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What is This?
Fantasies of Leadership: Identity Work
Stefan Sveningsson and Magnus Larsson, Lund University, Sweden

Abstract This article explores middle managerial talk and practice connected to expectations of leadership in a planned corporate cultural change programme. Here we explore how a middle manager positions him or herself in relation to contemporary discourse on leadership. We discuss how managerial claims of leadership in practice seem inconsistent with the actual practice. Based on these findings we suggest that leadership ideas could be seen as a kind of fantasy related to identity work, rather than actual practice. We investigate this fantasy in terms of its various sources and relate the fantasy construction to management education and to the planned cultural change in particular.

Keywords fantasy; identity control; identity work; leadership; managerial work

Introduction

Much writing on contemporary leadership depicts managerial leadership in terms of leaders creating visionary directions for subordinates to voluntarily follow (Bryman, 1996; Wright & Taylor, 1994; Yukl, 2002). The leader is often portrayed as being strong, directive and persuasive, with abilities to engage and commit others to follow his (sic) vision and mission in a voluntary and non-coercive manner (Barker, 1997, 2001; Conger & Kanungo, 1998). Furthermore, Rost (1992) emphasizes leadership as primarily accomplishing change and Conger (1999: 147) characterizes both transformational and charismatic leadership as about ‘leaders in change agent roles’. Kotter (1990) talks about how leadership concerns developing and communicating meaningful visions and inspiring others to attain the vision.

Judging by these common images of leadership frequently advanced by the media, businesses, leadership consultants and executive education programmes at business schools, it is increasingly recommended that most managers – regardless of organization and industry – receive a healthy dose of leadership education in order to be effective in the 21st century. Present-day talk of leadership development is thus targeting and embracing a widening range of managers, including middle and junior managers.

Despite a few sceptics who suggest that research on charismatic leadership promotes an overly romantic and heroic view of leaders (Beyer, 1999), the popular notion within contemporary leadership is creating both new and altered leadership expectations and demands in the workplace, affecting the work lives of many
managers. Given this popularity, it is timely to investigate in depth what processes are set in motion when the talk of leadership is supposedly put into practice in organizations. In particular it is important to appreciate how managers – to whom this talk is primarily directed – relate to change-oriented, transformational and visionary leadership, the latter being a distinctive part of contemporary leadership. This article therefore focuses on the subjectivities of managers, and in particular on how they talk about, possibly practice and try to create meaning in their work lives in situations when there are clear expectations of leadership.

In order to accomplish this, we explore how a particular manager talks about and positions himself relative to leadership in general and in relation to topics that are usually characterized as aspects of the contemporary discourse of leadership. The article focuses on an in-depth study of how a middle manager and his group of subordinates worked with a comprehensive cultural change programme that included expectations on leadership as a key aspect. There are relatively few studies that have addressed leadership by observing interaction processes of ‘transformative change’ (Barker, 2001: 491) and interpersonal influence and communication processes of leadership in ‘real-life’ local organizational situations (Andersen, 2000). The study goes some way to addressing this shortcoming by observing leadership in practice in a specific empirical setting.

Drawing on material from this study, we discuss some intriguing aspects of managerial talk and action, mainly focusing on an apparent contradiction between managerial claims regarding leadership and actual leadership practice. A key aspect of this discussion concerns how parts of the contemporary leadership discourse could be seen as regulating identity work (Alvesson & Willmott, 2002) in terms of promoting self-esteem and securing a sense of well-being. In this article we thus seek to draw attention to identity in general and identity work in particular as important, but still insufficiently explored, aspects of subjectivity and meaning in writings on leadership. As indicated, the topics have been raised conceptually (Alvesson & Willmott, 2002; Brown, 1997; Collinson, 2003; Knights & Willmott, 1989) but apart from some exceptions (Alvesson & Sveningsson, 2003; Knights & Willmott, 1992) there are relatively few empirical studies addressing in depth the significance of specific subjective processes of identity constructions in relation to leadership. In sum, then, we aim to (a) explore the significance and meaning of the contemporary leadership discourse from a middle manager’s perspective; (b) investigate how claims of leadership stand in relation to its presumed practice, the aim here being to show that the significance of leadership could be related to identity rather than to leadership practice.

The article is organized as follows. First we explore theories around leadership and identity. After a brief discussion of method and a short description of the background of the company setting where our study took place, we then elaborate on the workshop that constitutes the major empirical input for discussion and analysis. We then proceed with an analysis of leadership as identity work and fantasy formation. We then return to the cultural change as a significant regulative context for identity work. There we discuss the meaning of the leadership discourse in relation to the challenges of the workshop, after which we summarize and draw some conclusions.
Theoretical background

Leadership

Research on leadership is vast and we will concentrate our discussion in this section on the parts of the contemporary literature that relate to our research question and help us to explore the empirical material (for reviews see Bryman, 1996; Dubrin, 2001; House & Aditay, 1997; Yukl, 2002).

Like much of the contemporary literature on leadership, a central theme in our empirical material and subsequent analysis is the recurrent refrain (see Wood & Case, this volume) of leadership as something distinct from management (Barker, 1997; Fagiano 1997; Kotter, 1990; Mintzberg, 1998; Steyrer, 1998; Zaleznik, 1977). Management is characterized as being about controlling, coordinating, and directing (Mintzberg, 1998), and according to Kotter (1990) more formal and scientific than leadership. Leadership is commonly said to be about inspiring people and push transformation (Kotter, 1990; Zaleznik, 1977). Wood and Case (this volume) frame these qualities of the refrain of leadership as its regulative rhythm, the idea that leaders accomplish and make things happen.

Leadership in our empirical material is described as inspiration and visionary change. Indeed, one reason for the attempted cultural change in the studied organization was a perceived need to establish a clear and visionary leadership. This view of leadership has a strong overlap with what is referred to as the ‘New Leadership Approach’ (Bryman, 1992, 1996) and the following discussion relates primarily to ideas associated with that approach. This perspective is, we suggest, central to what we conceptualize as the contemporary leadership discourse. ‘Discourse’ in this context refers to a way of reasoning (both verbal and textual), that produces certain truth effects in the world; indeed, discourse is anchored in a particular vocabulary that can be said to constitute a particular version of the social world (Alvesson & Kärreman, 2000).

