of leadership in HE thus becomes a dynamic negotiation and exchange between the centre/top and schools/departments and amongst informal networks of colleagues and peers. The way in which leadership is talked about by our informants draws sharp attention to the need for *both* vertical *and* horizontal leadership, not just as an ideal but as a necessity given the nature of academic work. A similar finding is reported by Collinson and Collinson (2006) based on their research in FE colleges and is described thus:

“Many FE staff prefer a leadership approach that combines specific elements from both distributed and hierarchical perspectives which are often viewed as competing and opposing polarities within the literature. Repeatedly, respondents have expressed a preference for aspects of *both* traditional, hierarchical leadership (structure, clarity and organisation) *and* contemporary distributed leadership (team-work, communication and shared responsibility).”  
(*ibid*, p. 10, initial emphasis)

Collinson and Collinson term this ‘blended leadership’ in that it indicates that successful leadership requires a mix of approaches. This evidence supports a growing

tendency within the field to assert that distributed leadership is not a panacea or replacement for individual, hierarchical leadership but rather something that supports and enhances it. As Spillane (2006) argues:

“More important, what is likely to be most salient is not the fact that leadership is distributed but how leadership is distributed... A distributed perspective on leadership can coexist with and be used beneficially to explore hierarchical and top-down leadership approaches.” (ibid, p. 102-103)

Where respondents in our study called for greater direction from formal leaders, this appeared to be more like Howell and Shamir’s (2005) representation of ‘socialised’ rather than ‘personalised’ charismatic leadership. There remains a desire for open and genuine consultation, yet also a need for someone to articulate a sense of direction and to authorise individuals to act on behalf of the group for the collective interest – a representative who embodies group values and aspirations.

It has also been mentioned that we found evidence of all the forms of distributed leadership identified by MacBeath et al. (2004) even though most of these (perhaps with the exception of ‘cultural’) are also commonly associated with traditional hierarchical models of leadership. Thus, whilst this taxonomy is moderately comprehensive, it arguably gives little more clarity or precision than the term ‘leadership’ on its own. In our own research we chose not to impose a definition of distributed leadership, but rather to let the interviewees present their own understanding and experiences of the concept. From this we can identify at least two clearly interrelated yet competing representations as described below.

1. *Devolved*: when talking of distributed leadership, interviewees primarily described formal mechanisms for the distribution of operational, strategic and decision-making roles and responsibilities across the institution. Of these, devolution and delegation were fundamental in assigning leadership responsibility to individuals, pairs, groups and teams further down the organisational hierarchy. Despite representations in some of the academic literature, most interviewees painted ‘distributed leadership’ as a process coordinated from the top and ‘rolled-out’ across the organisation.
2. *Emergent*: where interviewees pointed to more bottom-up and emergent processes of collaborative and informal leadership, whereby individuals, groups and teams willingly take on responsibility and generate new ideas and initiatives. This seems to be best captured by the notion of leadership as diffused

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or dispersed across the organisation. Leadership, from this perspective, does not adhere to clear lines of hierarchy and command, but emerges from the interplay between collective engagement and individual agency – from this perspective everyone has a part to play in the leadership of the institution whether formally recognised or not.

The main distinction between ‘devolved’ and ‘emergent’ leadership in this regard is between formal (and intentional) leadership orchestrated from the top and informal (potentially unplanned) leadership emerging from across the organisation. Whilst devolved leadership is formally embedded within organisational structures and processes emergent leadership often operates outside these parameters. Thus, for example, a researcher, lecturer or professor can exert considerable influence within an institution by virtue of their academic reputation, enthusiasm and/or connections, whether or not they are formally recognised within the university management structure. Of these two accounts, it is the latter that bears the closest resemblance to ‘distributed leadership’ as most commonly described in the literature but is the least prevalent within our own data (possibly because our informants were selected on the basis of holding formal offices of devolved authority).

Our study clearly supports the view that organisational leadership in HE needs to strike some form of balance between these processes. Inevitably this may shift depending on the nature of the task - with a ‘devolved’ approach most likely to be acceptable for the management of finances and an ‘emergent’ approach for the development of new research ideas. The role of HOS/HOD may be defined as constantly seeking an integration of these two processes - one such mechanism being the Annual Strategic Planning Exercise whereby schools and departments present their business plan in relation to the institutional strategy (see section 4.4.1c).

Ultimately, however, an understanding of how leadership is enacted within HE is incomplete without an appreciation of the dynamics of power and influence within and beyond institutions. Broadly the two forms of distributed leadership (devolved and emergent) cited earlier draw on different sources of power – the first on ‘hard’ power (through formal authority and control of resources) and the second on ‘soft’ power (charisma, expertise, relationships, etc.). Such a representation, however, is overly simplistic due to the complex interplay and interdependence between these dimensions and the extent to which they interact with other social processes. In particular, it is important to recognise that power relations are woven into many aspects of

organisational and social life in ways that may be hard to notice or alter, even by those who actively engage in them. As Foucault argues:

“Power is everywhere; not because it embraces everything, but because it comes from everywhere.” (Foucault, 1978-86, 1:93, cited in Harvey, 2006, p. 90)

In focussing on the dynamics of power within universities we must not neglect the wider political context of UK HE (as described in section 4.2.2). Universities are at the forefront of the government’s drive towards the ‘knowledge economy’ and improved leadership and management are regarded as key enablers (Leitch, 2006, DBIS, 2009). The search for distributed leadership in universities is not merely born of ideological commitment to inclusivity and participation but rather through increasing commercial and market pressures (Olssen and Peters, 2005) and the need to do more with less.

### **4.5.2 The utility of a distributed perspective on leadership in HE**

From the account given so far the concept of ‘distributed leadership’, as used by our interviewees, is applied very broadly and incorporates examples of individualised, hierarchical and formalised ‘devolved’ leadership as well as shared, bottom-up and informal ‘emergent’ leadership. It could be argued, therefore, that as a *description* of leadership in HE this concept offers little more clarity than the term ‘leadership’ on its own. Despite this, however, it still appears that, as a concept, it has a certain resonance and appeal to academics, perhaps due to the connection with notions of collegiality, participative decision-making and the nature of academic work.

As an *analytic framework* for exploring leadership the concept of distributed leadership is more promising. Its fundamental value, in this regard, is to draw attention to the wider constituents of leadership – the systems, processes and structures (both formal and informal) all of which shape leadership practice. To this extent, the manner in which budgets and resources are handled, forums for communication and participation, and reward and recognition, are fundamental aspects of leadership – influencing (and being influenced by) the manner in which leaders and their constituents engage. This perspective also draws attention to the temporal dimensions of leadership, encouraging us to take a longer-term view of the situation – to consider the changing motivations, actions and experiences of individuals over the course of their career. Furthermore, as an analytic framework distributed leadership encourages recognition of different forms of leadership and influence (including top-down, bottom-up and horizontal) and a

consideration of leadership activity that occurs outside traditional hierarchical channels of command and authority, frequently beyond organisational boundaries.

Fundamentally, though, our research leads us to conclude that one important, yet not widely recognised, way in which distributed leadership is being used in HE is as a *rhetorical* device. It seems to offer an ideal to which HE institutions and their members can aspire; an alternative to the lived experience of dislocation, disconnection, disengagement, dissipation, distance and dysfunctionality. Indeed, in describing their negative experiences of leadership interviewees inadvertently paint an image of a more desirable approach – one that is located, connected, engaged, clear/in-focus, close/in-touch and functional/beneficial.

It was Pondy (1978) who first referred to leadership as a ‘language game’ whereby, through the effective use of rhetoric leaders can frame the understanding of others. Bennis (1993, cited in Goddard, 1997, p. 51) likewise argues that “effective leaders put words to the formless longings and deeply felt needs of others. They create communities out of words”. Distributed leadership offers a persuasive discourse that embeds both concepts of collegiality and managerialism. It appears to give a framework for the integration of top-down and bottom-up decision making processes that is likely to be more flexible and responsive than the traditional committee structure whilst evading the professionalisation of management that has occurred in other sectors such as the National Health Service. In the current climate of change within UK HE whereby collegial and bureaucratic structures are giving way to corporate and enterprise cultures (McNay, 1995) such a discourse becomes particularly significant. Within this context the notion of ‘distributed leadership’ could be used by universities to construct social identities (Haslam, 2004) that bring together notions such as ‘academic’ and ‘manager’ so that, for example, management is seen as an integral element of being a good academic or ‘management’ is reframed as ‘leadership’, rendering it more appealing to those resistant to managerial connotations.

Such an approach, however, is a double-edged sword – whilst distributed leadership may be used to enhance the sense of belonging and engagement in universities it may equally be utilised by those in positions of real power to give the illusion of consultation and participation whilst obscuring the true mechanisms by which decisions are reached and resources allocated. Another danger is that if organisations decide to push the ‘emergent’ approach to distributed leadership too strongly they may end up missing the



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very real need for individual responsibility and accountability as well as a strong sense of vision and direction (in effect a ‘blended’ or ‘hybrid’ approach).

The ‘shadow side’ of distributed leadership is particularly concerning when considered in the current environment where most UK universities are rationalising (if not eliminating) their main formalised mechanism for bottom-up influence and decision-making: the committee structure. In this case does ‘distributed leadership’ just offer an empty rhetoric of engagement whilst greater powers are being divested to smaller groups of people? Does it risk undermining organisational effectiveness by reducing the influence of key individuals without an appropriate forum for collective action? Or does it simply offer an illusory ideal that will fail to meet the expectations of those promoting it? As Salaman (2004, p. 77) warns:

“Although the current cult of leadership may seem (and indeed present itself) in marked contrast, even opposition, to management (hence the need for definitions to clarify the differences between the two), in functional terms they are remarkably similar in that both offer to resolve the failures of organization by avoiding and individualizing them.”

In all likelihood leadership in HE is becoming more widely dispersed but in ways that may not be recognised or controllable. In time (perhaps quite soon) we may find that real influence in HE has become distributed well beyond the boundaries of institutions: to students who shape institutional reputations through the National Student Satisfaction survey (NSS) and their engagement in online communities; to parents and children who make decisions based on ‘value for money’; to employers who demand more flexible and demand-led higher skills; and to cross-institutional partnerships to meet the increasing complexity of demand for HE; etc. (see Bolden et al., 2009a, and Bolden et al., 2009b for further discussion of these issues in relation to the employer engagement agenda).

In this changing and competitive environment, as Harris and Spillane (2008) argue for schools:

“Distributed leadership is not a panacea or a blueprint or a recipe. It is a way of getting under the skin of leadership practice, of seeing leadership practice differently and illuminating the possibilities for organisational transformation.”  
(ibid, p. 33)



The contribution of distributed leadership is not in offering an alternative to other accounts, but in enabling the recognition of a variety of forms of leadership in a more integrated and systemic manner.

### ***4.6 Chapter summary***

In this chapter I have explored the ways in which university leaders, at various levels, perceive of leadership and how it is distributed within their institutions. The data highlights a number of issues but, in particular, the hybrid/blended (Gronn, 2008, Collinson and Collinson, 2009) nature of leadership practice and the extent to which managerial identities may be experienced as ‘in tension’ with academic identities. From the accounts of academic leaders in sample institutions we identified two main forms of distributed leadership: ‘devolved’ (where leadership is formally delegated from the top of the organisation) and ‘emergent’ (where leadership is shared and emerges from within the organisation). We also noted a distinction between hierarchical (vertical) and horizontal leadership roles and the common requirement for leaders to move between these types of role as they progressed through the organisation. It is concluded that whilst ‘distributed’ may offer an accurate description of how leadership is enacted within universities it also carries a powerful rhetorical function in that it resonates with ideals of collegiality whilst serving to deliver managerial outcomes.

# 5. THE PRACTICE OF LEADERSHIP

“It is perfectly true, as philosophers say, that life must be understood backwards. But they forget the other proposition, that it must be lived forwards.” (Gardiner, 1988, p. 90, cited in Weick, 2003, p. 454)

## ***5.1 Overview***

The study reported in this chapter was informed by questions arising from the previous investigation into leadership in HE outlined in Chapter 4. In addition to a broadly distributed perspective on leadership the theoretical framing for this enquiry was a ‘practice-based’ approach to the study of leadership and organisations (e.g. Carroll et al., 2008, Whittington, 2006) and is also informed by literature on sensemaking and discourse (e.g. Weick, 1995, Alvesson and Karreman, 2000, Fairhurst, 2007). The arguments are illustrated through findings from a collaborative academic-practitioner research project in three rather diverse organisations, where we examined how middle-senior level managers conceived of and described their role in ‘accomplishing leadership’<sup>51</sup>.

Whilst a practice orientation to this research might suggest a micro-level analysis of the various practices utilised by leadership practitioners, the stance taken within this chapter (as informed by the conclusions of the previous study) is that ‘leadership’ is a social process, shaped and informed by a diverse range of factors and actors both within and outside a given organisation. In order to appreciate the various ways in which specific ‘leadership’ practices are utilised and the reasons why, it is proposed, one needs to consider both the contextually specific features of the enactment as well as the wider discourse and structure in which this occurs. To that extent, this chapter will endeavour to explore the interaction between individual and collective sensemaking processes through which practitioners frame and articulate their role(s), and facilitate and mobilise others to work towards a shared objective – in effect a meso-level analysis.

## ***5.2 A theoretical framing for study 2***

Whilst many of the building blocks of this investigation have been touched upon in earlier chapters of this thesis I will take this opportunity to give a brief review of the key arguments for a leadership-as-practice perspective and how this relates to the literature on distributed leadership. In so doing, I seek to present a theoretical frame for the subsequent empirical investigation.

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<sup>51</sup> Note that much of this chapter is based on a conference paper presented at the 7<sup>th</sup> International Conference on Studying Leadership, co-authored with Professor Jonathan Gosling. The research is based on a collaborative enquiry, again with Prof Gosling, with leadership and management practitioners. In each of these activities, however, I took a lead role in framing, conducting, analysing, interpreting and presenting the research.

### 5.2.1 Leadership-as-practice

In an article presented at the 6<sup>th</sup> *International Conference on Studying Leadership* in December 2007, and subsequently published in the journal *Leadership*, Brigid Carroll, Lester Levy and David Richmond called for a practice-based approach that aims to reveal how leadership is accomplished on a day-to-day basis. Drawing parallels to the ‘Strategy-as-Practice’ (S-A-P) field they proposed that:

“The time is ripe for a leadership-as-practice body of work that, for virtually identical reasons as strategy, aims at the demystification, deepening and appreciation of the ‘nitty-gritty details’ [...] of routine and practice that Chia (2004, p. 33) calls ‘a practical logic’.” (Carroll et al., 2008, p. 364)

In making this argument they contrast the practice perspective with the competency-based approach to leadership, highlighting the extent to which the latter reinforces a ‘methodological individualism’ (Chia and Holt, 2006) that fails to capture the complex, interdependent nature of leadership practice.

The competency approach, as defined here, refers to a range of techniques concerned with the identification and development of leadership and management attributes, qualities, capabilities and/or behaviours. Largely arising from the work of David McClelland, the McBer consultancy group and the American Management Association during the 1970s and 80s in the USA (see Horton, 2002 for a review) this approach aimed to identify the behavioural attributes of effective managers, with a job competency being defined as “an underlying characteristic of an individual that is causally related to effective or superior performance in a job” (Boyatzis, 1982, p. 21). The popularity of this approach amongst the HR community led to its widespread adoption within organisations on both sides of the Atlantic and the incorporation of these principles into the National Occupational Standards in Management in the UK (MCI, 1987, 1997) despite widespread critique (see, for example Salaman, 2004, Conger, 2005, Bolden and Gosling, 2006, Hollenbeck et al., 2006).

Using Boyatzis’ definition above Carroll et al. (2008, p. 364) indicate how a focus on *individual* competencies, considered to be *causally* related to *superior job performance* reinforces a view “whereby the individual agent is credited with primacy, a linear relationship is constructed from intention to intervention, and performance is governed by purpose, principles and co-option into an overarching strategic plan.” Treating leadership as a series of capabilities to be acquired and applied, it is argued, reinforces trait, behavioural and situational/contingency perspectives on leadership that

underestimate the relational, ethical, emotional and socially constructed nature of leadership practice (see Chapter 2).

The alternative proposed by Carroll and colleagues is the notion of ‘leadership-as-practice’ (L-A-P). This approach is built on constructivist logic, is relational and collective, acknowledges the significance of non-quantifiable measures (such as discourse, narrative and rhetoric), and is situated and socially defined – fundamentally it is concerned with how leadership emerges and is enacted in everyday situations and how it both shapes and is shaped by the actions of leaders - a distinction illustrated through reference to Heidegger’s (1926/1962) notions of building and dwelling as outlined below.

“Heidegger’s distinction between building and dwelling (as discussed in Chia, 2004, Chia and Holt, 2006, Chia and MacKay, 2007) speaks very tangibly, if symbolically, to the vast gulf between competency and practice. The building mode is the one that characterizes competency logic. This mode relies on the agency of a motivated and intentional actor to act on a world they stand separate from to achieve preconceived ends and objectives. In a dwelling mode, action is ‘immanent’ (Chia and Holt, 2006, p. 637) in that it unfolds along with identity through feeling, responding, coping and negotiating with the day-to-day. Dwelling, for Heidegger, is mindless – not because it lacks sense and efficacy, but because it must ‘follow an internalised predisposition: a *modus operandi* rather than any deliberate conscious intent’ (Chia and MacKay, 2007, p. 236).” (Carroll et al., 2008, p. 367)

Thus, whilst leadership action may be intentional and targeted towards the achievement of a particular goal, it may equally emerge in the moment, unnoticed and unplanned – a disposition or ‘way of being’ rather than anything more absolute or instrumental.

In outlining the need for a L-A-P body of knowledge Carroll and colleagues embrace the wider ‘practice turn’ within social theory, respond directly to recent calls for a closer alignment between theory and practice in management and organisational studies, and speak to the concerns of post-heroic and distributed perspectives on leadership (see chapters 1 and 2 for further details). A practice perspective on leadership is therefore very alluring - appearing to offer a real alternative to person and process theories of leadership and of addressing the ‘double-hurdle’ of contributing both to theory and practice (Pettigrew, 1997).

### 5.2.2 So, what is ‘practice’?

In his analysis of the practice turn in strategy Whittington (2006) identifies three principle strands of practice theory: the notion of ‘relationality’ (the inter-connection between the individual and the social); the notion of ‘practice’ (the *how* of social action); and the ‘actors’ (on whose activity practice depends). These principles, he argues, give rise to three interdependent concepts: strategy praxis (what people actually do when strategizing)<sup>52</sup>, practices (shared routines and behaviours that guide and shape strategic activity) and practitioners (the various social actors involved in creating and implementing strategy). He concludes that:

“The essential insight of the practice perspective is that strategy is more than just a property of organizations; it is something that people do, with stuff that comes from outside as well as within organizations, and with effects that permeate through whole societies.” (ibid, p. 627)

The practice turn, however, is not just concerned with understanding and describing ‘practice’ but also with generating theory and insights that can assist practicing managers. As Weick (2003, p. 453) argues “when practitioners complain that no one is addressing the real world, these are not so much complaints about a place as they are complaints about situated activity and the inability of people to conceptualize it”. The difficulty is that ‘theory’ (the primary focus of much management and organisational research) requires a certain level of abstraction and generalisability in order to be deemed useful – it is “an inference from data that is offered as formula to explain the abstract and general principle behind them as their cause, the method of operation, or their relation to other phenomena” (Weick, 1987, p. 102). By contrast, practice is “equated with doing, concreteness, understanding, know how, and wholes” (Weick, 2003, p. 454) – it is embedded, emergent and enacted by people within a given time and place. The paradox, therefore, is that whilst life “must be understood backwards” (through reflection on action) it “must be lived forwards” (Kierkegaard, cited by Gardiner, 1988, in Weick, 2003, p. 453-4). In the retrospective sensemaking of theory, life is given a certain level of order and clarity that is rarely experienced when living forwards, in a state Heidegger (cited in Weick, 2003) refers to as ‘thrownness’: a mixture of unknowability, unpredictability and enactment that is fluid, ongoing and dynamic.

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<sup>52</sup> Note that this is a rather simplistic description of praxis. For further discussion on the nature of this concept please see section 6.4.

Carroll et al. (2008, p. 369) highlight similar issues in their empirical account of L-A-P, where they identify the importance of “habits, process, consciousness, awareness, control, everydayness and identity” that sit in contrast to the rather discrete and observable qualities that tend to prevail within more traditional competency-based accounts. These aspects, they argue, are indicative of ‘dwelling’ and point to the significance of tacit knowledge, personal disposition and the surfacing of unconscious assumptions and ways of working. “The leadership that emerges from such a discourse”, it is argued, “is one of intentionality, depth, authenticity and questioning” (ibid, p. 369).

In representing leadership in this way, whilst taking a relational view of leadership, the primary focus of L-A-P is on the sensemaking processes through which leadership actors influence and persuade others on a day-to-day basis. Such a concern complements the work of authors such as Cunliffe (2001), Pye (2005), Iszatt-White (2006) and Kelly (2008), as well as contributing towards a growing body of literature on the importance of practical wisdom (sometimes termed ‘phronesis’) and mastery in leadership and management practice and development (Grint, 2007, Raelin, 2007, Kupers and Statler, 2008, Schweigert, 2007, Kane and Patapan, 2006, McKenna et al., 2009, Flyvbjerg, 2006).

### **5.2.3 The relationship between practice and distributed perspectives on leadership**

Rather like other emerging approaches to leadership, a practice perspective poses a number of significant challenges to existing leadership theory, research and development, including:

1. A broadening and redefinition of who is engaged in leadership work;
2. Exploring ‘non deliberate practical coping’ as well as ‘planned, intentional action’ (Chia and Holt, 2006, p. 643); and
3. Exploring the practical impacts of the practice turn for leadership development (Carroll et al., 2008).

All three of these challenges are shared by the distributed perspective on leadership in that they extend the focus from the behaviours and/or attributes of specific ‘leaders’ to the social processes of ‘leadership’. Whilst a ‘distributed’ perspective on leadership, however, is mainly concerned with how leadership is configured (Gronn, 2009a) a

'practice' perspective is primarily concerned with how it is accomplished. Spillane and Diamond (2007), for example, propose that:

“A distributed perspective foregrounds the *practice* of leading and managing, but there is more. A distributed perspective frames this practice in a particular way; it frames it as a product of the interactions of school *leaders, followers*, and aspects of their *situation*. This distributed view of leadership shifts focus from school principals and other formal and informal leaders to the web of leaders, followers, and their situations that gives form to leadership practice.” (ibid, p. 7, initial emphasis)

A practice perspective on leadership complements this approach in so far as offering a means for examining the nature of this interaction, in particular, how leaders (and followers) may draw upon particular aspects of the situation (including 'practices') in accomplishing 'leadership work' (or work that may subsequently come to be regarded as 'leadership'). Thus, whilst a distributed perspective may enable us to map out the terrain of leadership (who is involved, how do they interact, what are they trying to achieve, etc.) a practice perspective encourages us to consider what various actors are doing when involved in 'leadership work' (what practices do they draw on, how do they construct and maintain roles, etc.). Drawing on the work of Whittington (2003), Carroll et al. (2008) outline six key questions at the heart of the leadership-as-practice approach:

“Where and how is the work of *leadership* actually done; who does this *leadership* work; what are the common tools and techniques of *leadership*; how is the work of *leadership* organized, communicated and consumed?” (ibid, p. 372, initial emphasis)

As can be seen, there is some overlap here with the concerns of distributed leadership, particularly questions 1, 2 and 4, but by adding the questions of the common tools and techniques of leadership, and how it is communicated and consumed the practice perspective draws attention to the micro-processes and discursive nature of leadership.

To retain a focus on practice and application we, the researchers on this project, believed it necessary to firmly incorporate the views and experiences of practicing leaders through a 'relational scholarship of integration' (Bartunek, 2007) whereby practitioners and academics jointly collaborated in the design, conduct and interpretation of the research. Indeed, to truly embrace the implications of a practice-based approach it was considered essential to bring practitioners into the research and



interpretation process to give an insider-perspective to complement the outsider-perspective of the academic team<sup>53</sup>. Such an approach recognises the situated nature of leadership and the need for detailed appreciation of the context in interpreting what is going on.

An alternative approach would have been an ethnographic immersion in the context, such as Samara-Fredericks' (2003) detailed empirical study of organisational change in a manufacturing company in which she explored the day-to-day routines and interactions of six 'strategists', from which she identified six key practices:

"The ability to speak forms of knowledge; mitigate and observe the protocols of human interaction (the moral order); question and query; display appropriate emotion; deploy metaphors and finally; put history 'to work'." (ibid, p. 144)

These practices could equally apply to the work of 'leaders' and differ from the more tangible behaviours and activities delineated in competency frameworks in so far as they represent "intricate, dynamic, fragile and skilled . . . attempts at improvisation' and 'realtime efforts to assemble a plausible narrative' constituting 'embodied, emotional and moral human beings'" (Samara-Fredericks, 2003, p. 168, cited in Carroll et al., 2008, p. 373). The practice is not a tool, but rather a mode of engagement.

Both for practical reasons, in terms of accessing 'leadership situations' and the time required for ethnographic investigation, as well as methodological reasons, in terms of balancing 'insider' and 'outsider' perspectives we opted for a collaborative academic-practitioner enquiry as described in the next section. Through the ability of either group to intervene in the interpretative processes of the other we hoped to reveal a number of 'unready to hand' moments when tacit assumptions and knowledge are surfaced (Weick, 2003).

"The crucial point is that the potential for better theorizing lies in closer scrutiny of those moments where backward and forward views meet, namely, unready-to-hand moments. These are moments when practitioners are interrupted and discover relevancies that had been invisible up to that point." (ibid, p. 468)

Such a view would see management and leadership as a form of 'practical coping' informed by a range of tacit models and assumptions which may only be revealed in unexpected moments of change or crisis. Whilst an appreciation of the inner-workings of processes may not be essential for effective leadership practice (although it may help

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<sup>53</sup> This is a similar argument to that put forward in Chapter 4 about the significance of the researchers being able to draw on their experience as 'practitioners' within the HE context.

enhance the ‘reflexivity’ of agents - see, for example, Cunliffe, 2009) they are important in leadership research and in gaining a fuller appreciation of how leadership is ‘accomplished’.

### ***5.3 Methodology and approach***

The opportunity to conduct a piece of collaborative practice-focussed research arose from an academic-practitioner network facilitated by the Centre for Leadership Studies at the University of Exeter. From 2005-2007 a total of 24 participants (all middle-senior level managers with a responsibility for leadership development) from 12 organisations (of a variety of sizes, sectors and locations) had met 3-4 times per year to discuss issues relating to performance management and leadership development. During this time a number of conceptual and practical issues had surfaced and been discussed, including group identification, speed of response, embracing diversity and leadership learning, appraisal and reward (see Bolden et al., 2008a for further details). In 2008 it was agreed that there would be value in conducting some empirical research in member organisations on how leadership is perceived and accomplished.

#### **5.3.1 Framing the topic**

The research team took this as an opportunity to present the notion of L-A-P as a way of exploring how leadership occurs. The thinking behind this research was heavily informed by the earlier investigation of leadership in HE which highlighted its blended/hybrid nature (Collinson and Collinson, 2006, Gronn, 2008) - constituted through the coming together of individual, social and structural factors within a given context and moment in time (see Bolden et al., 2008c) - as well as the significant rhetorical function of the leadership discourse within large and complex organisations (Bolden et al., 2009c). Through discussion with representatives from five of the most engaged organisations it was decided that the research should focus specifically on *the ways in which leadership practitioners draw upon leadership practices in their day-to-day leadership praxis*.

In designing a methodology we sought to elicit rich descriptions of leadership practice from managers whose roles spanned both operational and strategic areas and to develop an approach that could be replicated across a number of different organisations. We also sought to gain an active involvement of the practitioner members of the group in data collection and interpretation (see Bartunek, 2007 for a discussion of the merits of this approach). As the selected approach needed to marry practicality and rigour it was

decided to develop a semi-structured one-to-one interview schedule<sup>54</sup> that could be completed by members of the network with a selection of staff from their own organisations. A standard briefing was given at the outset (including the purpose of the study, partner organisations and confidentiality agreement) with annotations where necessary to explain questions and concepts<sup>55</sup>.

### 5.3.2 Sampling and access

In total 19 interviews (each approximating 45mins–1hr) were conducted with middle-senior level managers in three different organisations – one concerned with the collection, processing and delivery of ‘real time’ financial, and other, data (DataCo); one with issues of national defence and peacekeeping (DefCo), and one with the processing and distribution of goods (ProCo)<sup>56</sup>. All interviews were conducted on a face-to-face basis over a period of six weeks in the summer of 2008. In order to observe how interviews were being conducted I attended a number of interviews (three in DataCo and one in ProCo). In DataCo and DefCo interviews were recorded and then transcribed in full, whilst at ProCo detailed notes were recorded and written up by the interviewers (with the one interview attended by myself being fully recorded and transcribed). All organisations were of a substantial size (over 10,000 employees). Further details of the sampling and organisational context are given in Table 5.1.

Organisation	‘DataCo’	‘DefCo.’	‘ProCo’
Nature of business	Data processing and delivery	Military	Goods processing and distribution
Business sector	Private company	Public/military	State owned company
Number of interviews	5	5	9
Gender balance (male/female)	4:1	4:1	6:3
Nature of roles (operational/support)	3:2	5:0	6:3
Number of different interviewers (practitioners/academics)	1:1	1:0	2:1

**Table 5.1: Sample demographics**

<sup>54</sup> The relative merits of this approach have been discussed previously in section 4.3.

