Leadership

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Leadership Refrains: Patterns of Leadership

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Abstract *This article considers issues of leadership and leadership development by reflecting on the notion of the refrain as pattern. Drawing on our research of leadership within UK further education (FE) we examine how tracing 'patterns of leadership' can provide an insight into the practical accomplishment of leadership in FE as everyday 'ordinary' work. In an era of increased change and uncertainty about the character of leadership within the sector, we use our ethnographic data and interdisciplinary backgrounds to consider leadership development as essentially a design problem through adopting and adapting the notion of patterns that emerge in the architectural work of Christopher Alexander and the organizational studies of Tom Erickson. In doing so we point to the comforting effect of both the refrain and the pattern to repeat, return, renew, react, refine, reconstruct and resolve. We conclude by suggesting some of the ways in which the documenting and describing of such patterns of leadership can be used as 'teachable moments' for the design and deployment of programmes of leadership development and training.*

Keywords *design; ethnography; further education; leadership; patterns; refrains*

Introduction

A report from the Council for Excellence in Management and Leadership (2002) found that practical leadership skills in the UK were 'in short supply from top to bottom of organisations'. Within further education (FE) it is intriguing (but perhaps not surprising) how quickly a 'crisis in leadership' followed the incorporation of colleges in 1993 – when college principals, freed from the 'heavy-hand' of Local Education Authority (LEA) regulation, were given the power to manage their own institutions. The 1992 Further and Higher Education Act increased colleges' responsibilities enormously (and suddenly) to include managing multi-million pound budgets, negotiating staff pay and conditions, resolving legal issues of ownership and maintenance of property and so on. However, as Goddard-Patel and Whitehead (2000: 195) note, 'despite the importance and enormity of the tasks suddenly laid at the door of FE governors and managers, little of any practical consequence was done to support them in preparing for this new era of enterprise'. Faced with an increase in the numbers of colleges in serious difficulty, the perceived 'managers' right to manage' has recently been overtaken by a 'crisis in leadership' as failure has

increasingly been assigned to college Chief Executives who have been described as 'ambitious to the point of recklessness . . . and have got their way in doing all this by being "strong", "ruthless", "heavyweight", "determined" and "visionary"' (p. 202) – paradoxically the very qualities often associated with 'good' leadership (Bass & Avolio, 1994; Bryman, 1992; Goleman, 2000). In addition, the reported 'crisis in leadership'[1] in this setting raises a range of questions for researchers – most notably, how leadership has become so seamlessly associated with organizational success and yet appears so poorly understood as both problem and solution, or as Sacks (1972) might put it, how leadership seems to be 'a solution to an unknown problem arrived at by unknown means'.

Currently across the UK post-compulsory education[2] institutions like FE colleges are inspected by agencies like the Office for Standards in Education (Ofsted) so that providers of teaching and learning can be legitimately graded for the quality of their leadership. Yet 'leadership' itself has only recently become a category used by Ofsted in their inspection criteria. Before the Learning and Skills Act 2000, the Further Education Funding Council (FEFC) measured colleges on their 'Management and Governance', and it was only after 2000, and the introduction of Ofsted-led inspections guided by a new Common Inspection Framework (CIF), that 'management' was seemingly relegated to second position behind a concern with grading 'Leadership and Management'. It is also not made explicit in inspection documentation and guidelines how leadership is to be graded as something distinct from management. Given also that this change occurred at a time when other government reports promoted the importance of leadership for the success of the sector (Department for Education and Skills [DfES], 2002: 35–6), some have suggested that categories such as 'leadership', 'performance', and 'effectiveness', particularly when used within the public sector, should be viewed cautiously by researchers – not as observable and measurable phenomena – but as organizing devices, or 'policy technologies' (Ball, 2003) through which other political agendas can be played out (Hoggett, 1991; May, 1994; Pollitt, 1993). In other words, 'leadership' has developed a political dimension in UK further education, and the post-compulsory sector more generally, as institutions and inspection agencies are encouraged to demonstrate effectiveness and efficiency both in the delivery of teaching and learning *and* in the systems used to monitor and control this delivery.

Against this political background this article suggests that leadership as a phenomenon cannot be studied merely as a set of personal characteristics and skills but must be understood as something more complex, as a process of organization, or as we suggest here, as a set of patterns. As such, leadership can be thought of as a form of work; work that has social, political and technological dimensions which have only recently been discussed within critical leadership literatures (Grint, 2002; Knights & Willmott, 1992). Yet despite attempts to broaden the sphere and scope of leadership as a researchable phenomenon, the training of embodied leadership *skills* has become the dominant approach in programmes of development in both public and private sector organizations and institutions.

Given that critical leadership research does not usually inform the design of such programmes, we ask whether there are ways in which research and leadership development can help to inform one another through the concept of patterns; patterns as both a means of ordering research data and for providing designers of programmes

and their participants with sector-specific case materials – a method already used in the design of technological systems and architectural spaces (Alexander et al., 1977; Erickson, 2000a, 2000b). Taking the recursive qualities of the pattern, therefore, we ask whether this approach to research and leadership training could also provide a response to Barker's (1997) critical refrain of 'how do we know how to train leaders if we don't know what leadership is?' by providing glimpses of leadership-in-practice alongside traditional methods of self-development and group-building exercises. Treating leadership as a design problem, therefore, may provide one way of understanding what is important about leadership from the point of view of the 'user' – in this case the user being those for whom *doing* leadership in some way forms an important part of managing and accounting for their everyday working life.