Steyrer (1998) suggests that the New Leadership Approach to leadership includes distinctions between management and leadership, between transactional and transformational leadership and a focus on charismatic leadership. As noted earlier, many authors contrast management to leadership, the former described as planning, staffing, controlling and producing predictability and order, while the latter is commonly related to establishing direction through communication, inspiration. This is related to the transactional and transformational approach to leadership, the former usually understood as a leader that exchanges money and security for compliance and performance of routine tasks while the latter is commonly seen as empowering, inspirational and visionary, usually in situations demanding radical change (Burns, 1978). Steyrer (1998) also argues that formulation and communication of vision are the most emphasized aspects of how charismatic leadership is described in the New Leadership Approach. Hence, a common denominator in these writings is the attention to vision, but there is also talk of cooperation, networking, teamwork, creativity, and inspiration. Mintzberg (1998) characterizes how leadership of knowledge workers should be ‘inspirational’ and ‘supportive’ while Kotter (1990) emphasizes the formulation of ‘vision’ as central. Similarly Fagiano (1997) suggests that leadership is to ‘help others do the things they know need to be done in order to achieve the common vision’. Leadership is also often understood as producing change and
releasing creative development (Barker, 1997; Yukl, 2002). Yukl (2002) characterizes leaders as being visionary, passionate, inspiring, innovative and courageous as opposed to consultative, tough-minded, analytical, and structured.

Communication is seen as central but in terms of managers doing the talking, preferably by advancing an engaging and inspiring vision for subordinates to voluntarily follow (Conger & Kanungo, 1998; Maccoby, 2000) in order to accomplish change (Yukl, 2002). According to Bennis and Nanus (1985, cited in Conger, 1999) the end result of leadership should be empowerment. They describe leadership as engendering ‘an organizational culture that helps employees generate a sense of meaning in their work’ (p. 149).

Hence, there is a strong tendency in the contemporary discourse on leadership to transform managers from ‘apparatchiks of various forms of bureaucracy’ (Scarborough & Burrell, 1996), to ‘leaders’ and ‘visionaries’ (du Gay, 1996; Senge, 1996). Arguably, the latter terms are laden with positive values that offer a more appealing managerial identity (Knights & Willmott, 1989, 1992; Sveningsson & Alvesson, 2003). Based on the discrepancy between how managers talk about themselves and the actual practices they exhibit towards subordinates in our case, we suggest that the notion of identity is relevant and needs to be considered in some depth.

**Identity work and fantasies**

In dynamic contexts, such as many parts of present-day working life, it is common to talk about identity as temporary and processual constructions rather than something fixed and stable, that is, essential (Albert & Whetten, 1985; Alvesson & Willmott, 2002; Ashforth, 1998; Gioia et al., 2000; Sveningsson & Alvesson, 2003; Thomas & Linstead, 2002).

Based primarily on Alvesson and Willmott (2002), we suggest that identities are temporary and processual constructions that are regularly constituted, negotiated and reproduced in various social interactions. This could be particularly significant for managers in general when facing subordinates in situations of social interaction where they are expected to perform managerial leadership such as implementing a corporate cultural change (Barker, 1997; Kotter, 1990; Mintzberg, 1998; Yukl, 2002). However, the relationship-dependent and fragile character of managerial work can make it difficult to accomplish and sustain a stable, coherent and steadily growing feeling of competence, respect and self-esteem. The idea of identity construction as a process might here be used to conceptualize efforts whereby managers in general try to secure a sense of self and thus a certain ontological security in a destabilized working world (Knights & Willmott, 1989).

Alvesson and Willmott (2002) conceptualize identity processes as an interplay between: (a) self-identity, the individual’s image of him or herself (Giddens, 1991); (b) identity work, the active construction of a self-identity; and (c) identity regulation, which refers to the regulative effects of organizational and social processes. Self-identity here refers to subjective meaning and experience, and provides temporary answers to the question ‘who am I, what do I stand for and how should I act?’.

A particular self-identity implies a certain form of subjectivity, often positively associated with certain values and labels such as leader and leadership (Knights &
Willmott, 1992). Such values and labels potentially ‘tie’ a person’s feelings, thinking and acting in particular directions and can function both as forms of anxiety reduction (Brown, 1997; Collinson, 2003) and organizational control (Alvesson & Willmott, 2002). Identity work is here seen as aimed at achieving an affirmative well-being and securing a reasonably strong self as a basis for social relations (Alvesson, 1994; Collinson, 2003; Knights & Willmott, 1989).

The organizational and social contexts should here be understood as regulative to the extent that they provide (symbolic, discursive, material, etc.) input that in various ways affects identity work (Alvesson & Willmott, 2002). In psychodynamically oriented literature it is often suggested that individuals defend their identity against threatening aspects of the social context (see for instance Brown, 1997; Diamond & Allcorn, 2003; Fonagy et al., 2002; Freud, 1921; Gabriel, 1999). Through a variety of defensive mechanisms, perceptions of reality are distorted or deflected, leaving a valued identity unaffected by actual social interactions. The point here is not to elaborate on various defensive mechanisms but rather to highlight that self-identity in some instances can become loosely connected to actual social interactions. Based on this we suggest that self-identity may assume characteristics of fantasy, that is, an idea or a belief that is not significantly affected by actual behaviour.

Fantasy as a concept has been used in several ways (Spillius, 2001). It has been understood as: (a) a conscious as well as unconscious phenomenon (Brakel, 2001; Gabriel, 1997); (b) as a defensive mechanism (Brown, 1997); and (c) as a cognitive belief with various functions (Brakel, 2001). According to Bion (1967) and Freud (1933) fantasy is intimately associated with dreaming. Common to these perspectives is the idea of a mental process that is little affected by experiences of reality, i.e. social interactions. Brakel (2001) differentiates between ‘beliefs proper’, that are informed by reality; ‘neurotic beliefs’, where reality is distorted in order to defend against anxiety; and ‘fantasy’, those interpretative processes that are not distorted but rather disconnected and unaffected by reality.