<sup>55</sup> See Appendix 2a for the interview schedule.

<sup>56</sup> Note that the names of the organisations have been changed to ensure anonymity of responses. As in Study 1, our organisational contacts acted as ‘key informants’, assisting us in gaining access to the organisation, selecting and contacting interviewees, and in helping to interpret and contextualise findings.

### 5.3.3 Analysis and interpretation

A broadly reflexive (Alvesson and Sköldbberg, 2000) approach was taken to the interpretation of findings, comprising a two phase iterative process of individual and collective analysis and reflection as outlined below.

*Phase 1:*

- Note taking (practitioners)
- First-pass coding and identification of themes (academics)

*Phase 2:*

- Presentation and discussion of preliminary findings (academics and practitioners)
- Revision of findings and circulation of research notes (academics and practitioners)
- Further iteration and discussion at seminars (academics and practitioners)

The first phase of analysis involved myself collating and sorting interview notes and transcripts with the qualitative analysis software Nvivo, and subsequently manually coding responses to identify key themes for each of the questions and organisations. An inductive thematic analysis approach was utilised in which themes were identified from the data rather than defined in advance (see Boyatzis, 1998). From this, a detailed research note was compiled with a relatively descriptive account of the main issues, a number of illustrative quotations and details of broad similarities and differences between respondents and organisations.

The second phase involved a series of workshops at which the academics, practitioners and a variety of people not directly involved in the research could discuss findings and possible interpretations. A total of four such workshops were held over a period of five months following data collection, involving a total of about 20 different people<sup>57</sup>. At each stage of this process detailed written notes were prepared by the academic team and circulated to participants. In addition revisions to the initial summary of findings were made on an ongoing basis so as to incorporate the reflections and experiences gained from the practitioner group.

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<sup>57</sup> These workshops varied in format but were informed by focus group methodology in terms of the facilitation of discussion and capturing of responses (see Bryman and Bell, 2007, Chapter 19).

### **5.3.4 Limitations and potential bias**

There are a number of limitations and potential areas of bias that need to be taken into consideration when interpreting the findings from this study. The main issues regard the sampling process and interview methodology, as described below.

#### **a. Sampling**

Firstly organisations were invited to participate on the basis of their membership of an action learning group coordinated by the Centre for Leadership Studies at the University of Exeter, and their commitment to play an active research role within this study (as well as providing a small amount of funding to cover research costs). To that extent, it could be argued, these are organisations that already take leadership and organisational development seriously and can see a value from engaging with an academic institution in exploring these issues.

On a related point, the contact people within each organisation were active members of this group and had been exposed to a number of previous iterations of discussion and reflection on issues relating to leadership development and performance management. To this extent, they may have already been influenced by the ideas explored previously and/or have a broader interest in these issues beyond a direct concern for practical challenges within their organisations (such as their own professional and/or career development).

Thirdly, interview participants were selected by our organisational contacts and, in most cases, interviewed by them. To this extent there may have been some underlying selection bias and/or response bias which it was hard for the academic research team to recognise through limited direct engagement in these processes.

A fourth sampling limitation is that interviewees generally came from one level (i.e. 2-3 levels below the Executive Board) and a limited cross-section of the organisation (as defined by geographic area and/or operational focus) although, as this is the main level at which the analysis is focussed, this should not be a major issue.

A final sampling issue is that the sample size is small, given the size of the organisations being investigated. In effect, this study should be considered as an exploratory inquiry rather than a robust empirical investigation of these organisations.

Together these issues raise questions over the degree to which the findings from this study can be generalised more widely within and beyond the organisations being investigated. Despite this, given the opportunity to verify and interpret findings in

conjunction with our key contacts (each well versed in the principles of interview research) and a range of other informants who were uninvolved in either data collection or study organisations, we had some opportunity to compare our findings more widely.

### **b) Methodology**

The other main potential limitation and/or area of weakness of this study is in terms of methodology. The primary data collection method was self-report interviews with practicing managers. To this extent, it may be possible to challenge the extent to which findings give an accurate account of the behaviours and practices that were being discussed. Indeed, an ethnographic/observational approach may have been preferable given the topic of investigation although it is questionable about the degree to which such an approach would have generated insights into the cognitive processes that informed and accompanied behaviours. Indeed, whilst interviews may not be ideal they do enable a level of insight into the reasoning and thought processes of interviewees that may not have been possible through other approaches. Furthermore, no attempts have been made within the analyses to imply that what people say they do is a direct representation of what they actually do. Indeed, as will be seen, attempts have been made to problematise precisely these issues<sup>58</sup>.

A further methodological challenge I would like to highlight is the use of practitioners to conduct research interviews within their own organisations. Such an approach may be problematic for a number of reasons, including response bias through interviewees moderating their comments in light of their relationship with the interviewer, the interviewer leading or priming respondents in particular ways, and/or the interviewer interpreting responses in the light of their own expectations rather than taking an objective perspective. In the current study, whilst we recognise these dangers, we endeavoured to minimise their potential adverse effect through a) clearly briefing interviewers in advance about interview protocol, b) clearly briefing interviewees about the nature and process of the research (including issues of confidentiality and voluntary participation), c) producing a detailed interview guide with interviewer notes (see

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<sup>58</sup> Whilst a rigorous ‘discourse analysis’ approach (see, for example, Johnstone, 2002) was not utilised due to limited resources and the lack of complete transcripts for all interviews we did seek to explore the manner in which language was being used by interviewees to construct the world around them as this could be considered as one of the key tasks and activities of ‘leaders’. Hence, as suggested by Bryman and Bell (2007, p. 536) “discourse is not just a mirror on the social world around us, but in many ways plays a key role in producing that world. *How* we say things - our phrases, our emphases, the things we leave out - is meant to accomplish certain effects in others. In so doing, we have an impact on others’ perceptions and understandings and as such on their and our reality.” These ideas will be returned to in section 6.7.

Appendix 2), d) having interviews recorded and transcribed where possible and otherwise written up as detailed notes, e) having a researcher (myself) observe/monitor a number of interviews within each organisation (except in DefCo, where this was not possible), f) having the research team conduct the initial analysis, and g) involving the full group (and external members) involved in the subsequent interpretation process (see section 5.5.3 for further details). From my involvement in this process, I would argue that the involvement of practitioners in conducting the interviews greatly enhanced the level of rapport and engagement with interviewees rather than vice versa.

Finally, in a similar way to that outlined in section 4.3.4, the manner in which the academic team was comprised only of males from a research-intensive university and supported and funded by members of the staff/organisational development of participating organisations may have inhibited the possible emergence and/or recognition of counter-narratives. Once again, however, the principle of reciprocity (Bell and Bryman, 2007) featured strongly, as well as a reflexive approach to analysis and interpretation (Alvesson and Sköldberg, 2000).

### ***5.4 Research findings***

As indicated in section 5.3.3, the analysis process comprised two main phases: (1) coding of interview findings by theme and (2) an iterative process of group discussion and interpretation<sup>59</sup>. This section recounts the findings primarily gained from Phase 1 (and verified through discussions in Phase 2). Further insights from Phase 2 are raised during the discussion.

The results have been grouped under four headings: (1) taking on a leadership role; (2) the accomplishment of leadership; (3) organisational structures and processes; and (4) tensions and challenges, to mirror, as far as possible, the structure in the previous chapter and to cover all questions from the interviews.

#### **5.4.1 Taking on a leadership role**

This section incorporates responses from questions 1, 2 and 9 on the interviewee's job role and experience, perception of the leadership role, and learning to lead.

##### **a. Job role and experience**

All interviewees had spent considerable time within their respective organisations and worked their way up through the hierarchy. The shortest period spent within the

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<sup>59</sup> Detailed notes on findings from each of these phases are available on request.



organisation was three years although this was a return to the organisation after a period spent working elsewhere. For those who had spent most of their professional life with the same organisation internal job changes, relocations and networking opportunities offered a breadth of experience and assisted in the development of relationships across the organisation.

As can be seen from Table 5.1 the majority of the interviewees in all three organisations were in primarily operational roles and therefore directly involved in delivering the key outcomes of the organisation. Most did not have a direct customer-facing role although the existence of ‘speed-of-response’ contracts with customers at DataCo ensured that this remained a key driver within the organisation. ProCo likewise, whilst having a less formally stated contract with individual customers, had their overall performance monitored by an external regulator, and hence placed a high degree of emphasis on this aspect of their service.

In terms of variations between roles within the different organisations these can be largely classified in terms of operational and support functions. Between roles there were some significant contextual variations, especially those relating to social and cultural differences between employees at different sites, the differing nature of tasks/roles (some being more project orientated whilst others linked to ongoing activities), and the relative focus on customers and the wider community. Each of these factors was seen to have an impact on the nature of the leadership role and an appropriate style of engagement as highlighted by the quote below.

“[Q. Are there any significant differences between your role and others within the organisation?] Yes, the political aspect of the [general manager] role in [this region]... [is that] we are integrated with the Government. [This region] is heavily unionised and socialist in its politics, words like ‘profit’ don’t go down very well whereas ‘public service’ does. We are used to jobs for life and when we have finished with our jobs we hand them on to someone else in the community.” (ProCo, interview 1)

In this quote, the respondent indicates how the political culture of the region in which s/he operates, alongside a strong trade union influence and close relationship between the organisation and the local community drives the need for both a different vocabulary as well as approach to leadership than would be appropriate in other locations.



**b. Perception of leadership role**

All respondents perceived themselves as having a significant leadership role by virtue of their position within their organisation as indicated in the following quote:

“People who work in this organization will look up to me for direction, for approval in certain regard, and therefore I must be a strong example, both to the young students who come through in terms of what they see as an experienced and capable operator and a responsible officer in the role that I have and the position I hold, and certainly for my staff, they work for me. Although we are all working for [DefCo], they work for me; that's quite clear and therefore I have to hold a leadership responsibility in order to get them to be motivated essentially.” (DefCo, interview 3)

This was even the case for one of the interviewees within DataCo who reported having a leadership role despite having no direct reports:

“I've always had leadership responsibility. Once you've been a team leader or manager or in a specialist role it is hard to say goodbye to the people you are working with, you understood their problems, could share expertise etc. I never felt I left management of the organisation even if I no longer have any direct reports.” (DataCo, interview 2)

In all three organisations leadership was described as being concerned with providing direction towards the achievement of organisational goals/objectives in quite a practical way. There was a particular emphasis on goal achievement in ProCo and DataCo, strongly linked to the time sensitive nature of the business, and a preference for 'straight talking' as indicated below.

“When you do a leadership forum with this group I don't think people like standing on ceremony. They don't like big words. They don't like the bullshit stuff. They want to know where we are, where we're going, and how we're going to get there. They don't want namby pamby visionary stuff that's not real to them. Leadership for me is giving people something that is real. My leadership style is very earthy. It's not something that you'd get out of a textbook. It's around the interaction with people. Do I see it as being a bit dictatorial? Yeah, there's a bit of direction you need to give. I very much want people to have an adult to adult type relationship.” (ProCo, interview 9)

Leadership was seen by all interviewees as essentially about working with people – communicating, building trust, establishing a relationship so that people pull together in pursuit of shared goals. There was an emphasis on delegation rather than command and control in all three organisations although in DefCo the military rank structure increased the likelihood of compliance towards a more command-orientated approach although this was generally not utilised unless entirely necessary, as illustrated below.

“I do consider myself as a [job role] and an Officer as a leader, but not in the charging forward mould, if you like. I don't think of myself naturally as a leader; I think of myself in terms of someone who wants to do a good job for the people that work for her and that's what leadership is to me – that's the leadership aspect for me. It's directing my people to achieve what I want to achieve but at the same time ensuring that they come in to work feeling valued, feeling that they can add value. And I am comfortable that if they are enjoying themselves, they feel motivated and they feel valued, even though I might be, as is the case, on occasion, thinking ‘crikey, this is really hard work’ and there are times when my staff will come and see me and I think ‘this is the last thing I want to do, given everything that I've got on my plate’, but I know it's important. So it's the people aspect. So in that respect, I see it is very much leadership, management of people and ensuring that's my key responsibility. What I tell my staff is ‘the only thing I lose sleep over in my job is staff reports’ because if I can't recognise their worth throughout the year, even if I haven't been able to see them as often as I can, I'll find that difficult to live with.” (DefCo, interview 4)

### **c. Learning to lead**

In all three organisations interviewees claimed to have learnt to lead primarily through experience and example - often learning from bad leaders and experiences as much as good ones. Trial and error and learning from mistakes were also seen as important learning opportunities although in many cases respondents claimed to have insufficient time for reflection.

“[Q. To what extent are people within the organisation encouraged to reflect on learning and experience?] I think if I'm honest it's a nice aspiration to do but the pace of life is such that I think that's very often something that's overlooked. Occasionally if things go badly then there may be an encouragement to reflect and to look at why things have gone badly but generally speaking, if something is good enough then we move on to the next thing and I don't think we always

have time to reflect. I don't think we create the time to reflect because we're always busy being busy and I recognise myself that we're so busy being busy that actually if we'd sat down and we'd resolved some of the issues that weren't going quite so well, then perhaps we'd be less busy trying to unpick some of the problems that we've created." (DefCo, interview 2)

There was some formal leadership/management training in all three organisations but it was generally considered of limited significance other than for generic skills/knowledge acquisition. Formalised feedback and review sessions in all organisations gave managers the opportunity to review/reflect on leadership and experience but generally these were rather ad hoc and unsystematic. There was perceived to be a general focus in all three organisations on meeting performance objectives as opposed to 'leadership' per se, as described below.

"To give you an example, we can get dragged out for a week and be away from the area and then get a real shoe in for performance, given that we haven't been in the area and why we don't know the metrics and the numbers [...] One thing I find amusing is we're constantly challenged with the fact that we are [general] managers, we are not operational managers. That's bullshit. We are operational managers because we don't have the capability or we have too many metrics and don't focus on the six key ones, whatever it might be, there's these two huge pulls, the [general managers] do not get caught up in the dogma of the operation, yours is strategy, yours is looking forward, yours is looking over the horizon, how do you get to the horizon. It's not in the dogma of have you cleared your work plan today, have you hit your budget, what's your quality results like. Every behaviour and every forum that you go to drags you not into strategy, horizon, general management, it's focused on absolute detailed dogma and testing and probing why don't you know every single metric." (ProCo, interview 9)

Of the various approaches to supporting and developing leaders mentoring was seen as a useful way for sharing experience and for enabling people to talk through challenging situations and dilemmas. This gives a less formalised, and perhaps less threatening, environment for personal development, as well as being a core part of the role of the leader him/herself.

"[Q. How do people learn to lead within your organisation?] Well obviously by virtue of the structure. The guys will have been through some form of

leadership or management training both military and civilian [...] that's sort of the base line of what we have but thereafter it's very much a question of mentorship, and I'm a firm believer that at all levels people need to be mentored .... [I see this] as a continuous process in that you're forever giving people the benefit of your wisdom, which they may or may not choose to use, and I see my job very much as developing the next me, because at some point somebody is going to have to succeed me [...] So I think it's a process of continuous growth and we all have a responsibility for that." (DefCo, interview 2)

### **d. Summary**

This section has presented findings relating to interviewees' experiences of taking on a leadership role. Key findings are summarised below.

- All interviewees had spent a considerable time within their respective organisations; most were in operational leadership roles; and a number reported the need to adapt their leadership style to fit the contextual requirements of their part of the organisation.
- All interviewees saw themselves as holding a substantial leadership role in terms of providing direction towards the achievement of organisational objectives. Leadership was largely considered as about mobilising staff to work together in the pursuit of shared goals, and dependent on effective communication, building trust and establishing relationships. In each organisation there was a preference for delegation over command, although there was also a recognition that styles may need to adapt according to the nature of the task.
- Interviewees reported to have learnt to lead predominantly through experience although, it was reported, that there was not much time for reflection. Formalised leadership and management development had been helpful in some cases, especially in terms of receiving feedback. Mentoring was also cited as a particularly helpful process.

### **5.4.2 The accomplishment of leadership**

This section incorporates responses from questions 3 and 4 on the interviewee's perception of how leadership is accomplished on a day-to-day basis within their part of the organisation, who is involved, and the impact of informal social groups and relations.

**a. How leadership is accomplished**

In terms of accomplishing leadership, most respondents saw their role as comprising two main elements: 1) defining and ensuring that organisational objectives are met, and 2) communicating with and motivating their staff.

Most respondents within each organisation described their contribution as translating and cascading strategic direction/intent, set at the most senior level of the organisation, and converting this into operational deliverables through the engagement and coordination of their staff as indicated in the following two quotes from interviewees in operational roles.

“I get direction from our boss. He sets his strategic objectives and I then translate that into, if you like, the operational objectives that we have to achieve with the [sites]. My team then translate that into actionables, both for them individually and also in tasking that they sent out.” (DefCo, interview 5)

“Leadership is getting the most out of the talent you have within the organisation, achieving the goals you set out. Summarised as getting the most out of the team and delivering to the objectives that have been cascaded to you.” (DataCo, interview 1)

A similar description was given by staff in support roles, although framed in a slightly different way, as shown in the following quote.

“I think a lot of the practical elements [of accomplishing leadership] are really around defining vision and setting a high level description of where we want to get to as an organisation at all different levels, starting at the [DataCo] as a whole, right down to relatively small groups of the organisation that define that vision of what they want to achieve. Turning those into tangible objectives and where appropriate trying to incentivise those objectives. I think that’s a lot of how leadership is driven on a day to day basis. There’s also a personal angle to this which is to do with one to one meetings between line managers and their reports where, sometimes quite explicitly the objectives are discussed, but certainly the immediate priorities which are leading towards those objectives and are discussed on a regular basis and direction is set and adjusted through those relationships. Certainly that’s a large part of how leadership works.” (DataCo, interview 4)

Thus, despite the relatively senior level of all the interviewees their capacity for leadership was largely framed and constrained by organisational objectives agreed at board level. To this extent, it may be difficult to disentangle these descriptions of leadership from more traditional conceptions of management<sup>60</sup>.

With regard to the leadership ‘practices’ that respondents described using in their leadership work, in the course of the interviews we identified a number of these - some of which were quite formal and implemented at an organisational level, whilst others were more personalised and informal. At an organisational level, practices included the use of technology (for example management information systems that capture performance data), and IT systems (such as emails and the intranet) that facilitate communication. Standardised organisational systems and processes, such as HR frameworks for reward and progression, as well as development and appraisal systems (including the PDR process, leadership development, and the application of leadership and/or management competency frameworks) were also important in monitoring and rewarding performance. Meetings (both formal and informal) were also cited as important mechanisms for interacting with staff and reaching decisions, as were company newsletters, bulletins, etc. These will be discussed further in section 5.4.3a.

At an individual level practices included ‘walking the floor’; social interaction outside of work; and personal prioritisation of activities (the social aspects will be discussed further in 5.4.2c). Much of this was about building relationships, trust and an awareness of issues affecting staff, as outlined below.

“From my perspective, all I tend to do is walk the floor. Whenever I can, I go down and see how the guys are doing; see how the course is doing; see if they've got any issues... for the most part it's the informal route that works quite well.”  
(DefCo, interview 1)

One interviewee also spoke of an approach s/he termed ‘be nice Friday’, in which s/he set-aside time each week to recognise and highlight the success of staff members.

“I have ‘be nice Friday’. On a Friday, I have some time that says, who am I going to be nice to, who am I going to reward and recognise? If I didn't do that, I wouldn't find time to stick my head above and think, who's done a cracking job or something really good this week? It's not just me that does it, it's [X] that manages me, but I am very conscious of doing it, that we find an excuse, on a

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<sup>60</sup> These points are discussed further in section 6.2.

Friday, and I try not to only do it on a Friday, but I always try to find an excuse to say to people, well done.” (ProCo, interview 9)

Whilst this might sound quite contrived it appears to be a personal response to the challenge of scheduling time in a busy week to focus on important interpersonal aspects of the job. Together the practices described appear to offer a range of techniques that enable interviewees to carry out their job and to reinforce their role as a ‘leader’. It is possible to distinguish between relatively systematic organisational practices (concerned primarily with the communication and achievement of performance targets) and more individualised activities (concerned primarily with building a sense of community and shared purpose)<sup>61</sup>.

### **b. Who is involved**

There was felt to be a strong team approach in all three organisations, with key players at different levels responsible for cascading and defining objectives. Given the level of interviewees within their organisations most were nominally in charge of a team although they worked closely with other members of this group to agree and achieve objectives. In most cases, individual responsibilities were quite clearly allocated to different team members.

In terms of leadership influence there was also a perceived need to work with and to influence key stakeholders within and beyond the organisation through a mixture of top-down, bottom-up and horizontal leadership. In ProCo, for example, as outlined in 5.4.1a there was a strong trade union and political influence within one part of the organisation that affected the way in which leadership was talked about and enacted. To this extent, both these groups could be considered as contributing in some way as to how leadership is accomplished.

In DataCo there was also a high level of customer influence as a result of the service contract agreements and a number of high-level strategic relationships. Customer service targets at ProCo defined general performance targets, monitored by an independent watchdog, and drove a similar tendency to heavily monitor performance outcomes.

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<sup>61</sup> These forms of practice will be discussed further in section 5.5.



DefCo placed a strong emphasis on the ‘mission command’<sup>62</sup> approach whereby operational decisions were devolved as far down the chain of command as possible, thus implicating potentially quite junior staff in operational-level leadership and decision making as indicated below.

“I believe very much in mission command and I like to set broad objectives without specifics, if you like. I like to give my team ‘Here’s my broad intent; now you go and deliver that how you see fit’ [...] I think you give broad intent to your team and they then translate that into actionables and deliverables, without constantly referring back and saying ‘What is it you actually want me to do?’. I think that is intent. ‘Here’s my broad intent; deliver that how you see fit’.” (DefCo, interview 5)

Despite differences in terminology such practices were also observable in the other two organisations, especially DataCo where it was described thus:

“I would say that there’s a structure in [DataCo] around mission analysis, so that is then set at the strategic level, so at board level, and then each business group is tasked to then take that mission and to interpret that mission for what their group’s contribution will be to deliver on. That then gets drilled down into objectives and target setting at each level of the organisation. Then at the point where it reaches an individual contributor that would be used to very much define and shape their objectives and targets.” (DataCo, interview 5)

Within each organisation high-level strategic decision making remained predominantly the domain of the top leadership team but operational leadership, in terms of how to deliver these outcomes, was distributed quite widely throughout the organisation and adapted to the specific context. In both ProCo and DataCo the CEO was seen as a key advocate and role model for leadership in bringing about strategic change.

### **c. Impact of formal and informal groups**

In all three organisations social groups and a sense of shared identity were seen as key to ensuring effective leadership. Group membership was often shaped by formal structures and tasks (i.e. dictated by which work group you belong to and who you work

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<sup>62</sup> Mission Command is described as “a philosophy and has four enduring tenets. It requires timely decision-making, a clear understanding of the superior’s intention, an ability on the part of the subordinates to meet the superior’s remit, and the commander’s determination to see the plan through to a successful conclusion. It promotes decentralised command, freedom and speed of action and initiative but is responsive to superior direction.” (Jupp, 2006, p. 33, citing British Defence Doctrine)



alongside on a regular basis) but was supported and facilitated through informal and social interaction both in and outside of work.

“The social element does influence leadership in the sense that groups get formed because of shared interests (socially or work related). You’re more likely to get influenced by other managers in similar parts of the organisation in different locations, and also to draw on other peoples contacts. Team leaders get more influenced by other team leaders that they work with or interact with socially. The ability to get things done reflects on the ability to make contacts, connections or networks within the organisation. Whilst there is no formal way to build the network, opportunities do arise to meet other people from the organisation. For example our [senior management training event] draws together 40 people from around the globe and different parts of the business, and is a good opportunity to network and make new contacts.” (DataCo, interview 2)

In all three organisations there was mention of regular social gatherings after work, often in a pub, along with sports and other groups that staff could choose to become involved with. In DefCo this was perceived to be a core part of the organisational culture and complements the formal lines of responsibility as outlined below.

“I think it’s vital... particularly in our business which is very much a people business. The formal groupings are there and they’re formed naturally out of frankly our culture. Our culture is based upon communications orders groups. I have a lot of working groups to achieve what it is that we need to do which in effect is not so much a social group, but it’s a formal working group where there is social interaction. So that’s a key part of it because to my mind we’re dealing with people largely and getting people to do stuff that generally needs people to buy into it and be committed to what it is and I see that as a way of buying in. In terms of informal, I think by virtue of our organisation being based where we are... we tend to socialise together anyway there’s an awful lot of communication and interaction, work effectively work done in the bar type activity which sounds a little bit haphazard but actually what it does is, if you like, it emphasises some of the message we’re trying to get across. In some instances it acts to explain where some of the dry more formal stuff doesn’t necessarily hit the mark. We’re able in the bar to sort of get down to basics and discuss it in terms of what it means. In that sense because we’re part of a community I think the informal falls out of the formal.” (DefCo, interview 2)

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In DataCo team goals and competitions (usually work performance related) are used to strengthen team identity and cohesion and are particularly embraced within parts of the world such as India where the incentives (both financial and esteem) are highly sought after.

Given that many interviewees had been with their organisations for a long time and to a large extent worked their way up through the ranks, some also retained active social links with people in other parts of the organisation as part of their approach to keeping in touch with what was going on in the organisation.

“I joined the company in 1985, came straight from school. I joined on the [trainee] scheme, which was a block release type project with a placement and then you go to college. I did that for a few years... I [still] talk [things] through with other [trainees] from 25 years ago. We talk about where the company is, how it feels for them, what they look at when they look forward and what they think is great, etc. They’ve had the same opportunities and exposure as me. They’re still with the company now. It’s by choices. What they see and sense doesn’t make them think, I’d like to do that. One of the reasons is because of the turnover. Why would I set myself up for that only to get the turnover of managers. I think we’re in a time warp if we think that frontline people don’t hear that language. Most of them like the affiliation of having the same person to build a relationship and confidence.” (ProCo, interview 9)

Whilst developing a sense of personal connection with people through organised and informal opportunities for socialising was considered essential by all interviewees one or two did mention a potential downside given their line management responsibilities and indicated a need for balance, as indicated below.

“I think if you're over-familiar, in other words if the social aspect is too easy, then you get into difficult areas, because if you have to give somebody a task which is not particularly either pleasant or welcome, and you know somebody too well and you've shared too many good times with them, if you like, then there's that little bit of erosion of being able to give out the hard task. On the other hand, if the environment is completely sterile and the leader cuts himself off and doesn't do any socialising with his employees or whatever you want to call them, then I think you won't get the same response either. So there has to be some middle ground, and I think finding that middle ground is difficult.” (DefCo, interview 3)

The ‘social capital’ (Day, 2000, Adler and Kwon, 2002) built up through networking and informal contact offers a powerful resource for people in leadership positions through the information it gives them, the opportunities for feedback, and the ability to build and trust and rapport.

“The formal stuff sets boundaries and direction. The informal can be very powerful and transformational. This creates trust and enables risk taking.”  
(ProCo, interview 5)

This quote is particularly illuminating to the extent in which it highlights a distinction between formal (organisational) practices and informal (personal) practices.

### **d. Summary**

In this section I have reported findings on how leadership is considered to be accomplished. Key findings are as follows.

- Most interviewees saw their contribution as a leader as translating and cascading strategic direction/intent (defined at board level) and converting this into operational deliverables. To this extent it was hard to distinguish many of these accounts from those more typically associated with ‘management’.
- In terms of leadership ‘practices’, two broad categories could be identified: 1) *formal/organisational* (e.g. management information systems, IT communication systems, HR frameworks, meetings); and 2) *informal/personal* (e.g. social interaction outside work, ‘walking the floor’, and ‘be nice Friday’). Whilst the former category is concerned primarily with communication and achieving performance targets, the latter is concerned with building a sense of community and a sense of shared purpose.
- In each organisation a variety of stakeholders could be identified who contribute to leadership in some way. Within the organisation these included the interviewees themselves, their senior managers, colleagues and staff. Outside the organisation they included customers, trade unions and policy makers.
- Within each organisation there were attempts to devolve operational leadership responsibility as far down the hierarchy as possible (mirroring a ‘mission command’ approach) although high-level strategic decision making remained predominantly the domain of the senior leadership team.

- In both commercial organisations (DataCo and ProCo) the CEO was perceived to be a key advocate for leadership and endeavouring to use it to bring about organisational change.
- In each organisation social groups and a shared sense of identity were seen as key to ensuring effective leadership. Opportunities for socialisation (both inside and outside work) were seen to contribute in a direct way to the manner in which leadership occurs and a means through which leaders can keep in touch with views from across the organisation.

### **5.4.3 Organisational systems and processes**

This section incorporates aspects of responses from questions 3, 5 and 7 on the interviewee's perception of which organisational systems and processes support the accomplishment of leadership, how leadership is recognised and rewarded, and how it is talked about within the organisation.

#### **a. Systems and processes that support leadership**

All three organisations had regular forums for discussion, communication and decision making. One of the most important of these was considered to be meetings where participants had the opportunity for face-to-face contact with their colleagues, managers and subordinates. The weekly management team and staff meetings were seen to be particularly important forums for communication. Other important channels (particularly at DataCo and ProCo) were regular newsletters/updates circulated for communication as well as extensive performance management systems for monitoring progress. All three organisations indicated a high dependency on the use of technology in capturing and conveying management information although this was most advanced at DataCo and ProCo where real-time performance measures were monitored on an ongoing basis.

