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What is This?
Defaulting to Management: Leadership Defined By What It Is Not

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Abstract. The dynamics between identity (who I am) and anti-identity (who am I not) are drawn on to explore the identity work of senior and middle managers who have elected to embark on formal, sustained and intensive leadership development work. We construct the concept of a default identity, not primarily as an oppositional or negative identity, but as a baseline identity that, because it is securely held, has a major role to play in the understanding, acquisition and performance of more emergent identity constructions. In exploring the dynamics between management (default identity) and leadership (emergent and desirable identity) for instance, it becomes clear that each is shaped by the other in subtle and overt ways. We conclude that the recognition of the dynamics and relationships between them holds some promise for new thinking and innovation in terms of individual organizational identity work, leadership development and organizational change. Key words. identity work; leadership; management

Before I moved here I used to have a four quadrant leadership chart pinned up on my wall, then I moved desks and I don’t know where it is now. I haven’t got it back up, but I used to look at it and refer to it on occasion. I wasn’t really in a leadership role then. I had one analyst reporting to me. So it wasn’t particularly important at that time. But from this perspective I can...
sees what I can get out of it. (Leadership Development Participant, Senior Organizational Manager)

Like all good stories, this could be seen as encapsulating a larger narrative—the one that is this paper. We present it as a story about leadership and management. This lost four-quadrant leadership chart happened to be in the wrong place at the wrong time, as we learn that this manager had it on the wall in a time when she was doing ‘management’. The implication is that now that she is doing ‘leadership’ it would make sense, but unfortunately the chart is lost. Just as in this story, managers are increasingly told they need leadership. But once a person is a leader and has lost the chart, leadership seems an idealized and hazy notion and s/he reverts or defaults to management ways of being and doing. So this story is also about identities, which can be considered in much the same way as in the story. The leader identity is increasingly desirable, but it is not necessarily clear what one does with that identity when the manager identity and its supporting structures are well ingrained. A manager identity lacks the profile and current hype of a leader identity, but it’s established and known all the same, while leader identities, in the words of one of our research subjects, are ‘intangible’ and ‘nebulous’. We want to use the above story as indicative of the identity work at stake as managers grapple with the management and leadership demands made of them.

While the significance of identity in organizational studies is well established (Bauman, 2001; Giddens, 1991; Hall, 1996; Shotter and Gergen, 1989) theoretical and empirical inquiry into what is termed identity work or the processes of identity construction could be considered relatively recent (Ford, 2006; Kornberger and Brown, 2007; Sveningsson and Alvesson, 2003). To date, theory and research focusing on the workings of identity construction (as opposed to the outcome of it) reveal the ongoing and elusive efforts of organizational actors to understand who they are and aren’t, what they do and don’t do, and what they should and shouldn’t do. In short, identity work is pivotal in understanding how actors insert themselves into organizational life.

Much of this research has centred on managerial work (Sims, 2003; Watson, 1994), specifically management work in a knowledge context (Sveningsson and Alvesson, 2003) and how managers ‘do’ leadership (Alvesson and Sveningsson, 2003a, 2003b, 2003c; Ford, 2006). This research has highlighted the ideological, rhetorical, ambiguous and problematic nature of the managing and leading that managers represent themselves as being engaged in. Increasingly theoreticians argue that what is prominent in organizations, such as management, leadership and intra- or entrepreneurship is invested more in identity construction than in actual practice (Jones and Spicer, 2005; Sveningsson and Larsson, 2006). In this paper we accept and build on the above identity-focused approaches to management and leadership.
The point of inquiry in this paper is in understanding at a micro-level why some identities come to hold more power and appeal than others, and at a macro-level what effects a shift in the collective pursuit of one identity over another might have on the nature of self, work and organizational life. At the heart of this paper is the debate about the relationship between management and leadership that has fuelled decades of scholarly and practitioner interest (Barker, 1997; Kotter, 1990; Mintzberg, 1998; Yukl, 2002; Zaleznik, 1977). It seems that for those engaged in any level of managing, leadership has become a normative expectation, demand or practice (Sveningsson and Larsson, 2006). We build on the proposition that the manager identity has become a negative or ‘anti-identity’ or a ‘not-me position’ (Sveningsson and Alvesson, 2003: 1188; Sveningsson and Larsson, 2006) that is currently contributing much of the momentum behind the increasingly high profile of leadership and leadership development. Certainly there is research that exposes the leader identity as predominantly idealized, grandiose, rhetorical and elusive (Alvesson and Sveningsson, 2003c; Barker, 2001; Wood, 2005), but what we investigate in this paper is the extent to which one identity relies on another and how the existence, efficacy and power of each in the relationship between them might be better understood. In so doing we focus on the dynamics of different identities in forging the partial, incomplete, ongoing, negotiated achievement that is a sense of self at work.

Therefore we focus on the interaction between identities, the dynamics and instability of identity co-existence and the ability of what we term here, a default identity, to facilitate a space for a ‘new’, desirable identity construction. We acknowledge a recent surge of interest in anti-identity, alterity and dis-identification (Elsbach and Bhattachharya, 2001; Jones and Spicer, 2005; Sveningsson and Alvesson, 2003; Sveningsson and Larsson, 2006). That literature to date has tended to explore the power and attraction of the identity that is juxtaposed with the anti-identity. In contrast our paper reverses this logic and explores how a default identity (in this case a manager one) can be impacted by an alternative or emergent identity (in this case a leader one).