Fantasies are often described as a significant aspect of the relationship between leaders and followers (Gabriel, 1997, 1999; Hirschhorn, 1988; Kets de Vries, 1999). Further, leaders’ fantasies of themselves are often described in terms of self-aggrandizement (Brown, 1997) or grandiosity (Howell, 1988; Maccoby, 2000). These fantasies are mainly understood as related to narcissism (Howell, 1988; Steyrer, 2002), that is, regulating self-esteem and a sense of well-being (Brown, 1997; Carr, 1998; Freud, 1933).

Fantasies about oneself that portray who we aspire to be (like) were described by Freud (1933) as parts of the ego ideal and Schwartz (1990) has described how organizations can become part of this ego ideal, thus giving membership in an organization a powerful emotional force (see here the literature on organizational identification; Whetten & Godfrey, 1998). Rather than being defensive in the face of threats, this force is a form of seduction, building on fantasies of gratification connected to a certain membership or role (Carr, 1998). Analogous to this, we will argue that specific leadership ideals, promoted by organizations as career opportunities and/or as parts of change efforts, can fuel identity work and fantasy formation for the individual manager.

In sum we have discussed how leadership ideas can exert powerful influence on self-identity while still leaving behaviour unaffected. Following that we also
discussed how formation of fantasies of leadership can become an important part of identity work, supporting self-esteem and well-being (Brown, 1997; Collinson, 2003; Knights & Willmott, 1992).

In the subsequent discussion we will draw upon parts of the contemporary discourse on change and visionary leadership (Barker, 1997; Fagiano, 1997; Kotter, 1990; Mintzberg, 1998; Yukl, 2002; Zaleznik, 1977) as we analyse how the manager in our study talks about himself as a manager. We will connect to ideas of identity to argue that part of the contemporary leadership discourse might be seen as sustaining identity work, rather than being expressed in actual leadership practice, in spite of contrasting managerial claims (Alvesson & Willmott, 2002; Collinson, 2003; Gabriel, 1999; Kets de Vries et al., 1991; Maccoby, 2000). The analysis has some linkages with the attribution theory of leadership (Calder, 1977; Meindl et al., 1985; Pfeffer, 1977). However, our aim in this article is not merely to show how leadership is used as a symbolic attribute in order to explain ambiguous situations, but rather to show how talk of leadership could be employed as a device for identity work. Significant for this aim is the attention to show how control is exercised through the ‘manufacture’ of subjectivity (Alvesson & Willmott, 2002; Deetz, 1992; Knights & Willmott, 1989, 1992; Sennet, 1998).

Method

This article reports on the observation of a particular event (a workshop) and related interviews from a broader ethnographically oriented study of an international knowledge-intensive firm. In order to achieve sufficient depth and to be able to make nuanced interpretations of the empirical material, we have used several research methods as well as conducted long-term fieldwork at the company. These have given us in-depth knowledge of the organization and the description of the organizational context of the workshop – a proposed cultural change programme – is aimed at facilitating an understanding of the basis of the workshop.

Of particular relevance for this study is the fact that we were given an opportunity to make an in-depth study of a technologically significant and – according to most organizational members – core section within a research and development (R&D) department. We interacted with employees in this section for over a year, documenting work-group meetings, management information meetings, workshops and daily informal gatherings. This was possible since we were given carte blanche to visit the company and follow daily work more or less at our own initiative. We had also learned that the manager of that particular section, henceforth called Sol Ace, was particularly interested in leadership and could therefore be significant in terms of making it possible for us to come close to one of many topics under investigation. In Goffman’s (1959) terms, we tried to enter the ‘back regions’ of the organization, beyond the façade of managerial appearances and performances. Although not drawn upon extensively in this article, this acquaintance with the organization gave us background, context and some pre-understanding of the interactional dynamics among participants, something that potentially reduces the risks of misunderstandings or premature conclusions.

The primary event that we focus upon – a workshop – represented an occasion for social interaction and could be seen as having considerable potential for leadership...
practice. By concentrating on a particular event it is possible to pursue a more intimate and profound study of leadership. Alvesson (1996: 32) suggests that the methodological advantage of studying a particular event rests with the idea of the possibility of making ‘detailed descriptions’ of ‘naturally occurring events’. In order to capture the social interaction at the workshop in detail and as it occurred we selected three parts – passages – which we suggest constituted the dynamics at the workshop.

As will be seen later, we try to follow the idea of being somewhat ‘descriptive’ in the empirical section although we naturally acknowledge that any featured empirical material is selected as a result of theoretical and other forms of ‘biases’ that inevitably influence choices in social research. However, we have attempted to handle the empirical material with care and to select passages that adequately cover the major dynamics and typical interactions at the workshop.

By the use of passages we do not suggest that we try to naïvely mirror or picture the reality from a realistic perspective, for as previously noted all empirical material is laden with assumptions. However, observations could be seen as less theoretically constrained and ‘biased’ than interviews and could thus be suitable when studying interaction phenomena such as leadership processes.

In addition to observations we also interviewed Sol Ace on nine occasions and all of his subordinates on several occasions. During interviews we had the opportunity to double-check our interpretations of the workshop and make adjustments of interpretations when necessary.

Consequently, talk with Sol Ace and his subordinates deepened as the study progressed, frequently addressing complex and difficult areas of role expectations, leadership issues and superior–subordinate relations. Interviews took place at the company and at our offices at our university, given that interviewing at a neutral place may encourage people to talk more freely (Easterby-Smith & Thorpe, 1991). However, independently of when and where they occur, interviews are problematic as media for the communication of ‘truths’ or ‘genuine experiences’ because of the existence of a multitude of contextual influences such as social norms, scripts for talking, value-laden language, expectations of both the interviewee and interviewer, political interests and so on (Alvesson, 2003; Silverman, 1993). Recognizing this, we sought to strengthen the credibility of the interpretations through the use of a multitude of interviewees and the establishment of close contact with Ace and his subordinates. Limiting the study of leadership to but one group of superior and subordinates may look precarious but we think that leadership issues call for considerable depth and richness and that the wealth of our empirical material compensates for the limited sample used here.