“[Q. What organisation systems/process do you use to support leadership?] We use all communications channels, daily weekly, monthly, annual planning sessions. We also carry out face-to-face discussions and support it all with a monthly newsletter. Our ‘work time learning and listening’ sessions, daily conference calls and daily huddles in units underpin our leadership activity.”  
(ProCo, interview 1)

In each organisation there was some attempt to interface these systems with organisational processes for HR, finance, etc. The rank structure in DefCo underlined

the chain of command and was supported by the 'Mission command' philosophy as a framework for delegation. Similar practices were observed at DataCo although not labelled in this way (see section 5.4.2b).

Despite the prevalence and visibility of formal reporting lines in each organisation (especially DefCo and ProCo) there was an awareness of the danger of creating organisational silos and the need for some form of horizontal/lateral coordination. The following quote from ProCo indicates how informal socialisation (as discussed in 5.4.2c) may help to ameliorate the rigidity of silo structures.

“We are seen as different groups which creates functional silos and an exclusive social identity. The more informal we make them the more inclusive they become. They are less grade-based and they get to see leaders as people as opposed to bosses.” (ProCo, interview 1)

### **b. How leadership is recognised and rewarded**

In all three organisations it was felt that performance was recognised and rewarded rather than leadership per se. This was particularly the case in ProCo and DataCo where clearly defined and measurable performance targets were set for most aspects of the business and the role of interviewees was generally that of ensuring these were met.

“Achieving targets and results rather than how you achieve them [is what is rewarded]. Results come first, how you do it second.” (ProCo, interview 3)

“Some of the immediate outcomes of good leadership aren't always measurable. Rewards at all levels are tangible - i.e. reward for meeting targets, levels of customer service etc. You could have a good leader that fractionally misses their targets but has invested more in their people and done more for the business but doesn't necessarily get recognised for it. The destination is important, not how you made the journey.” (DataCo, interview 2)

The distinction between 'performance' and 'leadership' is interesting in the extent to which it points towards a possible tension between organisational processes. A number of interviewees highlighted a tendency for their organisations to focus on achieving short-term performance targets, whilst they, themselves, saw a trade off against developing people and relationships over time. This was particularly the case in ProCo with a very clearly defined 24 hour work-cycle that was repeated day after day. DataCo experienced a similar pattern of work in some aspects of its business and the high degree of customer responsiveness drove a focus on speed and action rather than

reflection and debate. The work pattern was more varied at DefCo although there remained a tendency in each organisation for reward and recognition systems to focus predominantly on the operational and political aspects of the job rather than maintaining a good relationship with staff.

In each organisation there were a variety of reward mechanisms but these were primarily linked to the promotion and grade structure. ProCo and DataCo also operated a bonus system. Rewards were mainly based at an individual rather than group level. Each organisation operated a regular performance review (PDR) process (mainly monthly) for managers and staff. Despite this, there was a sense in each of the three organisations, as discussed earlier, that it is performance rather than leadership that is rewarded.

“I’m not sure that we do reward [leadership] other than in terms of competition for promotion. That is its own reward, I suppose, that if you perform well, then promotion comes along. It’s a meritocracy. But there’s no other, as far as I can see, incentive reward for leadership.” (DefCo, interview 5)

With regard to the distinction between ‘excellent’ and ‘moderate’ leadership this was generally regarded as providing a clear sense of direction, inspiration and support to staff, whilst still meeting performance targets, as indicated in the following quotes.

“I think moderate leadership is: you get the job done and not much else, if you like. So, people are content, but nothing special. Good or excellent leadership I think is that you have the ability to put in the extra mile, when you need to, morale is high, people are happy and you start to get people wanting to come to that particular team or that Unit, because they've heard it's doing well and it's good and that people are happy there, so they think "Right, well I'd like to join that outfit; sounds like a good outfit; sounds like a good place to work" and so I think that's a key issue.” (DefCo, interview 3)

“Moderate Leadership is achieving the numbers whereas excellent leadership is when teams are changing willingly without going through the change curve. Excellent is also when we are good at the what and the how. The link to reward is not particularly strong.” (ProCo, interview 1)

“Excellent leadership is someone who is able to achieve the vision set by the CEO and go beyond what has been set. Moderate leadership is achieving what has been set in terms of performance and results.” (DataCo, interview 3)

Each of these quotes illustrates a predominantly qualitative rather than quantitative distinction between moderate and excellent leadership. They illustrate the importance of ‘getting the job done’ whilst creating a more engaging sense of purpose and contribution for all staff. They also, however, associate the accomplishment of leadership with the actions of leaders.

### c. Summary

This section has presented findings on organisational systems and processes to support and facilitate leadership. Key findings are summarised below.

- Each organisation has regular forums for discussion, communication and decision-making. Of these, the most important were considered to be management and staff meetings.
- In each organisation there were attempts to align internal systems with wider organisational processes (such as HR and finance) so as to facilitate horizontal/lateral coordination and minimise the risk of silo formation.
- In each organisation it was felt that performance is recognised and rewarded rather than leadership per se. Reward systems are primarily linked to the promotion and grading structure. A tension was evident in a number of cases between the achievement of short and long-term aims.
- The distinction between moderate and excellent leadership was largely a qualitative one – in terms of fostering a clear and inspiring sense of direction, whilst also meeting organisational performance targets.

#### **5.4.4 Tensions and challenges**

The final section of the results summarises some of the main tensions and challenges reported in describing leadership at the participating organisations. It is informed by responses to questions 6, 7 and 8 on what happens in times of change, crisis and/or uncertainty; perceived differences between the rhetoric and reality of leadership and the main challenges faced by leaders. These were also themes that drew most attention during the Phase 2 discussion of findings and will be explored in greater depth in the discussion in section 5.5.

**a. What happens in times of change, crisis or uncertainty?**

This question was included to test the assertion by Weick (2003) that it is in the moments when practitioners are interrupted in their work that we can gain insights into the underlying assumptions that inform their practice.

This was one of the questions where the greatest degree of difference could be seen between individuals and organisations. In ProCo the question was generally accepted as relating to difficulties in meeting short-term operational performance targets and perceived by all as leading to a more controlling style of leadership with greater intervention from the top of the organisation as indicated below.

“We become more autocratic when we shouldn’t be... It is almost natural when it occurs, we revert to type.” (ProCo, interview 1)

“People retrench, close up, become less collaborative, more defensive and focus on the short term... Demands for data is driven centrally, empowerment vaporises, more interference from the centre... It becomes intrusive, more direct and short term, more intense, stifles development and stifles problem solving too.” (ProCo, interview 2)

In periods of organisational change there was also perceived to be a retrenchment to existing silos despite the benefits that may occur through a more collaborative approach.

“In a crisis, people go to type and resort to command and control. The same things happen in times of organisational change. People become very siloed in their approach. There needs to be much more cross working. A lot of resistance exists – the ‘not invented here syndrome’. There needs to be much more sharing of what good [leadership] looks like... there needs to be diversity in leadership, but mimicking the leader occurs in times of change.” (ProCo, interview 8)

Each of the quotes above indicates a possible evaporation of leadership in times of crisis whereby it is replaced by ‘management’ and/or ‘command’. Despite this rather negative image, however, one interviewee indicated that operational crises can focus leadership activity in a positive way that may be difficult to sustain during more stable periods.

“Leadership styles change in crisis - they become less collaborative... The focus is much more on the leader standing forward and taking control in the crisis... Things can go either way, we are best in times of crisis than longer term ‘crisis-less’ situations.” (ProCo, interview 4)



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In DataCo a similar focus on operational performance was evident and, like ProCo, a greater tendency towards directive leadership although this time grounded in effective communication and clarity of direction. Due to the importance of timely provision of data to clients there was an advanced crisis planning process that largely defined which activities to undertake.

“Rigidity to process kicks in - we do this reasonably well and plan for crisis. There is a framework in place to address [most] crisis situations.” (DataCo, interview 1)

Within this organisation there was also talk of response to personal change or crisis for staff, which demonstrated a level of sympathy and concern for employees.

“Crisis generally brings out the best in our leaders, particularly people crisis. [Following some recent deaths in the organisation] tragedy has bought out good leadership skills. When anyone leaves they might not discuss career or performance but always talk about people they worked with and those they will miss/leave behind. Local culture has empathy for colleagues.” (DataCo, interview 2)

Despite the importance placed on communication, planning for crisis and demonstrating a level of empathy, however, the dependence on senior level decision making may have an adverse effect on the quality of decisions, as suggested below.

“I suppose, one of the challenges here is that, at times of crisis and uncertainty, knowing the correct direction can become more difficult, so while there’s a premium put on making correct decisions and being more directive and moving in to action more quickly, that can be a more difficult thing to do at times when actually the correct direction is not widely recognised and actually you may need to take time and consult a lot of people to work out what the right answer is. There is a tension there but the evidence is that actually a bias toward actions and making quicker decisions during a time of crisis is probably the best thing to do but perhaps a bit risky.” (DataCo, interview 4)

DefCo was the organisation that demonstrated the greatest difference in responses to this question. Within this organisation, perhaps due to the nature of their work, the occurrence of crisis and uncertainty was widely accepted. Like the other organisations, it was generally agreed that in such situations a more controlling approach was adopted,

however interviewees expressed the need to balance this against a more caring approach at other times.

“I think leadership has to ebb and flow between the nice, soft, cuddly and the harsh ‘get this done or else’ and you have to move between the two as you see fit. And you can't do too much of either, frankly. You've got to find the right balance. So I think, when in times of difficulty you move away from the softness to the more, the harder approach and I think that's when cracks can occur, because people don't like it. They don't like being – we're all in the military, but we don't actually like being told what to do, funnily enough. And so, if you continually take the hard view and there's no sort of comeback to you, and you ride roughshod over people all the time, then you will get - the cracks will show because they stop wanting to work for you because they don't seem to get any thanks for what they do, and they come in every day and its just ‘get this done or else’ sort of regime.” (DefCo, interview 3)

In this organisation a number of interviewees endeavoured to distinguish between crisis and change situations. Crisis was largely conceived of as a critical (often life-threatening) situation that demanded strong and decisive leadership, whereas change was a longer-term process.

“What’s a crisis? I’m not too sure I can answer that. I’m having difficulty relating to a crisis. [Q. Take a specific example...] I saw decisive action, I saw people sort of thinking outside the box and dealing with their own anxieties in some instances in a more positive way and others just going to jelly. I saw people coming to the fore that were able to deal with chaos and be able to make sense of it and basically to reassure and to motivate others that things were going to be alright. And again that was executed at all levels; just because the individuals who were on the ground clearly were going to have the more immediate issues but I saw evidence of that even back at the UK where people’s reaction was almost of shock and not really knowing what to do even... in some instances people became a little bit reluctant and of course that’s a time when there needs to be a certain amount of leadership to be able to reassure people ... enable them to go and do what they need to do.” (DefCo, interview 2)

In each case, the interviewees stressed the importance of good communication and maintaining a sense of common direction within the team.

“I think fundamentally what changes when things become more uncertain is that there is far more work required I think in terms of building the team and working the team to make them recognise that actually the fact that they don’t necessarily understand individually, you need to build some faith in that where we’re going is still right [...] I think more focus on the team aspects and some of the maintenance elements of your team become more critical, with almost the reassurance because not everybody’s quite so comfortable with uncertainty and ambiguity because it’s uncomfortable for them.” (DefCo, interview 2)

“Communication, if you don't communicate change, then you've lost it and you won't get the support of your subordinates, because none of us like change and that includes people like myself. And so you have to be able to persuade...” (DefCo, interview 3)

In each of the cases above the response to this question was strongly framed by the context and tended to result in a shift towards an expectation of specific individuals taking an active and decisive leadership role (supporting the research of Klein et al., 2006 on ‘dynamic delegation’). Furthermore, whilst the discussion in this section has treated these accounts at face-value the attempt to construct a sense of context could be regarded as a practice in its own right (Grint, 2005b).

### **b. The rhetorical use of ‘leadership’ within organisations**

There was a sense within all three organisations that leadership may serve an important rhetorical function in terms of focussing attention on particular behaviours and activities. It had become somewhat of a ‘buzzword’ in ProCo and DataCo, strongly linked to the culture change programmes within each and actively endorsed by the CEO, as indicated below.

“Lots of buzzwords [are being] thrown around. We’re no longer forming management teams now forming leadership teams instead. When did we make the transition from management team to leadership team – is it purely a name change or is there a difference between management and leadership? Much of this is down to the merger and roll out of the new structure/team with reference to using the phrase ‘leadership’. Do people really understand what leadership is really about or is this the latest buzzword?” (DataCo, interview 2)

Indeed the renaming of ‘management teams’ as ‘leadership teams’ had also recently happened at ProCo.

“Just recently we’ve changed the name of an area management team to an area leadership team. That’s fairly recent. Same thing on a [regional] level, we’re no longer called the [general manager’s] forum, it’s called [new name]. For me, we could call it whatever we bloody well want, most people down there will want to see, it’s about how you behave, how you respond to them, and what you do for them. That’s the most important bit for me. That’s why I’m not hung up on whether I’m called a [general manager] or I’m called an [operations manager]. Just don’t try and tell me I’m one or the other when actually everything that we’re doing is down one line. You’re trying to kid me and trying to play, this is my view, a psychological thing. It’s in the words and they’re trying to play a game that says we now want you to have a more broad, generalised role and wider accountability.” (ProCo, interview 9)

From the accounts given by interviewees it could be argued that notions of ‘leadership’ were more deeply embedded within DefCo but discussed in different ways depending on the context. In particular interviewees indicated that this was a challenge when interacting with people from civilian organisations as indicated below.

“I think the fundamentals of leadership - vision, direction, communication - the sort of terminology that people understand and can relate to, I think is all very normal and it’s what they’ve grown up with and that’s what they’ve been used to. Interestingly, use of that sort of language tends to turn off our civilian colleagues which again means that we very often have to adapt our approach to leadership because you’re dealing with a different population in many instances. The use of management buzz words and leadership theories tends to be treated somewhat with disdain, it tends to be seen as the same thing being dressed up in slightly different ways, the Emperor’s new clothes if you will. ‘Management bollocks’ is a term that is very often used for this type of stuff and that’s largely I think because of the nature of the community that we’re in, which is very much task orientated and not so worried about the process and intellectualizing leadership is seen almost as being an end in itself and not actually contributing necessarily to what it is we do because the final analysis it’s all about achieving something in our world and understanding how that is delivered, isn’t necessarily high on the agenda. But I do think the language tends to switch people off, we have been very very careful but equally there’s a lot of people that think they understand leadership and of course you ask two different people,

and you'll get two different perspectives on it, hence the reason why we're doing this." (DefCo, interview 2)

There were some variations between interviewees in the degree to which they saw a difference in how leadership was talked about within the organisation and how it was experienced (the 'rhetoric' and 'reality'). In most cases, however, there was a sense of some sort of disconnect and within all three organisations this was primarily with regards to the relative importance placed upon people as opposed to tasks.

"I think increasingly, despite, some of the rhetoric about people being our most important assets, and things like that, and the continued message that people do care, we do care etc, etc, we're losing that, and people are not paying enough focus. I personally believe that that's one of the indications, one of the results, of why we're currently [facing...] some of the manning difficulties we currently have. If people are that important, we need to remember our people." (DefCo, interview 1)

"We espouse 'people are at the core of the business,' the reality is we reward financial performance." (ProCo, interview 3)

There was also, to some extent, a tension over the degree to which leadership was regarded as a dispersed activity or something just associated with particular roles within the organisation.

"Yes, the difference is that you don't have to be in a positional power of leadership to be the leader. Sometimes leadership is exhibited by team mates rather than the team manager – sometimes a good thing, sometimes not. You can't necessarily assume that leadership is just discharged by the position." (DataCo, interview 2)

"I think that a lot of the rhetoric about leadership is focussed on change and high profile change and while that is very important and has been particularly important over the last few years, I think the rhetoric probably understates the importance of managing continuity. So I think there a lot of unsung leadership that goes on which is primarily around maintaining service to customers which actually is not highly visible and doesn't get talked about much but is incredibly important." (DataCo, interview 4)

Contextual variations meant that the divide was greatest for strategic/central leadership where it is experienced as 'remote'. Operational leadership within units generally made

better use of face-to-face interaction and was seen as more concerned about people<sup>63</sup>. In ProCo there was a sense of overwhelming focus on short term operational performance and a culture of compliance, risk aversion and competition.

### **c. Main challenges for leaders**

Interviewees from all three organisations cited communication as a key challenge. This was particularly true for those who were somewhat remote from their staff. In DataCo, for example, a number of respondents held ‘global’ roles in which they managed a team of staff located in different places around the world. To this extent, opportunities for face-to-face communication were extremely limited and they had to depend on the relationships established during rare face-to-face meetings. A similar issue occurred for leaders at DefCo, where staff would be deployed into the field for periods of time outside the direct locality of their leader.

In ProCo the issue of physical distance generally emerged in a somewhat different manner, with several interviewees responsible for managing very large groups of staff across a geographical region. In this case it was very hard for them to see staff and sites regularly and so they needed to maximise the impact when they did, as indicated in the following quote by a manager who described having an ‘earthy’ relationship with his/her staff.

“[Q. How do you have an ‘earthy’ relationship with 4500 people?] You don’t do it with that many people. You do it at the touch points you get to. You make sure that you do have touch points. For example, I’ll do a delivery next week with a union rep who gave me a verbal kicking when I went and saw her. So I thought, I’ll test you now. Rightly, she gave me a kicking over something we did from here and I thought I wouldn’t leave it there. I said I’d come back and see her. I can’t do that all of the time. But you use that as an example. So suddenly it’ll be ‘the [general manager’s] out on [operations]!’ For them, it’s quite groundbreaking. For me it’s about how you manage the relationship to get the best performance and the best appreciation from that individual. Not just the individual, because I know she’ll be of influence over the unit and I’ll use that relationship in weeks and months after. We’ve got to be seen to be able to do that. So as a senior leader, it means you do the strategy thing but sometimes you’ve got to do the earthy bit. You can’t do it all the time but you do need to

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<sup>63</sup> This is similar to Alimo-Metcalfe and Alban-Metcalfe’s (2005) concept of distant and nearby transformational leadership as mentioned in section 2.3.2b.

dip your toe back into that to get people understanding that you're prepared to do that. It's finding a professional tone and language that you use with them, that they understand." (ProCo, interview 9)

Additional challenges to those already discussed included the demand for a high speed of response (in all 3 organisations) and customer responsiveness (ProCo and DataCo), each of which meant that there may be insufficient time for wide-scale consultation prior to taking decisions.

### d. Summary

In this section I have presented findings on tensions and challenges. Three main themes were explored, including the response to crisis and change, the rhetoric and reality of leadership, and the challenges of communication. Key points are summarised below.

- The first set of tensions related to issues of *control and autonomy*. Within each organisation it was recognised that in times of crisis, change and/or uncertainty there was a tendency for increased centralised control and intervention to occur. This was experienced particularly strongly in ProCo and considered to lead to a climate of defensiveness and a lack of collaboration. In DefCo it was considered that crisis was an inevitable part of the job and not necessarily something to be avoided. In this case, it was felt that strong individual leadership was required in such situations but that this needed to be balanced alongside a more inclusive approach at other times.
- The second set of tensions related to the *rhetoric and reality* of leadership. In each organisation it was considered that the term 'leadership' held an important rhetorical significance in terms of encouraging particular forms of behaviour and activity. Within both ProCo and DataCo the use of the term 'leadership' was a relatively recent trend and associated with an organisational change process. There was a sense within each organisation of a tension between the importance attributed to 'people' and organisational systems that recognise and reward a primary focus on 'task'. It was also felt that, despite acknowledgement of the nature of leadership as a collective process, the primary focus is on formal leaders.
- The third set of tensions related to the main challenges for leaders. Of these the balance between *closeness and distance* of communication and relationships were considered particularly significant. A number of interviewees spoke of the



need to address this through creating a compelling narrative that could be easily shared between people across the organisation.

### ***5.5 Discussion***

Together the findings presented above paint a picture of where the interviewees, each in middle-senior management roles, are looked to by the organisation and their subordinates to provide a clear sense of both leadership and management.

In each organisation there was a strong emphasis on the importance of leadership, in terms of setting and communicating a clear sense of direction, and motivating and inspiring staff, although in both ProCo and DataCo the explicit reference to ‘leadership’ was a relatively recent trend, driven by the CEO and his/her senior executive team as part of a wider cultural change process.

Despite emphasis on the importance placed on leadership, however, respondents within all three organisations indicated that they (and other staff) tended to be recognised and rewarded for management-type activities (in terms of achieving performance targets) rather than ‘leading’ per se (described as building relationships with staff to achieve commitment and motivation to group aims). This was regarded as a problem to the extent to which it drove a primary focus on task more than people. The most effective approach to leadership, as described by interviewees was one that achieved *both* a focus on performance *and* people although it was recognised that the relative balance afforded to each may need to be adapted according to the situation<sup>64</sup>.

In this section I will consider the findings from this study in relation to the L-A-P perspective as outlined in the introduction to this chapter. I will begin by considering what they tell us about the dimensions of practitioners, practices and praxis outlined by Whittington (2006). I will then consider the issue of praxis in greater depth through a consideration of the ‘practise of practices’ (Antonacopoulou, 2008), before moving on to consider the dominant discourses and narratives of leadership and how they could be interpreted<sup>65</sup>.

#### **5.5.1 Practitioners, practices and praxis**

As indicated in section 5.2 a practice lens on leadership draws attention to the diversity of actors involved in leadership work (‘practitioners’), the various individual and organisational practices that they draw upon (‘practices’), and how leadership is actually

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<sup>64</sup> Supporting style and situational theories of leadership.

<sup>65</sup> It is this part of the discussion that draws particularly on the Phase 2 discussions with practitioners.



enacted on a day-to-day basis ('praxis') (Whittington, 2006, Carroll et al., 2008). Having used these ideas to frame the current enquiry I will now reflect on their ability to capture something of the nature of leadership as it is perceived and experienced by the people in our study.

### **a. Practitioners**

Firstly, with regards to 'practitioners' the findings from this study highlight a range of individuals and groups who contribute either in a direct or indirect way to leadership within the organisations being studied. Given the particular focus on the role of middle-senior level managers it is not surprising that they regarded themselves as pivotally involved in the day-to-day work of leadership. However, whilst these people clearly have some discretion over how leadership is accomplished and how organisational objectives are communicated they operate as part of a larger system that substantially influences outcomes. Other key practitioners highlighted within this study include members of the senior executive group, line managers, colleagues, and even staff ('followers'<sup>66</sup>). Each of these groups makes a direct contribution to leadership work through their ability to shape, communicate and/or implement organisational objectives, as well as supporting, motivating and inspiring other people within the organisation. For more senior colleagues there was a clear expectation, within all three organisations, of this being the source of overall strategic direction in terms of organisational mission and intent, with the remainder of the organisation responsible for translating, cascading and operationalising this.

The interview findings, although primarily concerned with top-down, hierarchical leadership, also revealed substantial evidence of bottom-up and horizontal/lateral leadership influence. Thus, for example, in section 5.4.4b we see a couple of quotes that clearly indicate the significance of leadership by people in customer-facing and non-managerial roles that helps maintain an overall sense of continuity, cohesion and shared identity amongst team members.

In addition to the direct contribution of different organisational members, however, we also see evidence of the indirect influence of key stakeholder groups, both within and outside the organisation, such as trade unions, major customers, industry regulators, partner organisations and policy makers. Whilst these actors may not directly control what goes on in the organisation, through their ability to shape priorities, influence staff opinion and, in some instances to issue or withhold resources (financial, human,

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<sup>66</sup> Although this was not really a term used by interviewees.

reputational, etc.), they can have a major influence on the strategic aims of the organisation and the means by which results are achieved. Within the current study this is perhaps most clearly evidenced within DataCo and ProCo (both commercial organisations) in which maintaining a timely and responsive approach to customers permeates all aspects of organisational functioning.

Like distributed leadership, therefore, a practice lens enables recognition of the contribution of a wide range of actors but, through its focus on what people actually do, it may enable a clearer distinction between relative contributions and the manner in which leadership roles are constructed and maintained.

### **b. Practices**

As indicated in sections 5.4.2a and 5.4.3a during the course of this research we identified a number of discrete practices that interviewees referred to in carrying out their leadership role. Through analysis of the different practices and how they were talked about it was possible to discern two broad categories of practices:

1. *Formal*: relatively systematised organisational practices designed to manage and monitor performance and the use of resources.
2. *Informal*: more emergent and ad hoc practices used by individuals and groups to strengthen group cohesion and build/maintain relationships.

The first set of practices appears to offer a toolset of techniques and processes that leaders/managers can draw on in their work and to reinforce their role as a 'leader'. At an organisational level this included the use of management information systems, HR practices for monitoring and rewarding performance, and leadership and management competency frameworks. Team meetings were also cited as important mechanisms for engagement with staff. Together these practices served a number of functions including facilitating communication and knowledge exchange (in both directions), as well as monitoring and rewarding performance. The evidence, however, would support a view that these practices are not neutral. Indeed, by virtue of different people having access to different sources of information and communication dependent on their position within the organisational hierarchy such systems help to reinforce differentials of power, influence and reward (Foucault, 1980). The management information system at DataCo is a prime example of this, where real-time performance statistics are channelled directly to the desktop of managers but with different access rights (i.e. which pieces of information can be seen) depending on one's position within the

organisation. The performance review process, present within each organisation, likewise serves to reinforce a manager-subordinate relationship through the nature of the dialogue they invoke – i.e. the line manager as ‘reviewer’ and the employee as ‘reviewed’ (see section 5.5.2 for further elaboration on this argument).

The second set of practices were more informal and personal and included activities such as ‘walking the floor’, after-work drinks, and ‘be nice Friday’. Whilst at one level these practices were presented as neutral in terms of making people feel recognised and valued, and building a sense of emotional attachment between group members, they also served to reinforce the leader’s influence over others through the improved relationships they created with followers<sup>67</sup>. A number of interviewees mentioned the need to balance the proximity of relationships with followers with retaining sufficient ‘distance’ to make difficult decisions that may have a detrimental impact upon them<sup>68</sup>. This was a difficult balance to achieve and approached in different ways by the various interviewees.

In interpreting and identifying ‘practices’ we often found it difficult to distinguish between the use of practices as tools and the use of practices as techniques. Thus, for example, whilst meetings might be regarded as a tool for communication and/or decision making, they may equally be regarded as a technique for establishing and maintaining hierarchical relationships (see Hodgkinson et al., 2005, and Jarzabkowski and Seidl, 2008 for further analysis of the role of meetings in the strategy process). This begs the question of whether the ‘practice’ is the meeting itself, or the act of convening a meeting (and all the various functions that are accomplished during the meeting). Given the diversity of activities and the heavily contextualised nature of how they are implemented and utilised our preference was to consider them in the latter sense (a view endorsed during our subsequent conversations with the practitioners involved in this research). Thus, to employ a metaphor, what is important is not so much the contents of the toolbox but the logic upon which the craftsperson selects which tool to use and the skill with which s/he utilises it to achieve an outcome (see next section for further elaboration on this argument).

An understanding of leadership ‘practices’, therefore, is integrally bound up in an understanding of how various actors utilise them. The practices identified in this study span a wide range activities, tools and techniques that support practitioners in

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<sup>67</sup> Indeed, one could argue that this IS their fundamental purpose in terms of ‘leadership’.

<sup>68</sup> Echoing the views of Adair (1983), mentioned in section 2.3.1d.

accomplishing the functions for which they are held responsible, as well as helping to retain their position within the hierarchy and shaping organisational discourse. They draw attention both to the physical as well as the socially constructed aspect of the leadership system/context and, as such helps highlight the ‘hybrid’ (human/non-human) nature of leadership as described by Grint (2004a).

### c. Praxis

The findings above indicate a blurring of boundaries between ‘practices’ and ‘praxis’. Accounts of ‘praxis’, in a way, fell between descriptions of ‘practices’ and the factors that moderated how they were enacted. Interviewees often highlighted the significance of internal (e.g. organisational systems, processes, physical layout and the distribution of resources) and external (e.g. economic, political and social) factors in shaping modes of engagement. They spoke of personal differences between leaders, those they were expected to lead and other significant stakeholders and how this made particular forms of interaction and outcome more or less likely. They also highlighted the significance of national, social and organisational culture, and the importance of a shared sense of ‘social identity’ (Haslam, 2004) in framing allegiances and facilitating collaborative working.

Section 5.4.2c indicates the significance attributed to ‘social capital’ (Putnam, 2000, Adler and Kwon, 2002) in maintaining and enacting leadership. The historical legacy of individuals, groups and organisations, as well as the influence of key stakeholders (as outlined in 5.5.1a), was also highlighted as a key factor influencing how leadership occurred, particularly in determining reputation, trust and loyalties. The following quote indicates the legacy of a previous manager and the symbolism of ‘open’ or ‘closed’ doors.

“We probably as [a unit] are quite insular if the truth be told. I tried to make a certain difference when I first arrived here. The double doors out the front were always closed. That was a bit of a legacy issue. So what I've tried to do is open those doors and make sure that, you know, people can come and see us, a little bit easier now.” (DefCo, interview 1)

Alongside these issues there were regular references to tensions between the lived experience of managing/leading and what one desired/aspired to be and to do. Described by interviewees as dysfunctional, and metaphorically referred to by us in our conversations with the practitioners researchers as ‘shadow themes’, these were

revealed within all organisations (although not all interviews), and included unrelenting pace, increased responsibilities, lack of time for reflection, a culture of risk aversion, distortion of feedback, loss of fun, wishful thinking, difficulty in being ‘authentic’, excessive internal competition and a short-term focus on performance (these will be explored further in 5.5.3). In explaining how they go about their work as a leader interviewees frequently described having to work with these tensions whilst still achieving the desired outcomes<sup>69</sup>.