We structure this discussion into four sections. First we explore the contemporary relationship of managing to leading from an identity construction perspective. The second section explores the concept of anti-identity, developing a further and related theorization of it in the form of default identity. The third section illustrates, discusses and evaluates empirical data from established organizational managers who explicitly seek to acquire or extend a leadership identity. The final section looks at the implications of this study for organizational studies, identity work research, leadership and leadership development studies and practice.
The Management/Leadership Relationship: An Identity Perspective

The relationship of management and leadership has been a set piece in the literature for decades now. The trajectory of that debate moves through their essential differences between the two concepts (Zaleznik, 1977), their complementarity (Kotter, 1990), and more recently their interdependence (Yukl and Lepsinger, 2005). While such theorists argue over the nature of the exact relationship, they share a belief that management and leadership can be differentiated through the nature of the skills, behaviours, techniques and activities. The assumptions in this kind of literature are that leadership and management draw from different personal and positional resources or are occupied on a different spectrum of activities and concerns. In each case their delineation, in theory at least, is quite separate, non-ambiguous and complete.

Two recent approaches to the relationship between management and leadership depart from the above tradition by posing their difference, not in terms of position, skills or tasks but as mindset, intentionality and context. Heifetz (1994) draws a distinction between technical work (known problems that can be solved through known solutions) and adaptive work (unknown or uncertain problems that require a process to create new solutions). The first lies in the province of management and the second in that of leadership. While to a certain extent the context and nature of the ‘problem’ may determine whether an issue is technical and requires management, or is adaptive and requires leadership, it’s the choices and capacity of organizational actors to hold uncertainty and foster learning that ultimately determine whether a management or leadership response is applied. Grint (2005) is even clearer in arguing that management and leadership are constituted by social actors’ preferences and comfort with regard to power and uncertainty as opposed purely to anything innate in a specific problem. In a number of historical case studies he shows that actors construct both the nature of the situation confronting them and any subsequent leadership or management identification and approach through a combination of social, rhetorical and experiential forces. Both Grint’s and Heifetz’s work suggest that management and leadership need to be considered as distinctive strategies, mindsets and responses that organizational actors need to be prepared to exercise when any moment or interaction presents. While neither Grint’s or Heifetz’s is an explicitly identity orientated approach to the management/leadership question, both move us nearer to seeing the relationship between management and leadership as a complex intersection of self, social and contextual constructions.

Research and theory from an explicit identity perspective is premised on the assumption that leadership and management are fundamentally intangible, are only loosely connected to specific interaction and practice, but are central to identity work or the manufacture of subjectivity (Alvesson and Willmott, 2002; Sveningsson and Alvesson, 2003; Sveningsson and Larsson, 2006). Identity research therefore refocuses attention on the
creating of identity in ‘the forming, repairing, maintaining, strengthening or revising’ (Sveningsson and Alvesson, 2003: 1165) of constructions such as manager and leader. This has the effect of focusing on the meaning, interpretation, and framing of leadership and management as entities that can confer meaning, esteem and significance (Alvesson and Willmott, 2002; Collinson, 2003; du Gay, 1996; Maccoby, 2000). An identity approach to the management/leadership relationship thus shifts attention from the performance of management or leadership to the appropriation of either as a resource in the process of self-actualization and meaning-making. This changes the question from ‘what is it that managers/leaders [really] do?’ to ‘how can the manager/leader identity facilitate self meaning, positioning and value?’

Identity orientated approaches to both management and leadership have shown them to be vastly less robust and coherent concepts than either the scholarly or the popular literatures have been comfortable to admit. Both terms are ‘ideologically loaded labels’ (Alvesson and Sveningsson, 2003a: 985) that represent different kinds of power, discourse, perspectives on organizational realities and identity choices. Most important to this paper is the finding that when organizational actors are allowed to explore their constructions of leadership in depth, it seems to disintegrate or disappear (Alvesson and Sveningsson 2003a, 2003b, 2003c). Not only does leadership prove very difficult to define, but even at its least vague and most agreed senior managers seem unable to evoke these characteristics in their talk using any specifics in the lived ‘realities’ of their work (Alvesson and Sveningsson 2003a, 2003b, 2003c). Overwhelmingly, even those managers who identify as engaged in leadership reveal themselves to be mired in bureaucracy and administration and ‘doing’ their work, as most employees do their work, through conversation and listening. Alvesson and Sveningsson (2003b: 1435) term such leadership ‘the extra-ordinarization of the mundane’.

Furthermore identity research has compellingly drawn attention to the ‘positive cultural valence’ (Alvesson and Willmott, 2002: 620) associated with leadership. A corollary of this is that in acquiring and sustaining a leader identity rather than a manager one, an actor has access to greater self-esteem, well-being, significance and affirmation (Alvesson and Willmott, 2002; Sveningsson and Larsson, 2006). Like any other discourse, the leadership discourse produces ‘truth effects’ (Alvesson and Karreman, 2000) which in management spaces that look increasingly fragile, ambiguous and unstable make leadership both powerful and compelling (Grey, 1999; Jackall, 1998; Thomas and Linstead, 2002). Identity research has consistently been associated with narrative (Brockmeier and Carbaugh, 2001; Dunne, 1996; McAdams, 1993) where identity is connected with the ability to ‘develop a narrative of identity and life-history’ (Sennett, 1998: 26), ‘keep a particular narrative going’ (Giddens, 1991: 54), and that such narratives are subject to constant dynamism and revision of ‘canonical models and archetypes’ (Taylor, 1989: 289). Leadership then is
the contemporary organizational narrative that supports a desirable identity while other ‘canonical models and archetypes’ (such as management) have declined in their ability to do so.

