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Beyond leadership and followership: Working with a variety of modes of organizing

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Contemporary business life has high hopes and expectations for leadership. Managers are expected to provide more, new, and better leadership – strategic, visionary, charismatic, level 5, transformational, post-heroic, authentic, servant, you name it – in order to guide their organizations to success and at the same time contribute to a better world. Whatever the problem is, leadership is rapidly offered as the solution. But the meaning of “leadership” is often very vague. It is a powerful identity-booster, but close up studies show how confused and inconsistent many managers often are about leadership and many fail to live up to unrealistic ideals. Often leadership recipes are a source of problems just as much as solutions to them.

The key issue addressed in this article is that in a time of strong leader-centrism it is easy to forget that there are other ways of making people work well together, than through leadership. A broader spectrum of other *modes of organizing* – here defined as ways of providing direction, advice, support, coordination, encouragement, inspiration and feedback in order to make people work productively together (or autonomously) – is often needed. We suggest some caution in over relying on leadership in favour of working with this wider spectrum of ways of organizing.

Leadership is about *influencing meanings, values and beliefs in a hierarchical (unequal) relation*. It is often confused with management. Management is about planning, budgeting, resource allocation, assignment of tasks, control, policy making, hiring/firing, role specifications in the employment contract, not primarily about meanings, ideas and values. Management targets subordinates’ behaviour more directly, while leadership addresses people’s feelings and thinking, or hearts and minds, as pointed out by scholars such as John Kotter and Abraham Zaleznik. Of course, in practice management and leadership often overlap, but that is not a reason to ignore their important

differences. Leadership is also different from people influencing each other in a horizontal or “equal” way, i.e. through teamwork or collegial support. This is sometimes referred to as “shared leadership”, which of course tends to create confusion.

No doubt, leadership often makes a difference. Visionary and inspirational leadership can provide purpose and broader meaning. It can lead to shared ideas and values, crucial for people working together. A leader showing high ethical standards may set a good example and boost morale in organizations. But successful leadership as described above is also quite complex and difficult. Few managers come close to the high ideals. Disappointment, confusion and cynicism often follow – among managers as well as their subordinates. And with a strong emphasis on leadership there is also a cultivation of followership: subordinates waiting for the leader to show them the way. This may be purposeful and adequate with very strong managers (or informal leaders) with plenty of time for doing leadership and fairly weak subordinates highly receptive to leadership attempts, but often these preconditions are not there.

Our research group has conducted decades of in-depth studies on the leadership efforts of managers in leading multinational companies in industries such as telecommunications, electronics and high-tech, life science and IT-and management consulting. One recurrent finding is that managers’ leadership talk and practice often differ, sometimes radically. Many managers – perhaps more than other people suffering from biased feedback – have an unrealistic, blown up understanding of themselves and their impact. Managers and subordinates often assess the leadership efforts quite differently. A recurrent finding is that leadership seldom works so well as managers and others like to think.

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BEING REALISTIC ABOUT LEADERSHIP: CONSIDERING LIMITATIONS OF MANAGERS' TIME AND ABILITY

Managers are often busy people and leadership is a time-consuming way of providing inspiration, encouragement, direction, advice, support, coordination and feedback; to profoundly influence how people think and act takes time and patience. Most managers interact not only with subordinates, but spend a lot of their time with superiors, colleagues, customers, suppliers and others. Mundane administrative and operational tasks take time, especially for managers: IT-issues, forecasts, budgets, monthly reporting, legal compliance, and so forth. In short, as a manager you are often bombarded with other more or less urgent and important issues that makes it hard to find time for doing leadership. In fact, many managers we have studied actually said that they simply had little time for leadership.

In addition to lack of time most managers, as human beings, have personal imperfections. Few people are that charismatically, psychologically and communicatively gifted so they actually can live up to the ideal of being transformative or authentic or other popular concepts sold by the "leadership development industry" (educators, mass media, consultants, HR staff, researchers). Many managers like to think they can, but their self-view is seldom confirmed by how their subordinates think of them. This is not to deny that there are good managers doing excellent leadership, but the average manager seldom comes close to the ideals. There is a grandiose image of leadership that easily leads to myths and fantasies that is indeed problematic. Wishful thinking and narcissistic feelings of greatness easily take over. And people seduced into grandiose, seemingly easy "solutions" tend to breed disasters, when fantasies and hopes clash with imperfect reality at workplaces.