“We just burn people out. In this company, we burn them out. It doesn’t feel like we have any conscience about it... That’s the bit that comes back to the personal beliefs and core standards. I wouldn’t do that to someone. I wouldn’t be able to do it. You’ve got to ask yourself, how long do you want to be in this company... What I don’t like is being compromised, my personal standards being compromised. That’s a real test. When it gets back to where do you see yourself going, you put yourself in that point and think I’m not sure I really want to be a part of this company.” (ProCo, interview 9)

In this quote the interviewee says something both about the organisational culture, as s/he perceives it, as well as his/her own leadership praxis. ‘I wouldn’t abuse people in this way’, s/he intones, and in so doing presents him/herself as trustworthy and prepared to stand up and challenge the status quo.

In understanding praxis it may be helpful to think of the leadership practitioners in our sample as ‘bricoleurs’, drawing on whatever they have at hand to frame, shape and coordinate the activities of organisational members. Weick (2001, p. 62) describes this notion as follows:

“The French word *bricolage* (which has no precise equivalent in English) means to use whatever resources and repertoire one has to perform whatever task one faces. Invariably the resources are less well suited to the exact project than one would prefer but they are all there is. The person who engages in bricolage is called a *bricoleur*, which means roughly a jack-of-all trades or someone who is a professional do-it-yourself person (Levi-Strauss, 1966, p. 17). A bricoleur should not be confused with an odd job man, because considerably more knowledge about materials is assumed in the case of the bricoleur.”

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<sup>69</sup> It is important to note that these were all successful individuals in successful organisations yet they still felt this oppressive tension.

Bricolage is thus a skilled activity, developed largely through experience over time, in which a manager/leader learns to improvise with whatever tools, resources, expertise, etc. are available to achieve a given outcome within a given context. It is more of a craft than a science and the process through which it unfolds is integrally linked to the situation/context. Any assessment of the skill or mastery of a bricoleur must be informed both by the functional outcome (did they achieve the task they set out to do?) as well as the process by which they achieved it (how creatively and efficiently did they utilise the resources at their disposal?). The performative aspects (both in terms of the performance itself and the purpose it serves) are an integral part of the work and support the view that quantitative measures alone are insufficient to account for how or why people may choose to act as a 'leader' nor to describe leadership outcomes. When observing the 'bricoleur' in action, as with the observation of any skilled artist or craftsman, consideration of the aesthetic qualities of their engagement may well be as important as the functional contribution achieved (see, for example, Ladkin, 2008, and Gosling and Wright, 2007 for a discussion of the role of 'beauty' in leadership). Such a position may go some way towards explaining the distinctions made between moderate and excellent leaders in section 5.4.3b and the concerns about a competency based approach to leadership as outlined in sections 1.2.3 and 5.2.1.

### **5.5.2 The practise of practices<sup>70</sup>**

The interdependence of leadership practices, practitioners and praxis as outlined above is beginning to be recognised within the wider research community. The ESRC Advanced Institute of Management (AIM) in the UK, for example, is now calling for investigation of the 'practise of practices' – a shift from studying the 'practices' themselves to how they are used 'in practice' (see, for example, AIM, 2008, Antonacopoulou, 2008). Like much within the field of management and leadership studies, it would seem that what matters is not so much what you do but how you do it<sup>71</sup>. In order to illustrate this point I will now present and comment on some additional quotes from the study, beginning with one about conducting performance reviews.

In the following quote we see how the effectiveness of the practice of 'writing performance reviews' is presented as dependent on the skilfulness with which it is

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<sup>70</sup> Please note that this and the next section of the discussion are heavily informed by the work of Prof. Jonathan Gosling and should be considered as a joint contribution.

<sup>71</sup> An argument supported by Burgoyne et al.'s, (2004) review of the impact of management and leadership development on individual and organisational performance.

practised which, in turn, is presented as dependent on the practice of ‘training’. As such these can be regarded as nested and inter-related practices.

“What continues to disappoint me is how little training we give our people in the art of writing [performance reviews]. One of the most important parts to someone's progression – we're talking about progression and what do we do? How much training have I received in writing people's [performance reviews]? Couple of hours on [basic training] some years ago. That's not enough and that's where potentially there's a problem. Good people might be disadvantaged by virtue of how good their 'line manager' (I hate that term) – is at writing a [performance review], or how good they might be with a pen.” (DefCo, interview 1)

In this extract ‘training’ and ‘writing performance reviews’ are presented as if they were standard activities that might be done more or less skilfully, but whose meaning and purpose is commonly recognised. Within this view both may be described metaphorically as ‘tools’ that practitioners can draw on in carrying out their leadership work.

Such an appreciation, however, is highly limited to the extent in which it underestimates the interactive nature of such processes. ‘Training’ and ‘review writing’, whilst indeed practices in their own right, also serve to construct and/or reinforce roles such as ‘trainee’ and ‘report writer’ which, in turn, are framed in terms of a relationship – i.e. trainee/trainer, manager/subordinate. To engage with such practices, therefore, participants must also engage with the process of ‘getting into role’ (Miller and Rice, 1967, Lawrence, 1977, Reed, 2001).

Looked at from this perspective leadership and management practices are important not only because they help people do their job but because they offer a means by which they can find, make and take their role (see section 3.5.5). As such, they are important bases from which leaders can assert and legitimise their position within the organisation and maintain (or challenge) hierarchical relationships.

We can get a clue to what is going on here by looking at a rhetorical move we might call ‘reach for the toolkit’. The interviewee cited above acknowledges the problematic nature of ‘writing review reports’, but elides one kind of problem (that reviewers make or break a person’s career) with another (that reports might be poorly written). The first problem presents the review writer with a moral hazard: he or she might be responsible for ruining someone’s career. The second problem suggests that this hazard might be



avoided if only reports were well written. The hope must be that if so, decisions would always be 'right'. Therefore 'training' would prevent the kinds of reports that would leave the writer feeling guilty about having played a part in an unfair or 'wrong' decision. In effect, training could be presented as a potential defence against the anxiety that one might make a mistake and feel guilty about it. Training could be a 'tool' for fixing this anxiety, as well as a way of acquiring the 'tool' of 'report-writing'. It is also a 'tool' for communicating organisational vision and values and hence provides the user ('trainee') with some form of benchmark against which to assess their practice.

From this perspective one might posit that a degree of anxiety is inevitable in nearly all managerial and leadership relations – in effect wherever there is a situation in which someone (the manager or leader) is only able to achieve the outcomes for which s/he is held accountable through the contribution of others (followers/subordinates)<sup>72</sup> (Lawler, 2005 ). It is within such environments that 'leadership' may well be invoked as a potential solution, or an 'absence of leadership' blamed for any shortcomings. Far from Gemill and Oakley's (1992) portrayal of leadership as an 'alienating social myth' it is portrayed as the glue that holds things together (although perhaps a social myth all the same).

Drawing on the psychodynamic tradition authors such as Gordon Lawrence (1977) and Burkard Sievers (1994) have argued that there are yet more profound anxieties wrapped up in practices such as performance reviews and training - suggesting that such practices embody the hope that life, like careers, moves in a generally upward trajectory towards greater fulfilment, success and recognition. If a career falters, it should be for some rationally explicable reason: measurably poor performance on behalf of the individual, market downturns or organisational mishaps, for example. After all, such reasonableness also reassures those who are successful that there is good reason for this, even if they may at times be less sure of themselves than they would like to be<sup>73</sup>. But behind this lies the inescapable fact that all reasoning is temporary and conditional on health and life. However far from our conscious minds the shadow of mortality is always with us and comes a little closer to the surface when we engage with tasks that by analogy suggest the immanence of career death (be that through redundancy, retirement, lack of promotion, etc.). It is precisely when engaged in these practices that

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<sup>72</sup> A similar scenario might be argued for sports coaches, medical practitioners, teachers, etc.

<sup>73</sup> A number of authors (e.g. Clance, 1985), for example, have talked of 'impostor syndrome' in which leaders and/or managers feel unable to internalise their accomplishments and are concerned that they might be 'found out' to be a fraud.



we are closest to the intimation of mortality and the feebleness of reason to defend against it.

From the account above we can see that a) practices may be presented as ‘tools’; b) this simplifies the complex co-construction of practices and practitioners and justifies hierarchical inequalities; and c) constitutes a praxis mediated by conscious and unconscious factors such as moral hazard and existential anxiety.

Whilst ‘reaching for the toolkit’ may be one way in which managers can defend themselves against the inherent anxiety of their roles, an alternative (and potentially complementary) approach is to affirm a sense of community. There were frequent indications of such an approach in the accounts from practitioners in this study, such as the following extract, cited in 5.4.1a:

“The political aspect of the role in [this region]... [is that] we are integrated with the Government. [This region] is heavily unionised and socialist in its politics, words like “profit” don’t go down very well whereas “public service” does. We are used to jobs for life and when we have finished with our jobs we hand them on to someone else in the community.” (ProCo, interview 1)

In this quote we see ‘community’ presented as the context that explains what ‘goes down’. The interviewee suggests that jobs are like personal possessions that are handed on from one owner to another. The practice of ‘handing them on’ is clearly quite different to practices such as ‘filling vacancies’ or ‘succession planning’. The practice of ‘handing them on’ suggests something other than a toolkit - a relationship between practices and practitioners oriented to affirm community belonging and shared commitment to public service. The praxis is still moderated by conscious and unconscious factors but indicates an alternative rationale to that in the previous quote. At an unconscious level the notion that jobs are handed on like heirlooms may well be a means of coping with the anxieties of career mortality - a belief that there will be something of value to hand on and that people of the same community will receive and value this inheritance. It also, however, offers an alternative means for achieving the same outcome - recruiting people into new roles – one that is fundamentally bound up in the use of language and discourse. Here the talk IS the work of the manager (Gronn, 1983).

The accounts above give some tentative insights into how leadership practitioners draw upon leadership practices to frame and make sense of the world in which they find themselves. They are, however, not just the impartial users of leadership and

managerial ‘tools’ but actively construct, and are constructed by, the practices (as well as a host of other factors) by which they are surrounded.

The two categories of approach described above (‘reaching for the toolkit’ and ‘affirming community’) bear a similarity to Heidegger’s distinction between ‘building’ and ‘dwelling’ highlighted by Carroll et al. (2008) in their critique of competencies and call for a practice perspective on leadership. This point will be returned to in Chapter 6 but, in the meantime, I would like to highlight a tension that was exposed during interviews between the intent and experience of people in formal leadership positions and the potential insights that this offers into the discursive nature of leadership practice.

### 5.5.3 Leadership discourses

The discussion so far has given a relatively straightforward account of the insights afforded by an L-A-P perspective. It can be seen that a diverse range of actors are involved, that there is a range of practices that they can draw on in their work, and that what is actually done is heavily shaped by situational and contextual factors. The previous section, however, also begins to reveal a deeper level of complexity to how leadership practices are actually put into practice and the potential danger of taking accounts at face value - in effect what is *actually* being done is not necessarily what people *claim* is being done, or *wish* were being done.

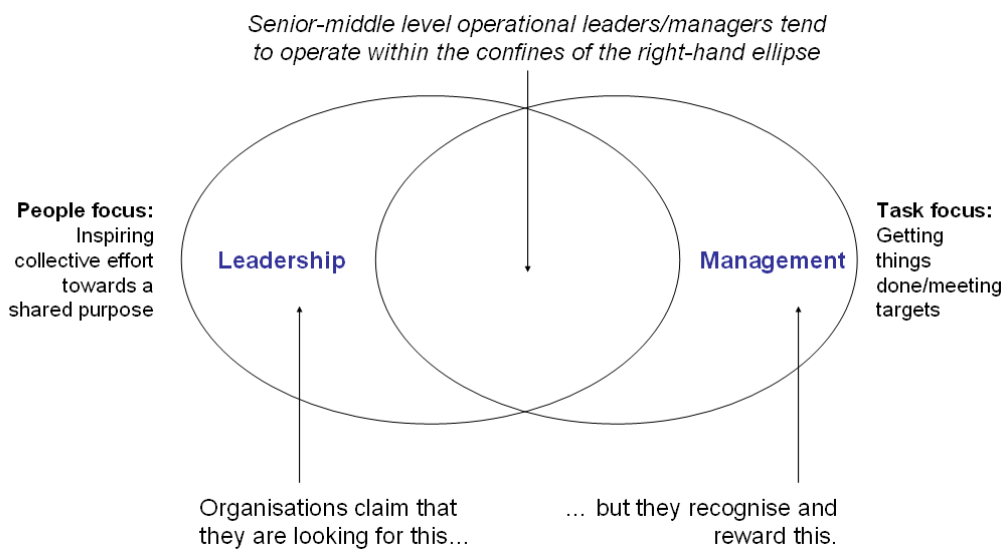
To move beyond the interview transcripts themselves to the sensemaking processes that underlie them, in this section I will draw extensively on the subsequent iterative discussions with practitioner members of the research group, the process of which is described below.

Following completion of all of the research interviews a summary analysis of findings was produced and circulated to all members of the network. A meeting was then convened in which the practitioner researchers first discussed their experiences of having conducted the interviews and I then presented the findings in relation to the LAP idea. In the discussion that followed a number of points were raised including: the differences between what leaders at different levels within an organisation are trying to achieve; a tendency within the research to over-use terms such as ‘leadership’ and ‘strategy’ vis-à-vis the extent to which they are used within organisations (especially DefCo); and the manner in which processes of leadership and management are interwoven and largely inseparable. Particular attention was given to the extent to

which there may be a tension between what organisations measure (in terms of performance outcomes) and what they espouse (in terms of values and behaviours)<sup>74</sup>. I drew the diagram in Figure 5.1 to try to illustrate this tension.

In an email exchange following circulation of notes a practitioner member of the group (speaking on behalf of himself and a colleague at ProCo) said:

“Thanks for your notes - I had a few reflections as well which I share below... I think for us we are probably always rewarding at a level below which performance should be expected. The interviews [my colleague] and I did were at the senior not mid-level, yet the expectations versus reward issue would still be true. With regards intent...if it is true that managers are seeking to emulate their leaders then perhaps they are not leading at all, or in very rare circumstances, and should really be known for managing as that is where the majority of their time is spent.....it will probably then fall to a bit of EQ, IQ, SQ



**Figure 5.1: Tensions between performance and expectations**

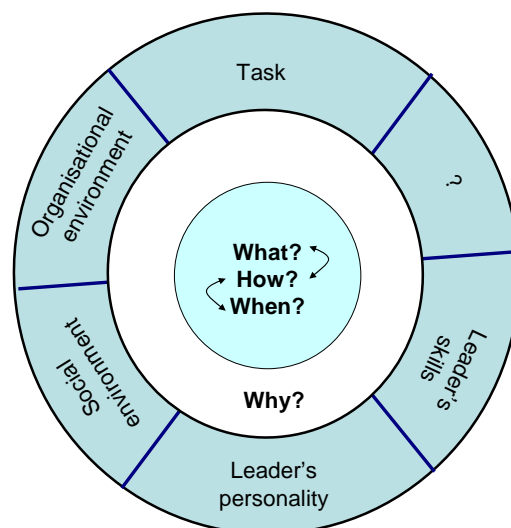
and so on for each individual to determine whether they break out of this mould or not....something that is perhaps more circumstantial and situational than related to type of organisation, with the probable exception of highly entrepreneurial organisations. Much of this comes back to our initial question of what are 'leaders' accomplishing....if it is managerial tasks without a unique direction then perhaps one should question if they are leading at all....at the last meeting [Admiral Lord] Nelson was used as an example of someone who led but spent significant time managing...certainly he was a leader who did managerial tasks working with a great deal of independence and the question that must be

<sup>74</sup> See sections 5.4.3b and 5.4.4b for empirical evidence to support this distinction.

asked is, I guess, so what if he did not do all that managing, could he have been as successful, more successful or less so.”

This quote is interesting for a number of reasons, not least in how it attempts yet struggles to separate the concepts of leadership and management. A sense is conveyed that leadership is a higher order activity than managing and that people spend more time involved in the latter than the former. The final question, however, reveals a preoccupation with performance (i.e. what is most effective?) rather than categorisation.

At a second meeting of the group (five weeks later) we, the academic members, were asked to explain how these findings relate to broader research on leadership and management and for the group collectively to consider the possible implications for leadership development. In the subsequent discussions two key contributions arose. Firstly, one of the practitioner members drew up the following diagram (Figure 5.2, overleaf) to summarise how leaders (and those looking to develop and/or support them) need to continually balance a number of considerations, including the nature of the task, the environment (organisational and social), the leader’s skill and personality, and most fundamentally ‘why’ do this (what is the purpose of leadership). Each of these factors, it was proposed help to inform what, how and when a leader should take action.



**Figure 5.2: Balancing considerations for leadership**

Secondly, following on from this, attention returned to a table, first presented at the previous workshop, in which we highlighted an apparent tension between what interviewees perceived they should be doing as leaders and their actual experience of leading. This table (Table 5.2) was derived from analysis of the interview data and,

whilst this distinction was not present within all interviews it was evident within the majority and within each organisation<sup>75</sup>.

What I believe I should be doing... (leadership themes)	What I tend to experience... (shadow themes)
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Setting direction and monitoring performance</li> <li>- Communicating to and influencing people</li> <li>- Building relationships, trust and loyalty</li> <li>- Focus on people and task</li> <li>- Learning through experience and example</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Unrelenting pace</li> <li>- Increased responsibilities</li> <li>- Lack of time for reflection</li> <li>- Risk aversion / avoiding mistakes</li> <li>- Distortion of feedback</li> <li>- Loss of fun</li> <li>- Wishful thinking</li> <li>- Difficulty in being 'authentic'</li> <li>- Short term focus</li> </ul>

**Table 5.2: Tensions between leadership intent and experience**

From Table 5.2 it can be seen, for example, that whilst interviewees spoke of a need to be authentic in order to build trust and loyalty they sometimes felt a tension between their personal values and those of the organisation. Likewise, whilst feeling that they ought to take time to focus on long-term strategic issues they found themselves prevented from this by a relentless pressure to achieve short-term performance outcomes.

Whilst this table in no way purports to be a comprehensive representation of the views of interviewees it does mirror findings that have long been recognised within organisational and management studies (e.g. Stewart, 1963, Mintzberg, 1973, Sisson, 1994, Legge, 1995) but are not often discussed in mainstream accounts of leadership. Although these findings capture only a fragment of the data from our study they were widely recognised by the professional managers within our group and further endorsed at a number of wider forums for the dissemination and discussion of findings<sup>76</sup>.

In our discussions about the possible nature of this split four possible readings (or interpretations) were explored:

- **R1:** The left-hand column offers a genuine account of what leaders are trying to do but their ability to achieve this is inhibited by a series of barriers/blockers (the right-hand column) that they continually struggle against.

<sup>75</sup> See section 5.4.4 for an illustration of how this distinction appeared in the interview data. There is also a similarity to the observations about experiences of distributed leadership in section 4.3.3d.

<sup>76</sup> Including two workshops (one at the 2008 CLS Annual Forum and a one-day CPD event for members of the CLS Professional Network in June 2009), an academic conference (7<sup>th</sup> International Conference on Studying Leadership, Auckland, Dec 2008), and a number of teaching sessions (including the Exeter MBA and CPD schemes).

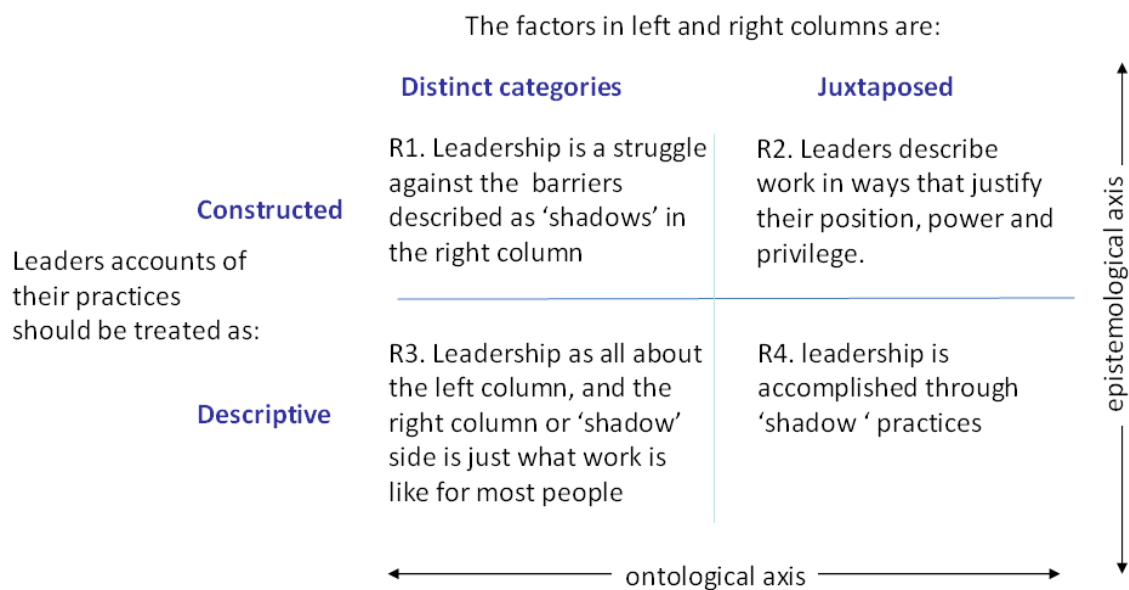
- **R2:** The right-hand column is used as a form of rhetoric to legitimise the positions and rewards of people in middle-senior leadership roles. Hence, respondents may be using the interview process to articulate the fact that they are important and busy people with significant responsibilities. In describing the pressures they experience interviewees may be both defending their positions and managing expectations about their capacity to deliver the kinds of outcomes expected of them.
- **R3:** These factors exist independently of one another and the right-hand themes are not specifically related to the leadership role. A small number of interviewees, for example, focussed almost exclusively on issues to the left with little or no reference to issues on the right. Perhaps, then, one's experience of leadership is shaped by virtue of one's situation, personality, coping mechanisms and degree of self awareness. The issues in the right-hand column may simply arise from life experience - affecting leaders like anyone else.
- **R4:** The right-hand column may actually describe a number of processes and practices that are constituent elements of leadership practice in the environments within which these leaders operate. Could it be, for example, that 'wishful thinking' is a means for articulating a compelling sense of direction in an unpredictable and uncertain world? Could 'inauthenticity' be referring to the emotional detachment required to make tough decisions whilst building relationships and a perceived sense of trust amongst followers? Could 'unrelenting pace' and lack of time for reflection be invoked in order to mobilise action towards the achievement of short term operational goals where there is limited time for consultation and alignment of interests?

Clearly whichever of these processes is at work holds different implications for understanding the nature of leadership practice. If R1 is correct, for example, then we may consider leadership as an ongoing struggle against the barriers highlighted in the right-hand column. The leader's job becomes one of endeavouring to construct a new reality in which the factors in the right-hand column are in some way diminished, despite remaining a somewhat inevitable feature of organisational life. If R2 is correct then we would do well to be wary of the accounts of leaders and how particular discourses may be used to justify their position. This perspective may lead us to take a somewhat sceptical view of the nature of leadership and maybe even challenge the extent to which it exists as a discrete phenomenon. In the case of R3, we might well be

## THE PRACTICE OF LEADERSHIP

encouraged to investigate in greater detail the coping mechanisms, qualities and practices of those leaders who do not perceive this tension. Whilst they are in a minority they may offer valuable insights into what constitutes an effective and/or resilient leader. Finally, if R4 is correct then greater attention is required into the mechanisms through which leadership work is enacted. Organisational initiatives aimed at improving the effectiveness of leadership may not be best targeted at eradicating apparent obstacles but of better enabling leaders to ‘work the system’. A major ethical concern lurks here too, though, in the degree to which the ends can be considered to justify the means.

Each of these readings suggests a different approach to interpreting discourses of leadership. On an *epistemological* axis we have two primary options about how to consider leaders’ (interviewees’) accounts of their practices: (a) as objective descriptions of reality; or (b) as socially constructed narratives. On an *ontological* axis we have the options of regarding the left and right hand columns as: (a) distinct categories of phenomena; or (b) as juxtaposed (interdependent) categories. These distinctions are illustrated diagrammatically in Figure 5.3.



**Figure 5.3: Alternative perspectives on accounts of leadership practice**

Figure 5.3 enables us to be explicit about two sets of interpretive choices that are faced by anyone trying to understand leadership through the analysis of interview transcripts. Firstly, we must consider the rhetorical status of these accounts and decide whether they should be taken as reliable descriptions of what ‘leaders’ do and experience, or whether they should be considered as constructed sensemaking narratives (Weick, 1995). These



are questions of epistemology – about ways of knowing. Secondly, we must decide on how we consider the relationship between categories - as describing distinct and independent phenomena, or as dialectically juxtaposed/interdependent. These are questions of ontology – about the nature of being.

Whilst these different interpretive stances may help shed light on the confusing diversity of approaches to the study and practice of leadership, they pose quite different challenges and implications depending on the interests of the reader. Thus, for example, in the current enquiry, whilst the academic team found themselves reflecting on the implications for leadership theory and research, the leadership development practitioners kept asking ‘what are the practical implications’ in terms of developing, supporting and assessing leaders. This is an example of the ‘double dialectic’ described by Colville (2008) (see section 1.2.2) and perhaps one reason why practitioner-academic networks can prove difficult to sustain over time<sup>77</sup>.

One particularly significant further insight provided from our engagement with the practitioner researchers was the observation by one member of the group (and endorsed by the others) that there is some truth in all of these ‘readings’ and that the issue is not so much one of being able to identify which is being, or should be, used but rather to understand how people draw upon each of these in their leadership work. The proposal, therefore, was for a far more fluid appreciation of these dimensions, how they co-exist alongside one another, and how people move within and between different positions when carrying out leadership work.

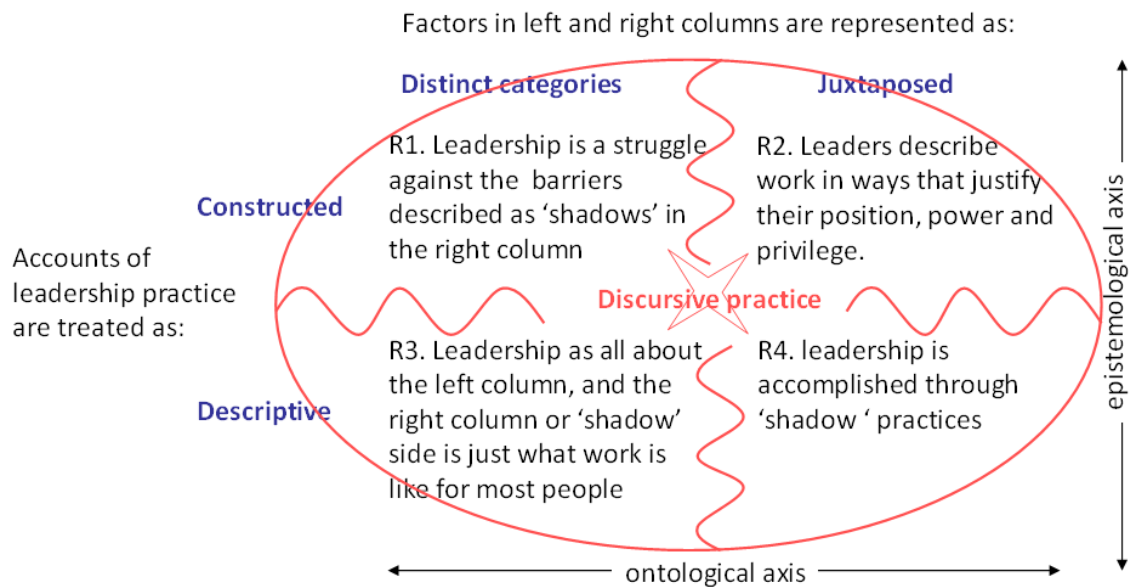
According to the practitioners in our group practicing leaders approach these options as *discursive* rather than *interpretive* stances, shifting their perspective in a constant dialectic between realist and constructivist positions. For example, a manager who recognizes the 2-columns of espoused and experienced leadership might well use this to describe a sense of frustration (R3), then to justify this as ‘par for the course’ of leadership (R1). He or she might then realise (perhaps in conversation with a colleague, coach or partner) that there would be little to distinguish leaders if it were not for the struggle and anguish (R2). Indeed, it may well be that the rush and pressure is precisely how leadership is accomplished, maintaining constant uncertainty and dependency in the organization while reinforcing solidarity between leaders experiencing similar pressures (R4).

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<sup>77</sup> Indeed, we noted ourselves that at this point the interests and focus of the academic team began to depart from that of the practitioner group such that after one or two more iterations it remained hard to sustain the group.



Furthermore, it was suggested, leadership discourse conducts a constant recycling around this model, not only reflexively, as described in the previous paragraph; but also in text and public speech. If so, the model in Figure 5.3 might be modified, as illustrated in Figure 5.4, to show the likelihood of movement between different discursive positions – quite possibly in various directions at once. This would be a valuable direction for future research - possibly drawing on ethnographic studies combined with discourse analysis - but demands a ‘dialectical’ approach with a far greater level of ontological and epistemological flexibility than is typical within the social sciences (see Fay, 1996, Chapter 11 for an argument in defence of such an approach).