For the leader identity to be termed ‘desirable’, we need some conceptualization of the processes involved in identity work that give meaning to such identity characterizations. Alvesson and Willmott (2002: 627) have provided such a model through the ‘interplay’ (Sveningsson and Larsson, 2006: 206) of self-identity, identity work and identity regulation. Here self-identity, deemed ‘a repertoire of structured narrations’ (Alvesson and Willmott, 2002: 627), is constituted and re-constituted through identity work or ongoing processes of ‘self-doubt and self-openness’ (Sveningsson and Alvesson, 2003: 1165), which then continually demand choice and interpretation. Those are both responsive and resistant to identity regulation and control, which in the contemporary world most commonly occurs through ‘the managing of ‘insides’-the hopes, fears and aspirations of workers- rather than their behaviors directly’ (Deetz, 1995: 87). Critical to identity regulation is the degree of congruence that a self-identity has with dominant identities and discourses. In terms of this discussion, identity regulation raises the question of the ‘fit’ between conceptualizations of leadership and prevailing management discourses.

We propose that this interplay of self-identity, identity work and identity regulation can provide a strong platform for understanding the management/leadership relationship and its implications for the realities of organizational life. One essential component applicable to the management and leadership relationship in this identity work model is the nature of anti-identity in shaping the relationship, energy and congruence of the two.

**Theorizing from the Anti-Identity Construct**

This paper builds on the construct of anti-identity to explain and explore the management/leadership relationship. Notions of ‘what am I not’ certainly are not new to questions of identity. Giddens (1991: 41) talks of ‘the struggle of being against non-being’ as generic to ‘ontological security and existential anxiety’. Certainly one of the ways we narrow down the answer of what it is we are, do and stand for is by being cognisant of what it is we aren’t, don’t do and desire not to be thought of. In this sense identity work can be accepted as encompassing being and not-being equally. For the concept ‘anti-identity’ to have value, it needs to do considerably more, we argue, than merely represent the opposite of the affirmation or actualization of identity choices.

Sveningsson and Alvesson (2003a) trace anti-identity to the literature on organizational dis-identification (Elsbach, 1999; Elsbach and Bhattacharya, 2001). In this work organizational dis-identification occurs where ‘individuals’ social identities and self-concepts are defined by the groups or organizations from which they perceive their identities to be separated’ (Elsbach and Bhattacharya, 2001: 394). Such a difference has its basis in a
distancing of self from organization whereby self identity is at least partly defined by what that self feels threatened by, disconnected or excluded from. While the language and concepts used to discuss dis-identification can appear negative and oppositional, the theory of dis-identification is far less so, with the thinking that where dis-identification has been a strong component in a process ‘positive social identities’ can still result. A number of points stand out as particularly relevant for this inquiry. Firstly, that dis-identification can indicate a transitional or provisional phase of an identity change. Secondly, that dis-identification can be associated with an over-simplified and stereotypical understanding of ‘what I am’ and ‘what I am not’. Lastly, that dis-identification has a complex relationship to identification where an understanding of self in terms of a lack of belonging, congruence or alignment, isn’t necessarily coupled with an opposing positive identification with something else. Indeed Elsbach and Bhattacharya (2001: 399) warn us that identification and dis-identification are not necessarily strict opposites of each other. We find this a warning that is very applicable to the management/leadership relationship.

Dis-identification is given a post-structuralist perspective by Holmer-Nadesan (1996) who sees the rejection of identification in two different ways: through negation (counter-identification) or through replacement by an alternative identification (dis-identification). So anti-identity could be perceived as being driven by either a rejection of an existing identification or a seduction by an alternative identification. What both counter- and dis-identification share however is ‘a sense of deprivation, lack or insufficiency’ (Holmer-Nadesan, 1996: 58). The association of dis-identification and, we would argue, anti-identity, with something that is lacking is a vital one. An illustration of similar thinking comes from Jones and Spicer (2005: 235) when they draw from Lacan and Zizek to understand the entrepreneur as ‘an open space’ or ‘lack’, ‘essentially indefinable, vacuous, empty’, and ‘an absent centre’. Again this draws attention to the genesis of anti-identity in dis-identification and the connotations of ‘insufficiency’ that have accompanied it.

In the identity literature to date, the concept of anti-identity has been most commonly used in identifying what Sveningsson and Alvesson (2003: 1189) coin ‘the ‘not-me’ identity position’. In their study, anti-identity comes into reckoning when the subject of their case study perceives herself as having met the expectations of her global and managerial roles but hasn’t positively claimed such identities as particularly desirable or adopted them as a positive identity. Thus in that particular article, anti-identity is viewed as ‘a necessary evil’ (Sveningsson and Alvesson, 2003: 1184) that is considered more expedient and pragmatic than deeply construing of identity. Sveningsson and Larsson (2006: 217) offer a further elaboration of anti-identity with a different research subject who uses a leadership self-identity to evade a technically orientated identity. Thus it is the technical identity that plays anti-identity to a pro or desired identity of leadership. When it becomes clear that the leadership identity is more a fantasy or
romance form of subjectivity whilst, providing the subject with enhanced self esteem and awareness, doesn’t translate into practice, this is deemed problematic. Both studies suggest that there are dynamics additional to absence or non-being in the anti-identity construct that need to be further explored.