Good leadership calls for reflexivity, thoughtfulness and recognition of shortcomings rather than just following fashionable trends and popular recipes about how to act. It calls for realism instead of excessive positivity and naïve optimism. It calls for consideration of employees often wanting and benefitting from autonomy and relying on peer relations as much or even more than being devoted followers eager to be led by their leaders. It also calls for seriously considering the alternatives to leadership: both vertical and horizontal modes of organizing.

BEING REALISTIC ABOUT FOLLOWERSHIP: THE "LEADERSHIP SCEPTICAL" SUBORDINATE

In contrast to being a formal subordinate to a manager, being a follower to a leader entails a largely voluntary submission. As a manager, you can control subordinates' behaviour in line with what the employment contract stipulates, but not necessarily their thoughts, feelings, values and sense making. The latter is the key of leadership. But changing peoples' hearts and minds is not easy. Subordinates have their own understandings and priorities. They are exposed to competing messages and values from colleagues, family, friends, co-workers and professional communities. Organizational cul-

tures frame people's sense of reality and are often beyond the direct control of individual managers trying to do leadership. It is here also important to point out that skilled leaders often articulate and focus on what is — more or less consciously — already in people's hearts and minds rather than just insensitively trying to change their views, values, feelings and sense making. We typically ascribe leader qualities to people that fit our "prototypes" for how a leader should be, i.e. how they correspond with our particular view of leadership. Radically changing people is difficult and rare, even though of course people can be made to change behaviour in crises situations or gradually over time.

It is often assumed that managers doing leadership are outstanding in relation to their subordinates; they have convincing visions and values, they are impressive gestalts that are respected and admired by their subordinates prepared to be guided by their leaders. It is often taken for granted that managers are smarter, more knowledgeable, morally superior, more psychologically insightful and rhetorically skilled than their subordinates, being prepared to follow. Of course, sometimes managers are superior in some aspects compared to their subordinates and thus have a good platform for exercising leadership. But more often managers are only marginally superior to some of their subordinates, in particular more talented or experienced ones. Just because a person is promoted or attending some executive education program does not mean that s/he is necessarily far above others in terms of ability. Sometimes they, as many of the managers that we have studied, run the risk of making fools of themselves when trying to live up to unrealistic leadership ideals. Subordinates are often not impressed. One of us recently observed a meeting where two top managers launched a new strategy. All the standard leadership material was there: visions, values, well prepared power points, presentation skills etc. The response of the subordinates indicated deep scepticism; "A lot of buzzwords", "So hollow", "Gosh I had thought they were better than that", "What have these people been smoking". In another of our studies the manager believed he was a fantastic coaching leader, but after some time the subordinates thought he was incapable of making decisions and found the coaching often more manipulative than helpful.

In many contemporary organizations subordinates are competent, self-confident and like think for themselves. They are not always so interested in being followers to a manager trying to do leadership. Many feel that they do not flourish in a hierarchical context where the leader is the star of the local solar system. Too much exposure for less well thought through managerial leadership activities are not always well received. Blunted and perhaps increasingly frustrated targets for leadership attempts can start showing cynicism, faked or shallow acceptance, ignorance, and so forth. A well-known phenomenon is the BOHICA response: Bend Over Here It Comes Again — a new "inspirational" talk, a change initiative, a new (and better!) corporate vision. This risk needs to be recognized and carefully measured against the pressure to proactively intervene, as often described by the leadership development industry.

Illustrative practical examples can be the middle managers at one global high-tech company that we studied telling us that:

“The managers I struggle with most are the ‘motivating’ types, who try to create energy and momentum, but only move back and forth without keeping a clear direction.”

Another middle manager at the same company told us that:

“My work has seldom received much leadership. Something that I appreciate (laughter)!”

A senior software developer in another high-tech company we studied was asked about his manager’s leadership and was happy with him getting the hint from his subordinates about not being too ambitious:

“So far there haven’t been any problems with George [referring to his new manager realizing that he should not try to interfere too much].”