**Figure 5.4: Leadership as a discursive practice**

## 5.6 Chapter summary

The research reported in this chapter explores the notion of leadership-as-practice and the various ways in which middle-senior level managers within three large, complex organisations, consider leadership to be accomplished on a day-to-day basis. A collaborative research approach was employed, in which representatives from each organisation organised and conducted their own interviews, prior to these being compiled, analysed and interpreted through an iterative process of academic and practitioner reflection and discussion.

Findings from this study indicated that interviewees consider themselves centrally involved in accomplishing leadership within their organisations but, in so doing, they interact and engage with a wide range of actors, stakeholders and processes, each of

which helps shape and inform the leadership style, approach and outcomes. Leadership is dispersed in some significant ways, as well as being embedded within social and organisational systems and culture. Middle-senior level managers, as investigated in this study, are quite clearly looked to by their organisations for 'leadership' although much of what is actually recognised and rewarded could just as easily be labelled as 'management'. Analysis of the accounts of interviewees indicated a degree of separation between the lived experience of holding a 'leadership' role and the rhetoric and/or expectation of what they should be and how they should act. In exploring these accounts we identified a range of factors commonly associated with 'leadership' and others, labelled as 'shadow' themes or 'obstacles to leadership', that seemed to resonate widely with the experience of people within both these and other contexts.

In engaging with the practitioner researchers to reflect on these findings we recognised a number of possible options in how we chose to interpret these accounts and the apparent tensions therein. In particular, we pointed to a distinction along both epistemological and ontological axes, each of which held quite different implications for leadership development and practice. Further discussion indicated that practicing managers may well alternate between different dialectical positions on these axes in order to assist them with accomplishing the tasks with which they have been charged and in managing their own identity challenges and tensions.

The main conclusion from this study is that day-to-day leadership praxis is largely discursive in nature, in which leadership practitioners endeavour to convey a sense of shared purpose and direction through their use of a range of leadership 'practices' that create and/or maintain role relations and sensemaking narratives that facilitate identity processes.

# **6. MAKING SENSE OF LEADERSHIP**

“Life is a path you beat while you walk it. It is the walking that beats the path. It is not the path that makes the walk.” (Michael Fullan, 1988, cited in Jackson, 2004, p. 5)

## **6.1 Overview**

The two studies recounted in Chapters 4 and 5 endeavoured to explore two different perspectives on leadership - distributed leadership and leadership-as-practice – which have been proposed as alternatives to the dominant individualistic accounts summarised in Section 2.2. In this Chapter I will consider the main outcomes and findings from each of these and the possible insights they offer for understanding the nature of leadership in organisations.

The chapter begins with a general discussion of the two studies, followed by a series of sections exploring the implications for each of the three questions outlined in the introduction: 1) the links between individual and collective approaches to leadership; 2) the links between leadership theory and practice; and 3) the links between agency and structure. The chapter concludes by firstly considering leadership as a sensemaking process and secondly by exploring the inter-relating themes of discourse, identity and purpose that are woven through the arguments within this thesis.

Overall, it is proposed that *a holistic representation of leadership remains elusive because of the manner in which grand Discourses and micro-level discourses of leadership (Alvesson and Kärreman, 2000) interact to attribute the social process of leadership to the actions of individual leaders.*

The final chapter will consider the empirical and theoretical contribution of these insights and the implications for researching, practicing and developing leadership.

## **6.2 A tale of two studies**

Despite being conducted in different contexts, with somewhat different methodologies and theoretical orientations there are some striking similarities between the findings of both these studies. Both demonstrate a diversity of actors involved in the leadership process and the need for bottom-up and horizontal/lateral leadership to support and complement hierarchical (top-down) direction and influence. Both also highlight the extent to which structural and cultural factors, including the use of organisational systems, processes and practices, constrain and enable leadership practice. To this extent, leadership can be considered as ‘hybrid’ in both the senses outlined by Grønn (2008), whereby it is a blend of different forms and functions, and Grint (2004a), whereby it emerges through the interplay of both human and non-human aspects of the system.

Furthermore, both studies highlight the significance of the discursive context in which leadership is conceived and enacted in shaping the nature of roles, as well as understandings of organisational, team and individual purpose. In both studies there was evidence of how the idea of 'leadership' was strongly associated with social and cultural change within the various organisations. This was both true of the universities in Study 1, in terms of the perceived need to reorientate higher education in the face of a changing external context and marketplace, as well as each of the organisations in Study 2, in terms of organisational restructuring to enhance customer responsiveness and/or organisational efficiency. Within each organisation, however, there was also evidence to indicate that the 'rhetoric of leadership', as espoused by senior organisational actors (and on occasion the leadership development industry as well) did not align with the 'reality of leadership', in terms of what the holders of significant operational roles (of whom 'leadership' was expected) experienced on a day-to-day basis. In each case, despite a tendency to espouse a primary focus on 'people', the experience was one of a focus on 'task'. Such a situation was often perceived to be exacerbated by performance management and reward systems that focussed almost entirely on the accomplishment of pre-conceived outcomes rather than how they were achieved, or whether they were the most appropriate ones to pursue.

In both studies, therefore, despite talk about the importance of widespread engagement in leadership, in terms of determining a strategic vision and direction for the organisation, it was perceived that the emphasis was primarily on management-type activities in the achievement of operational targets. Thus, as indicated in Figure 5.1 the roles, functions and activities of middle-senior level managers can be seen as comprising both elements of leadership and management, with a heavy bias towards reward and recognition based on managerial capability.

In terms of differences between the two studies, these included: a stronger emphasis on performance outcomes and customer responsiveness within commercial and public-service organisations in Study 2; and a stronger sense of identity-struggle for leaders within universities in Study 1. Whilst these differences may arise in part from the different theoretical framing for each study – Study 2 being more concerned with the accomplishment of leadership (and hence the achievement of leadership outcomes), whilst Study 1 was more concerned with the distribution and uptake of leadership responsibilities (and hence identity issues to do with taking up a role) – it is also quite

possible that they highlight contextual differences between perceptions of leadership within these different sectors.

Gioia and Thomas (1996, p. 370), for example, argue that unlike the commercial sector, within universities “there are few bottom-line measures like profit or return on investment that apply to the generation and dissemination of knowledge”. In consequence, they argue, much of the focus of senior university leaders is on influencing the ‘image’ of the organisation as perceived by key stakeholders rather than the delivery of more tangible outcomes. Whilst the management of ‘image’ is also undoubtedly significant within each of the Study 2 organisations they do each have a set of relatively concrete ‘bottom-line’ performance measures as well.

Within each organisation there was a strong emphasis on the importance of the credibility and perceived capability of leaders and the extent to which this enhanced the likelihood of people to ‘follow’ them and endeavour to achieve the desired outcomes. In each organisation there was mention of the need for a degree of balance between command and control, and a softer, more participative approach, although there was variation in terms of the extent to which, in particular the former, style would be accepted by those in the role of follower. Thus, for example, in the military (DefCo), despite awareness that command and control leadership should be used with discretion, it is more widely accepted as an acceptable approach than in universities where it would quite possibly be met with vigorous resistance.

Within all of the organisations studied the principal functions of leadership could be considered as defining and communicating a clear and coherent sense of direction; aligning and coordinating the diverse array of actors and activities across the organisation to pull together in the pursuit of shared objectives; and building and maintaining the commitment and engagement of individuals and teams. To this extent, our findings provide support for Drath et al.’s (2008) DAC ontology of leadership (as discussed in section 3.4) though ‘direction’, ‘alignment’ and ‘commitment’ in themselves do not necessarily constitute ‘leadership’. In the same way as the tripod of ‘leader’, ‘follower’ and ‘shared goals’ is only a partial representation of leadership (in that there are many situations where this model fails to adequately capture the nature of what is going on), the DAC ontology captures some (but not all) of the *outcomes* of effective leadership rather than ‘leadership’ per se.

There is another difficulty revealed by these studies in that the functions and activities of ‘leadership’ are heavily overlaid by those of ‘management’. To this extent, when

people talk about leadership, take on a leadership role, or assess the impact of leadership within organisations what they are often focussing on could just as easily be labelled 'management'. This was evident within universities in Study 1, in that taking on a leadership responsibility almost inevitably involved the acquisition of some sort of managerial duty or responsibility and the need to be held accountable for some form of organisational activity. Within the Study 2 organisations the interviewees quite clearly occupied 'management' roles within their respective organisations (despite a recent move to renaming these 'leadership' roles in DataCo and ProCo). The assessment and reward of performance was likewise closely associated to the achievement of operational outcomes (something that could just as easily be considered a function of management as of leadership). Thus, it might be quite possible to conclude that "if everything is leadership, then logically nothing is leadership" (Washbush, 2005, p. 1084) – leadership may simply be a more desirable label for management and/or one of the many functions that a manager is required to perform (Mintzberg, 1975).

The findings from the two studies reported in this thesis indicate then, that the recognition of leadership is a somewhat qualitative assessment, heavily dependent on subjective and contextual/situational considerations. In terms of determining a general model or theory of leadership, therefore, they are of limited utility. Thus, returning to the representations of leadership in Chapter 2, there is evidence from these studies to support the view that leadership is heavily influenced by the personal attributes of leaders (a trait perspective); that good leaders focus both on task and people (a behavioural perspective); that leadership style needs to be adapted to the situation (a situational perspective); that leaders may be best suited to leading in particular contexts (a contingency perspective), and that, in times of change, leaders need to be able to inspire their followers towards a compelling vision of the future (a transformational perspective). Furthermore, there is evidence to support the view that leadership is not just linked to formal managerial roles and that some people may lead 'quietly' (quiet leadership), sometimes in the pursuit of a greater purpose (servant leadership); and that pairs, teams and groups can contribute towards leadership, not just individuals (co-, team, shared and distributed leadership).

To that end all of the theories presented in Chapter 2 can be considered, to a greater or lesser extent, as correct and, equally, as incorrect to the degree that they capture only a partial truth. Leadership, as can be seen from the two studies reported here, is an amalgam of different practices, approaches, capabilities, contributions, relationships,

outcomes, identities, contextual factors, symbols, judgements and discourses that, when they come together, may or may not be perceived as good or bad examples of leadership. What both studies indicate, however, is the centrality of narrative and discourse to an understanding of how 'leadership', whether or not it exists as a discrete phenomenon, informs the sensemaking processes of people within organisations (thereby supporting a constitutive or discursive perspective). Furthermore, the ability to act upon and influence these narratives is strongly linked to issues of power. Thus, for example, whilst a 'distributed' perspective may advocate the sharing of accountability and responsibility for leadership the ability for people to act upon this is dependent on their access to, and control of, resources and other sources of power (French and Raven, 1959, Morgan, 1986). To move beyond the rhetoric of 'distributed leadership' to more democratic forms of organisation requires a more equitable distribution of power (Hatcher, 2005) although, as Currie et al. (2009) demonstrate within schools, organisational actors may find themselves in a 'catch-22' situation whereby competing forces both foster and inhibit the adoption of a distributed approach to leadership such that only 'weak' forms tend to be achievable. According to these authors, embedded approaches to the mitigation of risk and the limitation of excessive personal influence within the public sector mean that truly distributed leadership may be most difficult to implement in precisely those contexts where it could have the greatest effect (e.g. within schools in socially deprived areas).

### ***6.3 Leadership configurations: the interface of individual and collective approaches to leadership***

If all of the representations of leadership in Chapter 2 are in some way incomplete or flawed then what possible contribution, over and above what is already understood about leadership, can the ideas of distributed leadership and leadership-as-practice offer leadership researchers and practitioners? In this section I will consider the particular contribution of each of these approaches and the extent to which, when considered together they may offer an alternative understanding of what leadership is and/or could be.

As indicated in section 2.3.3b, distributed leadership is based on three main premises (Bennett et al., 2003):

- (1) that leadership is an emergent property of a group or network of interacting individuals;



(2) that there is openness to the boundaries of leadership; and

(3) that varieties of expertise are distributed across the many, not the few.

These are important insights for challenging our fascination with the leadership of ‘heroic’ individuals but should not be taken as evidence to dismiss the potentially pivotal role of such people. Many distributed leadership scholars are increasingly going to lengths to stress that distributed leadership is not a replacement for individual, hierarchical leadership and can actually be greatly facilitated through the support of key organisational actors (e.g. Spillane and Diamond, 2007, Harris, 2004, Leithwood et al., 2009). Indeed within the field of school leadership, for example, despite the importance placed on the contribution of actors from across and beyond the school the vast majority of studies still remain focussed on the pivotal role of the headteacher/principal in fostering a culture of ‘distributed leadership’<sup>78</sup>. The danger then is that despite the best intentions of its main protagonists, the concept of distributed leadership may simply end up looking like another description for delegation. To overcome this apparent dilemma Collinson and Collinson (2006, 2009) have put forward the notion of ‘blended’ leadership and Gronn (2008) has proposed ‘hybrid’ leadership to indicate how leadership practice at an organisational level is comprised of a variety of different forms of leadership (top-down, bottom-up, horizontal, etc.). From this perspective, it is not so much the leadership style of a particular individual that is important but how this combines with and complements other forms of leadership within the organisation. As Pearce (2004, p. 55) suggests:

“The issue is not vertical leadership or shared leadership. Rather the issues are: (1) when is leadership most appropriately shared? (2) How does one develop shared leadership? And (3) how does one utilize both vertical and shared leadership to leverage the capabilities of knowledge workers?”

Harris and Spillane (2008) propose that the concept of distributed leadership has been well received within schools because it has: “*normative power*; it reflects current changes in leadership practice in schools... [It] also has *representational power*. It represents the alternative approaches to leadership that have arisen because of increased external demands and pressures on schools... [And] lastly and most importantly, distributed leadership has *empirical power*. There is increasing research evidence that distributed leadership makes a positive difference to organisational outcomes and

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<sup>78</sup> For example each of the six cases of ‘distributed leadership’ presented in Spillane and Diamond (2007) focus particularly on the role of the principal, as do many of those in Leithwood et al. (2009). For further discussion of this issue see Gronn (2010).

student learning.” (ibid, p. 31-32, my emphasis). On the basis of this argument they propose that the concept of distributed leadership is most useful as an “*analytical frame* for understanding leadership practice... [And] a *tool* for school leaders by offering a set of constructs that can be harnessed to frame diagnoses and inform the design process” (ibid, p. 32-33, initial emphasis). They go on to argue that:

“The analytical frame galvanises attention towards leadership *as practice* rather than leadership *as role*; it focuses attention on the complex interactions and nuances of leadership in action. It offers an alternative and potentially illuminating way of tracking, analysing and describing complex patterns of interaction, influence and agency.” (ibid, p. 33, initial emphasis)

The findings from Study 1 in this thesis support these claims to some extent in that they indicate that ‘distributed’ is a perhaps a more accurate description of leadership in HE than purely leader-centric accounts, and that through using it as an analytical frame for researching leadership we may surface some aspects that may otherwise have remained hidden. The potential for ‘distributed leadership’ to be used as a ‘tool’ by leaders, however, is a difficult one. Harris and Spillane present the potential ‘tool’ function of distributed leadership somewhat unproblematically, offering it as a framework by which school leaders can ‘diagnose’ and ‘track’ leadership within their organisations. The findings from both studies 1 and 2 in this thesis, however, point towards a more significant *rhetorical* function in that a large part of the impact of focussing on leadership, distributed or otherwise, is to mobilise people to pull-together in pursuit of organisational (aka managerial) objectives. Thus, for example, a school leader utilising the concept of distributed leadership as recommended by Harris and Spillane may accomplish their aims not by gaining a clearer understanding of how leadership actually occurs within their organisation but simply by alerting staff to the need to take on more leadership (and by virtue of this managerial/administrative) responsibility. To this extent we concur with authors such as Leithwood et al. (2004), Woods (2004), Gronn (2009b) and, indeed Harris and Spillane (2008) who assert that ‘distributed leadership’ is not the same as ‘democratic leadership’ – indeed, it is not, there are times it can be downright manipulative!

To overcome the tendency towards any normative or ideological assumptions about the notion of distributed leadership Gronn (2009a) proposes the idea of ‘leadership configuration’ – “a pattern or an arrangement of practice” (ibid, p. 383). From this perspective, he argues “in any organization in which there may be evidence of persons

and units leading, that configuration is simply one of ‘leadership’, unqualified and unembellished, the practice of which happens to be shaped in contextualized ways” (ibid, p. 390). Taking such a perspective on leadership, he argues, carries two major implications. Firstly, rather than seeking to describe particular styles of leadership in isolation, researchers would be advised to identify and map the multiple hybrid forms of leadership that occur within a particular organisation/context longitudinally over time. Secondly, “a corollary of this strategy of mapping or contouring practice is to subvert the rationale and validity of what might be termed normative leadership advocacy” (ibid, p. 391). To this extent, Gronn proposes abandoning the tendency to label different forms of leadership in a way that invokes normative comparisons between them, for example ‘transformational’, ‘servant’ or ‘distributed’ leadership, but instead to concern ourselves with the underlying bases upon which leadership is founded (as French and Raven, 1959, did for the concept of power). From this angle, the aim of leadership research should not be to prescribe an ideal model of leadership but, rather, to explore where, why and how certain forms and configurations combine to beneficial effect.

### ***6.4 Leadership praxis: bridging leadership theory and practice***

This then brings us back to issues of practice and praxis. In considering the potential contribution of an L-A-P perspective on leadership in Study 2 we revealed a number of competing notions of ‘practice’ and the manner in which leadership ‘practitioners’ draw upon leadership ‘practices’ in their day-to-day leadership ‘praxis’. Through the discussion of findings, and particularly our experience of collaborating with practitioners in the conduct and interpretation of the study, we noticed a tendency for practitioners to alternate between different discursive positions when involved in leadership work (as illustrated in Figure 5.4). Thus, whilst leadership practices such as the use of performance reviews and management information systems may be regarded simply as ‘tools’ that leaders make use of in their work they can also be considered as more than this. Indeed, the majority of management and leadership practices require the various protagonists to enter into role (Lawrence, 1977, Reed, 2001).

As described in section 3.5.5, ‘taking up a role’ involves three interrelated pursuits - role finding, role making and role taking - through which a person carves out a place for themselves within the organisation (Reed, 2001). To this extent leadership and management practices are important not only because they help people do their job but because they also help to define and shape their role. As such, they are important bases from which leaders can assert and legitimise their position within the organisation and

maintain leader-follower relationships. The point at which ‘distributed leadership’ as a collective property of the organisation falls down is that, more often than not, access to particular practices is available only to certain people. Furthermore, the extent to which a person’s use of such practices may be regarded as an example of ‘leadership’ is shaped by the degree to which they are regarded as occupying a ‘leadership role’. For example financial administrators and personal assistants can exert considerable influence through their control of financial resources and access to key organisational actors respectively, in such cases however, this is generally not perceived as ‘leadership’ but as ‘administration’ or ‘bureaucracy’.

Critiques of the practice perspective<sup>79</sup> highlight three particular areas of concern for this approach. Firstly, several authors have questioned the way(s) in which ‘practice’ has been conceptualised. Chia and Holt (2006), for example, argue that current conceptualisations underestimate the significance of ‘relationality’, in particular the relationship between agency and action and Carter et al. (2008) highlight the tendency for conceptual flexibility and ambiguity. A second concern raised by Chia and MacKay (2007) amongst others is that, through its emphasis on the actions of ‘strategists’ (or ‘leaders’) the S-A-P (or L-A-P) approach may inadvertently reinforce the assumption “that practices are what actors ‘do’ [and that] individual agents are initiators of practices rather than themselves products of social practice” (ibid, p. 219). And thirdly, it is argued that through its emphasis on action, the practice perspective may underestimate the significance of other dimensions of social practice, particularly those relating to dynamics of power, ethics and legitimacy (Ezzamel and Willmott, 2004, Carter et al., 2008). Carter et al. (2008, p. 93) provide the following eloquent illustration of these tensions:

“The unconsciousness of the discourse of strategy as practice constitutes the silences of everyday organizational life: the non-issues, non-decision making, the exclusions from the agenda, the overlooked and un-noted actors, acts and omissions, those things that are strategically unthinkable: telling the truth about the pollution ‘externalities’ of present practices rather than lobbying for looser regulation; being honest about the health risks to children and young people who eat food products that are heavily promoted and heavily saturated with trans-fats; or admitting that the dream machine of the moment is a heavily expensive

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<sup>79</sup> Particularly strategy-as-practice, although arguably the same concerns apply to L-A-P.

gas-guzzling SUV with an unstable centre of gravity, and a greater propensity to kill pedestrians in whose way it gets and do greater damage to smaller vehicles.”

The investigation in Study 2 of this thesis highlights similar concerns in that the focus remained strongly on the use of leadership and/or management practices by people in formal management positions to accomplish organisational outcomes as defined by members of the senior executive group. To this extent, the interviewees could be considered as agents of the organisation, and the management/leadership practices they drew upon as ‘tools’ with which to achieve their ends. Such a perspective is problematic, however, in so much as it either overestimates or underestimates the amount of agency that such people have when carrying out their work. By overestimating their agency we run the risk of neglecting their level of embeddedness within a wider social system and the degree to which this shapes how they are perceived and what they are able to do. By underestimating their agency we risk ignoring the level of discretion and influence that they have in enacting their leadership and management work and the degree to which they are co-creators of the systems in which they reside. To this extent a degree of balance is required – leaders/managers do not act in isolation and, whether consciously or not, are implicated in building and maintaining power relations. To truly appreciate what goes on ‘in practice’, therefore, greater attention is required to the ‘practise of practices’ (Antonacopoulou, 2008) – in effect leadership ‘praxis’.

Purcell et al. (2008) demonstrate this in a recent study of HR practices where they conclude that “employees’ experience of [HR practices] is inexorably linked with their relationship with their [first line manager] who is seen as the agent of the organisation and the deliverer of the people management practices” (ibid, p. 75). HR practices, therefore, are not regarded as neutral, but ultimately bound up in power relations and the organisation of work. In choosing to adopt a particular practice, the user both constructs his/her own role as well as that of the people he/she engages with. This notion of co-creation is captured in Graham-Hill and Grimes’ (2001) definition of praxis, whereby they propose that “praxis refers to a creative activity through which humans create and change their world and themselves” (ibid, p. 280).

The concept of praxis originated in ancient Greece, where it was used to describe “almost any kind of activity which a free man is likely to perform; in particular all kinds of business and political activity” (Bottomore, 1983, p. 384, cited in Graham-Hill and Grimes, 2001, p. 280). Aristotle described praxis as one of the three basic activities of

man, alongside ‘theoria’ and ‘poiesis’, which together contributed towards three types of knowledge: “theoretical, to which the end goal was truth; poietical, to which the end goal was production; and practical, to which the end goal was action” (Wikipedia, 2009). The focus on freedom, alongside practical knowledge, is important in that it indicates a degree of discretion in how one acts and the need to draw upon knowledge to inform action. To this extent, the notion of praxis should be considered not just as ‘what people do’ (as implied by Whittington, 2006) but, perhaps more importantly, the cognitive processes that inform decisions about practice and the processes by which these are converted into action.

The use of praxis in modern organisational studies is heavily informed by its appropriation as a key element of Marxist thinking. According to Graham-Hill and Grimes (2001, p. 280):

“Marx calls attention to both the positive and negative forms of praxis: the former is the free conscious activity of human beings; the latter is the constrained activity that results in various forms of self-alienation. For Marx, alienating activity originates in the conditions of labor in a capitalist society. This opposition between praxis and labor is a central theme in later Marxist and radical humanist thinking, where the notion of both ‘positive’ and ‘negative’ praxis gives way to simply praxis and self-alienation. To eliminate self-alienation it is necessary to change the conditions under which the labor occurs.”

Thus, in recent parlance the notion of praxis has been employed to invoke positive forms of action, in a rather similar way as many people have used the notion of ‘leadership’ to refer to the positive aspects of interpersonal influence within organisations (often contrasted against ‘management’ or ‘managerialism’). In separating out the positive from the negative aspects of praxis, however, there is a danger of idealising one form (the positive) and ignoring the fact that it may only exist by virtue of its relationship to the other (the negative). Rather like the alternative accounts of leadership practice highlighted in Figure 5.3, it is entirely feasible that construction of the positive is only possible through engagement with the negative (R4) or, at the very least that a discourse that invokes both is used to legitimise power imbalances (R2) or the need for better ‘leadership’ (R1). In effect, as with the Chinese concept of ‘yin and yang’ the seed of one is ever present in the other – a view that is supported by the comments of our practitioner group in that skilled leaders and managers may move

fluidly between different positions dependent on the situation and audience, and which demands a dialectical perspective on leadership (Collinson, 2005).

### ***6.5 Building, dwelling and habitus: reframing the tensions of agency and structure in leadership***

In Carroll et al.’s (2008) account of the concept of leadership-as-practice they present it as “positioned as directly opposite to competency logic” (ibid, p. 365). As discussed in section 5.2.1, they draw on Heidegger’s notions of ‘building’ and ‘dwelling’ to propose that the competency approach is based on the idea of building, whereas the L-A-P approach is founded on the idea of dwelling. Such a distinction, they propose, holds a host of implications for the study, theory, practice and development of leadership as summarised in Table 6.1.

<i>Competency</i>	<i>Practice</i>
Rooted in objectivism	Explicitly constructionist
Individual level of analysis	Inherently relational and collective
Quantifiable and measurable	Discourse, narrative and rhetoric
Unanchored in relationship and context	Situated and socially defined
Privileges reason	Privileges lived or day-to-day experience
Assumes intellect predominantly	Incorporates embodiment and emotion

**Table 6.1: The competency/practice distinction**

(Source: Carroll et al., 2008, p. 366)

Whilst this is a useful comparison in many ways, it polarises the debate into two opposing camps rather than presenting them as potentially complementary and/or co-existing approaches. Thus, through this representation, Carroll et al. position competency and practice approaches as competing ontologies which represent fundamentally different ways of knowing and engaging with the work of leadership. The findings from Study 2, however, indicate a degree of flexibility in how leadership practitioners engage with these concepts and an inter-relationship between them. Indeed, Heidegger himself highlighted the interdependence of building and dwelling. He traces the origins of both words to a common root, the German word ‘bauen’ and identifies their relationship thus:

“Dwelling and building are related as end and means. However, as long as this is all we have in mind, we take dwelling and building as two separate activities, an idea that has something correct in it. Yet at the same time by the means-end



schema we block our view of the essential relations. For building is in itself already to dwell.” (Heidegger, 1971, p. 146, cited in Ladkin, 2006b, p. 95)

Thus “for Heidegger, then, dwelling comes about through the active engagement of building” (Ladkin, 2006b, p. 95). Such an insight is significant in challenging the “pernicious dualisms” (Fay, 1996, p. 223) that permeate the philosophy of social science – where questions are presented as requiring an *either/or* response. The field of leadership studies is replete with such dichotomies, including leader/follower, leadership/management and hierarchical/shared. The research presented in this thesis (and elsewhere), however, points towards other options, including *both/and* or *neither*. Thus, for example, the interviewees within both studies are charged with being both leaders and managers, as well as both leaders and followers (or may even regard themselves as neither). Likewise, both agency and structure come into play in shaping how leaders/managers can go about their work. Furthermore, this is not just dependent on their own agency and structure but also that of their ‘followers’ and other actors both within and outside the organisation.

Thus, to return to Carroll et al.’s (2008) argument, leadership competencies, and the logic of ‘building’ on which they are founded, are an integral part of leadership work, as is the logic of ‘dwelling’ and associated practices. In positioning these as competing perspectives we do ourselves no favours – the key thing is how do the two interface to give rise to what might be regarded as ‘good’ leadership (assessed in terms of both means and ends); what might be done to either side of the equation to increase the likelihood of ‘better’ leadership; and on what bases are any of these assessments being made?

Cunliffe (2001) attempts to address this dilemma through recourse to Shotter’s (1993) notion of ‘managers as practical authors’. She argues:

“Managers do not act as rational agents in an already existing reality but simultaneously construct, make sense, and are constructed by dialogue and ways of relating in their organizational landscapes. ‘Good’ managers are those who have a reflexive awareness of the complexities of the authorship process and who may use a range of linguistic tools to jointly construct possibilities for participating in conversations and organizational life in different ways.” (ibid, p. 367)

From the perspective of Shotter’s ‘rhetorical-responsive social constructionism’, as used by Cunliffe, competency logic need not purport to represent an objective reality, but



rather offers an important rhetorical technique through which managers and other organisational actors can “try to create a sense of place and situate themselves in relation to others” (ibid, p. 354). It offers a powerful (if somewhat misleading) mechanism for sensemaking and the influence of others.

“I suggest ‘good’ managers/authors are sensitive to their relational surroundings, they are able to explicate vague understandings and articulate ‘features’ and relationships from the welter of impressions organizational members experience. In doing so, they create possibilities for action.” (Cunliffe, 2001, p. 358)

Rather like Reicher et al.’s (2005) representation of leaders as ‘entrepreneurs of identity’ who initiate structures in which people can act, Cunliffe (drawing on Shotter) demonstrates how, through language, managers (and leaders) can act as ‘practical authors’ in shaping people’s sense of self and, consequently, their ability to act.