Treating leadership as a design problem

The need to conduct more detailed studies of leadership-in-practice has long been recognized in both leadership studies and educational research (Bryman, 1992, 1999; Gronn, 1982; Gronn & Ribbins, 1996; Stogdill, 1974; Yukl, 2002) and yet few studies have ventured into the everyday *doing* of leadership – particularly within an educational setting. This is in large part due to the dominance of a view within the leadership literature, popular management theory and the media that there is something special about leadership (Meindl et al., 1985; Pfeffer, 1977). Leadership as a phenomenon, we are often told, transcends the everyday, the mundane and the ordinary. Leadership is typically associated with more mystical, charismatic qualities such as the ability to influence, arouse, inspire, enthuse and transform (Bass & Avolio, 1994; Goleman, 2000; Huey, 1994), qualities that exist outside of the ordinary and mundane features of daily life. As such, within organizational settings leadership is usually associated with what some claim is *really going on* behind the everyday doing of work. Thus leadership is frequently theorized as the exercise of power, the setting of goals and objectives, the managing of cultures and the mobilization of others to get work done (Alvesson & Sveningsson, 2003b; Gemmill & Oakley, 1992; Schein, 1985; Smircich & Morgan, 1982; Vroom & Yetton, 1973). Whatever leadership *does*, therefore, is usually portrayed in both critical and mainstream writings as beyond the observable accomplishment of ordinary work – and usually beyond the world as it is experienced by the practitioner. Indeed, leadership regularly manifests as a result of perceived organizational and societal crises and as such is cast as 'a savior-like essence in a world that constantly needs saving' (Rost, 1991: 94). As we have described in our own research setting in FE, leadership has emerged phoenix-like in response to a breakdown, or disruption, in the taken-for-granted and everyday routine of working life in further education.

Perhaps it is not surprising then that leadership is traditionally treated as something special. What it actually is, is therefore not as important as whether it works, whether it creates order, unity, or increases organizational performance and effectiveness. In other words, 'leadership is the solution; show me the problem' (Alvesson, 2004). It is in the face of such normative visions and policy-driven agendas that the designated 'leaders' encountered in our fieldwork feel they must match such imagined notions of leadership by demonstrating they too are strong, forceful, charismatic, and positive agents of change and improvement. This, of course, begs a whole

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gamut of questions for us as researchers such as: Is leadership the solution or the problem? What is it? Who does it? How do we recognize it? Can we develop it? However, in seeking to understand what is so 'special' about leaders and leadership, and how to recognize the good from the bad, the solution from the problem, what often remains largely unexplicated, is how leadership emerges as a word, a concept, or an observable practice that is employed in the world of the practitioner. In other words, the work that 'leadership' does in the organization of everyday life is usually not as important as the theories and concepts of leadership deployed by the researcher.

For us, the starting point to the study of leadership must begin by considering, in detail, what work leadership actually does in a given organizational setting. What we mean by this is, what is it that people who occupy perceived leadership roles and the people they work with actually do with their days, do in their offices, do in meetings, and so forth?[3] Second, how can we as researchers document and study leadership as the practical accomplishment of such work? In our approach to the study of leadership we are not especially interested in developing any new theories – or even attempting to evaluate the plethora of theories and approaches that currently exist – since we doubt that such theories can actually explicate the phenomena they purport to explain. Indeed, as with many explanatory and theoretical accounts, 'leadership' as the object of inquiry almost seems to disappear from view as theories are advanced, challenged and defended.[4] Our interest in leadership is rather different, and, in a sense, more practical, as we are looking for ways for research to contribute to the implementation of leadership development programmes through an understanding of leadership as a *situated practice*. Consequently we approach leadership as a 'design' problem. In other words, we want to know, from the interdisciplinary perspective common to the design enterprise, what the requirements for a leadership development programme might be, and how it could be designed and deployed for use by actors in a specific organizational setting. For us leadership is what Rittel and Webber (1973) might term a 'wicked problem' and viewing it as a practical design problem, as opposed to a theoretical concern, may have some benefit.

When leadership is regarded as a 'design' problem – rather than one associated with personality traits, cultural characteristics, or theoretical frameworks – the point of uncovering relating patterns of interaction lies in developing a set of scenarios of 'teachable moments' that *resonate* with participants' experiences, rather than seeking to explain or replace them. These are moments that are recognizable as what Burton Clark (1972) called 'organizational sagas', and what Julian Orr (1996) has termed 'war stories'. In this way we accommodate what is sometimes termed 'the turn to the social' in design (Grudin, 1990): the recognition of, and central concern with, users and understanding situations of use, not divorcing systems – systems that incorporate people and their activities as well as technology – from the settings in which they would be deployed and used. Ever since this much-heralded 'turn to the social' in systems design, research and experience appear to have produced a common ethos that designers need to better understand those they design for: designers need to understand the accomplishment of everyday work as well as idealized representations of it (Crabtree et al., 2000). As we have said, leadership, therefore, needs to be understood first and foremost as 'work'.[5] The challenge then is to design teaching and learning programmes for principals and senior managers in post-compulsory education that somehow 'mesh gracefully' and meaningfully (Erickson, 2000a) with

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these readily observed practices and activities in further education. In other words, we are seeking to look beyond developing generic management or leadership skills towards identifying and encouraging skills and abilities that are rooted in the sector.

Tracing patterns by 'following the leader'

While every child understands the notion of a pattern, the academic origin and relevance of patterns for us lie in the work of the architect Christopher Alexander, notably his books *A Timeless Way of Building* (1979) and *A Pattern Language* (Alexander et al., 1977). Alexander uses 'patterns' to marry the relevant aspects of the physical and social characteristics of a setting into a design. The notion of patterns, according to Alexander (1979: 247), establishes 'a relationship between a certain context, a certain system of forces which occurs repeatedly in that context, and in a certain spatial configuration which allows these forces to resolve themselves'. As Erickson (2000a: 252–3) suggests, patterns are also 'ways of representing knowledge about the workplace so that it is accessible to the increasingly diverse set of people involved in design'. For us the 'workplace' is that of college principals and managers in further education, but it also includes researchers and programme designers who are working to design meaningful programmes of leadership development for the sector. As such these patterns, when applied in an educational setting, provide both focus and possible solution for leadership development programmes. For us the advantage of the notion of patterns lies in transforming and representing our wealth of observational materials in ways that are sensitive to both the observed practices and needs of 'leaders'; needs that are rooted in everyday familiar work of practitioners.