These and other interviews from our research program illustrate the tiredness of leadership efforts in many modern organizations. Many managers are convinced of their significance as leaders – often fuelled by the leadership development industry, eager to satisfy its consumers’ need for wishful thinking and narcissism – while their subordinates notice little of this:

“In particular I have noted the lack of leadership, whatever that is, but instead noted the *image* of a world class leadership. In reality it seemed like the most successful managers just were engaged in internal meetings with other managers. Leadership is . . . like something you mostly are talking about. Preferably in grand and pompous terms. Everyone seems to be leadership oracles when they are asked to assess themselves.” (Engineer in a global industrial equipment company)

When it comes to leadership, realism and modesty are as rare as they are important. In our studies, we have often seen that when subordinates want direction, support or other forms of interference from their managers they actually ask for good old-fashioned *management*, e.g. clear objectives or guidelines, more resources, clarity around expectations, deadlines or budgets, help with trade-offs and priorities, clarification of policies, fair wage setting, etc. Often, they want managers to act upwards, to protect units from excessive demands or unproductive interventions from senior levels. But acting upwards in the hierarchy is not about leadership and followership.

Managers and their not always so helpful allies in the leadership development industry – often preaching about leadership and neglecting most other things that managers do – need to realize that there are alternative ways to make organizations function. And bring these alternatives more to the forefront.

THE 6M MODEL: SIX DIFFERENT MODES OF ORGANIZING

Leadership has no doubt its place, also in organizations with well-educated, highly motivated self-starters as the ones quoted above. But as previously said it is important to recognize the risk of ‘overusing’ leadership – in rhetoric as well as in practice. Of course, there are many forms of

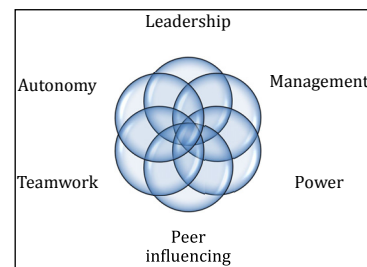


Figure 1 Modes of Organizing — The 6M Model

leadership – but there are also ways for people working together that is *not* about leadership. Clever thinking calls for distinctions and understandings of nuances. Through distinctions, we can better see options and act more wisely. It is therefore also useful to remember that there are alternatives to leadership and that these sometimes are more appropriate in order to ensure direction, support, coordination, discipline, advice, feedback, encouragement or inspiration. Below we present a framework that will help to identify and evaluate various means – so called modes of organizing – to achieve that.

In Fig. 1 and Table 1 (below) we organize the alternatives as six different modes of organizing: three vertical modes – leadership, management and power – and three horizontal modes – group work, peer influencing and autonomy. Vertical modes are characterized by a hierarchy (formal or not). Here one part – the leader, the manager or the exerciser of power – is significantly more influential than the actor(s) he or she is trying to influence – the follower, the subordinate or the target of power. Horizontal modes are based on equality and influence is more evenly distributed among actors, e.g. team members, peers within a profession or people working autonomously.

Leadership, as already described, is about relating to and influencing people’s hearts and minds, i.e. managing their meanings. Leadership includes persuasive, sometimes seductive talk, directing attention to important issues and engaging in symbolic, exemplary behaviour. As a follower, you voluntarily submit to the ideas and inspirational example of the leader. Not by force, anticipation of rewards or because your formal employee contract demands it, but because you buy into the leader’s message about what is right, wrong, desirable and possible to do. The leader’s action and communication affects the sense of work, practices, objectives and values. People tend to feel good about themselves and their employment. They are cognitively and emotionally inspired. This is of course easier to achieve if the leadership acts are well aligned with and articulate what is already in people’s hearts and minds as well as the organizational culture.

At its best, effective leadership leads to shared understandings, to flexible and committed actions. It can inspire people to create a positive work environment and accomplish objectives better. It can therefore of course be very powerful. A good example in this sense was an IT-consulting firm we studied, where all new hires had a week of “boot camp” where the firm’s history, myths, values, mission, vision, culture and *raison d’être* were effectively communicated by senior managers to a responsive audience. Key values like being open and treating everybody as a friend and