“Managers, along with other organizational participants, author the shape of their organization’s operational space or social landscape, as well as a sense of their own identities and the identities of those around them. This authorship occurs between people, dialogically, as they respond to each other in their everyday conversations. What makes managers authors, is that they are concerned not merely with the design of organizational structures, systems, or goals, but with creating new possibilities for action, new ways of being and relating in indeterminate, ill-defined realms of activity.” (Cunliffe, 2001, p. 352)

Whilst both of these approaches assume a fair degree of agency on behalf of managers and leaders they are, of course, somewhat constrained and shaped by the circumstances in which they find themselves. Pierre Bourdieu’s ‘theory of practice’ (Bourdieu, 1977, 1990, 1998) offers a useful conceptual frame here, and a number of concepts, including ‘capital’, ‘field’ and ‘habitus’ that offer a way through “the central conundrum within sociological theory concerning the nature of the relationship between individual agency and structural determinism” (Lingard and Christie, 2003, p. 319). Assuming a position he refers to as ‘constructivist structuralist’ or ‘structuralist constructivist’ (Bourdieu, 1990, p. 122), Bourdieu indicates how people come to internalise aspects of the social environment through a process of social conditioning and, in so doing, constrain their likely perceptions, interpretations and responses to social situations.

The notion of capital (human and social), has already been cited as a means for expressing the relative significance of individual and collective capacity in leadership development (see Day, 2000, Iles and Preece, 2006). As Brubaker (1993, p. 221, cited

in Lingard and Christie, 2003, p. 319) proposes, however it is the idea of “‘habitus working within different fields’ which allows Bourdieu to ‘transcend a set of basic intellectual oppositions: between structure and action, determinism and freedom, reproduction and transformation, society and individual, and especially, encompassing all of the others, objectivism and subjectivism’”.

Bourdieu (1990, p. 53, cited in Ozbilgin and Tatli, 2005, p. 864) defines *habitus* as “a system of durable [...] principles which generate and organize practices and representations that can be objectively adapted to their outcomes without presupposing a conscious aiming at ends”. *Habitus* therefore can be considered as a largely unconscious internalised representation of the external world that serves as a basis for thought and action. The content of the *habitus* is developed experientially over time such that it remains unique to each individual. A *field* is defined as “a structured social space, a field of forces, a force field. It contains people who dominate and people who are dominated. Constant, permanent relationships of inequality operate inside this space, which at the same time becomes a space in which the various actors struggle for the transformation or preservation of the field. All the individuals in this universe bring to the competition all the (relative) power at their disposal. It is this power that defines their position in the field and, as a result, their strategies” (Bourdieu, 1998, p. 40–41, cited in Lingard and Christie, 2003, p. 322). The field, therefore, can be regarded as a network of power-relations that transcends a simple, functional description of organisational structure.

In bringing together these ideas and relating them to the concept of leadership it becomes possible to express the embeddedness of leaders within social systems, and the degree to which leadership practice is necessarily shaped by *both* individual agency *and* organisational structure. Whilst the *field* determines their level of power and influence within a given situation, it is the *habitus* that directs likely action. Thus, accepting that individual agency offers the potential for people to do almost anything, the repertoire of likely actions is constrained (in a non-deterministic manner) by the physical, social and psychological structures in which they find themselves. In a similar way that organisational or national cultures define rather than impose acceptable social norms, so too are actions within organisations predisposed to certain forms of enactment. It is perhaps through gaining a clearer understanding of these processes that we will gain a better understanding of the nature of leadership praxis (see Gunter, 2001, Lingard, 2003

for further discussion of these issues). As Thompson (2001, p. 14, cited in Lingard and Christie, 2003, p. 317) proposes for school leadership:

“Bourdieu... makes it possible to explain how the actions of principals are always contextual, since their interests vary with issue, location, time, school mix, composition of staff and so on. This ‘identity’ perspective points at a different kind of research about principal practice: to understand the game and its logic requires an analysis of the situated everyday rather than abstractions that claim truth in all instances and places.”

### ***6.6 Sensemaking: leadership as the management of meaning***

If, as indicated above, the leaders within the studies reported here can be considered as *both* products *and* producers of the environments in which they find themselves – and leadership as *both* socially constructed *and* embedded within organisational structures, processes and practices – what does this tell us about the nature of leadership practice?

One possible solution to this question, proposed by Annie Pye (2005), is that leadership is an example of ‘sensemaking in action’. Following on from arguments such as Pondy’s (1978, p. 87) observation that “most definitions of leadership define it as a form of social influence but so are most things that involve more than one person (e.g. social facilitation effects, group decision making)” and Mitroff’s (1978) assertion that most leadership research is “committing a Type III error of solving the wrong problem precisely” (Pye, 2005, p. 34), she proposes instead the application of a ‘sensemaking’ lens whereby leadership is regarded as offering one potential solution to the challenge of ‘organising’.

Drawing on Weick’s (1995, p. 17) representation of sensemaking as: 1) grounded in identity construction, 2) retrospective, 3) enactive of sensible environments, 4) social, 5) ongoing, 6) focussed on and by extracted cues, and 7) driven by plausibility rather than accuracy, she illustrates how the accounts of senior leaders can be best understood as sensemaking narratives rather than evidence of leadership per se. She goes on to propose that:

“This seems to sum up some of the considerable difficulties which are central to the concept of leadership: it *is* something grounded in identity construction, about which we make *retrospective* sense, *enactive* of sensible environments, undoubtedly *social* and *ongoing*, focused on and extracted by *cues* and most

definitely driven by *plausibility* – shaping plausible meaning – *rather than any notion of accuracy.*” (Pye, 2005, p. 38, initial emphasis)

Whilst acknowledging that “the topic of leadership will never be replaced by sensemaking”, she proposes that “to understand leadership as a sensemaking process helps us to see much more clearly what is going on in organizations” (Pye, 2005, p. 46).

A sensemaking lens holds significant implications for both the study and practice of leadership in that it illustrates how individuals “construct meaningful explanations for situations and their experiences within those situations” (Gioia, 1986, p. 61). To this extent we would be best to consider the accounts of leadership practitioners as constructed narratives that endeavour to make sense of the situations and experiences they are trying to convey, and their work as ‘leaders’ as endeavouring to shape and influence the sensemaking processes of others (Rouleau, 2005).

From a research perspective, when applied to the studies within this thesis it is entirely plausible to consider the accounts of academic leaders in Study 1 as attempts to make sense of the situations in which they find themselves. Within this, it is perhaps unsurprising that a number of apparent tensions emerge as interviewees struggle to make sense of the overlapping roles and identities of ‘leader’, ‘academic’, ‘manager’, etc. A similar situation arises in Study 2, where the competing accounts of leadership intent and leadership experience could be taken as evidence of ‘organising’ in which some aspects (predominantly positive) are classified as ‘leadership’ and others (predominantly negative) are classified as ‘shadow themes’ (or obstacles to leadership). In engaging with the interviewer, as an attentive listener, the interviewee has the opportunity to construct a narrative of their own role as ‘leader’ within the organisation. As such, the interview itself can be regarded as a forum for ‘identity work’ in which the interviewee is invited to write their own story (Cunliffe, 2001, Sims, 2005, Beech, 2008).

From a practice perspective it could also be argued that the practice of leadership is fundamentally tied into processes of sensemaking and identity construction. Thus, for example, the accounts from the two studies in this thesis clearly indicate the importance of setting and communicating a clear sense of direction. To this extent the ‘leader’ could be considered as a ‘sense giver’ (Gioia and Chittipeddi, 1991) or ‘meaning maker’ (Smircich and Morgan, 1982) who conveys a common sense of purpose to his/her ‘followers’. To the extent that the ability to create and convey a meaningful sense of purpose is not the exclusive province of the holders of formal managerial positions,

other people within the organisation may also emerge as ‘leaders’ and some formal post holders may be considered as ‘lacking leadership’.

Whilst such a linear account of the sensemaking process, whereby the ‘leader’ offers an interpretive frame to ‘followers’, may be appropriate for certain situations, for example where a senior management team are endeavouring to convince staff within their organisation of the need for strategic change (see Gioia and Thomas, 1996, for an account of this in relation to higher education), it is unlikely to be sufficient to account for sensemaking within the complex web of relationships identified within many of the organisations in the two studies in this thesis. To this extent, in order for the idea of sensemaking to transcend the notion of *leadership as something done by leaders* to the idea of *leadership as a social process* it must find a way of capturing the multitudinous range of factors that influence the sensemaking processes of people throughout, and beyond, organisations.

Maitlis (2005) provides empirical evidence of exactly such an approach through a detailed longitudinal study of three British symphony orchestras. From this work she was able to distinguish four broad forms of organisational sensemaking (guided, fragmented, restricted and minimal) which differed according to the level of sensegiving activity provided by ‘leaders’ and ‘stakeholders’ which and led to somewhat different accounts and actions. Two key dimensions of organisational sensemaking processes within this study were identified as ‘control’ and ‘animation’.

A *controlled* approach to sensemaking was largely facilitated by formal leaders (i.e. members of the organisational hierarchy) and:

“... tended to occur in an organized, systematic fashion, rather than ad hoc: controlled sensemaking processes were dominated by scheduled meetings, formal committees, and planned events with restricted attendance, rather than by informal, impromptu meetings of self-organizing groups. Sensemaking occurred in this controlled way both because leaders drew on their formal authority to organize sensegiving occasions in which issues were discussed through formal channels, and because stakeholders responded to leader sensegiving by participating in and supporting these organized opportunities for sensegiving. A second key aspect of controlled processes was that a significant amount of sensegiving occurred in private meetings between stakeholders and leaders, rather than in more public, open forums. Leaders engaging in high levels of sensegiving were able to use key resources available to them, such as time,

space, and their personal networks, to create opportunities to meet stakeholders one-on-one so that discussions could take place away from the scrutiny of others.” (ibid, p. 30)

Both of these aspects were highly evident within the two studies in this thesis, in particular, Study 2 where interviewees were asked to comment on how organisational practices and processes, and informal social networks, impacted upon their day-to-day leadership work.

*Animated* sensemaking processes on the other hand, according to Maitlis, are largely contributed to through the engagement of stakeholders and involve an intense flow of information and a continuous rhythm, as described below.

“A central characteristic of this animation was an intense flow of information: leaders routinely reported back to their boards, executive teams, and other stakeholders, and information was also regularly shared among stakeholder groups. The presence of stakeholders who were actively engaged in shaping the interpretations of events and issues resulted in a greater circulation of information, both directly from those stakeholders and from leaders who were motivated to provide information in response to stakeholder activity [...] The second characteristic of these animated processes was their continuous rhythm: sensemaking around these issues remained active over an extended period. The diversity of interests and perspectives of the various stakeholders engaged in sensegiving led to sensemaking processes that were not resolved quickly or easily, processes in which different stakeholders engaged in the conversation at different times. Thus, sensemaking in animated processes tended to occur in iterative discussions that continued over many months, as numerous stakeholders volunteered their opinions and stated their demands, and leaders worked to articulate their own accounts of the issues of concern.” (ibid, p. 31)

These processes were less evident in the data from the two studies in this thesis (perhaps because an ethnographic methodology would have been required in order to identify them) although, it could be argued that, the emphasis on collegial and participative decision-making within many of the universities in Study 1 support such an approach. A ‘collegial’ style of leadership was most evident at the departmental level and related, largely to discussions about teaching and research activity (leadership of the discipline) than management/leadership of the organisation.

Maitlis' (2005) representation of controlled and animated sensemaking processes, and the relative contributions of leaders and stakeholders, offers a potential analogy to the distinction between vertical and shared leadership (Pearce, 2004) whereby, in the first situation formal leaders/managers draw upon their position within the organisation to influence others and, in the second situation, a diverse range of stakeholders contribute towards a shared and emergent sense of direction and purpose. Rather like Collinson and Collinson (2006, 2009) and Gronn (2008), Maitlis avoids proposing that one approach to sensemaking (or leadership) is 'better' than another, but that the key is to achieve an appropriate blend of approaches for the situation.

It is precisely here that mid-senior level operational managers, such as those in our Study 2 investigation, can have the greatest influence – not so much through their direct leadership or managerial influence per se, but through their ability to mediate different forms of sensemaking activity.

Ladkin (2007) gives a compelling account of such a situation through focussing on the activity of operational leaders charged with implementing environmental sustainability initiatives within three different organisations. From this work, she identified that “these leaders often find themselves managing power relations and facilitating conversations from the centre point of a hub, in which a key preoccupation is how to encourage those on different spokes of the hub to communicate and create new meanings together” (ibid, p. 4). To this extent, such leaders are not so much responsible for ‘sensegiving’ as “facilitating the joint meaning-making capacity of different stakeholder groups around their organisations. In this way, these leaders were critical in ‘bridging meaning’, enabling new meanings to be created, or in creating space through which new meanings could be created across different organisational discourses” (ibid, p. 4).

Such an account certainly matches the observation from our Study 2 interviews that many interviewees saw their role as one of ‘translating’ or ‘operationalising’ strategic intent rather than defining the overall purpose/direction for the organisation. “Such work”, as Ladkin (2007, p. 6) explains, “is essentially hermeneutic - it involves the exchange of meaning and the co-creation of shared understanding”. From this perspective, leadership is not ‘heroic’ but rather a collaborative activity in which particular individuals play a key coordinating role in the management of meaning (Smircich and Morgan, 1982).



Such a perspective also supports the hybrid/blended view of leadership as identified in Study 1, whereby the key aim of ‘distributing’ leadership is to achieve an appropriate balance between autonomy and control between academic units and the central university. Whilst some leaders are fundamentally concerned with the effective operation of the organisation and its constituent parts (what we termed ‘vertical’ or ‘top-down’ leadership), others are responsible for achieving coordination, collaboration and consistency across the organisation (what we termed ‘horizontal’ or ‘lateral’ leadership). Furthermore, both forms of leadership are dependent to some extent on ‘bottom-up’ leadership whereby operational units, and the individuals within them, take on responsibility for developing work within their own areas.

### ***6.7 Discourse, identity and purpose: the elusive nature of leadership practice***

It has been argued so far in this chapter that the work of ‘leadership’ as described by the practitioners in both studies in this thesis comprises elements of management and leadership, occurs within a network of power relations, is supported through practices that may require the participants to ‘enter into role’, combines ‘building’ and ‘dwelling’ type activities, and is largely enacted through participation in sensemaking narratives. In this final part I would like to explore a number of connecting strands (discourse, identity and purpose<sup>80</sup>) that run throughout each of these arguments and the extent to which they may help account for the difficulties highlighted throughout this thesis in providing a systemic and collective representation of leadership practice.

With regard to the first of these themes, it has already been discussed that leadership can be considered as a largely discursive practice, whereby ‘leaders’ endeavour to articulate a sense of meaningful purpose and to influence others to ‘follow’ this direction. From this perspective, language can be considered to have a performative quality in that leaders (and certain other stakeholders) ‘do things with words’ (Austin, 1963). Like “a priest uttering the words ‘you are now married’, a ship-owner declaring ‘I name this ship the Molly Aida’, a judge saying ‘I sentence you to death’ or a reviewer ticking the ‘rejection’ box in the review sheet. In these cases, words are actually creating a social fact rather than simply describing a situation” (Spicer et al., 2009, p. 543).

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<sup>80</sup> Please note that there is insufficient space here to give a comprehensive review of each of these areas. For a more detailed review of literature on discourse see Alvesson and Kärreman (2000).



This is not to say, of course, that all words spoken by leaders have a performative dimension but to suggest that, by virtue of their position, they are particularly well placed to say things that may (come to) be accepted as social facts by those listening. Hence, the potential impact of utterances is inextricably linked to the roles and identities of actors and the relative power dynamics between them. As Butler (2003) argues “performative acts are forms of authoritative speech; most performatives, for instance, are statements that, in the uttering, also perform a certain action and exercise a binding power” (ibid, p. 225, cited in Spicer et al., 2009, p. 543-4). She goes on to propose that “performativity must be understood not as a singular or deliberate ‘act’ but, rather, as the reiterative practice by which discourse produces the effects that it names” (ibid, p. 2, cited in Spicer et al., 2009, p. 544).

A similar argument was put forward by Gronn (1983) nearly 30 years ago when he argued that school principals (still referred to as ‘administrators’ at this period in time) use talk as a mechanism for tightening and loosening administrative control, and that “the power to control must be worked at linguistically and worked at never-endingly as an ongoing everyday activity” (ibid, p. 20).

Samara-Fredericks’ (2003) work similarly highlights the pivotal role of language, and the need for strategists to: “speak forms of knowledge; mitigate and observe the protocols of human interaction (the moral order); question and query; display appropriate emotion; deploy metaphors and finally; put history ‘to work’” (ibid, p. 168).

The last of these points resonates with Bakhtin’s (1986) notion of the ‘double-voice’ whereby language is used to continually recycle and reinvent past events and actions to meet current circumstances and needs. From this perspective language can be seen to hold multi-layered meanings, inherited from previous speakers and overwritten and adapted by our own aims and aspirations (Helin, 2009). As Fairhurst (2009, p. 1611) argues “what is ‘text’ one moment becomes ‘con-text’ the very next”.

In an influential review of the literature on discourse in organisations Alvesson and Karreman (2000) identify a number of competing and conflicting ways in which the notion has been used. From these accounts they identify two main dimensions along which accounts of discourse tend to be positioned, as follows:

“The first is the connection between discourse and meaning (broadly defined): does discourse precede and incorporate cultural meaning and subjectivity or is it best understood as referring to the level of talk (and other forms of social texts) loosely coupled to the level of meaning? The second is the formative range of

discourse: is discourse best understood as a highly local, context-dependent phenomenon to be studied in detail or does it mean an interest in understanding broader, more generalized vocabularies/ways of structuring the social world?" (ibid, p. 1129)

In the subsequent discussion they distinguish between analyses that focus on micro-level discourses (with a small 'd'), that endeavour to reveal how language is used to construct meaning in-situ, and macro level 'grand' Discourses (with a capital 'D'), that act as a broader ordering force on how people think about and engage with their environment. They conclude by proposing the need for investing greater attention to the contextual specificities of language and the manner in which it interacts with and constructs meaning – in particular how micro discourses inform and are shaped by macro Discourses.

The manner in which university leaders in Study 1 used ideas such as distributed leadership to allude to notions of collegiality and participative decision making is one illustration of how grand Discourses inform micro-level discourses. In such a context, it could be argued, the Discourse of 'distributed leadership' offers a potential means for integrating the somewhat competing Discourses of 'managerialism' and 'collegiality' within HE. Through adopting a 'distributed leadership' discourse (in spirit if not always in terminology) these leaders can help inform the sensemaking processes of those around them, as well as reconciling their own identity tensions associated with both leading and being part of a community of scholars.

The connection between discourse and identity is illustrated well in the following quote from Cunliffe (2001, p. 361):

“The managers I spoke with did not talk about their identity as fixed or bounded in terms of roles or competencies, nor did I get the impression they saw themselves acting out scripted roles (Goffman, 1959). Instead, they spoke about different facets, ways of relating, and the dilemmas they faced. I suggest our sense of being emerges in rhetorical-responsive dialogue between multiple organizational voices. In other words, identity is not categorized as a noun but a way of being-in-relation-to-others as we contest and negotiate who we are in responsive ways. In this sense, the origins of dialogue and self are embodied in our reactions as we find ourselves responding and moving in particular ways. Thus, managing is a way of being because our actions, our ways of making sense and constructing our world are not separate from us, they do not stem from

a detached knowledge of the world, but are intimately linked to what we feel, say, and how we engage with our surroundings. We ‘continually work on (our) humanness’ (Watson, 1994, p. 19), i.e., who we are as we relate and converse with people.”

Discourse, therefore, offers a rich environment for ‘identity work’ (Sveningsson and Alvesson, 2003) in which the various protagonists can collaboratively articulate and reconstruct both their own identities and those of others. To this extent, “identity is a process that is both the outcome of, and the input to, dialogue” (Beech, 2008, p. 54) and identity work is a reciprocal process through which people both construct and are constructed:

“The process of identity work is a combination of writing one’s own story, being written by others and of seeking to write oneself into the stories of others.” (Sims, 2005, p. 54)

From the above discussion it can clearly be seen that discourse and identity are closely linked and that both have a significant influence on interpretations of meaning and purpose. As Sinclair (2007, p. 143) argues:

“Identity work is not an end in itself, merely to secure the self, but a vehicle through which to better understand one’s power, actions, vulnerabilities and possibilities.”

This is where we complete the circle because if identity work is about discovering a sense of place and purpose, and discourse is the process by which this is achieved, leadership is about how this sense of meaning is converted into purposeful action. As Barker (1997, p. 354) proposes:

“Leadership is a means for individuals to explore, to understand, to modify, and to articulate their own ethics, and those of other individuals. Through leadership, people come to visualize a common summum bonum<sup>81</sup> that in turn comes to be manifested in leadership role expectations, which in turn come to be symbolized by and attributed to the leader. Within the new paradigm, it is not the leader who creates leadership, it is leadership that creates the leader.”

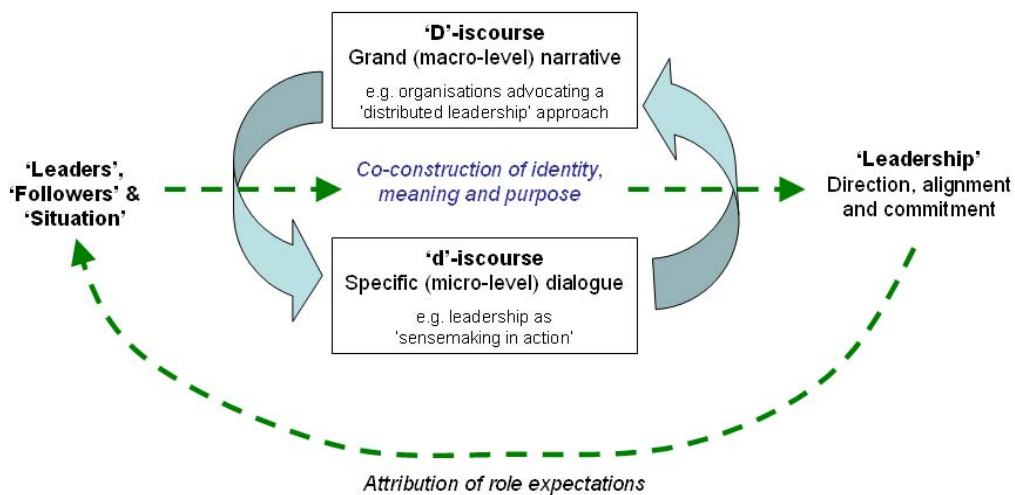
The irony, illustrated in the latter part of this quote, is the tendency for the social processes of leadership (an inevitably collective endeavour) to be associated with the emergence and identification of individual leaders. Thus, as illustrated in Drath et al.’s

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<sup>81</sup> Latin for ‘highest good’.

(2008) leadership tripod we tend to recognise leadership by virtue of the presence of ‘leaders’, ‘followers’ and ‘situation’ rather than ‘direction’, ‘alignment’ and ‘commitment’.

The two studies recounted in this thesis reveal some interesting insights into the relationship between discourse, identity, purpose and leadership. Study 1 highlights how a grand Discourse of ‘distributed leadership’ may be used within universities to enhance acceptance of, and commitment to, wider organisational goals/objectives. Study 2 shows how much day-to-day leadership practice is accomplished through dialogue and ‘sensemaking in action’. Although this is a gross simplification of what was discovered in each case together, effectively, they illustrate the interactive nature of micro and macro level discourses on leadership as illustrated in Figure 6.1.



**Figure 6.1: Macro and micro level discourses of leadership**

Figure 6.1 above offers a diagrammatic representation of the main argument within this thesis, which goes as follows:

- It is through the interaction of different forms of discourse that a sense of identity, meaning and purpose can emerge for individuals and groups.
- From this a sense of direction, alignment and commitment can emerge which may, in turn, become labelled as ‘leadership’ and subsequently manifested into role expectations of ‘leaders’ and ‘followers’.
- These revised roles and understandings, in turn, influence the nature of subsequent discourses.

## MAKING SENSE OF LEADERSHIP

In effect, this process goes some way to explaining why leadership remains such an elusive concept to represent and why, as highlighted by Drath et al. (2008), there is a tendency to resort to tripartite accounts of ‘leaders’, ‘followers’ and ‘situation’ when endeavouring to do so. Alternative accounts of leadership as a social process to accomplish shared outcomes such as direction, alignment and commitment struggle to gain recognition and acceptance within mainstream theory and practice because in the process of describing them it is necessary to identify the various contributions of different social actors which, in turn, shapes role expectations and leads to the identification of ‘leaders’ and ‘followers’ as illustrated in the earlier quote by Barker.

In order to break free of this cycle, perhaps, the only real solution is to create an alternative vocabulary through which to describe the outcomes desired of good leadership without recourse to leader/follower role expectations. One possibility, proposed by Henry Mintzberg, is the concept of ‘communityship’, as described below:

“‘Communityship’ is not a word in the English language. But it should be—to stand between individual leadership on one side and collective citizenship on the other. In fact, I believe that we should never use the word ‘leadership’ without also discussing communityship.” (Mintzberg, 2009, p. 141)

As he argues elsewhere:

“Isn’t it time to think of our organisations as communities of cooperation, and in so doing put leadership in its place: not gone, but alongside other important social processes [...] And with this, let us get rid of the cult of leadership, striking at least one blow at our increasing obsession with individuality. Not to create a new cult around distributed leadership, but to recognize that the very use of the word leadership tilts thinking toward the individual and away from the community. We don’t only need better leadership, we also need less leadership.” (Mintzberg, 2006)

Whatever terms we use, however, we need to remain aware of their ability to shape sensemaking processes. Whilst the notion of ‘community’ is promising in many respects for capturing something of the essence of ‘distributed’ and ‘engaged’ approaches to managing organisations (Mintzberg, 2009) it too carries numerous associations and the potential for suppression, control and the promulgation of unrealistic beliefs and expectations (see, for example, Parker, 2002, chapter 4) – in effect, what we name is not always what we get.

## 6.8 Chapter summary

In this chapter I have discussed the findings from studies 1 and 2 and related them to the broader literature on leadership. It has been argued that whilst leadership may be ‘distributed’ this occurs within certain bounds and that the ability to act is strongly linked to power relations and role expectations. The evidence from both studies implies that leadership practice is effectively ‘blended’ or ‘hybrid’ in that it involves a mix of hierarchical, shared and emergent forms and is shaped, in large part, by wider social and organisational structures, processes and discourses.

In order to make sense of and interpret the various findings from these studies I have outlined a number of lines of thought that shed some light on the three key questions highlighted at the start of this thesis. Firstly, I have proposed that the concept of ‘leadership configurations’ (Gronn, 2009a) offers a means for assimilating *individual and collective* accounts of leadership whereby it is regarded as comprising a variety of forms that co-exist alongside one another, rather than being classifiable in a single way (as many of the theories in Chapter 2 endeavour to do). Secondly, I have discussed the notion of ‘praxis’ and its potential to act as a bridge between leadership *theory and practice* by offering insights into how these two areas interact and co-construct one another. Thirdly I have explored the concepts of ‘building’, ‘dwelling’ and ‘habitus’ as alternatives to the notions of *structure and agency*, and have proposed that they may be useful lenses through which to consider how ‘leaders’ both create and are created by their social context.

Following on from these discussions I have presented the value of a ‘sensemaking’ perspective on leadership both in terms of understanding the various ways in which people make sense of the concept and in how leaders influence and persuade others in their day-to-day leadership work. Finally, I have identified the significance of micro and macro discourses in shaping and framing concepts of identity and purpose within organisations, concluding that there is a tendency for social processes to be reconceived in terms of ‘leader/follower’ contributions once labelled as ‘leadership’. It is proposed that in order to escape this cycle we may need to identify an alternative discourse, such as ‘communityship’ (Mintzberg, 2006), whilst remaining alert to the possibilities of this resulting in new difficulties and challenges.

# 7. CONCLUSIONS... AND NEW BEGINNINGS

“It takes more than one scholar, discipline, or theoretical approach to understand leadership. The study of leadership forces us to tackle the universal questions about human nature and destiny. For those questions, there will probably never be a general theory.” (Ciulla, 2006, p. 233)

## ***7.1 Overview***

In this final chapter I will reflect on the contribution of the research and discussion presented within this thesis to the body of knowledge about Leadership Studies. I will then consider the main implications of these conclusions for leadership theory, research, practice and development. I will conclude with a number of further areas for research.

## ***7.2 Contribution of this thesis to the field of Leadership Studies***

This thesis set out to investigate whether and how it is possible to explore leadership in a holistic manner that recognises the contribution of both individuals and the collective whilst remaining sensitive to contextual factors. In order to begin addressing this question, in Chapter 2, I reviewed an extensive body of literature that broadly represents leadership as a) a property of leaders, b) the product of a relationship between leaders and followers, and c) a social process. Whilst each of these approaches has undoubtedly informed understandings of leadership the two most dominant approaches (a and b) have proven inadequate to explain and/or capture the full complexity of leadership in contemporary organisations. Social process theories (c) appear somewhat more promising although have a tendency to portray leadership as rather abstract and elusive and hence have seen relatively limited uptake within mainstream leadership practice.

Within this thesis I chose to investigate two recent perspectives on leadership (distributed leadership and leadership-as-practice), through empirical work in a number of large, complex organisations, in order to more fully appreciate the contribution they could make to knowledge in this area. In this section I will illustrate the manner in which these studies and the subsequent discussion contribute to the knowledge base for the field of Leadership Studies. This will be dealt with in two sub-sections: the empirical contribution and the theoretical/conceptual contribution.

### **7.2.1 Empirical contribution**

In their own right, each of the two empirical studies in this thesis adds to the knowledge base about leadership.