There are, however, a number of rather different conceptualizations of patterns and, while inspired from Alexander's original work, the notion of patterns as we draw on it here has moved on somewhat. As such we wish to exploit patterns in the much looser spirit than originally suggested in Alexander's work where familiar situations were used to convey potential (and in his case, architectural) solutions. Put simply, the observed reoccurrence of *familiar situations* lies at the core of our advocacy of patterns. People, designers, college principals, senior managers and so on often encounter situations that are similar to previous ones, and one justification for this focus on patterns is the emphasis on drawing from a stock of previous experiences, guiding principles and theories-in-use to support the collection and generalization of successful solutions to common problems. And as with the refrain, 'each pattern describes a problem which occurs over and over again . . . and then describes the core of the solution to that problem, in such a way that you can use this solution a million times over, without ever doing it the same way twice' (Alexander et al., 1977: x). What we are concerned with, therefore, is not the construction of complex structured patterns of behaviour, but with loose and interpretively flexible methods of getting work done in an FE college; work that can, when observed in several settings, be grossly categorized as a kind of 'leadership work' that is both recognizable and understandable to others working in this setting.

Related to this is another intriguing rationale behind patterns that may prove useful in the context of leadership studies and leadership development. This is Alexander's notion of 'quality' ('the quality without a name'), a quasi-mystical property that both attracts and repels designers, but for Alexander it consists of

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answering questions such as 'what makes a good *Street Café*?', 'what makes a good *Place to Wait*, or *Sitting Wall*?' (Alexander et al., 1977; Erickson, 2000a). Here 'quality' refers not to some esoteric characteristic known only to the researcher or designer, but to recognizable features that ensure that buildings, organizations, activities 'really work'; that they fit with the social circumstances of use. For us, in contrast, the question might be 'what makes a good leader?', or 'what makes good leadership?' but we suggest that the steps towards resolution through the careful observation and documentation of everyday activities remains the same. Our interest, therefore, is to break down the question 'what makes a good leader?' into more manageable, more digestible segments of leadership work, such as 'what makes a good meeting, what makes a good inspection, a good public presentation, a good staff briefing, a good presentation of accounts?' and so forth, and to document the patterns that comprise this 'work' through a number of empirical examples.

Of course, we are not the first to point to the idea of 'patterns' as offering possibilities for leadership development and there is seemingly no end of 'self-help', 'self-improvement' management books that attest to this fact. In *The Manager Pool: Patterns for Radical Leadership* (Sherwood Olson & Stimmel, 2001), for example, the concept of patterns as general solutions to recurring problems is applied to management and leadership. They argue that knowing a number of patterns will both identify and improve the rare and desirable skills of leadership. But the patterns they produce and analyse (some 61 patterns in five different categories) bear no obvious or stated association to any rigorous empirical reality. Instead we are presented with a number of largely 'commonsense' or theoretically derived categories such as psychological patterns (states of mind), behavioural patterns (behaviour), strategic patterns, tactical patterns and environmental patterns. These patterns, drawing on a vast range of theories of 'good' leadership, supposedly describe how people interact, how they are led, and the environments they work in – but the data seem to consist largely of anecdotes and homily. For example, environmental patterns supposedly offer ways to improve team morale. In this category, for example, the 'Living Space' pattern builds on Christopher Alexander's ideas and suggests that the family home is an effective model for organizing the workspace with its mix of private and public areas for work, communication, rest, and play. Well, who says so? Where are the data? What's the evidence? Our aim here is not to critique this approach, or any other approach that uses patterns in this way. Instead we suggest, given that the proliferation of theories of leadership appears to be part of the 'problem' rather than the solution to understanding and developing leadership, that the place to start looking for patterns is in the setting itself, in the everyday, mundane, empirical and *recognizable* reality of leadership work (see also, Alvesson & Svenningson, 2003a). The central characteristic of our research has been an emphasis on the detailed observation of how work – leadership work – actually 'gets done'. The main virtue of ethnography is its ability to make visible the 'real world' sociality of a setting, producing detailed descriptions of the 'workaday' activities of, in this case, FE principals and senior managers. Through our ethnographies we are careful not to *impose* a framework on this organizational setting, but instead to explicate the social organizational properties of leadership as they are exhibited and accounted for by participants (Hughes et al., 1993). However, we do not underestimate the difficulty of this methodological choice for things that are familiar, in that, in this case, everyday

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leadership and leadership work are often extremely difficult to see clearly because of their very familiarity (Suchman, 1995).

Pattern 1: the public face of leadership

As with Alexander's notion of the recurring pattern, we begin by considering that in finding patterns in the fieldwork we are looking for examples of repeated, grossly observable phenomena in our ethnographic studies of everyday leadership work, describing them in detail and seeking a way to present them as interesting and useful scenarios for leadership development. What we are looking for when we analyse our fieldwork are patterns of observed behaviour and activity that draw on and reflect the experience of leadership, for as one college principal commented:

> the only difference between an experienced principal, for example, and an inexperienced one is you've just had more time to make more mistakes and to learn from them. The critical thing, I suppose, is to be able to know your mistake, because you don't learn anything really like as much until you find out. You like to try and convince yourself – on your better days – that something may have gone right, but you learn a lot more from this – from the things that go wrong – and it often is so frequently tied up with people who just aren't quite doing what you want them to do . . .