The interpretations of the material were inspired by two orientations. One is interpretive and more hermeneutic; here we try to focus on the meaning that presumably although not unproblematically might be related to talk of leadership. This means that we to some extent try to locate and reveal the logic and meaning in talk and statements a bit beyond the ‘exterior’, bearing the variety of context in mind even when it is not immediately present in the text (Alvesson & Sköldberg, 2000). The second and more post-modern orientation takes more seriously the possibility that talk might not refer to any logic or beliefs but rather be an effect of discourse (Alvesson, 2002; Prior, 1997). The latter means that we do not treat talk as an indication for something
stable beyond it, but rather are interested in variations and contradictions in language use, focusing on how talk is an effect of discourse. However, it also means that we do not necessarily expect a clear pattern, a coherence of meaning or empirical indicators pointing towards some synthesis.

Empirical background

Organizational cultural change

The empirical material in this article is based on a lengthy field study of an international high-tech company, Inventech, part of a global high-tech, Excellentechn. Inventech was created as an independent company as a result of a restructuring at Excellentechn. At Inventech sophisticated, highly developed software systems and applications for high-tech industry are produced. Employees, engineers with academic degrees in a technological discipline, are engaged in complex tasks, where the quality of work relies on technical knowledge and mental abilities.

Being a newly formed independent company required a new way of thinking and top management suggested the need for a reorientation of the strategic direction of Inventech, as compared to the former situation of it being an internal unit without any primary market responsibility. In addition, the relations between managers and other employees were poor in terms of trust and inspiration, and top management determined that there was a need to have inspiring managers, labelled ‘leaders’, with clear visions. Accordingly, leaders were needed to provide direction, earn trust, engage in long-term strategy work and offer ‘clear leadership’.

In order to reorient and rebuild trust between managers and employees, top management created a ‘cultural change plan’. The elements in the cultural plan were vision and mission statements, and some guiding principles, referred to as ‘forces and norms’ that were to provide direction to what many regarded as a technology-oriented organization lacking market focus. The plan could be seen as a way of creating a conceptual roadmap for the company. The three forces were called ‘forces for business success’ and they were backed up with five norms of which the most important was called ‘Leadership’, characterized as trust, inspiration and vision. Middle managers were expected to exercise leadership when implementing the cultural plan with their subordinates. The other four norms were: ‘Commitment’, ‘Communication’, ‘Empowerment’ and ‘Teamwork’.

The forces and norms were part of the new ‘cultural equipment’, and featured in a booklet with instructions of how to implement the norms. Middle managers were introduced to the new equipment by senior and HR management at two meetings, and then made responsible for holding implementation workshops with their respective subordinates.

In the workshops middle managers were expected to lead about ten subordinates in a session where they explored the meaning of the new norms on an individual, workgroup and organizational level. The setting was framed in terms of expectations on middle managers to employ the workshop in order to distribute the new norms to subordinates and thus implement the cultural plan. The ‘cultural equipment’ also contained short ‘explanations’ of the forces and norms and a schedule for the implementation of the workshop including instructions for exercises that were to be
executed with subordinates. The exercises focused upon the forces and norms, seen as building blocks of the new culture. A videotape was also shown to staff where the chief executive officer (CEO) and chief technology officer (CTO) explained their view on the new corporate norms.

In sum, the workshops constituted an almost ideal setting for leadership. In change processes such as this, leadership is often characterized as vital and Yukl (2002: 273) considers leading change as ‘one of the most important and difficult leadership responsibilities’. In this process, a leader is expected to create a shared vision (Bryman, 1992; Senge, 1996; Yukl, 2002) and a ‘sense of urgency’ in people about the need for a change (Yukl, 2002: 292). This puts the potential leader – the middle manager – in sharp focus.

The middle manager

The manager here focused upon, Sol Ace, has extensive experience in various technological areas within Inventech. He is considered to have extraordinary technical expertise and is commonly called upon by colleagues to act as a technological expert. Prior to the creation of Inventech, Ace had been promoted to a more senior position, making him responsible for a larger number of subordinates. At the same time he was also selected by top management to complete an MBA programme specializing in leadership and change of which he says, ‘it had an enormous significance. I work within a technical area, meaning that I now have the possibility to use leadership in my daily work’. The MBA gave Ace a platform to develop his talk of leadership and also to distance himself from the professional technology-oriented role that he had occupied since his recruitment:

I’m the technology freak and I’ve been that for so long. And the consequence of that is that I’m stuck where I am. But I don’t regard myself as a technology freak. It’s not my strength and I don’t like it. My superior sees me like that but here I am, with 12 years’ experience of product development and I have an MBA. Still, my superior sees me as the technology guru, as the one who knows technology. He has a view of my role that doesn’t correspond to my way of working. I’m the one who facilitates others.

In contrast, Ace talks of himself as a manager with leadership capabilities:

I think I am good at stimulating discussions. I can make groups function. I kind of make people act. I would definitely want to work with more overall tasks. I could be a project leader for customers, to work more overall in the company. I have to push these leader issues extremely aggressively and promote myself. I have to promote myself a lot more, outwardly.

Moreover, members of top management talk about leadership as a significant dimension and managers at Inventech are regularly measured on their leadership ‘skills’ by subordinates and assessed by external consultants. Ace says he feels very comfortable with the leadership assessments and that: ‘they provide input for my leadership’. He also says, ‘I have a rather good insight in how I am [as a leader]. They [the results of the leadership assessments] are positive and perhaps to some extent negative, and when they are, you start to reflect on that and you need to formulate and consider
new objectives’. The result of the leadership assessment is discussed between Ace and his superior: ‘we discuss the results and my profile as a leader’. From this position, of aspiring to and strengthening a new identity as a leader, Ace talked about the workshop occasion as significant as it gave him and his subordinates an opportunity to focus on issues often neglected. Furthermore, he stated that it gave him the opportunity to exercise leadership.