Table 1 Modes of Organizing — Summary and overview

Mode	Dominant direction	Definition	Key roles	Example of activities	Key conditions for success
Leadership	Vertical (persuasion)	Interpersonal influencing process in an asymmetrical relationship, targeting meaning, feelings and values	Leader and follower	Inspirational talk/behaviour in order to provide direction, meaning and emotional and/or moral support. Exemplary behaviour	Time, skill and receptive followers
Management	Vertical (legitimate authority)	Authority based on formal rights and hierarchy	Manager and subordinate	Planning, budgeting, supervision, schedules/rules/guidelines, and performance control/evaluation	Formal authority over the actors you are trying to influence
Power	Vertical (anxiety)	Authority based on force and/or political skills	Dominant actor and less dominant actor in a power game	Use of threats and sanctions, promising rewards, mobilizing group pressure, use of client/patron networks	Leverage and/or control over critical resources in relation to the actors you are trying to influence. Political skills. Authority
Group work	Horizontal (persuasion/group pressure)	Guidance and support from members of the work group	Team members in a rather equal relationship (no salient — formal or informal — “team leader” other than momentarily)	Co-decision making, team meetings and mutual adjustments on a daily basis	Co-workers that accept and are able to work together without significant hierarchical direction or support
Peer influencing	Horizontal (persuasion/advice)	Guidance and support from peers within the same occupational specialty/community of practice (outside one’s own immediate workgroup/organizational unit)	Respected and receptive actors in one’s network	Work in subject matter expert networks, conferences or informal contacts/ad hoc-problem solving. Informal meetings outside work meetings, lunches, etc.	Co-workers with strong and relevant network resources that accept and are able to work without significant hierarchical direction or support
Autonomy	Horizontal (competency/self-reliance)	Self-orchestrated work processes	Autonomous agent/professional	Thinking for yourself, to a significant degree setting own standards, planning and evaluating your own work and performance	Independent co-workers with high professional/work ethics and a large portion of intrinsic motivation

part of the community, were expressed through leader talk, personal example and social events.

However, leadership is hard to achieve and take skills, time, patience and responsive followers. And leadership talk emphasizing certain values and meanings may be vague, unclear and lead to rather diverse understandings, for example when customer-orientation, creativity or “being positive” are being preached. As mentioned, our in-depth studies indicate that leadership efforts seldom are successful; subordinates nod politely, but take little notice. They may “play” doing followership to “leadership”, but there is no in-depth influencing that really sticks. This does not necessarily mean that the managers we have studied are poor leaders but that the necessary preconditions mentioned above are not simply there.

Management, also previously described, is in contrast to leadership directly targeting actual behaviour and specific objectives rather than the thinking and feelings of people. It is usually based on formal hierarchical role descriptions and organization charts (e.g. the relationship between a superior manager and a subordinate co-worker) in terms of status, authority, rights and obligations. It typically addresses the input (hiring and firing people, resource allocation), output (performance management and management by objectives), actual content of work processes (standardization or specification of how work tasks should be performed) or direct supervision of people. Management is key to effective organizations, in particular where formal structures, procedures, supervision and delivery requirements are important. But management can be uninspiring, calls for compliance and assumes that the manager or the managerial/bureaucratic structure “knows best”. Many organizations, in particular large ones, have a tendency of being over-managed — with structures, guidelines, regulations and procedures for almost everything. Flexibility, commitment and the full use of the ideas and knowledge of subordinates are to some extent sacrificed.

Organizations are, however, not only sites where rational ways of organizing like management are at play. Often people have different and conflicting interests and priorities. Organizations are political sites and clever use of power is central and sometimes highly functional for units, especially if other more conventional measures (e.g. leadership and management) have failed. Managers are often engaged in political struggles and occasionally the use of coercive force, called *power* (of the coercive type) in the model, is central. It includes the ability to punish co-workers in more or less subtle ways (e.g. give them undesirable assignments) or to withhold resources or rewards that are dear to them. It can also mean raising the voice, show authority or being aggressive. Overcoming of inertia and resistance is here essential. Intimidation and hints of rewards or punishments (typically not regulated in the agreed upon remuneration scheme or personal development plan) can sometimes make things happen when reason, formal management and “softer” influencing efforts (such as leadership/voluntary followership) fall short. Publically celebrated managers are often skilled power players, sometimes for the benefit of their units and people working for them.

Organizational politics are seldom handled only through consensual leadership or rational management. In particular, in crises situations the use of coercive power may be moti-

vated and accepted. But there is a risk that the exercise of openly coercive power will be morally out of line, violate policies (or even law) and cause resistance (e.g. conflicts with unions). As with the other two vertical modes of organizing, there are few correctives to the leader’s/manager’s/power-holder’s possibly problematic understandings, objectives or priorities.