One persistent, grossly observable, feature that emerges in a range of our fieldwork settings is the extent to which college principals and their senior management teams engage in activities to manage the visible and public face of their institution. This idea of working to maintain in some way the public face of the college takes a variety of forms and emerges in a number of different contexts. While there are clearly elements of Goffman's (1959) 'presentation of self' involved here – including notions of 'front-stage' where the performance is given and 'back-stage' where the performance is prepared – the work involved, concerned as it is with the perception of the institution, often goes beyond such simplistic dramaturgical analogies. The fact that the organization has some kind of image to defend and project is often the subject of powerful and persistent organizational sagas (Clark, 1972). Such sagas generally involve stories describing periods of organizational change, periods of great instability, instances of 'organizational nostalgia' (Gabriel, 1993), references to the 'good' or 'bad' old days of the college, or more recent periods of change such as incorporation in the early 1990s. As with all sagas, the retelling of the history and identity formation of the college becomes a powerful means by which the public face of the college is both outlined and reinforced.

Take the following extract from a speech given five times during one day by one college principal to audiences of both staff and students. The speech was to mark a new beginning in the cultural values of the college. Throughout the speech the audience are reminded of the college's set of core values which must (according to the principal) be 'lived' by all those working and studying at the college:

> When I first came to [this college] I was actually intimidated. Before I even got inside I had to push through a gang of students stood smoking near the main entrance, y'know, literally push my way through. I'm being honest here, I felt

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intimidated, and I remember thinking, if I feel intimidated and I'm the Principal then how are other visitors to the college going to feel? When I reached what is now the main reception area I was greeted by the sight of bodies – bodies everywhere – students standing around, lying around, chatting. It looked like what we used to call back home a 'doss house'. I remember thinking, 'what kind of place have I come to?' For me a good college is not a youth club, it's a place of learning, it can be fun as well, but people have to take responsibility for that. We have to make each other feel valued. That's why we don't have strict rules here. We don't need them so long as we have mutual respect . . .

This principal takes great pride in the change that has taken place in the college since his arrival over two decades ago. This is evident in the number of times the story of the college's transformation was recounted to us and overheard over the course of the ethnography. A story not just told by the principal, but by the senior managers, middle management, administrative and teaching staff. It is a story that people within the college draw upon to build a sense of professional identity. As this lecturer of history told one of our researchers following one version of the principal's speech:

> I think that it's quite a comfort having such explicit values. It's like having Ten Commandments that you and the students can work within, and I really think that that creates a mutual respect . . . I mean, I teach history so I know something about political systems and I think that this system really does work. That's why it's true what [the principal] was just saying, we really don't need a lot of rules here because we have such explicit values . . . it's now a well-oiled machine.

Yet there is a tension evident at this college between these explicit values and the role of leadership. Staff feel the sense of organizational democracy and empowerment, but it is cultivated and moulded by the principal. As such, staff throughout the college feel a sense of ownership of the culture and its values, but at the same time comment that it is the principal that 'breathes life into the systems and culture'. As another lecturer within the college commented, 'I think they're his values, but they've been refined over the years'. Similarly, other staff commented on the difficulty the college would face when the current principal retires, since the culture of the college is bound up with the work, efforts and values of this one individual. The telling and retelling of the story of the college's transformation as a saga, therefore, is a means of empowering those working and studying throughout the college – making them both responsible and accountable – but at the same time the hero of the story remains the charismatic and transformational principal as recognized leader. This organizational saga is about empowerment, responsibility and organizational citizenship, but it is also a story through which the principal can be seen to be *doing* leadership.

The telling and retelling of such sagas is closely associated with Joanne Yates's (1989) notion of 'control through communication', particularly the argument that there is a link, an interrelationship, between technology use and changing managerial philosophies. In the above example, the storytelling practices of this principal were used both as a technology to empower and as a means of reinforcing the cultural values of the college which must be lived by all those present. More widely, post-compulsory education in the UK has undergone radical change and restructuring over the past decade. In particular, this has produced a 'customer-driven'

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approach to further education where entrepreneurial ideologies challenge more traditional and increasingly outmoded notions of teaching and learning, including the professional autonomy of teaching staff (Ball, 2003; Goddard-Patel & Whitehead, 2000). Instead, in order for colleges to thrive they are adopting the language and presentational practices of business (Loots & Ross, 2004). As we have seen in the above example, one key element of this is the engineering of new cultures, systems and technologies that promote, practise and present these new managerial and customer-focused philosophies (Kerfoot & Whitehead, 1998; Randle & Brady, 1997). However, as Yates (1989) suggests, new techniques and technologies alone are insufficient. What is required is the vision to use such technologies in new ways. One way in which such visions are promoted outside of giving speeches is in the proliferation of college newsletters, to staff, students and the wider community, and the way that such mundane paper-based devices are used both to communicate to customers and staff and to promote a 'brand approach' to education. Consider, for instance, these details from a college newsletter:

> During 2003 SMT recognised that, with increased individual use of IT, there was a need for more consistency of style in College documentation. Examples of the range of diversity in practice were evident in papers that went to Governors' meetings, in letters from different parts of the College to the same external organization (e.g. the Learning and Skills Council) and in memos from different departments. Font sizes varied from 8 to 14 point size and a variety of typefaces were used . . . this inconsistency potentially 'dilutes' the 'brand value' of the College.
>
> A group of 'professionals' was formed to develop documentation standards or 'house style' guidelines for use by all College staff. These guidelines should now be followed:
>
> 1. Develop and maintain a consistent identity for the college so that all readers will quickly recognize a document as being from the college;
>
> 2. Ensure documents portray a consistent high-quality, attractive, modern image that accords with the college's vision, mission, values and so on.

As with the crafting of organizational sagas, these 'technologies' are increasingly used by principals and senior managers to promote and disseminate specific leadership visions and objectives. Such technological accomplishments represent and draw upon specific 'genres' of organizational communication (Yates & Orlikowski, 1992), genres that evolve over time as new technologies are employed to generate, process and disseminate information in new and innovative ways across organizational domains. The production, mobilization and maintenance of the public image of the college through organized speeches, newsletters, standardized documentation, websites and so forth, has become a certain feature of the daily work of senior managers. It is work that is ongoing, repeated and grooved through everyday concerns with the brand value of a college. As such these two brief examples are not isolated incidents but instead are part of a pattern – a series of activities and incidents – that have at the heart of them the desire to project a particular image of the college, an image that has become a commodity to nurture and protect both within the institution and in the local community.