Let us now consider how this workshop, where leadership was to be performed, unfolded.

A cultural change workshop

We have chosen to present three passages that are typical of what transpired during the session, that is to say, the talk and actions described in the passages occurred regularly during the workshop and could be seen as distinct and characteristic of the interaction between participants. In order to make the exchange of comments between employees in the passages intelligible, we guide the reader with our own comments. In between some passages we qualify the interpretations somewhat in order to direct the reader’s attention to issues that we will return to in the subsequent discussion and analysis.

Those appearing in the passages besides Ace, the senior manager, are: Anderson, junior manager; Thomas, Lynch, Carroll, Jones, Sharpe, Dunne and Sinclair, all engineers and subordinates; and Smith, a researcher (and one of the authors of the article). The workshop consisted of presentations (by Ace), discussions and exercises.

About goals and commitment

Passage 1
On one occasion Ace said, ‘the goal of the organization is often seen from the owner but it can be seen from other interests as well’. He proceeded to discuss the Inventech goal: ‘sustaining profitability through customer satisfaction’. Sharpe, a subordinate, asked, ‘sustaining, why not just profitability through . . .?’. ‘I don’t know why,’ Ace said. Thomas, another subordinate, asked if Ace knew about objectives of other organizations. Ace didn’t and seemed at that point uncertain about how to proceed. He looked at Smith and asked if he had any other corporate objectives ‘in his back pocket’. Smith responded that ‘sustain’ is a very common word in statements about goals, referring to the long-term investment that companies want to signal. After this a rather lengthy silence followed.

Passage 2
While talking about commitment Ace asked, ‘how can we be more customer oriented?’. The question did not trigger any reaction and Ace rephrased it as, ‘how can we as a team contribute to the success of Inventech?’. Sharpe, a subordinate, asked, ‘sustaining, why not just profitability through . . .?’ ‘I don’t know why,’ Ace said. Thomas, another subordinate, asked if Ace knew about objectives of other organizations. Ace didn’t and seemed at that point uncertain about how to proceed. He looked at Smith and asked if he had any other corporate objectives ‘in his back pocket’. Smith responded that ‘sustain’ is a very common word in statements about goals, referring to the long-term investment that companies want to signal. After this a rather lengthy silence followed.

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‘it’s how we commit to what we are supposed to deliver and how we commit to our company, to Inventech, and how Inventech commits to us. Do we get enough support and do we feel appreciated for what we do? It has to do with how committed we are, how dedicated and committed we are, in our tasks, and how committed we are as a team towards our customers’. Ace talked slowly and cautiously while the others remained silent and looked in a rather puzzled way at each other, having difficulties understanding Ace’s talk.

Ace proceeded: ‘we should think in terms of our team in this exercise. There are some questions on page 5 [in the cultural change equipment] that we can use. “How can we as a team support Inventech’s success, how can we be more customer oriented?” [silence] . . . and “give examples of activities that we have that give” [silence] . . . “work satisfaction” [silence]’. Despite these attempts to help the subordinates engage with the issues, the exercise still seemed unclear to them, and they looked with uncertainty around them as if hoping to find some additional explanation. Sharpe asked, ‘do you mean the team commitment, Ace? I don’t understand’. ‘What commitment means to us’, Ace cautiously responded. Sharpe appeared to understand, ‘to us, OK’. Several of the others looked at their neighbours and signalled that they didn’t understand why Ace tried to clarify further the fragile situation. Apparently uncertain he proceeded very slowly and cautiously with ‘what is the . . . winning behaviour . . . how do we want to act, how should we act, how should we behave?’. This was followed by a long silence and finally Ace asked Smith if he had been through an exercise like that before, seeking assistance on how they should interpret it. ‘Should we outline specific actions that we can work with?’, he asked, obviously confused. Smith thought it could be a matter of asking what commitment means for them, and for every person. Ace followed that line and said that they should give examples of what commitment means to them, what their interpretation of ‘being committed’ was. Smith then proceeded to talk about the multiplicity of meanings connected to ‘commitment’ and suggested they all first reflect upon what all the concepts mean to them and then discuss the behavioural implications. Ace thought it was a good idea and suggested that they ‘mix interpretations and examples, then we can try to give some structure to it’.

As seen from the two passages, the exercises that Ace suggests seem difficult for the subordinates to engage in without further clarification and (potential) direction from Ace. In these situations, Ace displays inability to be of any assistance. For example, without much attempt at clarifying the notion of ‘sustained’ in the objective, he states that he does not know why that word is used there. On other occasions, he indicates confusion by remaining silent, giving confusing answers, or more slowly restating the formulations from the cultural equipment. The cultural equipment does not provide him with material for addressing the confusion, and when the subordinates call for him to go beyond that material, he seems almost unable to do so.
About vision and mission

As seen in the discussion above, Ace seems able only to present the material at face value. When the participants explore the mission and vision, the situation takes a complicated twist.

Passage 3

As Ace read the Inventech mission – ‘Through innovation, quality and commitment make our customers first, best and profitable’ – Thomas, a subordinate, reacted, ‘but what if we have two or three customers that buy the same thing?’ Ace saw the problem and assisted: ‘can everybody be the first?’ At this people laughed and Thomas continued with the idea that customers could be best and profitable, but not first. Ace didn’t answer and asked what ‘best’ means. Another subordinate, Anderson, pointed out that if they found customers who don’t target the same product, they could be best and first. Sinclair, another subordinate, said about functionality that Inventech could be the ‘first’ product to deliver the ‘best’ functionality regarding price and performance. It is up to the customers to use it: ‘it would be a possibility to be the first and the best’. Ace supported Sinclair: ‘The customers are different’, he said and continued with, ‘Inventech delivers the possibility to be the first and the best’. Here people looked at each other and seem unconvinced by Ace’s interpretation.