Apple’s Steve Jobs is a good example of a CEO that managed to combine all these three vertical modes of organizing in an often productive way, although his (ab) use of power sometimes was seen as highly problematic. Jobs was famous for his intensive stirring at people trying to object to him — in most cases they gave up.

Of course, often power and management (and leadership) overlap but they should not be muddled: overlap does not equate to sameness. For issues of clarity we avoid talking of leadership or management *as* power, although of course there is always a power aspect in this — exercise of power is rarely a matter of simple brute force, but tends to be linked to some elements of leadership or management.

In addition to these three vertical modes of organizing, there are also *horizontal* modes of organizing. Here fairly equal relationships are key in coordination and functional and psychological support, in sense-making and providing direction.

No doubt, hierarchical vertical modes of organizing have their place in most modern organizations. But more horizontal modes are often underestimated as means of providing direction, advice, support, coordination, feedback, encouragement and inspiration among subordinates. In particular in knowledge intensive organizations, able and well-educated co-workers often prefer less top-down, control and command types of instructions and influence. But also other major trends such as shifting demographics and an increasing number of highly educated workers/job seekers in many countries point in the same direction — horizontal modes of organizing might often be a good alternative or at least a complement to traditional vertical ones. Let us now present three of these more in detail.

Group work means that the members share responsibility, help each other and learn from each other without much interference (time, energy and focus) from their superior(s). A group or team is of course seldom entirely leader- or manager-free, but most organizing work is done through mutual adjustments among co-workers on rather equal terms, may it be within the formal line organization, a task force or a project. It can involve people working collectively with a common task or situations where people have different, well-defined tasks but need to coordinate these with each other. Common is that there is no team member that significantly stands out in terms of influence over his/her colleagues. The team may of course involve formal managers, e.g. an appointed project manager, but the formal position is not that central. Here, people primary influence based on arguments, knowledge and ideas, not on their titles. A typical example would be a group of engineers working on a technical problem with a new product that meet in order to solve that problem. No one — not even a participating manager — is necessarily more dominant or influential than the rest and the process is based on group discussions, emerging consensus and mutual adjustments. The outcome — the chosen solution — is a collective work

product, without any authority doing much orchestrating or monitoring.

Team members are the main source for direction, advice, support, etc. Sometimes people talk about this as shared leadership, but this confuses group work (or collaborative horizontal practice) with leadership. An advantage with group work is that people often feel responsible and motivated and there is more space for knowledge and good ideas to be taken seriously than in hierarchical situations, where management, power or leadership is supposed to be a key driver. Even with participatory leadership, the leader is still in the driver's seat and others tend to be more passive.

A problem with group work is that it is not so easy to establish. People may have different ideas, values and interests and there may be conflicts or time-consuming discussions. A group may also be more interested in protecting or maximizing self-interest or avoiding stress or boring work, and may thus be less inclined to prioritize work in an overall pro-organization direction compared to a situation where a manager or other authority is having a stronger say.

Similarly, network-based *peer influencing* is also characterized by its lack of hierarchical, vertical influence in favour of more horizontal, reciprocal interactions. In contrast to group work, here people in your network but outside your closest work group context, are used for advice, support, encouragement and inspiration. It may be colleagues in other parts of the organization, former colleagues/managers, a mentor, a consultant, relatives and friends, peers within the same profession in other firms, and so forth. Formal professionals often have strong associations, regular conferences, courses and other activities. Respected peers in these communities are sometimes more helpful for guidance than managers. Specific persons in a network can be actively used for many of the functions normally associated with managerial leadership, e.g. coaching or knowledge support.

An example of this is Andrew, a middle manager in a high-tech firm, who describes the relationship with his formal superior Edmund and his other colleagues like this:

Patrick is also an experienced colleague that is useful when you need an advice. Therefore, I ask Patrick for help when it comes to concrete and tangible issues. On the other hand, when it comes to for example important resource conflicts, I will go to Edmund [his manager]. (Andrew)

One could say that Edmund helps with management, e.g. resource issues, but respected colleagues matter more when it comes to advice and support.