Pattern 2: meetings as the stuff of leadership work

Meetings have long been of interest in studies of organizational life and it is difficult for anyone who has spent time in any kind of organization to argue that meetings are not an important and increasingly regular part of daily life, particularly in the work of senior managers in an FE college. Meetings form a central part of organizational work, whether they involve formal gatherings around a table, or more ad hoc occasions. In *The Business of Talk: Organizations in Action*, Boden (1994: 81) describes meetings as 'the very stuff of management', a place 'where organizations come together'. Through her own study of several organizational settings Boden carefully documents and analyses both the accomplishment of meetings themselves and the role of meetings in the accomplishment of organization. Our interest here is in the patterns of work through which meetings are accomplished.

Take the following material from the taped transcript of a meeting between the senior managers of an FE college and representatives of the local and national Learning and Skills Council. The meeting takes place in a tertiary college that currently operates on two sites and provides A-level, foundation- and NVQ-level courses for 16–19 year olds and adults in traditional academic subjects and also a wide range of vocational qualifications. Like most post-incorporation FE colleges, the college is one of four others that serve this particular community, and competition for students is fierce as each college aims to provide the highest standard of facilities and the widest range of courses. The meeting described here concerns plans for a new annex building to be built next to the existing site. This new building would provide the college with state-of-the-art teaching facilities for its popular hair and beauty courses as well as providing extra teaching rooms for other subjects. The meeting itself was called at short notice to discuss news that the Learning and Skills Council (LSC) capital committee had rejected the proposal for the new building. This news came as a blow to the management of the college since they had prepared the proposal with the assistance of the local LSC office.

The meeting (attended by the college management, and representatives of the local and national LSC) was arranged to find out why the proposal was rejected and what steps needed to be taken to amend the proposal for resubmission. The subject of this three-hour meeting hinged on one problem: what level of funding the college should say it needs in order to have a new version of the proposal accepted. However, the problem of which figure to use in the proposal presented several difficulties for this management team. The original proposal stated that the college required 35 per cent funding (the college would then make up the remaining costs). This figure was originally chosen since the local LSC had mentioned (informally) that this is the usual level that is awarded for funding such projects. According to the college's Finance Director, however, the college would actually need nearer 50 per cent funding, but by proposing a lower figure it was hoped that the LSC would view the college as a more financially secure investment which would secure at least 35 per cent with a view to increase this figure over the following the three years:[6]

> Local LSC Officer: 'Can I suggest a way forward? I think we all need to be happy with the process, and I think we need to put that in at this point in the conversation. But if we are happy with the process, I think it's less of how we

got from there to there, I think it, it would be useful to have a discussion about what *are* the reasonable levels of income, for example, so that we're all reasonably happy with the assumptions that are being made and then we can see what the result is from that, and what percentage that suggests. To my mind that will *at least* stress 35 per cent . . .'

Principal: 'If I sum up just where I think we are and you tell me if we're wrong: One option is to rework the figures again from the position somewhere in-between those of the capital committee so that it's a bit worse than it was, but not as bad as it in fact finished up as. That's one option'

National LSC Officer: 'But would you be comfortable with that as a college if you don't believe the numbers, I mean . . .?'

Principal: 'Well, there you are, I mean . . .'

Local LSC Officer: 'John's going through options ok, so . . .'

Principal: 'That *is* the option isn't it? That is the *only* option?'

Finance Director: '. . . but, this, I . . .'

Principal: 'Sorry, let me finish Brian. I don't know what the committee expects of us. Are they expecting to see the same proposal with 35 per cent grant level requested, but *reworked figures*, or are they expecting to see it come back with a request for a, a higher grant? Now clearly from our point of view, we would prefer the higher grant, because, *you know* really that's the figures that you put in the plan are based on degrees of optimism, and all you do, you can change that very easily by changing your optimistic view of the world, and it can go from *hugely* optimistic, which we felt we were to get by on 35 per cent, to much less optimistic, which were the reworked figures that Brian came up with. Now we have got a leeway within that, it's just which, which *looks* the more credible case, to actually go back and say "look, we have rethought, we've changed our position of optimism and we now think that we should have a 40 per cent grant" or whatever it would be. Or, to go back and say "whoops!, we realized we've gone from being overoptimistic to underoptimistic, to pessimistic", and then we'll come back again. I mean those two look the two, I think we've only got two options haven't we? Change the figures or change the grant level . . .'

This meeting demonstrates some of the complexities of what we have called 'leadership work' in an FE college. The meeting described here was a structured occasion for problem solving, the problem being what figure to present in a funding proposal. What appears as a straightforward problem of accountancy is treated by the actors in this meeting as a kind of organizational game that needs to be played out. The principal is careful to manage the delicate relationship between the college and the LSC but he is also keen to protect the professional image of his deputy. The representatives are also in a delicate position in that they want to offer help to the college but at the same time must not *be seen* to be helping by any outside authorities. This process of careful negotiation can be likened to a game since the rules of funding are also open to interpretation by the capital committee who will eventually make a decision on the proposal and who have themselves been known to change funding

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criteria from case to case.[7] Yet in this example it could be argued that deciding what figures to present, and therefore what story they should tell, is not so much about 'leadership' as about skilful administration and the management of performances (Bittner, 1965; Harper, 1988).