In order to build a more robust and sustained theorization of anti-identity we begin with a more comprehensive explanation of ‘anti’. The dictionary gives a range of meanings of anti including the more commonly understood negative connotations of the prefix in ‘against’, ‘opposite’, ‘opposed’ or ‘contrary’ alongside the more neutral meaning of ‘in place of’. While the more oppositional meanings of anti have informed the construction of anti-identity to date, we would like to bring the notion of ‘in place of’ more to the foreground. For both Sveningsson and Alvesson (2003) and Sveningsson and Larsson (2006) the anti-identity is explicitly negative in that it is used to describe an identity that their research participants are quite pejorative about and seek to avoid or escape from. However, while in our research, management clearly had some anti-identity connotations, as will be illustrated in the data of the following section, this was not solely due to the oppositional discourse it was usually embedded in. More so, management had connotations of a default, baseline or pre-requisite identity that has become so ingrained and indeed comfortable that it could be reverted to automatically. For this reason we would like to move away from the term anti-identity to that of default identity, or an identity that is both prior and well established to the more emergent identity of leadership.

Consequently we propose a set of three criteria that can help delineate a default identity beyond the initial and too readily oppositional statement of ‘what I am not’. While these criteria are embedded in the management/leadership relationship, we don’t wish to presume that management represents the only default organizational identity possible (professional or technical identities clearly could be considered as other possible default identity prospects), thus we offer these criteria somewhat more generically.

(1) Firstly, a default identity, while still dynamic, fluid and mutable, may well be less ambiguous, precarious and contradictory than more emergent identities. Indeed one would imagine that many ‘not-me’ positions in general have an impact and power precisely because at least initially they are more readily recognizable and understood than their more desirable, emergent identity alternative (Sveningsson and Alvesson, 2003: 1189). It follows that our first criterion is that a default identity is both previous and prior to an emergent identity.

(2) Secondly, a default identity has a different emotional valency than an alternative emergent identity. In the case of management we would argue that it certainly has enough of the negative or oppositional power of an anti-identity to mean that, while it is held strongly and reverted to automatically, it is taken for granted, held more cynically or ambiguously, and articulated less favourably. On the other hand, a professional identity,
if considered as a default identity, could well have a more positive valence than other identities (management or leadership) that might be acquired or developed and thus a different relationship trajectory is formed.

(3) Lastly we argue that a default identity and a more emergent identity have a relationship of complicity whereby the latter needs to be understood in relation to the former (not necessarily the reverse). In other words the emerging and desirable identity is embedded and intertwined with a default identity.

The presence of a default identity alongside an emergent identity then, requires that focus and attention must be paid to the relationship and interaction between the two rather than to the exclusive regrouping around one pole or the other. This is the contribution we want to make in terms of both the management/leadership literature and beyond that to the field of identity research.

**Method of Inquiry**

The theorizing of management as an anti-identity was an unexpected finding from a series of pre-programme interviews with 53 senior and upper middle managers from predominantly corporate organizations, who had been selected for intensive 18-month leadership development programmes in Australasia. Participants were drawn from two mixed industry cohorts and two cohorts drawn from a large corporate. The interviews took place prior to the programmes when prospective participants had had minimal exposure to programme materials.

In these semi-structured pre-programme interviews the participants were encouraged to discuss their perceptions of leadership and leadership development. Interviewers were directed to ask interviewees to define/characterize leadership and leadership development and to seek clarification of any other terms evoked in the discussion of leadership. Virtually all interviewees initiated conversation about management, and our data are primarily drawn from those discussions. All constructs were consciously treated as problematic, and interviewees were encouraged to explore the meanings they gave to them. This was achieved through an interview format involving just two core questions: ‘What is leadership?’ and ‘What is leadership development?’ and a series of exploratory options following each of those two questions. Instructions were given that any other core concepts introduced by participants (such as management, strategy, expertise) were to be subject to the same open inquiry as leadership and leadership development. Interviews were thus conducted with critical curiosity and a conscious attention to how participants constructed the terms that they brought into an interview that was overtly focused on leadership. To this end the interviews involved convergence (on the two core themes of leadership and leadership development) and divergence (into participant introduced constructs). That particular combination of convergence and divergence produced data that positioned leadership amidst other constructs.
We understand identity work as being intimately connected with discourse and view the latter quite broadly as ‘a connected set of statements, concepts, terms and expressions’ (Watson, 1994: 113) that both represent and structure reality (Alvesson and Karreman, 2000). Hence we understand the talk of our participants about leadership and management as ‘truth effects in the world’ (Alvesson and Karreman, 2000) that create their very existence. The major implication of this was that we read the interview data in an explicitly rhetorical, syntactical and discursive fashion. Of most note in this approach was the explicit attention we paid to qualifiers (‘more’, ‘better’); adverbs (‘forward’, ‘back’); adjectives (‘mundane’ ‘unknown’); and clauses (‘in fact’, ‘there’s more’). The use of the above provided a series of clues into the actors’ positioning, associations and relating of management and leadership. The data tables were assembled to convey both differences in the different use of rhetorical and syntactical devices, and similarities in the repetition of distinctly related patterns of constructions. Two sustained excerpts in the data section of this paper offer the opportunity to explore the interplay of self-identity, identity work and self-regulation in a more sustained fashion than the tables of shorter quotations. In discursively influenced research, choices of width versus depth are problematic (Alvesson and Karreman, 2000), and this inquiry attempts to use both to inform and extend the other. The bolding in the data is ours and functions as an indicator of those patterns to any reader of this material.

The integration of interpretive and discursive perspectives seems inherent in much, although not all, explicitly orientated identity research. Interpretive research tends to focus on how identities are talked into existence, while more post-structuralist research, through the device of subject position, traces how identity is constituted through the acquisition of types of talk (discourses) already in existence (Thomas and Linstead, 2002). While both perspectives are committed to exploring subjectivity, questions of agency dominate their respective approaches. Interpretive identity work would tend to be more wary of focusing on discourse at the expense of the agent or actor. Thus Alvesson and Willmott (2002: 622) are explicit about avoiding ‘the seduction’ of approaches that emphasize the constitutive power of discourse or what Sveningsson and Alvesson (2003: 1178) term as ‘muscular’ versions of it which can characterize the subject as both fragile and passive (Newton, 1998). This inquiry follows their lead in focusing on how actors actively constitute their identities through discourse rather than the reverse.