As subordinates tried to grasp the logic of the concepts, rather than the potential emotive and symbolic logic, it became confusing. As in earlier passages, they asked for assistance from Ace. When Thomas questioned the logic of the unclear and imprecise mission statement, Ace initially remained silent. Then he became engaged in a discussion of the literal meaning rather than being able to point to the possible metaphorical value of the mission statement. While the subordinates made some efforts to try to make the management vocabulary and symbols meaningful, Ace refrained from governing the discussion and instead adopted a position as observer.

The workshop experience: non-assertive disengagement

The workshop was also characterized by a strong sense of inexpressiveness and low emotional engagement among people in trying to elaborate the content in the cultural equipment. As seen from the passages, Ace talked in a low, slow and cautious manner as if constantly waiting for others to confirm his ideas. He maintained long silences between words and sentences, displaying what one subordinate described as his usual ‘poker face’.

When Ace presented the famous John F. Kennedy dream of putting a man on the moon as an example of a strong vision and asked if anyone wanted to comment upon it there was no response. Although a few fragmented comments were made, there was neither any strong discussion nor intellectual engagement. The few comments made were generally followed by long silences. Ace seemed weak in triggering emotions and engagement from subordinates. The only exception here was the reaction to the mathematical problems in the mission statement.

To sum up the workshop, we suggest that Ace had difficulties in providing meaning and guidance to the central concepts in the cultural change equipment. Ace
hardly stimulated commitment and readiness for action. This contributed to confu-
sion, uncertainty, and to fragmentation of the event. Ace hardly succeeded in ‘making
people act’ or in creating the sense of urgency and need for change, that Yukl (2002:
292) describes as central, or a shared and energizing vision (Bryman, 1992; Conger
& Kanungo, 1998). What then, does this have to do with leadership?

Leadership revisited

Leadership is explored here because of Ace’s claims that he exercised leadership at
the workshop. Ace says, ‘good leadership: that is to explain what the goal is, far away,
on the horizon, and then engage people to go with you’. Asked about whether he
considered himself to have exercised leadership during the workshop he clearly
declared, ‘yes, I think so’. He elaborated upon himself as a leader, saying:

I have formulated our goals and presented them very clearly. We’ve had
workshops concerning what we are to accomplish, tried to sketch our strategy
and our desired position. I have become conscious about the necessity of
everyone understanding the overall picture, that everyone understands where we
are going and why, how we are working and why.

Ace claims to have formulated a clear goal and strategy for his subordinates, saying
it is important that everyone understands the where, why and how of what they are
doing, issues related to the managing of meaning. When elaborating upon the ques-
tions of ‘who am I?’ and ‘what do I stand for?’ in the work context, Ace thus frames
his answers in terms of leadership. The leadership constructed by Ace connects to
charismatic and transformative aspects of the contemporary discourse on leadership
(Kotter, 1990; Senge, 1996; Steyrer, 1998; Yukl, 2002). It involves trying to identify
with potentially inspiring visions and cultural change (Kotter, 1990; Yukl, 2002).
When asked about whether he thinks the mentioned leadership literature has any
relevance for his leadership Ace says, ‘yes, I definitely think so. For example, I reflect
a lot about what we need to improve within five years’.

Considering the requests from subordinates about how to understand the concepts
in the culture material, one could say that the workshop provided an opportunity to
exercise leadership for someone talking about becoming a leader. At regular work
meetings one imagines that leadership sometimes could be substituted by profes-
sional knowledge and task characteristics (Howell et al., 1990; Pfeffer, 1977), but
this workshop concerned topics beyond regular work that raised expectations of
visionary and transformative leadership. However, as seen by the three passages,
these claims were not backed up by Ace’s actual performance.

Fantasies of leadership: identity work

Although Ace’s talk about leadership fails to match his practice, he nevertheless talks
persistently and with apparent conviction about himself as being a leader exercising
leadership. We suggest that the value of leadership ideas should be seen in the light
of the struggle Ace is engaged in, trying to escape and break away from an
increasingly frustrating identity (the technical ‘guru’ and ‘freak’) that he talks about
as disidentifying himself from (Elsbach, 1999). The identity as ‘technical freak’ is
insufficient in terms of providing a positive sense of self and contributing to a high self-esteem. The negative metaphorization of his current position (‘technical freak’) suggests that Ace constructs his professional technological role as an anti-identity (Sveningsson & Alvesson, 2003); a position as ‘not-me’ (Elsbach & Bhattacharya, 2001).

By framing the existing role in terms of an anti-identity and talking about it as being forced upon him by his superiors, Ace ends up frustrated, but the situation also calls for an exploitation of alternative sources of identity work. As a manoeuvre against the frustration and anxiety (Brown, 1997; Collinson, 2003; Freud, 1933; Knights & Willmott, 1989), Ace enacts ideas of contemporary leadership that provide higher self-esteem (‘I’m a leader’ and ‘I exercise leadership’).

Ace talks about how he has to promote himself in order to escape the ‘freak’ role and the idea of becoming a leader suggests that he can pursue activities more in line with the image of what constitutes an appropriate manager in the modern business world (overall strategic view and relationship with customers), that is, more in line with his ego-ideal (Carr, 1998; Freud, 1933). We suggest that the leadership discourse has made an extremely strong (Alvesson & Kårreman, 2000) imprint on Ace’s construction of himself and his managerial self-identity.

However, the discourse is less salient in Ace’s interaction towards subordinates. Ace talked about the workshop interaction as a case of visionary and transformational leadership, but as discussed earlier it is difficult to observe any plausible clues of such an interaction. From this we suggest that although Ace’s identity work draws upon leadership ideas, these are quite disconnected from practical experience. Leader as a possible self (Markus & Nurius, 1986) is here positively valued but not played out in interaction.