In an interview with the principal following this meeting one of our researchers discussed the problem of working on the funding proposal, and particularly some of the difficulties of working with local and national funding councils to arrive at a suitable figure. The principal summed up the meeting with the following:

> you play the game, you see, y'know . . . you see, theoretically what happens is you should put all the figures in, and out the end pops what level of support you need. But the reality is you never bloody win, we were told actually if we try to get a 35 per cent grant that we would never get it, so what we did was we made the figures show that we could just do it on 35, but it is a very tough squeeze. We first of all asked for 50 per cent . . .

There is no magic here. Leadership does not appear to be about magical or mystical qualities. While obtaining funding for a new college building is certainly a part of doing 'good' leadership for the principal and his team, the way in which this work is done – the pattern of activity – is actually quite ordinary. Meetings are held, proposals are planned, written and rewritten, e-mails, letters and phone calls are made, committees are attended and so forth. Indeed, one of the central findings of our study of educational leadership is that one of many mundane skills involved in being a college principal is the accumulation of 'organizational acumen' (Bittner, 1965): the ability and entitlement to interpret rules and procedures in a way that suits a particular purpose. In this case it was the skill of the principal, his senior managers and the members of the LSC to manipulate figures and calculations to put forward the best case for the funding of a new building. Indeed, as we have observed in many other settings, college staff at all levels of the organization have employed organizational acumen to achieve high grades at annual inspections, to meet internal and external performance targets, or to make figures and statistics tell a variety of credible stories to stakeholders. Yet such work is rarely covered in traditional studies of organizational leadership and decision making, and consequently rarely makes it onto leadership development programmes. Certainly one of the reasons for this oversight in organizational research is due to the sensitivity that surrounds such efforts but it is also because there are few studies documenting such everyday, mundane, practices in action. In our own brief analysis of our ethnographic data, we suggest that some of the common features of everyday leadership work in an FE college involve producing and mobilizing convincing accounts of the college; accounts of the college's achievements, and accounts of the college's financial status. As we have seen in the above examples, such accounting work takes effort and collaboration; it also involves the manipulation of figures, stories, systems and technologies to get work done. As such, we suggest that this work can be thought of as a pattern of activity, a pattern that could perhaps be best summed up as leadership through the management of accounts. In the final of our three patterns, we turn specifically to this notion of leadership as accounting work.

Pattern 3: playing with figures

Our final, and associated, set of patterns comes from observing and understanding a range of activities concerned with various notions of accountability. There is a vast literature on the subject of accountability, which we do not have sufficient space to discuss here. For an introduction to some of the debates surrounding the subject see Munro and Mouritsen (1996), Neyland and Woolgar (2002), Roberts (1991) and Starthern (2000). In this article, however, we are also interested in accountability as it is used within ethnomethodology as 'the ways in which actions are *organized*: that is, put together as publicly observable, reportable occurrences. They are not only done, they are done so that they can be seen to have been done. The study of "account-ability" therefore focuses upon the ways actions are done so as to make themselves identifiable within the social setting' (Button & Sharrock, 1998: 75, emphasis in original). Unlike some critiques of ethnomethodology we agree with Button and Sharrock that to make actions accountable and sensible is not just reserved for when the 'social tissue' of everyday life is seen to break (Czarniawska-Joerges, 1996: 308) but that accountability also forms an important part of maintaining 'ordinary life' (Sacks, 1984) through the successful accomplishment of mundane work. As such, for us, an important part of *doing* leadership is that it must be *seen to be adequately done* by others.

To anyone who spends any length of time with college principals or senior managers, the extent to which forms of accounting and accountability dominate working life is clear. However, what is less obvious are the subtly different forms of accounting that impact on the organization of daily life in different ways, that is, there are different patterns whereby principals and their SMT can be seen to be visibly oriented to notions of the account. 'Doing' accountability work requires different, observable, patterns of work. Our interest here then is in how and in what ways the need to account for work done drives the everyday activities of college managers and how this may be of interest to those wishing to learn and develop such 'skills of leadership'. As observed in our ethnographies, much of what counts as everyday leadership work within UK FE colleges appears to consist of producing, sharing and manipulating accounts of events, producing a number of subtly different versions, or as this quote demonstrates, the production of a convincing performance:

> [That was] a useful pre-meeting. For a set-piece meeting like this [with the Learning and Skills Council], it's important to be prepared. I feel I know where we are now and we all know what to say. We did this with Ofsted and got Grade 1 for leadership and management.

The last quote is taken from our fieldnotes following the observation of a meeting with the principal and his senior management team in a sixth-form college. Here leadership and management are treated as a performance that requires organization and preparation. As this principal explains, an important factor in the successful accomplishment of leadership and management is that it must be seen to be done (Button & Sharrock, 1998). Good leadership and management therefore involve the careful preparation of what can be said and done in front of an audience. In this case this is done by holding 'pre-meetings' to prepare for the real meeting that will happen later in the week. Such dress rehearsals mean that all staff involved in the meeting

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now 'know what to say' and how to carry off the performance necessary to accomplish the job that needs to be done – in this case discussing the financial status of the college with the LSC. Indeed, as we have seen since the introduction of the Common Inspection Framework, the audit performed by these agencies plays an important role in maintaining 'effective leadership' as a symbol of organizational success, particularly as inspection reports are publicly available and so have become a key resource for students in making decisions about where to study. However, one disadvantage with such visible measures is that the grades awarded for standards of teaching and learning, and particularly for leadership and management, influence the level of funding a college will receive. As this second quote suggests, continually having to demonstrate effectiveness in order to gain this legitimacy can be draining for teaching staff and management:

> Ofsted inspected the college in December 2001 and another inspection is not due until 2005. However, in order to prepare for this inspection we are having a practice inspection. Of course, nobody is adequately prepared and anxiety has set in. We know what is expected but staff continue to indulge in 'arguing with the ref', inspectors are not going to change their views on the importance of lesson plans or schemes of work, and management efforts to help staff prepare are construed as yet more burdens indiscriminately and unnecessarily placed on already frighteningly overburdened lecturers.