Peer influencing and knowledge sharing have a clear upside since networks are flexible, provide external perspectives on problems and are – from the organization's perspective – a “free” extra resource that can be utilized. In principle, people with rich networks can draw upon more knowledge and insight than a single manager and/or colleagues in the work unit can provide. Network resources are also fairly neutral – they are not involved in the daily political games within the organization and people may talk more freely about worries and issues than with their manager (perhaps actually being the source of problems). Disadvantages include network resources being very dependent on the network user's version of the problem, which can be

rather biased (“My boss is a jerk”). The network resource may have no or limited “local” knowledge. They cannot directly be used for alignment of meanings, ideas and effort at work as they usually only communicate with the network user, not the entire work group.

Autonomy refers to people being mainly self-directed at work. Of course, being part of an organization means that you still need to communicate with and adapt to relevant people such as close colleagues, peers and managers, but this is not dominant, regular or significant. Many highly qualified people being motivated by interesting work are able to work on their own, with only occasional support from others. A skilled physician, architect, a lawyer and crafts person is supposed to be able to work without much leadership or management or team support. Competent and responsible persons are able to deal with relations and collaborations necessary for the job without a manager, leader, peers or colleagues overseeing and guiding this. Autonomy may of course indirectly be supported by e.g. leadership or management, but the support occupies a peripheral rather than central position for the autonomous person. It is contradictory to emphasize the role of leadership to cultivate “autonomous followers”, as autonomy actually means “non-following”. This is often best done through the absence or minimization of leadership more than active work with making people autonomous – the latter being paradoxical. However, some signalling of the need for autonomy, for example communication of expectations on people being able to think for themselves at work may encourage autonomy and can therefore often be appropriate.

A typical case of autonomy in this sense is a telecommunications firm that we studied, where a senior manager emphasized that he is not very active as a manager (acting downwards) and that his subordinates (qualified software engineers) usually neither need, nor want interference from their boss:

Well, mostly it is them [the subordinates] that contact me when they need help with some issue . . . They need a leader that is sufficiently technically skilled in order to be able to give them support, but generally I do not think they need or want any interference from the boss. I have received a lot of feedback that confirm this.

In a consulting firm people said there was no need of “hand holding” and that “we are treated as adults”. Autonomy has the advantage that a qualified person in less need of guidance from a manager or other superior can make quick decisions and concentrate on work and results. Job satisfaction, commitment and flexibility often follow from autonomy. Knowledge work often calls for professional autonomy, rather than managerial hierarchies or leader/follower relations. There is however an obvious risk that people slack off or do the wrong things in a context with minimal managerial control, leader guidance or group pressure. Limited coordination with others is another problem. Knowledge sharing with other colleagues can become scanty. Sometimes people working (fairly) autonomously feel lonely and in lack of close peer or managerial support. There is of course also an anxiety and stress element in this.

In [Table 1](#) the six modes are summarized.

COMBINATIONS OF MODES

All the modes are more or less in operation in most workplaces, perhaps often without much careful thinking. Often the various modes of organizing operate in tandem or are mixed (This is illustrated by the overlapping circles in Fig. 1). For example, leadership often plays an important role in fostering a culture characterized by group work and/or may lead to people having values and orientations helping them be self-guided at work. Management might provide the appropriate structures (e.g. funding for participating in conferences, communication channels, meeting routines) for various horizontal modes of organizing. An organization capable of hiring and retaining many competent employees that are self-going may liberate managers from much work and allow them to spend more time doing limited and focused leadership in situations where it may be needed. A well-functioning team with well-defined responsibilities may facilitate autonomy. The use of power may marginalize destructive opposition and conflict and thereby aid group work or prevent people working independently from abusing the freedom at work. Of course, leadership and management are often intertwined: budget meetings or recruitment work may not only be about finance or manpower, but also underscore values and ideas about organizations.

In the same way, there are always bottom-up forms of organizing, so that group work, networks and autonomy moderate top-down influencing. Often groups and individuals modify or oppose what is seen as bad managerial decisions. Groups and individuals partly influence leadership and management through feedback and resistance. Many leadership acts are furthermore simply just disregarded.

Often organizational life takes place without people involved fully grasping what mechanisms and modes of organizing that are invoked: sometimes the vertical and horizontal blend, such as during interactions where everybody participates but the manager has a somewhat stronger impact than others. Combinations of modes and difficulties in separating them do not take away the value of considering them as distinct options. Working with the entire spectrum in order to identify problems and opportunities could radically improve organizations.