The Relationship of Anti-Identity to Identity

Vagueness and Un-knowing

Most immediately evident in the interview data was the vagueness and unknowing in interviewees’ definitions and characterization of leadership. Table 1 indicates the kind of statements that either directly referenced an
inability to articulate what leadership was, or that strongly implied a belief that this was a largely impossible task. While any abstract, idealized or decontextualized construction is complex and difficult for scholars and practitioners alike to grapple with and make any definitive statements on, it must be remembered that these were already senior and ‘successful’ managers who were both paying a lot of money for these programmes and committing considerable time to them. It seems important to ask why individuals who are senior in their organizations commit time and money to something they don’t understand, can’t pin down and show some doubt about ever knowing in concrete terms.

The quotes which make up this table highlight what is considered as unknowable, confusing and intangible about leadership. It is striking that none of these things are embedded in discernible anxiety, frustration or concern, with most seeming to fully accept the ‘mystery’ which is leadership. We contend that this high degree of comfort with vagueness and intangibility on the part of the great majority of prospective participants invites scholarly curiosity.

Leadership development proved to be characterized by the same vagueness and intangibility. Not knowing much about a programme before one starts is not surprising, but what does stand out is the participants’ embracing of the unpredictability and mystery of what they have signed up for. More than one participant talks about ‘leaps’ of faith and courage and ‘jumps’ into what is unknown. Nor is it just the detail of the ‘curriculum’ that is vague, but also its goals, objectives and outcomes. Some of those quotations in Table 2 go further by equating this uncertainty and intangibility with leadership itself. In other words, for many, the unknown is presented as intrinsic to leadership and its development. Again we must ask why a group of senior managers would appear so comfortable with programmes where

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### Table 1. The vagueness/intangibility of leadership

- ‘I think leadership is one of those sciences where we’re understanding more, but there’s more that we don’t understand, than what we do understand’
- ‘I’m sitting here from a position of not really understanding leadership as my understanding of leadership is nothing other than I’ve created a good business’
- ‘It’s all a big unknown to me, to be honest. I guess I really don’t know what makes a good leader or how they get to that’
- ‘And the more people try to define it, the less value it seems to add to me’
- ‘What is the key to leadership? I don’t think there is one. In fact I’m positive there’s not’
- ‘Leadership is right out of my natural comfort zone, because it’s intangible’
- ‘So I quite like the intangibility that comes with leadership’
- ‘Leadership for me is a confusing array of heaps of things’
- ‘I heard some of the lecturers talk about outstanding leadership. I remember thinking I wonder what that means’
- ‘It sounds like I’m waffling. I think leadership is a hard thing for me to describe’

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The metaphor of being blindfolded seems to be central to both understanding leadership and taking part in leadership development. The statements in both these tables contrast with the specificity and tangibility associated with management. In our 53 interviews we could not find one equivalent statement or even single qualifier connoting vagueness about management or managing. Indeed when asked to define or characterize management, participants reeled off checklists of activities with seeming certainty and confidence. For example:

I think management is the day to day running of the team, making sure that individuals are abiding by the rules and are taking the right tea breaks and following the right processes and procedures. To me that’s just managing on a day-to-day basis. Operational. And more making sure that the operations and the processes are running properly.

It is also important to note that most interviewees did stay with the request to define or characterize leadership until they arrived at an ‘answer’. Hence the vagueness and intangibility represented in the above quotations, either preceded further attempts at arriving at such an answer, or were subsequent to it as they deemed their efforts to be unsatisfactory or incomplete.

**Separation and Entanglement**

While participants attempted to define management and leadership separately, they also attempted to understand them together and in relationship. It was immediately evident that management came tagged with many qualifiers and adjectives. Table 3 shows a sample of these. Management is
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Table 3. Leadership and management comparatively speaking

- ‘To me management is a little bit more boring. It’s mundane and it’s not really as challenging’
- ‘It’s more than managing, okay?’
- ‘I need to understand where I am now in my management technique and what do I need to change, if anything, to be the leader’
- ‘It’s more than that, I don’t know what words to use to describe it, but it’s more than that’
- ‘At that point, believe me, it was management, not leadership, okay? It was definitely just management. And it wasn’t until I’d actually started to spend that time that I started to think more about not just management, but about hey, you know, you step up again’
- ‘The days of being a manager are long gone’
- ‘If I’m heading in the wrong direction and need to go back to being a manager or a team leader, it’s something I’d certainly like clarified’
- ‘So over the years my interpretation of what leadership is has just developed alongside that. Trying in my own mind to differentiate the two, so that if I am asked what is the difference, then I can give somebody an answer. And we can think, well yes that is what I need to display if I want to be classed as a good leader rather than just a good manager’

Presented as ‘boring’, ‘mundane’, ‘not challenging’ and as something that leadership is ‘more than’. Management is ‘just’ management for the bulk of participants, with the implication and often the stated proposition that leadership is the next step and the next challenge. Interview transcripts are full of qualifiers like ‘more’, ‘just’, ‘less’ and ‘next’. Often, leadership was described purely by these comparative connotations, meaning that leadership only made sense as ‘more’ than management, which would surely make its separation from management meaningless. While the pejorative tone of many of these statements is unmistakable, the tone of resignation is equally important to note.