Study 1 was the first explicit attempt to critically explore the distribution of leadership within UK higher education and the manner in which the Discourse of ‘distributed’ leadership was being employed by people with a formally recognised managerial responsibility. This investigation complements the burgeoning of literature on distributed leadership in schools (e.g. Leithwood et al., 2009, Harris, 2009, Spillane and



## CONCLUSIONS... AND NEW BEGINNINGS

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Diamond, 2007) and the emerging literature on distributed leadership in colleges (e.g. Collinson and Collinson, 2006). Whilst HE is also part of the education sector, and an area in which the terminology of ‘distributed leadership’ has been introduced, there has been barely any rigorous research from this perspective. Findings from this study revealed, as in schools and colleges, that leadership is configured in a ‘hybrid’ (Gronn, 2009a) manner, comprising vertical, horizontal and emergent forms of influence. The nature of governance and funding structures, organisational size and complexity, as well as the nature of professional roles within HE however, bring to bear some different dynamics in how leadership is enacted, communicated and allocated. In particular, a tension can be identified between ‘academic’ and ‘managerial’ identities that may discourage individuals from aspiring to take on a ‘leadership’ role within certain HE contexts. Within such an environment the Discourse of ‘distributed leadership’ may offer a persuasive rhetoric that appeals to both proponents of ‘collegiality’ and ‘managerialism’ yet, in so doing, may mask the true dynamics of power and influence within such organisations.

Study 2 was only the second time the concept of ‘leadership-as-practice’ had been investigated in an empirical setting. Whilst the previous study (described in Carroll et al., 2008) had focussed on participants on a leadership development programme, Study 2 took this concept out into organisations to explore the perceptions and experiences of practicing managers. Furthermore, it employed a collaborative academic-practitioner methodology that has seldom been used within leadership and management studies, despite calls for such an approach (e.g. Bartunek, 2007, Ng, 2010). Through an exploration of the dynamics of leadership practice and praxis, as described by mid-senior level managers in a number of large, complex organisations, this study offers an illuminating insight into the mechanisms through which such people engage in ‘leadership work’.

In addition to their individual contributions, however, through including two different yet linked investigations, I have also offered the personal narrative of a researcher endeavouring to come to a greater appreciation of leadership. This narrative (supported through personal reflections in Chapter 1) gives a behind-the-scenes account of studying leadership which is seldom portrayed in the reports of standalone studies. Indeed, as argued in section 1.3.2, the account of a personal quest for a solution, and then for understanding, presented in this thesis can be taken as an analogy for the field of Leadership Studies more generally. The search for answers is sometimes fruitful in

producing insights, and these may enable people to orientate themselves to leadership as they experience it, but the journey is often as important as the destination. These ideas will be explored further in the next section.

### **7.2.2 Theoretical/conceptual contribution**

In addition to the empirical contributions outlined above, this thesis also contributes towards the theoretical/conceptual body of literature on leadership in a number of ways.

Firstly, it provides new insights into the nature of ‘distributed leadership’ – particularly the manner in which it may be used as a rhetorical device to enhance commitment to, and engagement with, organisational objectives (see section 4.5).

It also offers theoretical developments to the concept of ‘leadership-as-practice’, in particular, highlighting the importance of *how* practices are drawn upon and utilised by various organisational actors, and the extent to which ‘leaders’ may alternate between different discursive positions in order to accomplish the tasks with which they have been charged (see section 5.5).

By drawing together these two studies, however, the primary theoretical contribution of this thesis is to provide an integrated account of the manner in which leadership practice is both constructed and enacted through discourse. Within the discussion in section 6.7, it is illustrated how macro-level ‘Discourses’ interact with micro-level ‘discourses’ (Alvesson and Kärreman, 2000) to construct a sense of shared identity, meaning and purpose; which leads to a degree of common direction, alignment and commitment (Drath et al., 2008); which, in turn, become attributed into role expectations (as illustrated diagrammatically in Figure 6.1). Such an account goes quite some way to explaining why social process theories of leadership have not garnered the level of support that may be expected and why, even where leadership is clearly the outcome of collective endeavour, recognition and reward is often directed towards a small number of individuals who are singled out as ‘leaders’.

With regard to the question set out at the beginning of the thesis it is suggested that a holistic representation of leadership is unlikely to be attainable given the huge variety of contexts in which leadership occurs and the many forms that it takes. Furthermore, it is suggested that there is no ‘essence’ of leadership to be captured, rather leadership works through and within discourse and, as such is constructed by the communities in which it occurs. To this extent, it is suggested, the quest of Leadership Studies should be to seek understanding rather than a ‘solution’. Such an understanding, however, is inevitably

multi-faceted, depending on the contribution of multiple scholars and approaches. Rather than seeking to identify the one best way to lead, organisations should foster the emergence of a diversity of leadership forms which, in turn, may require a somewhat eclectic engagement with the literature. The conceptual pillars outlined in section 3.5 offer one possible mechanism for ‘sensitizing’ oneself to important issues although, as discussed in section 3.6, care needs to be taken to ensure a degree of commensurability between the ideas and approaches advocated.

In the following sections I will reflect further on the implications of these conclusions and contributions to a) leadership theory, b) leadership research, c) leadership practice, and d) leadership development. The chapter concludes with recommendations for further research.

### ***7.3 Implications for leadership theory***

This thesis has given a broad overview of the field of Leadership Studies and changing perspectives and approaches to theory. In many of the traditional leadership models outlined in Chapter 2 leadership is represented as something that resides within the leader. Later theories have presented it as something that arises through the interaction between leaders and followers and/or as a wider social process that occurs within organisations and groups. As Drath et al. (2008) highlight, though, within nearly all theories there is a common ontology whereby leadership is represented as something done *by* ‘leaders’ *to* ‘followers’ in pursuit of a given task.

Whilst it may well be true that this is how leadership is accomplished in certain situations, such a representation does not fit well with more emergent, informal and collective forms of leadership within complex and collaborative environments. Given the increasing prevalence of knowledge-based industry (in which the workers control the means of production) and the need for organisations to engage in partnerships (where hierarchical relationships are diminished) such scenarios are increasingly prevalent within organisational life and hence the need to develop theories and ways of thinking about leadership that fit these contexts.

Astley (1985, p. 503, cited in Alvesson, 1996, p. 475) proposes that:

“Theories gain favour because of their conceptual appeal, their logical structure, or their psychological plausibility. Internal coherence, parsimony, formal elegance, and so on prevail over empirical accuracy in determining a theory’s impact.”

## CONCLUSIONS... AND NEW BEGINNINGS

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Dominant theories of leadership to date have been accepted to the extent that they have resonated with the experiences, perceptions and social expectations of the times (in which it was considered appropriate to attribute 'leadership' to the actions of a 'leader'). Whilst many of these theories are based on limited and somewhat inconclusive evidence, and are increasingly unable to account for the wide diversity of leadership forms now present within organisations and societies, they remain difficult to dislodge from the popular psyche, particularly within Western society from whence the vast majority of management and leadership literature originates.

"Western language codes leadership as a noun and therefore as a separable object of study [...] leadership tends on the whole to be reified and treated as if it can be dissected and examined much as one would examine any other object in the environment. In contrast the Eastern tradition of Taoism treats leadership, more specifically the use of power, as a fluid set of interrelations co-ordinated with a natural order as it is, emphasizing co-ordination, location and connection with environmental contexts, rather than modification of the environment in line with an intellectual idea of what we would prefer it to be. Whereas for the West leadership is about active and shaping control, for Taoism it is more about engagement, understanding and co-ordination." (Prince, 2005, p. 105)

Whilst alternative perspectives, such as 'distributed leadership' and 'leadership-as-practice', are now being developed and promoted through academic literature in many cases they still struggle to escape the recurrent refrain of 'leaders' and 'followers' and to gain widespread recognition within organisations beyond a limited number of contexts. Furthermore, empirical evidence, such as that presented in Chapter 4 of this thesis, implies that even where more distributed notions of leadership are recognised and embraced they may well mask other important organisational dynamics (such as an uneven distribution of power and rewards) such that their role is as much rhetorical (in providing a compelling account of organising) as offering an accurate description of how leadership actually occurs.

The discursive significance of leadership, both in terms of how 'leaders' manage to influence others and of how talk of 'leadership' helps to create and maintain power relations, is illustrated through the study described in Chapter 5 of this thesis. In analysing and interpreting the accounts of these 'leaders' it is possible to see how, through talking about leadership, they may find a means for articulating what is meaningful and important to them and, in so doing, tend to bundle up a curious and

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changeable collection of perceptions, feelings, desires, expectations, experiences and practices. What each of these bundles has in common is reference to the mobilization of human effort in some collective enterprise yet, in providing their accounts, interviewees often reveal a number of inherent tensions and paradoxes about the role(s) in which they find themselves. Such findings illustrate the value of taking a ‘dialectical’ approach to the study and representation of leadership as outlined below.

“In a *dialectical* approach, differences are not conceived as absolute, and consequently the relation between them is not one of utter antagonism. Indeed, on a dialectical view, alternatives, while genuinely competing, only appear ‘other’ to each other. They are in fact deeply interconnected, and the confrontation between them reveals how these differences can be comprehended and transcended (transcended not in the sense of being obliterated but in the sense of being held in tension within a larger framework). Competing alternatives originally thought to have exhausted the possibilities can then be replaced with a wider viewpoint which recognizes the worth in the original positions but which goes beyond them.” (Fay, 1996, p. 224)

The evidence from this thesis implies that whilst there is an almost natural tendency to produce essentialist theories and models of leadership, in which leadership behaviours, attributes and outcomes are neatly categorised and presented in order to offer supposedly ‘practical’ guidance to leaders and organisations, such accounts do not capture the contested and conflicted experience of many practicing managers. From the current research this is particularly true of academic leaders within universities who may sense a distinct tension between their identities as managers and academics, but is equally evident in the accounts of leaders in other organisations who distinguish between the rhetoric of ‘what they think they should be doing’ versus their actual experience. Whilst it may be easy enough to categorise the perceived negative aspects of work as barriers to effective leadership and/or performance the insights provided to us by practicing managers in Study 2 reveals a number of alternative ways in which these narratives can be interpreted and utilised. In particular, it was noted that leaders may employ a fair degree of discursive flexibility in terms of how they engage with each of these negative experiences – sometimes invoking them as obstacles to leadership and other times using them as a means to achieve the ends for which they are held accountable.

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Together the studies in this thesis offer some tentative insights into the form and practice of leadership. Ultimately, however, they are no more than glimpses from the riverbank. If leadership, like all human endeavour, is moving, flowing and changing over time how can we ever hope to capture it? As Wittgenstein proposes:

“How could human behaviour be described? Surely only by showing the actions of a variety of humans, as they are all mixed up together. Not what one man is doing now, but the whole hurly-burly, is the background against which we see action.” (Wittgenstein cited in Dreyfus, 1991, p. 7)

Pettigrew (1997) proposes that in order to convey the complex and changing nature of phenomena such as leadership we need to endeavour to ‘catch reality in flight’. Tsoukas and Chia (2002) propose a more radical solution, proposing that as reality is always in a state of ‘becoming’ it can never be captured and that all we can hope to understand is the process of becoming. The difficulty, of course, is that both of these approaches are incredibly difficult (if not impossible) to accomplish through research and/or theory. If we ‘capture reality in flight’ then it becomes static, no longer ‘in flight’, and hence loses its vitality. If we explore the processes of ‘becoming’ then we can never really understand what things ‘become’ and hence lose our ability to offer guidance to those people concerned with practical outcomes. Colville (2008) offers an alternative, perhaps more attainable, metaphor – that of the ‘flights and perchings’ of a bird. To study the form of a bird we must take our chances whilst it is stationary on a perch, yet to understand what it does we must observe it in flight. As with the analogy used at the start of this thesis, to build up a picture of a river it may be useful to take snapshots from different points along the bank yet, to truly appreciate its power and flow one must be prepared to jump into the current and float downstream.

The practical contribution of organisational theory, however, need not come only from its potential for direct application, but also from its role in shaping and stimulating discourses about the role and purpose of work. Spicer et al. (2009), for example, draw attention to the important role of Critical Management Studies in provoking debate about the nature and purpose of organisation. They describe it as a “profoundly performative project” (ibid, p. 537) yet one that has acquired somewhat of a reputation for negativity in its stance towards management and performance. Rather than abandoning the project, however, these authors call for “a ‘critical performativity’ that involves an affirmative stance, with an ethic of care, a pragmatic orientation, engagement with potentialities, and striving for a normative orientation” (ibid, p. 554).

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Arguably, a similar role could be carved out for the field of leadership studies – not in claiming to present an objective and generalisable account of leadership practice, but in facilitating discussions about what is important and worthwhile. As Amanda Sinclair argues in her book *Leadership for the Disillusioned*:

“Leadership should be aimed at helping to free people from oppressive structures, practices and habits encountered in societies and institutions, as well as within the shady recesses of ourselves.” (Sinclair, 2007, p. vx)

Following on from the critiques of management and organisation studies outlined in section 1.2.2 it may be time to reframe the manner in which theoretical knowledge about leadership is presented, as illustrated in the following quote.

“If we want to empower and re-enchant organization research, we need to do three things. First, we must drop all pretence, however indirect, at emulating the success of the natural sciences in producing cumulative and predictive theory, for their approach simply does not work in organization research or any of the social sciences (for the full argument, see Flyvbjerg, 2001 ). Second, we must address problems that matter to groups in the local, national, and global communities in which we live, and we must do it in ways that matter; we must focus on issues of context, values, and power, as advocated by great social scientists from Aristotle and Machiavelli to Max Weber and Pierre Bourdieu. Finally, we must effectively and dialogically communicate the results of our research to our fellow citizens and carefully listen to their feedback. If we do this – focus on specific values and interests in the context of particular power relations – we may successfully transform organization research into an activity performed in public for organizational publics, sometimes to clarify, sometimes to intervene, sometimes to generate new perspectives, and always to serve as eyes and ears in ongoing efforts to understand the present and to deliberate about the future. We may, in short, arrive at organization research that matters.” (Flyvbjerg, 2006, p. 370)

Leadership studies is a field of enquiry that has much to offer contemporary society yet, it is proposed, this contribution will not arise from purporting to offer a systematic evidence base from which leaders, managers and policy makers can determine how to run their organisations most effectively (although some such gains may be achieved). Instead, the contribution of leadership studies is likely to arise from asking (and offering other people the means to ask) the challenging and potentially inconvenient questions



facing society, including those very questions that may lead to the realisation that ‘more leadership’ is not necessarily what is needed (as argued by Mintzberg, 2004a, 2009). It remains unclear, however, the extent to which this is occurring or likely to happen given, for example, that at the recent International Conference on Studying Leadership (December 2009) I heard no reference to the Copenhagen summit on climate change that started on the same day and held substantial implications for all of our futures<sup>82</sup>.

### ***7.4 Implications for leadership research***

Following on from the previous points, in order to generate leadership theory, knowledge and insights that both ‘matter’ and are perceived as credible and useful to end users consideration needs to be given to the nature and role of research.

The personal narrative of my quest to gain a richer appreciation of leadership (as outlined in section 1.3.1) illustrates how in researching a subject such as this insights build slowly over time, with any individual study being largely shaped by previous experience and insights and leading to new questions and challenges. Whilst the project-based nature of much leadership research and the process of presenting findings and conclusions for academic, practitioner and policy audiences tend to result in neatly bounded arguments this is seldom how the research process is experienced by those behind the scenes. Leadership research, like all social inquiry, comprises a substantial degree of social construction (as illustrated in the quote by Alvesson in section 3.5.4) yet this is seldom explicitly acknowledged in published accounts. Only through recognising the assumptions and inevitable biases (social, cultural, philosophical, methodological, etc.) that we bring as researchers to our enquiries can we hope to gain a more realistic appreciation of the relative strengths, weaknesses and limitations of our approach. Indeed, only through being explicit about the choices and agendas that we bring to our work may it be possible to capture an honest account of what we find. As Anderson et al. (2006) suggest, such an approach may well enhance, our understanding of the underlying mechanisms of social phenomena.

“That we have choices as scholars in deciding among mechanisms that interest us may introduce an arbitrariness into scholarship that makes research, at least partially, a process of creation. For example, we can opt to elucidate one set of mechanisms while ignoring another set. By focusing on one mechanism to the exclusion of others, we create research streams that may only partially explain a

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<sup>82</sup> The outcomes of which were, ironically, largely determined as unsuccessful due to a ‘lack of leadership’ (see, for example, Guardian, 2009; GozoNews.com, 2009).



phenomenon. From our perspective, one benefit of an explicit treatment of mechanisms is to make more explicit our role in the creation of the social world. Revealing the logic that guides our choices in variable selection and hypothesis formulation, which often is only implicit in scholarly work, shows the reader which part of the social world we chose to explain. We can make the story of creation crisper and surface our role in that story: These are the assumptions of my story and the conditions under which my theory works, and this is what I overlooked and why.” (ibid, p. 111)

As discussed in Chapter 3, dominant approaches to the study of leadership still tend to be grounded in positivist or realist principles in an endeavour to offer predictive and prescriptive advice to leaders and their organisations. Whilst such an approach is clearly understandable it may limit the potential for leadership research to fundamentally challenge the ways in which we think about such phenomena. If, however, we take the discursive significance of leadership practice to heart, we may come to realise that leadership research does not simply need to describe the world, but can also transform it. Such an argument is illustrated in Cunliffe’s (2002) distinction between viewing ‘language as epistemology’ versus ‘language as ontology’. In referring to the use of discursive approaches in management studies Cunliffe highlights that in most cases these are applied as a research method rather than as a philosophical orientation, as described below.

“The key distinction between the language as epistemology and language as ontology is that the former assumes that language is an empirical phenomenon (Alvesson and Kärreman, 2000), something to be studied that helps us decipher already-made significations and relatively fixed meanings. From this perspective, language is used as a research method that helps us surface (or destabilize) the preexisting presents or meanings of original texts. Researchers study the general language systems, structures, and social categories that exist within texts to see how our subjects construct their worlds. So, we come to know the world through language and study language structures to tell us about the world. Discourse analysis, narrative analysis, textual analysis, and conversational analysis are examples of research methods drawing on this perspective. The second approach, language as ontology, emphasizes the crucial part language plays in constituting social realities and identities and assumes that ‘meaning is always ambivalent and resonates with the flux of experience’

(Höpfl, 1994, p. 468). In other words, meaning is created as language plays through us, as words, sounds, rhythm, and gestures evoke verbal and emotional responses. Three main premises distinguish this approach from the previous one and form the basis for developing a dialogical approach to inquiry: Language is metaphorical, language and meaning are an embodied practice, and language is indeterminate.” (Cunliffe, 2002, p. 129)

If research is viewed in this way, it can no longer be regarded as an impartial data gathering exercise, but rather as an intervention in its own right. Within the research recounted in this thesis the very act of enquiring about leadership within these organisations may well have changed in subtle or significant ways aspects of individual and organisational functioning. Indeed, for example, the practitioner-led interviews in Study 2 highlighted at least two direct ways in which this research had an impact. Firstly, it gave the practitioner interviewers a legitimate excuse to seek their colleagues’ opinions about leadership within the organisation, and secondly, it gave the interviewees the opportunity to reflect upon and articulate their understanding of leadership within this context. Both parties described this process as interesting and revealing and, in several cases commented on how rarely (if ever) their opinions had been sought on this subject. Activities such as this do more than simply capture information – they set in motion a process of dialogue and reflection that may well have a knock on effect for all parties.

To this extent, I accept the principles of Action Research that “research with human beings should be participative and democratic” (Ladkin, 2004, p. 536) and of Appreciative Inquiry in that “what we focus on becomes our reality”; “reality is created in the moment, and there are multiple realities”; and “the act of asking questions of an organization or group influences the group in some way” (Hammond, 1998). Indeed, I would even go as far as to propose, like Graham-Hills and Grimes (2001), that on occasion research can be emancipatory for the participant and/or researcher.

Whilst there are undoubtedly other implications for research, one more factor that I would like to comment on that has not been discussed much in the literature is the nature of research as a collective process. In each of the studies recounted in this thesis (and many others that I have been involved in during my career) I have worked as part of a research team and found the conversations and interactions with my co-researchers an essential part of the research process – in particular in terms of clarifying research questions and interpreting findings. The diversity of views brought by my academic

colleagues in Study 1 and the practitioner researchers in Study 2 greatly enriched the process and enhanced the potential contribution, whilst putting in place checks and balances to minimise the risks of excessive bias in the design, conduct and analysis of qualitative research. These are important issues for leadership researchers to consider and, in my opinion, should form a more substantial dimension of enquiries into this topic. As Ciulla (2006, p. 233) argues:

“It takes more than one scholar, discipline, or theoretical approach to understand leadership. The study of leadership forces us to tackle the universal questions about human nature and destiny. For those questions, there will probably never be a general theory.”

### ***7.5 Implications for leadership practice***

The findings from the studies in this thesis have supported the notion of leadership as a shared process, distributed widely within organisations – both shared across people at all levels, as well as embedded in organisational systems and processes (Grint, 2004a, Spillane et al., 2004). Furthermore, it has been proposed that leadership takes a variety of forms that co-exist alongside one another and need to be balanced in order to ensure an appropriate degree of hierarchical and shared influence (Collinson and Collinson, 2006, Gronn, 2008, 2009a).

To this extent, organisations and the people within them considered responsible for ‘leadership’ should be encouraged to find ways in which to foster a diversity of leadership styles and approaches, and to recognise the ways in which these various configurations complement, enhance and/or inhibit one another. Within a school environment, for example, Day et al. (2007) have indicated the pivotal role of headteachers in promoting change and facilitating the development of a distributed approach to leadership across the school. The question, therefore, is not one of vertical versus shared leadership, but rather what is the appropriate balance for the situation/task (Pearce, 2004).

The studies in this thesis suggest the value of a somewhat eclectic approach to leadership, in terms of nurturing a diversity of forms and understandings rather than endeavouring to advocate an ideal or generic approach<sup>83</sup>. Each context is unique, as are the various actors within them, and attempts at emulating ‘best practice’ are likely to be

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<sup>83</sup> This supports Ladkin’s (2010) argument (cited in section 3.6) that one of the reasons why there are so many theories of leadership is that they each approach it from a different side and/or aspect – each offering a different ‘piece of the puzzle’ but none capable of capturing the full ‘identity’ of leadership.

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unsuccessful. Whilst leadership competency frameworks and associated approaches (including performance management systems and 360° appraisal) may be helpful in highlighting organisational norms, values and expectations they can not influence leadership behaviour directly and may, in fact, lead to unanticipated and undesired outcomes. The promotion of individualist and functionalist ways of thinking, in particular, are major risks and may diminish true collaboration and organisational citizenship behaviour (Organ, 1988).

Whilst leadership may be widely distributed within the organisations studied in this research, however, this does not imply that it is necessarily democratic or that power and resources are evenly dispersed. Indeed, the evidence from both studies implies that the notion of 'distributed leadership' may well be used in a rhetorical manner in order to enhance commitment to managerial objectives. A similar point is made by Hatcher (2005, p 255) who highlights "a tension—I would say a fundamental contradiction—between distributed leadership and government-driven headteacher managerialism" within schools. Thus whilst a distributed approach to leadership may be advocated, staff experience may be one of increasing managerial control and the gradual erosion of collective bargaining. Such tensions are experienced even by senior level managers and directors, however, the crux is likely to come for middle level managers such as the Heads of School/Department within the higher education research reported here and operational managers in non-HE organisations. Individuals in such roles may well find themselves having to continually navigate a series of tensions and conflicts, largely associated with issues of identity and purpose.

For such 'leaders', whilst there may be a number of organisational and individual practices that they can make use of in their day-to-day leadership practice, their primary role is to act as a hub for sensemaking - 'translating', 'communicating' and 'prioritising' organisational objectives in the light of the specific context in which they find themselves. The research in this thesis indicates that leadership praxis for such people is a largely discursive activity through which they both shape and are shaped by the social and organisational contexts in which they find themselves.

A perspective such as this would imply that a good degree of leadership practice can be considered as 'identity work' (Sveningsson and Alvesson, 2003) through which people endeavour to develop and articulate a clear sense of identity and purpose for themselves and those around them. Leaders may be considered as 'entrepreneurs of identity' (Reicher et al., 2005) who help build a sense of common 'social identity' and craft

opportunities for group members to collaborate in pursuit of a shared enterprise. As Ladkin (2007, p. 6) proposes, such work “is essentially hermeneutic” in that “it involves the exchange of meaning and the co-creation of shared understanding”. The skills required of such people are more likely to be those of the ‘critical practitioner’ and/or ‘reflective practitioner’ than the ‘management scientist’ or ‘competent manager’ (Holman, 2000) – they need to reflect on and learn from experience rather than simply apply a standard set of practices. As Sinclair (2007) argues:

“Leadership is a process of critical and compassionate engagement with the world [... It] is a commitment to challenging accepted wisdom, to reflecting deeply on our motives so as to avoid co-option, to being mindful of relations between our bodies and psyches, to being in the moment, and to leading with the intent of freeing – both the self and others.” (ibid, p. xxiv)

Leadership, from such a perspective, requires leaders who are prepared to ask questions and involve others in determining what to do rather than seeking to provide an immediate solution or decisive action. It is a process requiring the development and application of ‘social capital’ as well as ‘human capital’ (Day, 2000), and is a process that depends on leaders who can apply ‘practical wisdom’ and ‘mastery’ rather than simply technical ‘know-how’ and ‘competence’ (Grint, 2007, Raelin, 2007). Within such a context, leaders can be considered as ‘bricoleurs’ (Weick, 2001): masters at drawing on whatever is at their disposal in order to complete a particular task.

### ***7.6 Implications for leadership development***

From the discussion above it can be seen that the ability to reflect critically on practice is one of the key capabilities of an effective leader. Cunliffe (2009) calls for the development of the ‘philosopher leader’ through an engagement with issues of relationality, ethics and reflexivity. She proposes that:

“The philosopher leader thinks differently, asking: What is important? What if we think about organizations, leadership, and ethics in this way rather than that? Where will it take us?” (ibid, p. 99)

Grint (2007) makes a similar point when he calls for the development of ‘practical wisdom’ for leaders. Drawing on Aristotle’s notions of *techné*, *episteme* and *phronesis*, he argues the latter is an essential part of leadership education, as outlined below.

“Leadership is not just a technical problem requiring greater *skills* – what Aristotle referred to as *techné* – if it was we would presumably have found the

appropriate training system some time ago. Nor is it just a problem of understanding, requiring greater *knowledge*, what Aristotle called *episteme*; again, if it was we should be less at its mercy today than we were 100 years ago, but it seems we are not. In addition, it may also require greater *wisdom* – Aristotle’s *phronesis* – through which leaders develop the wisdom to see what the good might be in the particular situation and then enact the processes that generate the good. In other words, it requires a form of action that focuses directly on fixing *the problem* itself, not a form of re-education or reskilling that fixes *the people*.” (ibid, p. 242, initial emphasis)

According to Grint, *phronesis* is concerned with elemental questions such as “Where are we going? Is this desirable? What should be done? (and adding a concern for power that eludes Aristotle) Who gains and who loses?” (ibid, p. 237-8). He goes on to argue: “*phronesis*, then, is not a method, and it cannot be reduced to a set of rules because it is dependent upon the situation and there is, therefore, no meta-narrative to guide the process” (ibid, p. 242). Accordingly “*phronesis* cannot be taught in any lecture theatre but must be lived through; in fact it is rather closer to an apprenticeship or mentoring relationship in which the wisdom of the mentor is embedded in the novice over time, but only indirectly through guided practice or engagement, not directly through formal teaching (Halverson and Gomez, 2001).” (Grint, 2007, p. 242).

Such a conclusion supports a growing body of literature that highlights the value of coaching and mentoring for leaders and managers (e.g. Hobson, 2003, Boyatzis et al., 2006, Garvey, 2010). Such approaches, it is argued, not only benefit the recipient through the knowledge, insights and opportunities for reflective discussion that they offer, but may also bring benefits to the mentor or coach – particularly in terms of developing and strengthening their coaching and facilitation skills. In an empirical study of mentoring Fowler and Gorman (2004) identified eight primary functions of the relationship as perceived by mentors and mentees: personal and emotional guidance, coaching, advocacy, career development facilitation, role modelling, strategies and systems advice, learning facilitation and friendship. Additional research has demonstrated a long-term impact of mentoring on organisational commitment and company loyalty (Payne and Huffman, 2005) and the importance of coaching as a managerial skill in its own right (e.g. Hirsh et al., 2004).

With regard to more formalised leadership development interventions, the evidence demonstrates the value of experiential and reflective learning for practicing leaders and

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managers that directly addresses working concerns (Gosling and Mintzberg, 2004). Furthermore, reflective and experiential development opportunities such as this are important forums for identity work in which current and aspiring leaders can work through their conceptions and understandings of leadership, shedding negative and restrictive images of leadership and experimenting with alternative approaches (Bolden and Kirk, 2009). Collaborative inquiry (Palus and Horth, 2005) and action learning (Ladkin, 2005) can also be powerful tools for the development of leaders, whilst also developing wider social capital within their organisations (Day, 2000).