THE NEED FOR A PRODUCTIVE MIX OF VERTICAL AND HORIZONTAL MODES OF ORGANIZING

All modes have their different advantages, drawbacks, limitations and risks. Every manager and subordinate realize the need for at least some vertical influencing of the subordinates — through leadership, management or power — at the same time as it is obvious that there are many organizations and situations where the manager does not know best and horizontal modes of producing good work relations are superior. The key is to accomplish an optimal combination of modes of organizing. This is not about a fixed design but a matter of on-going organizing. Working with this calls for considerations and discussions of all involved; accomplishing productive ways of working together is not only a top-down activity. Of course, people will have different impact

depending on formal position, experience, energy and talent. But all parties are to a varying degree involved in this — through followership and going beyond followership.

Organizations can work with this both informally and formally. In all organizations, even the most authoritarian or bureaucratic ones, there are informal, emergent ways in which people work. Subordinates can listen to their managers' efforts to do leadership, ask them for instructions, follow rules, adapt to expressions of power, but also listen more to fellow co-workers, approach people in their network for advice and support or try to work autonomously. Managers can do the same, trying to place themselves in the centre or avoid doing so, and encouraging people to work in non-hierarchical ways.

In well-functioning organizations managers and subordinates make effort to come to some shared understandings of how to work. All communicate their views and expectations and through open dialogues or more implicit understandings people are broadly in agreement on how much and what type of leadership, management, power use, group work, peer network support and autonomy that seem productive. Much of this is done informally, implicitly and in subtle ways. If a manager is upfront in dealing with what she sees as laziness and incompetence and subordinates seem to respect this or they protest or indirectly show their dislike, this will affect the use of power. If subordinates nod or look uninterested when the manager emphasizes values and norms it will make a difference for continued or discontinued leadership efforts, at least of the type used. If group work is enthusiastically embraced it will of course facilitate the process, but if people instead mutter about forced collaboration it will likely lead to more autonomy or more vertical forms of organizing instead.

Apart from informal, emergent organizing, issues around 6M can be openly discussed in workshops or formal meetings. Agendas addressing the overall functioning of a unit can be introduced. Do we need more/less or different forms of leadership, management, group work, network support, etc.? What can or should be done? What works? What needs to be improved? All involved need to participate and arrive at a reasonably shared understanding of how things work and what needs to be considered for change. Managers have a responsibility to make the organization function, but sometimes this is done through encouraging discussions and reflection and supporting horizontal ways of working together. *Laissez-faire* has a negative tone, but sometimes it may actually be part of productive organizing.

SO WHAT IS NEW?

This expose of various modes of organizing might sound familiar to the well-read student of leadership, perhaps associating to contingency theory and situational leadership. But in contrast to many other popular texts on how to "lead" an organization, our suggestion is to move away from a one-sided focus on the manager (as a potential leader) knowing best and viewing leadership as the ultimate key driver, making all the key decisions, including if and how to delegate. Wise forms of organizing need to involve also the non-managers. In our model, we emphasize the importance of initiatives from and dialogue with the subordinates in order

to define and agree upon the appropriate balance between the different modes. Subordinates claiming autonomy is somewhat different from a leader doing delegation. Flexible combinations of top-down, down-up and horizontal, participatory relations between knowledgeable subordinates and formal managers can, at various times, and on various issues, be an organizational ideal. This can lead to complications and messiness, but also top-down leadership as well as empowered team-organizations are in practice often much less smooth and streamlined than they may appear.

We also, in contrast to most writings on leadership, deliberately use *alternative vocabulary* to leadership in order to address various options. We think that this helps managers and others break away from being trapped in narrow-minded, leadership-infused language and thinking. We strongly warn against the over-use of the term “leadership”. Many managers are certainly already aware of the options besides leadership/followership, but we think our model and concepts can be helpful when trying to think more systematically and consciously about the alternatives at hand. If we look at virtually all leadership and management literatures and listen to the large majority of managers and management educators there is a strong and often naïve belief in the idea that “leaders rule and lead followers”. We need to support alternative vocabularies and mind-sets. Rather than seeing autonomy as a result of leadership delegation or development, autonomy may be result of competent persons simply refusing to define themselves as followers.