Following this disconnection from practice, we suggest that Ace’s self-identity as a transformative and visionary leader has taken on the quality of fantasy, understood as an idea that is disconnected from current reality, or, as Brakel (2001: 368) defines it, ‘fantasies are characterized as those propositional attitudes in which there is no attempt to match the truth conditions of the proposition to what obtains in the world’. The fantasy has defensive functions (Diamond & Allcorn, 2003; Fonagy et al., 2002; Freud, 1921) in providing release from the frustrations of his identity as ‘technical freak’, and provides the pleasure of a certain closeness to his aspirations and ideals, that is, narcissistic gratification (Freud, 1933; Gabriel, 1999; Steyrer, 2002).

The version of leadership reproduced by Ace when elaborating upon his own interaction with subordinates could thus be true in terms of representing his fantasy image of himself being a leader exercising leadership. As seen earlier, this image contradicts the actual managerial performance at critical moments (like the workshops we observed), but the contradiction does not ‘correct’ the image (Brakel, 2001), nor is it perceived by Ace as a contradiction that he has to account for, or understand as a challenge for development (Brown, 2000). The gap between talk and action is never explicitly acknowledged, which contributes to the quality of fantasy (Brakel, 2001; Freud, 1933). As a fantasy, Ace can maintain an unaffected image of himself as a transformational and visionary leader.

The narcissistic force behind the fantasy is derived from Ace’s attempts to disidentify from his current identification (as a ‘technical freak’) and establish an
Identity as leader. The fantasy as a leader here stands for sustaining an image that is in line with his talk of aspirations and ego-ideal. There is a significant element of aggrandizement in the image of the manager as leader in the contemporary leadership discourse (Brown, 1997; du Gay, 1996; Knights & Willmott, 1992). As well as facilitating Ace’s talk, this image is also more appealing on a general level (du Gay, 1996; Knights & Willmott, 1992). Thus, the power of the image is two-fold: there are intrinsic elements of gratification, self-worth, self-esteem and self-value connected to the leader image (Brown, 1997; Steyrer, 2002), and at the same time this image offers a fantasized escape route from the present not-me position. In terms of Alvesson and Willmott (2002: 629), the leadership discourse regulates Ace’s identity work by providing a specific vocabulary, a specific interpretative framework of leadership, defining Ace as a leader.

From this we do not argue that Ace has an essentially narcissistic personality. Rather, we suggest that the fantasy of leadership is sustained by disciplinary organizational and discursive contexts where the constructions of his existing self-identity – to remain in the technical role – seem highly unattractive.

Identity regulative contexts

The regulative contexts are primarily three: one is the regular company survey, another is the MBA education and lastly there is the cultural change plan, the latter discussed in a separate section on account of its presumed importance.

As noted, Ace is comfortable with the leadership assessments. They make it possible for him to talk about himself as a competent leader exercising leadership (in discussions with his superior). However, they measure Ace in terms of his listening abilities and other routine dimensions, rather than the strategic and visionary aspects that he often refers to when discussing his leadership. Based on his presumed ability (we know little of whether this ability has any substantial impact) to listen and provide comfort, Ace is labelled a competent leader but, as seen from the interview statements, he rather talks about how he manages to engage and make people act. What seems important here is the significance of being labelled a leader in accordance with the contemporary leadership discourse, that is, to engage in communication in terms of managers doing the talk for subordinates to follow (Conger & Kanungo, 1998; Maccoby, 2000). The assessments thus seem to mainly confirm and strengthen Ace’s leadership constructions (‘I have good insight in how I am’).

A second important element is the selection of Ace for an MBA programme specifically focused upon leadership development. The selection of Ace by top management signalled that he had leadership potential that could be strengthened and refined by an appropriate leadership education. The MBA also exposed Ace to various contemporary leadership ideals as proposed by, for example, Senge (1996), Yukl, (2002) and Kotter, (1990). The MBA seems to have amplified his frustration and created emotional tension by revealing attractive career alternatives. This is suggested when Ace says that ‘here I am, with an MBA’. Ace talks about himself as predisposed for more demanding tasks. It is also significant to relate Ace’s leadership fantasies organizationally and, in particular, to top management fantasies about a grandiose future (Levine, 2001).
Leadership in cultural change

As discussed, the cultural change plan consisted of a few ‘forces’ and ‘norms’ that constituted the ‘target culture’. The ways in which the forces and norms are formulated in the written text represent an interesting mixture of descriptions of the existing organization and managerial ambitions for the future organization. The forces and norms are presented as an already existing reality, rather than as managerial wishes. For example, leadership at Inventech is ‘characterized by trust, inspiration and vision’ although the cultural programme was initiated because of the low trust between managers and employees. The visionary leadership is not described as something to achieve but something already existing.

Since the shared norms are symbolically displayed as a jigsaw consisting of a few pieces that fit nicely together there is a strong feeling of harmony between central organizational elements describing the existing organization. The design presents the ‘targets’, or the wishful managerial thinking of the ideal organization, as something of an existing reality. Ideals and fantasies about a grandiose future are described as an existing reality (Brown, 1997; Levine, 2001). When talking to the employees at the time of the workshops the CEO said, ‘it should all fit together. Someone has made a jigsaw puzzle so that I can show you that yes, everything does fit together’.

On the espoused level is a clear and homogenous culture that is detached from the complex and often fragmented organizational life and its demands. It is typically comprised of a commonly used set of positively sounding norms circulating around in the business press, in consultants’ standard vocabularies and in companies’ vision statements. The target culture in this particular case could be seen as an idealized claim to culture – appealing, simple and straightforward. Based on this we suggest that the ‘descriptions’ in the cultural equipment are a less serious effort to capture analytically what exists in terms of values and meanings. The cultural efforts seem rather a fragile and inadequate way of trying to install a form of ideological control in order to govern the development of the newly created organization. This construction resonates well with Ace’s talk about him being a leader exercising leadership. Top management fantasies of the future could thus be seen as fuelling and inspiring middle managers’ fantasies about who they are as managers – their self-identities. The parties mutually sustain the fantasies about organizational and individual greatness (Kets de Vries, 1999).