The above extract is taken from a short diary study conducted with a new middle manager of this college. Accounts such as this suggest that measures designed to reward 'good' leadership quickly become targets for colleges to meet (Hoskin, 1997), and the pressures to meet targets can override other work within the college (Ball, 2003). As a result, it is often the case that 'audits do as much to construct definitions of quality and performance as to monitor them' (Power, 1994: 33). As Power goes on to argue in his detailed study of accountability and accounting practices, although organizational life often consists of 'checking up on each other', the formalization of this checking and monitoring through auditing represents a break with traditional forms of organizational control. Instead, audits serve to ensure the quality of control systems rather than the quality of 'first-order' operations; serving as a means of indirect control over work practices through the monitoring and regulation of other systems of control. In short, the primary objective of the audit is to achieve the *control of control*. And as with Foucault's (1991) similar notion of the 'conduct of conduct' controlling systems of control is therefore dependent upon rendering the practices, actions and behaviours of others and oneself visible and calculable, even if this is to the detriment of the first-order work that such audits are technically designed to measure. As the two quotes above suggest, being *seen* to be in control is at least as important as actually having control.

For the FE colleges that participated in our study, being seen to be in control of control is about gaining legitimacy (DiMaggio & Powell, 1991) via the inspections and published reports of auditing bodies and agencies. Under such a regime one has to be seen to be auditable – even if the actual efficacy of the audit itself is often difficult to demonstrate (Shore & Wright, 2000; Strathern, 2000). As the above quotes from our fieldwork suggest, this can lead to a kind of 'performed' audit, one more concerned with 'rituals of verification' than with interrogating the content of actual

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work practice (Power, 1997). Such politically important inspection regimes require auditors and 'auditees' within organizations and institutions to become particularly skilled at performing the audit and making the world verifiable and calculable within the matrices of the given audit process. This has led recent studies to challenge the popular notion of auditing as being a somewhat dull and fastidious task requiring merely the recording and collation of facts, figures and documentation (Harper, 1988; Neyland & Woolgar, 2002; Power, 1997; Strathern, 2000). Instead, they argue, studies of how audits are performed reveal a highly creative task in which the world is actively rendered manageable and controllable through the production of documentation, facts and figures. For FE colleges there is the added incentive not only to comply with the standards set by the inspectorate but also to do so as a form of 'leadership'. What is most significant in this sector is the political climate of 'new managerialism' (Ferlie et al., 1996; Pollitt, 1993; Randle & Brady, 1997) combined with the need to visibly demonstrate leadership for inspection regimes. Perhaps ironically, this has meant that *doing* leadership has become a collective activity that – quite apart from the visions and strategies usually associated with the term – involves ordinary, but skilful, management of accounts that can then perform 'leadership' for the benefit of others.

Discussion: patterns and the shock of the familiar

As evident in the above quotes, one of the main ways of performing leadership is through the preparing and rehearsing of performances of effectiveness by holding meetings and pre-meetings. There are many other examples in our data where principals, senior, middle managers and teaching staff discuss and work on the production and configuration of facts and figures for the purposes of demonstrating that such work is being done. As such, preparing for audit and working within 'policy technologies' (Ball, 2003) like the Common Inspection Framework and wider agendas like *Success for All* (DfES, 2002) means that much of the work of senior managers is taken up with the construction of convincing and 'authentic' performances of that work.[8] In this way, the work of principals and senior managers when they engage in decision making and analysis of management information involves an observable (and teachable) pattern of continuous (and often ingenious) struggles with technology and data. This 'gambit of compliance' (Bittner, 1965) played out by principals and managers requires that considerable experience and skill be used to legitimately accomplish this kind of work. Knowing which story to tell, which figures to use and which stakeholders to communicate to is an activity built up over time, through many repetitions (including successes and failures) through which leadership work is refined and crafted into a stock of what Bittner has also termed 'organizational acumen'. For us, the accumulation and application of such acumen depends upon a set of (often implicit), taken-for-granted, but potentially teachable skills, patterns interactions and activities that comprise everyday leadership work.

As our use of ethnographic data suggests tackling leadership (and specifically leadership development) as a design problem means that our approach differs somewhat from that taken by Alexander (and the software-design community) since we follow Erickson (2000a, 2000b) in suggesting that our primary, and rather different emphasis, is on the use of pattern languages as a descriptive device, a *lingua*

franca for people who lack a shared discipline or theoretical framework. Given the varied background from which programme designers, leadership trainers, researchers and practitioners are drawn, such an interdisciplinary approach and a common language are both essential and inevitable. As such, our patterns attempt to capture actual lived experience in a way that may provide the basis for a productive dialogue and understanding of leadership work as a situated accomplishment. Nevertheless our exposition does abide by some of Alexander's central concerns since, while not using them prescriptively, we are attempting to use patterns to capture accepted practice and support generalization. We are also suggesting the value of this perspective as a way of looking at the problem and possible solutions to 'leadership' in this sector. However, the pattern language is *not* intended to be a book of patterns that is followed by rote. This is not a crib sheet – rather we have presented a number of 'sensitizing' issues and cases that can be modified and re-presented according to local circumstances. Any college principal or senior manager who has experience with the situations described earlier can quickly understand, discuss, and contest these patterns, and in doing so can assist researchers, designers and trainers in the production of more meaningful cases and patterns of leadership work. As Erickson (2000a: 254) states of his related concept of *lingua franca* for design: 'It is actually a meta-language which is used to generate languages for particular sites. For any particular situation a subset of existing patterns is selected . . . These patterns – old, modified, and new – form a site-specific language which is used to guide reflection and discussion about the relationships among the site, the proposed design, and the activities of the inhabitants'.