The evidence from the studies in this thesis about the distributed nature of leadership also demonstrate the inefficacy of developing leaders without considering the wider context in which they find themselves. As Raelin (2004, p. 131) argues “don’t bother putting leadership into people [...] put leadership directly into the organization, where it belongs”. Leadership, management and organisational development are integrally linked<sup>84</sup> and, as the *Center for Creative Leadership Handbook for Leadership Development* concludes:

“To be fully effective, a development system must be integrated with the organization’s other processes: management planning, performance management, job selection, reward and recognition systems, and even mistake systems. The confluence of these processes determines the relative effectiveness of any one development activity.” (McCauley et al., 1998, p. 228-9)

Fundamentally, however, the evidence from this research on the socially constructed nature of leadership implies that if leadership is a social process then so too is leadership development. Whilst leadership development may empower, embolden and enhance the capabilities of individual leaders it also carries an important discursive function within organisations. The selection of who participates and who does not sends out important messages about who and what is valued within organisations – is leadership development regarded as a reward for those in senior roles; a recognition (and potentially self-fulfilling prophecy) of potential future leaders; or a remedial device for those failing to make the grade? The content, structure and process of development opportunities likewise conveys a sense of what is valued within the organisation – is the emphasis on personal knowledge, skills and competencies; on developing relationships and collective engagement; and/or on questioning, challenging and developing the

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<sup>84</sup> There is insufficient space to explore these issues further here, but they are discussed in detail in Bolden (2010).



organisation's approach to leadership? Evidence on the impact of leadership and management development indicates that what is most important is not so much *what* is done as *how* it is done (Burgoyne et al., 2004, Bolden, 2010). Leadership development can be a powerful catalyst for change yet may equally reinforce traditional assumptions and working practices.

### ***7.7 Some future directions for research***

The empirical studies reported in this thesis are but two small contributions to a large and expanding research base on leadership in organisations. In this final section I will outline what I see as a number of further areas worthy of investigation, including the distribution of leadership, the practice of leadership, and the discursive nature of leadership.

With regard to the *distribution of leadership*, from the research described in Chapter 4 it is concluded that the group level of analysis and social dimensions of leadership practice are the principal points at which agency and structure intersect. Moreover, it is proposed that these are amongst the least recognised and understood elements of leadership practice. For example, the legitimacy of leadership is crucially bound up with perceptions of credibility within the relevant field, and credibility is a 'currency' that is negotiated and secured at a group level. Universities (like many organisations) generally attempt to resolve their problems either by focussing on key individuals or by restructuring, seldom reflecting on the forces that connect people and enable them to work together in pursuit of a common aim. Through a more detailed exploration of social capital and the development and negotiation of identity at different levels of analysis we may achieve a deeper appreciation of what 'bonds' people together and 'bridges' social groups (see, for example, Edelman et al., 2004, Willem and Scarbrough, 2006, Antcliff et al., 2007) and thus enable a more powerful and relevant appreciation of how leadership is accomplished. In particular, it is proposed that greater attention should be given to studies of distributed leadership amongst staff with no formal management responsibility and those that endeavour to triangulate perspectives from across a wide range of actors (e.g. including 'follower' assessments of leadership rather than relying simply on the testimonies of 'leaders'). Furthermore, additional research would be beneficial into leadership that transcends organisational boundaries, such as that in partnership environments and communities, in order to elaborate on the processes of horizontal, informal and emergent leadership.



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With regard to the *practice of leadership*, the evidence from Study 2 demonstrates the value of conducting detailed empirical investigations of the ways in which leadership is accomplished within different organisations and contexts. In particular, it is proposed, that intricate examinations of contextually situated leadership praxis could help shed light onto the ‘practice of practises’ (Antonacopoulou, 2008) and the discursive nature of leadership. Whilst ethnographic investigations (such as those reported by Samara-Fredericks, 2003, and Maitlis, 2005) and ethnomethodological accounts (such as those reported by Kelly et al., 2006, and Iszatt-White, 2009) are good examples of this kind of work, so are studies that deconstruct the manner in which language is used to accomplish particular outcomes. The work of John Forester (2003) is a good example of this where, through detailed analysis of an extract of a meeting, he was able to demonstrate the varying ways in which language was utilised to convey meaning, legitimacy, identity, status and power relations. The actors did not use language to construct an imagined ‘reality’ but to reinforce and build upon existing understandings and relationships. Such an approach to enquiry holds great promise for a practice perspective on leadership, especially the extent to which it may be able to unravel the nested and overlapping nature of practices – e.g. the extent to which the ‘practice’ of meetings offers a forum for playing out further practices and reconstituting ‘practitioner’ identities.

These latter suggestions would also lend weight to the growing body of research on the *discursive nature of leadership* and the manner in which leadership practice is both accomplished through, and largely shaped by, discourse (see, for example, Fairhurst, 2007). Foldy et al. (2008) suggest that a focus on empirical evidence of ‘cognitive shifts’ would be one important way in which we could try to assess the impact of leaders on sensemaking. Gronn (2009a), also highlights the importance of explicitly recognising issues of power within our analyses and allowing for the possibility that supposed leadership outcomes may be achieved through means other than the contribution of individual leaders. A discursive approach to leadership also highlights the need for greater consideration of the dynamics of social research. Bell and Bryman (2007), for example, highlight some significant ways in which research with managers may differ from that with other social groups, including potential conflicts of interest and affiliation bias, power imbalances in favour of the subject rather than the researcher, sensitivities around the risks of harm or wrongdoing, and challenges relating to confidentiality and anonymity. Each of these are important issues that impact upon the ability to conduct rigorous and reliable research.

The issues discussed above point to rich and expanding topics for further investigation. To gain impact and recognition beyond the academic community alone, however, they need to find ways to connect with and relate to the experience and aspirations of practicing leaders and those charged with their assessment and/or development. To this extent, I also advocate an expansion of practitioner-informed research, in particular that conducted in collaboration with academic partners (as with the study reported in Chapter 5 of this thesis). Such work has the potential to address some of the criticisms levied at management and organisational research (as outlined in section 1.2.2) and of increasing the ownership and commitment to findings by such groups.

### ***7.8 Chapter summary***

In this chapter I have outlined the main contribution and conclusions of this thesis; explored the implications for leadership theory, research, practice and development; and highlighted areas for future investigation. In terms of leadership theory, I have suggested that leader-centric accounts that dominate current thinking in this area are increasingly unable to account for shared, emergent and informal leadership in complex and collaborative environments (such as partnerships and networks) and that alternative representations are required. Whilst approaches such as ‘distributed leadership’ go some way to addressing this issue, they still tend to rely on the tripod of ‘leaders’, ‘followers’ and ‘situation’ (Drath et al., 2008) and a more radical alternative may still be needed. For leadership research I have argued a greater recognition of the socially constructed nature of enquiry is required, that acknowledges the inherent biases and assumptions of researchers and the impact of the research process on participants. To this extent I propose the extension of collaborative approaches that draw on the expertise and experience of a range of different groups, including academics and practitioners from different domains. To be seen to ‘matter’, leadership research needs to address significant social concerns in an engaged and proactive manner. For leadership practice, I have argued that a somewhat eclectic approach should be encouraged within organisations, in which they endeavour to develop and nurture a variety of forms of leadership that complement and support one another rather than promoting a single ‘best practice’ approach. The discursive dimensions of leadership also draw attention to the importance of nominated leaders actively facilitating collective sensemaking processes and endeavouring to articulate a clear sense of shared identity and purpose. Finally, with regard to leadership development, the findings from this thesis highlight the value of reflective and experiential approaches that enable

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current and future leaders to learn and experiment within their own professional context. The development of 'practical wisdom' (see Grint, 2007), it is proposed, should be a key aim of development opportunities for individuals although this needs to be aligned with organisational systems and processes and supported through the building of social capital. The chapter concludes with a number of suggestions for further research on the distribution, practice and discursive nature of leadership.

# AFTERWORD

Completing this PhD has been a long journey. Since commencing I have done a number of studies and encountered a number of false starts. For each new perspective on leadership I have endeavoured to investigate I have found as many questions as answers. Pulling this work together into a coherent single piece of work has been, without doubt, the greatest academic challenge I have faced. It has been like building a giant jigsaw puzzle when the pieces keep disappearing, moving or changing shape. In completing this project, however, I have been forced to address and reflect on issues and dilemmas that I may otherwise have managed to avoid. The questions at the heart of this thesis are fundamental questions about the nature and purpose of human endeavour – they are questions that have challenged and perplexed even the greatest thinkers of history. I am not conceited enough to consider that I have managed to do more than scratch the surface of what has already been discovered about these subjects - let alone what may yet be found – yet, in my small way, I feel that I have travelled a long distance since my initial forays into leadership and management during my undergraduate and postgraduate years in psychology.

This journey has taught me many things – not least the limits of my own knowledge, experience and understanding. As Socrates famously said “true knowledge exists in knowing that you know nothing”. That I have not found an answer for the challenges of leadership, or a way of representing its elusive qualities, should not be taken as a failure but as something rather inevitable and, perhaps, even reassuring. For if leadership is something that is changeable and, to large extent, socially constructed through the various ways in which we think about, talk about, and endeavour to make sense of the worlds in which we live then it is also something that is within our ability to influence. If we find ourselves surrounded by negative, self-serving and/or ineffective forms of leadership then it should be within our ability to change it.

Through my time researching leadership I have found that the greatest advocates and ambassadors for what I have found are neither the organisations for whom I have conducted the work nor the other audiences for whom I write – for they each have a host of priorities and concerns other than those I can respond to – but myself and, on occasion, the people I manage to influence through my teaching, supervision and other relationships. It is for this reason that I chose to move from a research fellow to a

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lecturer role and, once this PhD is completed, intend to seek out other ways of applying my learning. This is not to say that the application of learning is the ultimate aim but, that through engaging in different ways and testing out our ideas in different situations we stand to gain other important insights and, in some way, influence the world in which we find ourselves.

This PhD does not mark the end of a journey, but a key milestone on a lifelong quest to know just a little more about what it means to be human. In reading this thesis I thank you for indulging my musings on this subject – I hope you feel you have gained something of value and I welcome any thoughts or comments you would like to share.

To conclude I would like to share a few words from the anthropologist Marja-Liisa Swantz (cited in Reason and Bradbury, 2006, p. 1):

“I do not separate my scientific inquiry from my life. For me it is really a quest for life, to understand life and to create what I call living knowledge - knowledge which is valid for the people with whom I work and for myself.”

Learning is a collective process and I thank all those who have taken time to join me as fellow travellers on this quest.

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# APPENDICES

## *Appendix 1a: Outline interview schedule for Study 1*

### **Briefing**

- This project is one of a series of studies being conducted with the support of the Leadership Foundation for Higher Education that aim to increase the evidence base for leadership development practice and policy in the UK higher education sector.
- The aim of our project is to better understand the processes of leadership at different levels within universities, especially at the School/faculty level as this is the main operational unit of the organisation.
- We are particularly interested in evidence of how leadership is distributed and shared between members of the organisation and how practices integrate with institution-wide strategies and systems to become, in some way, 'institutionalised'.
- We are also interested in how key organisational members acquire and develop any leadership skills and how their role as a manager/leader impacts upon their identity.
- Over the next few months we will be conducting interviews at the school and senior management level in 12 universities across the country. Preliminary findings should be available towards the end of the year.
- All interviews are entirely confidential and non-attributable but we would like to record and transcribe them for our own data collection purposes.

### **Questions**

#### 1. Leadership strategy and approach

- In your view, how is your institution led?
- What do you think are the key features of effective leadership at the institution?
- In your view, what are the key leadership positions in your institution?
- Where does strategic thinking for university come from?

#### 2. Taking up a leadership role

- What motivated you to take up a leadership role?
- What challenges have you faced in taking up this role?

#### 3. Leadership development

- What has been most beneficial in terms of preparation and development for your role?

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- How do you ensure that leadership development provision meets the development needs of your staff?

### 4. Sharing leadership

- When acting as a leader do you feel you work individually or as part of a team?
- To what extent is leadership embedded within the organisational culture and practices of the place rather than solely dependent on the number of key individuals?
- How can/do people without formal leadership roles influence and help shape institutional level strategies and policies?
- What do you think could be done to increase the sustainability and consistency of leadership at your institution?

### 5. Future trends and challenges

- How do you see leadership changing within your institution over the coming five years?
- What is your institution doing to prepare people for these changes?
- What are the challenges? What are the opportunities?



***Appendix 1b: Study 1 interview consent form***

**PROJECT:**                **Developing Collective Leadership Capability in Higher Education: Processes, Practices and Performance**  
**FUNDER:**                **The Leadership Foundation for Higher Education**  
**RESEARCHERS:**        **Georgy Petrov, Richard Bolden, Jonathan Gosling**

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**Interview with:** .....

**Date:** .....

You have been identified as a participant within the Leadership Foundation for Higher Education (LFHE) research project (please see attached sheet for more information on the project and topics/issues to be covered at the interview).

We wish to confirm that

- the identity of interviewees will not be disclosed under any circumstances;
- the names of institutions will not be disclosed without prior consent;
- the contents of interviews will remain completely anonymous and confidential;
- where interviews are recorded, transcriptions will be coded and remain anonymous to the transcriber;
- interview transcripts will be stored securely in accordance with the UK Data Protection Act;
- any quotations used from interviews will remain anonymous and non-attributable;
- the information obtained will be used only in relation to reports provided to the UK Leadership Foundation for Higher Education, or publications in research journals arising in from this work;
- participants are free to refuse to answer any question or terminate the interview at any point.

.....

.....  
Participant Signature                      Print Name                                      Date

.....

.....  
Researcher Signature                      Print Name                                      Date

### ***Appendix 1c: Sample institutional report***

Although broadly concurring with the findings from other institutions in our sample, particularly the pre-1992 research-intensive universities, there are a number of distinctive characteristics of the leadership and management approach at [University X].

1. In [date], following the recruitment of a new VC, the university underwent a major restructuring exercise, from [x] to [y] faculties and [xx] departments and numerous research centres to [yy] schools. This restructuring has, unsurprisingly, had a major impact on the way the institution is run and has taken a while to bed-down.
2. The restructuring exercise was widely recognised as essential in refocusing strategic focus to the areas of priority and strength within the university. As such, it offered a vital opportunity to clarify the objectives and purposes of the university and cement these within the strategic plan. Voluntary severance was used to free up finances for investment in areas of strength.
3. The [new] faculty structure represents a moderately devolved system of management and leadership. Faculty PVCs are budget holders for their schools, with the [other] main budget holder being the Registrar responsible for central administrative and support services. The level of budget and degree of autonomy at faculty level equates, in effect, to [a number of] mini-universities residing under the umbrella of [University X], with limited direct control from the centre.
4. Each faculty has an extensive support system, incorporating HR, finance, etc., supported by a fairly streamlined central service to ensure some degree of consistency of approach. Whilst this is a more expensive system than a more centrally managed system that involves some duplication of effort it affords greater flexibility and control to faculties and ensures a high degree of support at this level which leaves PVC of Faculty and HOSs feeling well supported.
5. The role of Faculty PVC is therefore a position of real power in the university but because of the support services, the incumbents are more able to remain research active than in certain other academic leadership roles, particularly HOS who have fewer support staff.
6. Some concerns were expressed, however, as to whether faculties are too devolved with insufficient overarching direction from the centre. The newly created role of

PVC for [x and y] is a step towards addressing this and taking an institution-wide view of how resources are used across the whole university.

7. Deans at the faculty level operate rather like the cross-functional PVCs at the central university level. In each case these are challenging roles as they hold substantial responsibility with little in the way of formal power. Such roles operate through inter-personal influence and the positions held on committees and other formal university bodies. At the faculty level they can be very helpful in supporting the PVC of Faculty and at university level, for supporting the VC, however in each case little can be achieved without the backing of the VC or Faculty PVC.
8. As in other research-intensive universities the role of HOS is difficult to recruit as it is largely seen as an administrative function that undermines ones research career with little in the way of financial other incentive. Having said that, HOSs generally say that they were not financially motivated to take on the role and did it largely out of a sense of duty to the school – and a concern over the other alternatives. All HOSs interviewed, however, did express some positive aspects of their jobs – primarily the possibility to influence their discipline and facilitate the work of colleagues.
9. [University X] has recently drawn up a competence framework for HOSs [...] which specifies the expected and desired characteristics of HOSs. This has informed a development centre for future and recent HOSs and constitutes a significant strand of the university's succession planning process (this is perhaps more acutely felt at [University X] as most HOSs were recruited at the same period during restructuring and hence coming up for renewal/replacement at a similar time). This framework is not perceived, by HR, to be static but evolving with the needs and demands of the institution.
10. [University X] has effectively used [public] funds for initiatives such as this, which enables the financing of short-term projects and pilots. The HOS funding is now coming to an end and the university is identifying how to continue funding this work from internal revenues. A similar initiative is now underway for administrative and support staff under the guidance of the Registrar. It was felt that policy-led initiatives (e.g. for improved leadership and management) can be a helpful lever for encouraging engagement with development initiatives.
11. As in all research-intensive universities research profile (or credibility) remains a vital consideration for people occupying academic leadership roles. However there

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is an increasing realisation of the additional skills required, including financial acumen, communication and inter-personal skills. The HOS development centre offers a useful channel for extending the pool of candidates from which future academic leaders can be selected (although not an essential prerequisite). In many cases it has been deemed successful through discouraging candidates who were not ready/able to take on such a role. In each case it has been well supported with development opportunities.

12. A larger number of interviewees at [University X] than some of the other universities visited mentioned the value of coaching and mentoring. This was true at all levels in the hierarchy and deemed particularly valuable during a time of transition, either between roles (i.e. prior to commencing and in the early months of a new post) or during organisational change (e.g. an opportunity to discuss and explore ideas for restructuring and change). The distinct requirements and benefits depended on the person and their role.
13. Within programmes, both internal and external, networking opportunities and the chance to discuss with people who have different experiences were generally found to be most valuable.
14. Relations are generally good between schools and faculties however there are some difficulties/resistance experienced at the interface with the central university. Despite being on the University Board faculty PVCs can find it hard getting their voices/perspectives heard, which is especially problematic when they are the main channel between the schools and central university. At the school level it can be felt that, despite invitations to contribute and consult, there is little transparency over decision-making at this level and, perhaps even, a tendency to indecisiveness that leaves people at the operational level unclear how to proceed.
15. These communication difficulties, it would seem, are exacerbated by the physical separation of central university services (i.e. the office of VC, cross-cutting PVCs, Registrar, HR, etc.) from the academic units of the university. Faculty PVCs, being based amongst the academic schools don't appear to suffer from such difficulties. The structure seems to encourage competition and rivalry between faculties that is "fought out" at the executive level.
16. There is a clear sense across the university that the administrative and support services should support the academic mission of the university. There is a common

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sense that the committee structure, in its current form, tends to slow down and complicate decision making processes across the university.

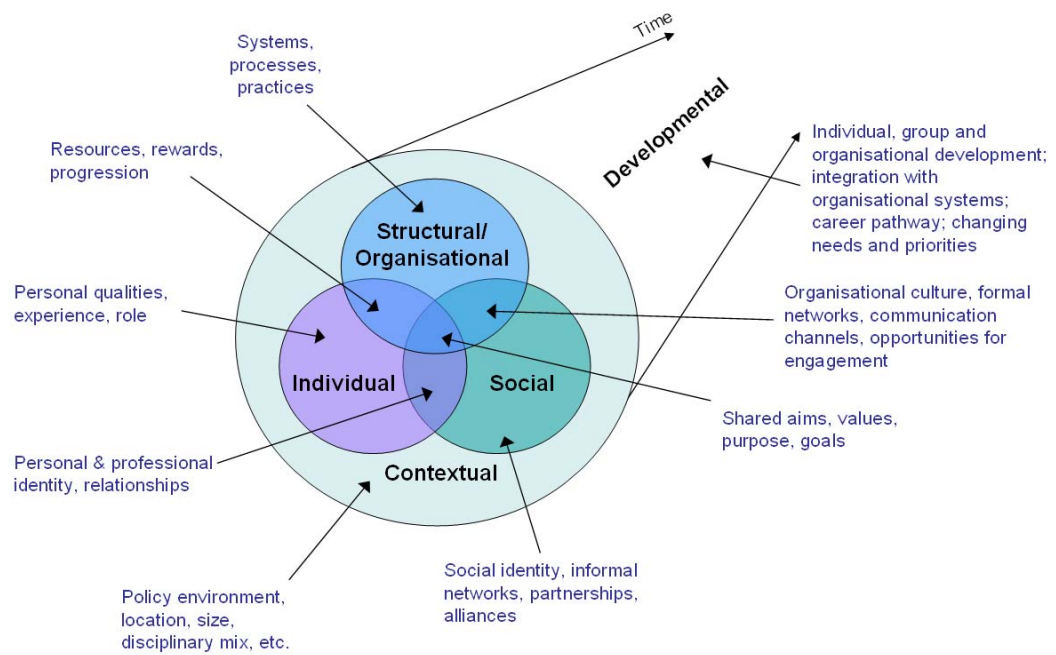
17. At the time of the interviews at [University X] the AUT industrial action was at its peak. This was seen by many as influential in how the university would be managed and led in the future. HOSs in particular, expressed a tension between their role as part of university management, a member of the academic community and a member of the union (in at least one case a HOS had to resign from the union because of this conflict). The [x] year term of headships, combined with the fact that many had not taken on these roles out of choice further enhances this tension. Another impact of the industrial action will be the manner in which additional income raised through student fees will be spent on staff salaries despite the increasing expectations of students and their families.

18. In addition to enhancing its international profile [University X] has clearly identified its role in the local economy of the [region] as a fundamental strand of its strategy. The [xxx] initiative, a major collaboration between the university [and partners] is one initiative that could well have long-term implications for the way the place is led, especially with regards to its relationship to business and community.

19. Another major change facing [University X] will be the appointment of a new VC [date]. The change in style will undoubtedly change leadership dynamics across the university although there is a general hope that this won't lead to structural changes as the university has only just recovered from the last restructuring.

Please note that these points are based on the research interviews and observations conducted at [University X]. They do not represent the views of the University of Exeter nor necessarily an objective account of the situation at [University X]. If you feel any points are incorrect or unrepresentative please contact [Georgy.Petrov@exeter.ac.uk](mailto:Georgy.Petrov@exeter.ac.uk) or [Richard.Bolden@exeter.ac.uk](mailto:Richard.Bolden@exeter.ac.uk). Thank you.

*Appendix 1d: Dimensions of leadership in HE*



For a description of each of these dimensions please refer to (Bolden et al., 2008b, c).

*Appendix 1e: Forums dissemination of Study 1 findings*

<b>Title of presentation</b>	<b>Forum/venue</b>	<b>Presenter</b>	<b>Date</b>
1) Distributed Leadership in HE: Some Preliminary Findings from the UK	28 <sup>th</sup> Annual European Association for Institutional Research Forum, Rome, Italy	G Petrov	30/08-01/09/06
2) The Distribution of Leadership in HE: Figure and Ground	Oxford Learning Institute Seminar Series, University of Oxford	J Gosling	09/11/06
3) Leadership and Leadership Development in HE	HERDA-SW Annual Conference, Torquay	G Petrov	09-10/11/06
4) Second workshop for representatives from participating institutions	Centre for Leadership Studies, University of Exeter	R Bolden, G Petrov and J Gosling	17/11/06
5) Like Herding Cats? Distributed Leadership in HE	CLS Seminar Series, CLS, University of Exeter	R Bolden, J Gosling and G Petrov	23/11/06
6) Opening the Boundaries of Leadership? Perceptions of Academic Leaders in UK HE about Distributed Leadership	SRHE Annual Conference, Brighton	G Petrov	12-14/12/06
7) Leadership in HE; Distributed, Dissipated or Disastrous?	5 <sup>th</sup> International Conference on Studying Leadership, Cranfield University	R Bolden	14-15/12/06
8) No More Heroes? The Distribution of Leadership in HE	Sustaining Excellence in HE, LFHE and HEFCE Joint Conference, London	J Gosling and G Petrov	09/01/07
9) Tensions in Higher Education Leadership: Towards a multi-level model of leadership practice	CLS Professional Network Conference, University of Exeter	R Bolden	04-05/12/07
10) Tensions in Higher Education Leadership: Towards a multi-level model of leadership practice	SRHE Annual Conference, Brighton	R Bolden	11-13/12/07
11) The Rhetoric and Reality of Distributed Leadership in Higher Education	Leadership in HE: Facts, Fictions and Futures, St. Georges House, Windsor Castle	R Bolden, G Petrov and J Gosling	31/03-01/04/08



## ***Appendix 2: Study 2 interview schedule***

### **Briefing**

This study, arising from work conducted at the Centre for Leadership Studies at the University of Exeter and a consortium of organisations (including the RAF, Royal Mail and Reuters), aims to explore how leadership is accomplished on a day-to-day basis. In particular we are interested in how different aspects of organizational life (including systems, processes, tasks and people) come together to shape how leadership occurs. We are also interested in the way(s) in which leadership impacts upon the performance of individuals, groups and organisations.

Within this study we are using a relatively broad definition of leadership as: “a process of influencing people to coordinate (or change) behaviours, activities and/or relationships towards achieving shared objectives”. We thus consider that leadership is more than the just activities of senior leaders and is subject to a wide range of factors that inform how it occurs and its likely impacts. By conducting this work in a number of different organizations and contexts we hope to develop a rich and detailed picture of leadership in practice that should be of use to leaders and those concerned with their development.

You have been identified as a participant because of your role in the operational (day-to-day) management and leadership of [*the organisation*]. We will also be interviewing a number of other people at similar levels both in this organisation and elsewhere. Interviews are expected to last about an hour [*check how long they have*] and will cover topics including your role, your experience of leadership, and the extent to which organisational systems and processes support or inhibit effective performance.

In answering these questions we’d like to ask you to be as specific as possible, giving stories and examples wherever possible. Participation is voluntary, your responses are entirely confidential and your identity will not be disclosed in any outputs. Should you not wish to answer a question or would like to terminate the interview at any stage then that is fine. In order to comply with the guidelines set down by the University of Exeter please take a moment to look and sign the Ethical Approval Form [*give a copy of the form*].

We would like to thank you for your involvement in this work and hope that you will find the interview enjoyable and thought provoking. In order to assist with the capture

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of your responses would you mind if we record the interview for later transcription?  
[check response].

### Questions

1. Please could you begin with a brief overview of your role within the organisation and how you came to be in this position?
  - *Your role*<sup>85</sup>
  - *Your background*
  - *Any significant differences between your role and others within the organisation*
2. To what extent do you perceive yourself as holding a leadership responsibility in your current (or most recent) role?<sup>86</sup>
  - *Why is this*
  - *Was this something you expected*
  - *How are you perceived within the organisation*
  - *Is 'leadership' talked about in the organisation or are other descriptions used*
3. On a day-to-day basis what do you and your colleagues do to accomplish leadership within your part of the organisation?<sup>87</sup>
  - *Who is involved*
  - *What do they do*
  - *How and why do they do it this way*
  - *Which organizational systems and/or processes support this*
4. To what extent do formal and/or informal social groups and relationships impact upon the way in which leadership occurs?
  - *How do groups and sub-groups affect the respondents' sense of 'social identity'*
  - *How do groups identify their priorities and distribute work between members*

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<sup>85</sup> Bullet points are intended as prompts only. Where issues are either not relevant or have already been covered please proceed to the next question.

<sup>86</sup> Where the respondent holds more than one role please ask them to respond for their main role. If they have only recently entered post it may be better to get them to respond for their prior position. The main thing is to ensure consistency of response for the position they are referring to.

<sup>87</sup> Look out for anything they are omitting in their account – are more mundane activities such as monitoring and maintaining continuity being left out? Where appropriate ask them why this is – how are they distinguishing 'leadership' from other activities?

## APPENDICIES

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- *Do respondents tend to work in isolation, as part of a relatively stable team or as part of a broad and changing group*
5. How is leadership recognized and rewarded within the organisation?<sup>88</sup>
- *At individual, group and organizational levels...*
  - *How are these communicated to staff*
  - *What assumptions are embedded in this approach*
  - *Are there any links to performance*
  - *How often (and how) are these assessed/reviewed*
  - *How would you (and/or your organisation) distinguish between moderate and excellent leadership*
6. What, if anything, changes about the way in which leadership is accomplished during times of change, crisis and/or uncertainty?
- *How is this shift mobilised/facilitated*
  - *What changes about the way in which leadership is perceived, experienced and/or enacted*
  - *Does it reveal any cracks, idiosyncrasies or contradictions within the system*
7. To what extent do you think the rhetoric of leadership (what is said about it) reflects the reality of leadership (how it actually occurs) in your organisation?<sup>89</sup>
- *If there is a difference then why*
  - *What purpose(s) does this serve*
  - *How do power differentials affect the way leadership occurs*
  - *Can you recall any common stories or accounts of leadership in your organisation that capture the essence of how leadership is perceived and/or experienced*
8. What are the main difficulties experienced by people in leadership positions within your organisation?
- *What, if anything, is (or could be) done to address these*
  - *What resources and/or sources of support can leaders make use of to reduce any tensions and/or conflict of interests*
  - *To what extent do 'followers' influence/have a say in how leadership occurs*

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<sup>88</sup> The intention of this question is to get at general trends (e.g. rational/objective (such as “competencies”) versus emotional/subjective (such as “values”)) rather than the specific details of systems. Where more detailed documentation is available, however, it would be a useful to obtain this support analyses.

<sup>89</sup> This question is looking for differences between what is espoused and what is experienced. It may be best revealed through the stories that people tell about leadership and leaders.

## APPENDICIES

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9. How do people learn to lead within your organisation?

- *What skills, knowledge and or competencies do they need to acquire (and how)*
- *How do they learn to navigate informal organisational systems and networks*
- *What are the motivations or incentives for taking on a formal leadership role*
- *To what extent are they encouraged to develop and access tacit (context-specific) knowledge and to critically reflect on learning and experiences*

10. Do you have any final comments you would like to add about how leadership is accomplished in your organisation – either building on earlier responses to cover an area we haven't touched on during the interview?

**Many thanks for your time and cooperation.**