While the data in the previous three tables are ways of representing strong patterns in the way that management and leadership are talked about across a group of research subjects, identity research work more often works with a smaller amount of rich or ‘thick’ data to achieve conceptual and empirical depth. Consequently the following table (Table 4) has two more extended narratives (to be read separately) of managing and leading. Both excerpts come from responses to questioning around the management/leadership difference. We have termed the first Bill’s narrative (we have not used real names). Bill is an owner-operator Chief Executive in the consumer goods sector with a large staff and a matching budget. The second, we’ve termed Roy’s narrative. Roy has had an exceptionally successful career, and is Chief Executive of a complex professional/knowledge organization, with responsibility for several hundred staff, a budget of hundreds of millions.

What is different between the two narratives is in Bill’s identification of leadership as something his employees could do, while Roy is thinking
Table 4. Narratives of managing and leading

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Bill's narrative</th>
<th>Roy's narrative</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>‘You know budgeting, planning, those fairly unemotive tasks, leadership is the inspiration, the vision, strategy and so on. Passion’s a pet word of mine I suppose. Management isn’t passionate, leadership is.</td>
<td>‘As with everything you’re involved with you start off and there’s bends and swerves. The other thing that you’ve got to do is have enough trust in other people that you actually don’t micro-manage. That you step away from things enough to say, no I actually don’t have to worry about that. That bit of the puzzle is taken care of.</td>
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<td>We’re a work in progress, I, like everything else. It doesn’t necessarily mean that individually people can’t have a leadership role.</td>
<td>I think there is always a danger, and I’m just as prone to that as anybody, to get sucked into the detail. It’s got lots of tentacles and lots and lots of partners. So you do need to get an understanding of how it ticks, and then you can step away from it.</td>
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<td>Right down to a very junior level, someone who is filling shelves, if we can inspire someone to have passion about how they are, we call it facing up, which is just finishing off the filling of a bay of shelving. Then we make sure that all the labels are lined up in the right way that all the colours are together. Everything is neatly lined up right to the front of the shelf.</td>
<td>I don’t know about daily, but a regular oscillation. At times you want to actually drill down and say, right why is this happening why it is.</td>
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<td>You know it’s quite a detailed role and in many respects quite hard to understand how anyone might want to feel passionate about that, because it’s shelf filling. And we’re taught earlier on in school that if we don’t pass our exams we need to be very careful because we might end up filling shelves. So there’s quite a lot to overcome.</td>
<td>I’ve found myself more and more getting involved in the nitty gritty. Down to actually analysing and producing spreadsheets. Which is actually when you say, this isn’t the best use of my time. I’m actually going above and beyond this and actually getting back to where I was.</td>
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<td>So the difference it makes to the business is that those people don’t need the same level of supervision. We decrease staff turnover. We have an increased work rate, all the key performance indicators that exist for someone in that role, just improved by virtue of the fact that they’re self-motivated.</td>
<td>It wasn’t very comfortable, because you actually quite enjoy it. And because you can do it, and do it reasonably well, in some ways it’s almost comfort food. Because you can do it. It’s a clearly identified task that you can say; well I’ve actually achieved something concrete today. Whereas a lot of the other stuff that you do, particularly in this office, you actually come home sometimes and you’ve actually worked hard all day and there’s very little concrete to show for it.</td>
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<td>They’ve a good level of self-leadership, because they’re passionate about what they’re doing. They want to do it to a high standard no matter what it is. They can understand the value and the worth; they see their place in the world by the fact, even though they’re just filling a shelf. They can understand how that fits into contributing’.</td>
<td>Whereas I think sometimes those very discreet management-type tasks are actually concrete, you’ve actually done something. As opposed to talking to people, building bridges, communicating, which is all important but rather nebulous’.</td>
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solely in terms of himself. Yet given these differences, both narratives focus on the interaction between managing and leading, and the role and organizational contribution that both Bill and Roy want to make. We are going to use these two narratives to illustrate how managing and leading are brought into relationship by senior managers.

Management and leadership are both differentiated by Bill and Roy. So in Bill’s narrative, management is ‘unemotive’, ‘isn’t passionate’ and is aligned with ‘shelf filling’, which while meant literally in his account, is a very insightful metaphor into the control, predictability, regularity and order that constitutes the rationality of management, whereby ‘all the labels are lined up in the right way, that all the colours are together. That everything is the same and neatly lined up right to the front of the shelf…’. In Roy’s narrative, management is ‘almost comfort food’, ‘concrete’ and ‘nitty gritty’ and constantly threatens to impose if Roy doesn’t fight its invasion. Leadership in contrast is ‘the whole great big thing’, ‘a bigger view’, ‘rather nebulous’ and appears to provide an escape route out of ‘micro-management’.

It is also evident that the negotiation of managing and leading involves identity issues, aimed at employees in Bill’s case and self in Roy’s. This is both explicit when Bill claims ‘we’re a work in progress’ and links leadership to ‘how they are’, ‘what they’re doing’ and ‘their place in the world’, while Roy declares ‘there’s bends and swerves’ in the trajectory and crafting of the two. For Bill, leadership doesn’t in the least change what his employees are required to do, but it would change their sense of ‘value and worth’. Roy depicts his movement between managing and leading as ‘regular oscillation’ and ‘vacillation’ in an effort not ‘to be sucked in’ to the ‘lots of tentacles’ that is management. Leadership provides an impetus and reminder to take himself away from what is comfortable and tangible and ‘discreet management-type tasks’ to tackle what is ‘very complicated’ in terms of ‘talking to people, building bridges, communicating’. For Roy leadership represents doing different kinds of things that might be ‘all important’ but are removed, distant and shadowy compared to the more immediate demands on his time.