Like Erickson we wonder what advantages and benefits this approach to leadership development might afford. We suggest firstly that patterns 'are more concrete, more tightly bound to the situation at hand, and thus more accessible to an audience that lacks a common disciplinary framework'. Second, that presenting empirical studies of leadership in action, the 'doing' of leadership, 'results in the modularization of workplace knowledge, and thus makes it easier to take a subset of a pattern language and apply it to a new type of workplace' (Erickson, 2000a: 260). As such, this is our response to the special, almost mythical, status traditionally accorded to 'leadership': if there is anything special about leadership it is simply that researchers have yet to realize the importance of the largely unexplicated and seemingly invisible 'work' that is essential in the accomplishment of educational leadership as an observable and accountable phenomenon (Alvesson & Sveningsson, 2003a, 2003b; Gronn, 1982; Gronn & Ribbins, 1996).

For us, the presentation of patterns of leadership work provides participants and researchers like us with 'teachable moments'. As with Alexander's patterns and Erickson's shared language, this involves the sharing of accounts of familiar and everyday work that is not usually documented and passed on but which can provide a detailed description of how such work is done, as well as insights into how such work can be supported by others. In an interdisciplinary environment involving researchers, course designers, trainers, and sector practitioners, we feel that patterns of leadership like those presented earlier provide a common ground for further dialogue. Unlike, semi-structured interviews, or questionnaires, the gathering of ethnographic data including interviews, but also observational methods, the collection of documents, diary studies and other methodological tools, can provide rich

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descriptions of practice which may challenge the status of leadership, and in doing so reveal a more complex world of work that practitioners in this part of the public sector must manage but for which few have been formally trained to cope with (Goddard-Patel & Whitehead, 2000; Loots & Ross, 2004). The sharing of stories of practice as patterns, we suggest, provides one method for researchers, trainers and practitioners to critically examine the nature of leadership in practice and reflect on the skills and work that practitioners engage in, rather than idealized or prescriptive visions of what that work is or should be.

Conclusion

'Good' leaders, it would seem, are competent and skilled in what Bittner (1965) has described as the 'gambit of compliance' and the accumulation of 'organizational acumen'. Leaders know what stories to tell at the right times, they know what figures to produce, how and when. They are skilled in managing performances, images and interpretations, and they are familiar with the routines and patterns of that work. These seem to be 'teachable' yet rarely taught skills, yet in describing such patterns of leadership work here we are not uncovering or revealing secret or esoteric qualities. If there is value in the fieldwork extracts above it comes from their very familiarity – the 'been there, done that' experience. It is exactly this quality, we suggest, that makes this work and these patterns useful for leadership development. Yet such skills are available to just about anyone working in an organization and are used everyday. Leadership skills may not be the esoteric preserve of leadership, but what may be more important is recognition that this is an essential part of what leaders do. As Alvesson and Sveningsson (2003a: 377) have succinctly put it, perhaps we have reached a time where we need to practise 'leadership agnosticism' in order to understand leadership as the 'extra-ordinarization of the mundane'. For now, however, in the absence of any shared knowledge of the practice, if leadership work is to be teachable and transferable it must be embodied in a concrete and recognizable form. Recognizable, that is, to those that must practise it. Above all, we have stated that leadership could be thought of as a design problem through which the tracing of 'patterns of leadership' may provide one useful means of understanding the social worlds of users/practitioners; a means through which we as researchers can inform the design of development programmes so that everyday work such as holding meetings, working with management information, communicating with funding bodies and so forth, can be supported rather than subsumed within more ambiguous, but politically charged, concepts like 'leadership'. In this article we advocate 'patterns' as a representational mechanism for the meaningful design of leadership training and development.

Notes

1. The crisis in leadership has framed recent discussions and consultation documents on leadership within the post-compulsory sector. See for example DfES (2003), a joint consultation document produced by the Standards Unit and the Centre for Excellence in Leadership.
2. In the UK post-compulsory education covers any formal teaching and learning for anyone above the age of 16 years. As such the sector is diverse and includes further education

(FE) colleges (of which there are several types, including general FE, tertiary and sixth-form colleges), work-based learning providers, adult and community learning centres, higher education institutions, and the many agencies, funding councils and governing bodies that coordinate and monitor the activities of the sector. Here we report on fieldwork conducted in five FE colleges (three tertiary and two sixth-form).

3. Indeed, we would support Peter Gronn's (1982) assertion that

    it would seem that at least two things must be done in an account which purports to answer a question along the lines of: 'What do school principals, superintendents, or administrators do?' First it must provide some description of the particular person actually *doing something*. In this respect, it would be an ethnographic account. Second, it must provide some analysis of how these 'doings' were constituted or constructed in the on-going interactive work of school personnel. This would make the account an ethnomethodological one. (p. 26, emphasis in original)

4. Indeed, Pfeffer (1977) and more recently Alvesson and Sveningsson (2003a, 2003b) have all commented on the phantom-like nature of 'leadership' and the receding horizon of seemingly endless definitions and theoretical frameworks that can be invented, reinvented and discovered by researchers. Yet such rigorous categorizing and measuring has yet to amount to a coherent and workable theory of leadership-as-practice.

5. The term 'work' here is used in the ethnomethodological tradition meaning 'whatever it is that takes analytic, intellectual, emotional energy . . . all sorts of normalized things, for example, personal characteristics and the like, are jobs that are done, that took some kind of effort, training, and so on' (Sacks, 1984: 413). Following Sacks we are concerned with work that is done and accounted for *as leadership* by members – in this way we are concerned with the practice of 'doing being a leader' in further education.

6. To preserve the anonymity of research participants all names of individuals presented in this article are fictitious.

7. For more details and analysis of this meeting see Iszatt White et al. (2004).

8. Like presenting facts and figures and *doing* leadership, to be 'authentic' is also a job of work to be accomplished (Ball, 2003). As with other calculable phenomena authenticity must be performed to make it amenable to the analysis and measurement of others.

Acknowledgements

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