Our suggestion to see leadership as just one option and to emphasize both a range of alternatives, and the need to include subordinates in the active work of finding a good combination of alternatives, may sound complicated. This is far from the simple “right and wrong” that the leadership development industry often is offering. Such leadership recipes are attractive and seductive, but seldom as helpful as they may seem. We have studied many managers creating problems for themselves through a naïve and uncritical belief in seductive leadership ideals. And of course, as organizations, people and situations are also varied, but can all benefit from considering alternative modes of organizing, and try to create a good balance. And this is not just a task for the leader/manager, but needs to involve many people in an organization, since a reasonable alignment of views is a clear advantage when trying to make sense of the options and deciding on the right balance.

CONCLUSION: LEADERSHIP IS JUST ONE OF MANY USEFUL TOOLS IN THE MANAGERIAL “SWISS ARMY KNIFE” — USE IT WISELY

To sum up, there are many ways of providing and getting direction, advise, support, coordination, feedback, encouragement and inspiration other than leadership/followership. The established “truth” of leadership as a panacea for all types of organizational challenges is unrealistic, narrow-minded and unhelpful. It often places a heavy burden on the meagre shoulders of most real-life managers expected to do great leadership. Close up studies show that many leadership interventions are superficial and backfire. Few managers have the time and ability to do the over-

ambitious leadership prescribed by popular management literature that they might feel expected to do; strongly influencing followers in all good respects, from ethics and values, to visions, cognitions, emotions and identities, from excellent task performance to a good workplace climate. Many employees are not that eager to be followers, but like to work in horizontal relations, get support from network contacts and be autonomous. As a consequence, many organizations may end up with plenty of leader-wannabees but few follower-wannabees.

We have therefore presented a framework based on six complementary modes of organizing, where leadership is but one option. Managers, but also subordinates, need to be aware of these different modes of organizing, willing to reflect on them and engage in discussions about the appropriateness of the various alternatives, generally in the workplace and/or in specific situations. The 6M Model can therefore be seen as a “Swiss army knife” for managers and co-workers thinking about how to make their organizations work. Individuals using a spectrum of modes of organizing can work more effectively than those with strength in only one mode. The advocate of the idea that leadership will solve all issues is like a guy with only a hammer — treating everything as a nail.

Balancing leadership with other modes of organizing can save precious time that can be used more productively, e.g. by focusing on customers and other strategic issues, sometimes neglected if managers concentrate on leadership and what Abraham Zaleznik refers to as “psychopolitics”. Of course, many managers partly realize this already, but many are stuck in seductive leadership talk and feel that they need to live up to grandiose images and follow the fashion (of being a level 5, transformational, authentic or whatever leader). This often clashes with reality, both the imperfections of managers, of their subordinates and the fact that organizational work very often is about mundane administration and operational issues.

The framework we propose can easily be used in organizational practice — informally as well as more formally. Through more or less implicit signalling and acting on an everyday basis people can form and revise how leadership, management, power, autonomy, group and network support work. Managers and subordinates, with or without support by external facilitators (central HR staff, consultants, etc.), may organize workshops scrutinizing themselves and the workplace and see if various elements in the organizing of productive work relations function well or not. Do we need more, the same or less of the various 6M elements? Are there too much or too little or the wrong types of vertical and horizontal ways of working together? Are other qualities needed in these respects? What is realistic to expect? How can we improve? Perhaps more leadership and less autonomy would be a good idea? Or more resources and more emphasis on using network resources could be a way of accessing functional advice, cognitive coaching and emotional support? Or to engage in efforts to make co-workers less manager/leader-dependent and more inclined to do mutual adjustment and effective teamwork?

Making organizations function well is of course a managerial overall responsibility, but sometimes best carried out together with people actively working with others, not necessarily all the time best seen as followers to superior

leaders. This joint work can be facilitated by a Swiss army knife mind-set. Good organizations are capable of acting without all the time falling back on “What is the problem? Leadership is the solution” thinking. It may well be that the solution is actually the problem, e.g. when managers follow the latest leadership fashion or try to live up to the ideals

expressed by the business press and management development institutes. So instead of routinely invest more hope and financial resources in leadership development, it may be a good idea to instead use the resources to develop the organization’s understanding of and skills in using all the potential tools in the organizational Swiss army knife.



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Supporting research for the main ideas in this article has recently been published in Mats Alvesson, Martin Blom and Stefan Sveningsson: *Reflexive Leadership*. (London: SAGE, 2017). This article is therefore in many respects an extension and further development of the ideas presented in that text.

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