Both men openly view leadership in self-regulation terms. For Bill leadership is a potential disciplinary device that his shelf fillers could internalize, thereby reducing the management required of him, as they wouldn’t require ‘the same level of supervision’, but would ‘do it to a high standard no matter what it is’, ‘have an increased work rate’ and understand ‘contributing’. Leadership then would have the potential to lower management costs and increase productivity, and would presumably be a source of competitive advantage. Thus Bill wants to see leadership internalized in his employees. In contrast, Roy’s leadership is orientated at regulating his own time, focus and self. At various times throughout his narrative it is associated with the ability to ‘step away from things’, ‘step away from it’ and ‘give yourself time’. For him, leadership literally counters the pull and power of management demands which can be both easy and...
satisfying to give in to. Both management and leadership thus appear locked in an ongoing battle for Roy’s identification.

Both narratives satisfy the three criteria established earlier in the theorization of the default identity. For both Bill and Roy management activity is what dominates and anchors their current experience, while a stronger leadership focus promises a reorientation in how they and their employees would accomplish their work. Certainly a mixed energy characterizes the management identity with Bill typifying management as passionless and Roy aware of its dangerously comfortable associations. Contrast this with the esteem, focus, scope, value and significance associated with leadership by both subjects. Finally the managing and leading in these narratives are complicit with each other.

Discussion

Our intent in this paper has been to construe the manager identity, not as predominantly oppositional or negative as in the anti-identity depiction, but more as a default identity that, as organizational demands, challenges and expectations are encountered, is reverted to readily, easily and frequently. This defaulting back to managing, we argue, has implications for the increasingly widespread development of leadership thinking, practice and identification. As discussed earlier in this paper, recent identity research on leadership has proposed that managers very readily claim the leadership mantle, engage in leadership talk, and frame their position, role and identity in explicitly leadership terms (Alvesson and Willmott, 2002). Since a leadership identity currently confers more esteem, status and significance than a management one, then it is scarcely surprising that organizational actors are quick to identify with the former. However, when managers are asked to give a rationale for such leadership, the tendency is for much of it to ‘disappear’ (Alvesson and Sveningsson, 2003c) and prove to be indistinguishable from management (Alvesson and Sveningsson, 2003a), mundane (Alvesson and Sveningsson, 2003b), or rhetorical and romanticized (Sveningsson and Larsson, 2006). This paper, in drawing attention to the role the manager identity plays in leadership’s ‘disappearance’, has the potential to offer some new insight and energy to the leadership concept, to the leadership development sector and to managers committed to growing their leadership capability and impact.

We would argue first of all that it is important not to see the concept of default in necessarily negative, pejorative terms. A default position after all offers a fall back position, a habitual and well known repertoire of assumptions, activities and processes, and automatic ‘cover’ that could be considered vital as one experiments and practises with more emergent approaches. Roy’s metaphor of management as ‘comfort food’ is indicative of the warmth, relief and security that a default identity can bestow. It then becomes possible to understand Roy’s excursions into the ‘nebulous’ and ‘intangible’ terrain that demarcates leadership as not just constrained by,
but also to an extent made possible by, his (comparatively) known facility and confidence with management.

Similarly then to Heifetz (1994) and Grint (2005), we propose that defaulting to a comparatively well known and held identity and set of practices like those pertaining to management, is not problematic if it is done with intentionality and consciousness. On the other hand, a default position can be a problem if one gravitates there too readily, automatically and unconsciously. It would appear that many managers are caught in exactly this predicament where they espouse a leadership discourse without moving away from a management point of reference. The technical expert-cum-leader in Sveningsson and Larsson’s inquiry (2006) would be exactly this kind of exemplar. It is no wonder then that leadership in much of the critical literature is cumulatively presented as insubstantial, fictitious, illegitimate, ineffectual, and ultimately more about ‘preventing change … than accomplishing change’ (Sveningsson and Larsson, 2006: 224).

However, such an assessment ignores the relative failure of leadership research, literature and development to provide adequate assistance in framing and interpreting the relationship between management and leadership in ways that are both nuanced and practical for those required to practise both (Sinclair, 2007). Given, as we propose, that management is the default or automatic option, then it follows that any leadership orientation, action or response is one that has to be chosen repeatedly. Both Heifetz (1994) and Grint (2005) remind us that the leadership approach is the most countercultural, counterintuitive and potentially fraught of the models to choose because of its complexity, uncertainty, long time span and demands on others. While the leadership identity and rhetoric are attractive and desirable, the reality of being a leader or being engaged in leadership, looks to be difficult and precarious to sustain. If indeed we do want more leadership from those in organizations (as Bill does in his narrative) then leadership development participants like those in this study need more help in conceptualizing, assessing and crafting a range of management and leadership responses and practices.

The practice that has the capacity to replace an unwanted defaulting mechanism with a more intentional and conscious choice in the development of both leadership identification and application then would be what Grint (2007: 242) calls apperception. Apperception is ‘the ability to frame and reframe situations’ (Fairhurst, quoted in Grint, 2007: 242) or alternatively ‘relate new experiences to previous experiences’ (Grint, 2007: 242). While Grint proposes apperception in the context of distinguishing knowledge, skills and wisdom, we would see it as the pivotal learning in the movement from managing to leading (and back again) that should facilitate identification, competency and fluidity with both modes. Apperception relies on a learning or development model built on reflection and experience. If reflection and experience can be harnessed together, then the ability to recognize and break patterns of being, doing and behaving becomes possible. If we accept that management is often a likely and
automatic default option, then it follows that ‘more’ leadership only becomes possible with the acquisition of practices and processes that disrupt and re-route such a tendency.

Thus an identity approach to the management/leadership question has considerable implications for leadership development. Any positioning of leadership and its development as elevated, grandiose, and extraordinary relative to management, runs the risk of fostering unnecessary negativity about management and insubstantiality of leadership. Researchers have alerted us to the difference between management development and leadership development (Day, 2001; Iles and Preece, 2006) and imply that such a differentiation is critical if leadership isn’t to be diluted or tainted by the former. An identity approach may well imply that attention paid to the relationship of management and leadership, rather than isolated skill or knowledge building in one (currently likely to be leadership development) should result in a stronger embedding of leadership. Thus somewhat ironically the pathway to more effective leadership development may be best developed alongside, and linked to, better management training. Such interdependence would certainly challenge many of the leadership development packages that currently exist.

More widely, understanding the interdependence of management and leadership can help us assess the place and power of leadership in organizational life. It is possible, although speculative, to view leadership as a challenge to organizational rationality. One could argue that Heifetz (1994) holds such a view. It is equally possible to view leadership as a new frontier of competitive advantage in the ‘tendency for ‘leadership’ to colonize a wider spectrum of social and personal life’ (Sveningsson and Alvesson, 2003: 1188) primarily ‘from the inside’ (Kornberger and Brown, 2007). In such a case leadership merely extends the corporate reach. We would argue that, unless attention is paid to management’s default properties, then the latter is all too likely. Consequently defaulting unconsciously to a management orientation has the capacity to ultimately neuter what is introduced under a leadership guise. On the other hand it could be argued that embedded and established organizational realities are most likely to be stretched, altered and reshaped by emergent identities that are legitimized by those that already exist. In this way a default identity can foster new identity possibilities that may partially take the place of what has been there to date. In the final analysis, the prospect of managers who are adept, agile and reflexive in their capacity to move between management and leadership modes must surely give hope for some organizational change.

This construction and analysis of managing as being in a default relationship with leading, we hope, tempers the opposition and negativity of the two in identity work research. Such research has been consistently pessimistic about leadership and its potential to effect change and even difference in organizations. When management and leadership are viewed as connected and complicit identities, this pessimism seems less warranted. After all both Bill’s and Roy’s narratives offer the potential to
be read not just as narratives of identity regulation but as ones of micro-emancipation whereby ‘employees have greater scope for arranging their own schedules and working practices, albeit with parameters’ (Alvesson and Willmott, 1996: 624). Their narratives remind us, even if only a little, that ‘people exploit the epistemological spaces made available to them’ and that any form of domination and control ‘are generally only partially successful’ (Kornberger and Brown, 2007: 500). We have found the leadership/management identity discourse of our participants is thus more ambiguous with respect to issues of control and emancipation than the identity literature has allowed to date.

Ambiguity is no stranger to organizations, nor necessarily a disadvantage to them (Pondy et al., 1988). Martin and Meyerson (1988: 113), while acknowledging that ambiguity tends to be accepted ‘with some reluctance and dismay’ suggest we ‘revel’ in it as ‘a source of innovation, creativity or productive change’. For Kodish (2006: 464), the presence of states like ambiguity and paradox increasingly found in our leadership data and research is indicative of at last beginning to understand leadership ‘in a richer and broader sense’ and moving away from the oversimplification and decontextualization that has been seen to typify much of the research traditionally. If the effect of this inquiry has been to bring more ambiguity to the management/leadership relationship, then for the reasons above, that would be both a constructive and dynamic contribution.

**Conclusion**

In conclusion, we represent the research participants in this inquiry as eager to acquire the leadership mantle but unable to make sense of it in isolation from their partially unwanted but comfortable management one. Their identification of leadership as intangible, unknowable and nebulous as compared to the specificity, clarity and pragmatism with which they depicted management, suggests a relationship between the two that is more complex and nuanced than straightforward negativity or opposition. We would argue that the insertion and legitimation of any kind of space, big or small, that sits outside the rationality of managing, surely has the potential to be at least niggling and irritating of the way things are done in organizations and thus deserves some scholarly attention and energy. The inability of participants to define and delineate leadership and their equanimity about not doing so, suggest their complicity in protecting and safeguarding such a space, even though they may not (yet) be able to translate it into practice. Both interpretative and critical research would be well equipped to at least assess and even participate in such a translation process.

Additionally we hope that we have managed to both illustrate and develop the theorizing and applicability of the default identity construct. Its existence would seem to provide yet a different kind of entry into the identity construction conversation. Relationships between selves and identities or
organizations and identities have tended to dominate identity research to date, while the dynamics between identities are acknowledged but still under-theorized and -researched. Clearly there are other identities—such as professional and entrepreneurial identities—that sit in relation to either managing or leading identities and could be useful in explicating the complex relationships that are increasingly seen to characterize contemporary organizational dynamics (du Gay, 1996; Jones and Spicer, 2005; Kosmala and Herrbach, 2006). The refining of a default identity from the dis-identification and anti-identity literature can help us further assess the potential for interdependence and entanglement amongst these.

We began this paper with a story about a four quadrant leadership table that got lost as its owner moved across different positions in her organization. From the perspective of the end of such an inquiry, the important difference between four quadrant charts and organizational identities are that the latter don’t get lost so easily or at all and indeed they can closely accompany their subject even as other identities are sought, desired and acquired. This inquiry asserts that we pay attention to those previous, prior, existing and even devalued identities as potentially powerfully linked to new identity possibilities that emerge.

References


Articles


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