This focus upon relatively abstract and symbolic fantasies about the future in the cultural equipment could partly explain the difficulties at reaching a more substantive focus at the workshop. It seems as if the talk of trying to capture the existing organization in terms of working methods, leadership, commitment, mission and strategic orientations in the cultural change programme is merely symbolic. Rather than trying to facilitate a more open dialogue about their commitment and about what mission and leadership could mean for them in their particular context they end up in trying to make highly symbolic concepts logically intelligible (as trying to solve the mathematical inconsistency in the mission statement). This proves difficult because the concepts do not lend themselves to open exploration in terms of logic, since they are more of a management rhetorical vocabulary. As Gowler and Legge (1996) suggest, management discourse is symbolically complex rather than logically
consistent. It is meant to evoke commitment and emotions, rather than form verifiable statements about reality.

However, the engineers in this case are knowledge workers and, considering the proposed importance of emergent and resource-based strategy making and learning in the modern business world (Mintzberg, 1998; Senge, 1996), the workshop constituted a potentially important occasion for involving those closest and most concerned with product development and the company’s future. However, the abstract concepts and avoidance on Ace’s part to problematize the concepts on a more substantial level, including the notion of himself being leader exercising leadership, led to the talk during the workshop remaining at a symbolic and, in this case, superficial level. The material seemed to disengage and disempower, perhaps alienate, employees from engaging in what for them would be the potentially highly significant issue the company orientation.

**Forms of identity control: the fantasy route**

The vocabulary in the cultural equipment, and concepts such as leadership could in this case be seen as being aimed at various forms of cultural-ideological control rather than actually making people substantially involved in the future of the company (Alvesson, 1995; Kunda, 1992; Wilkins & Ouchi, 1983; Willmott, 1993). Ace is regulated to identify himself as a leader exercising leadership in accordance with the top managerial wishes (legitimated with academic credentials by the MBA) but there is no substantial influence connected to that regulation. From a more general perspective one could say that middle managers in this case are entering a kind of symbolic identity pact that makes it possible for them to fantasize about, and label themselves as, leaders, as long as they refrain from entering into claims of a more substantive or specific nature (such as real influence in decision making). Middle managers are thus not only allowed, but strongly encouraged, to talk about themselves as being leaders exercising leadership, as long as they remain at a the level of symbols (titles), labels (on business cards) and in our case, fantasies (significant input in identity work). Talk of leadership could thus be seen as a form of managerial control targeted at people’s reflections about how they are – their self identities. Middle managers constitute and manufacture themselves as subjects through the disciplined ‘guidance’ of top managerial wishes about leaders and leadership. This could be seen as a manufacturing process in which people become more dependent for their well-being on the symbolic resources advanced by modern organizations, academics, leadership consultants and media.

**Conclusions**

Based primarily on observations of managerial work in practice and related managerial interpretations of that practice as instances of leadership, we have explored the link between leadership and identity work, and developed an analysis of identity work that circles around the interplay of self-identity, identity work and the regulation of identity. Of particular relevance to this analysis is an emergent body of work that is attentive to how control is exercised through the manufacture of subjectivity (Alvesson & Willmott, 2002; Deetz, 1992; Knights & Willmott, 1989, 1992;
Sveningsson & Alvesson, 2003; Watson, 1994). This motivates three conclusions and possible contributions.

First, we suggest that contemporary leadership (Bryman, 1992; Senge, 1996; Yukl, 2002) functions as a significant input in managerial identity work (Alvesson & Willmott, 2002). Wood and Case (this volume) suggest that leadership as a refrain conveys protective qualities, making people assured and empowered. The refrain can be seen as expressing certain restorative qualities as people subject to its harmony (Wood and Case, this volume). This partly supports findings by Alvesson and Sveningsson (2003) who suggest that talk of visions and strategy might be related more to managerial identity than to actual managerial work. However, in contrast to their study, our investigation is (a) based on observations at the level of managerial practice rather than based solely on managerial talk, and (b) suggesting that the contradictions between claims of doing leadership and actual practice seem less problematic for the studied manager (i.e. less frustrating).

Second, the claims of ‘doing leadership’ seem in our case particularly strong, suggesting that the leadership discourse can be seen as ‘muscular’ (Alvesson & Kärreman, 2000) in terms of its strong imprint on the managerial subject. Ace exhibits no frustration in talking about doing one thing (contemporary leadership) while actually pursuing the contrasting activity (more of instrumental administration). Based on this we suggest that Ace’s reproduction of the contemporary leadership could be seen as a fantasy. Ace’s identity work is thus partly based on a fantasy creation (or reproduction) about what he accomplishes with respect to his subordinates. In this way, the leadership discourse could function as a disciplinary device through which a middle manager may be controlled by the identity construction as leader (Alvesson & Willmott, 2002). The control in our case seems effective in terms of the fact that it creates a form of closure that leaves comparatively little space for doubt or reflection and that strengthens the notion of fantasy. The strength and significance of the fantasy can also be seen through Ace’s negative metaphorization of the existing managerial identity, the ‘technical freak’. This can be regarded as a form of anti-identity that sustains the notion of him being destined to become a leader exercising leadership. The fantasy could here also be seen as a way of trying to escape a role that seems more of a straightjacket.

Third, we suggest that talk of leadership in many cases substitutes symbols and identities for real and substantive influence (du Gay, 1996; Watson, 1994), as was the case in our cultural change. Arguably, the modern leadership discourse seems to be increasing in significance in a variety of organizations (Barker, 2001; Yukl, 2002), targeting increasing numbers of managers who seem ready to join the aggrandizing bandwagon of becoming all sorts of heroes. This could be less problematic if some managers were not so easily convinced that they are in fact leaders equipped to exercise leadership, while others realized that while they may talk about themselves as leaders in certain contexts (preferably outside work) they remain managers in the actual work context, a kind of hybrid managerial work situation (Alvesson & Sveningsson, 2003; Watson, 1994).

However, in many cases this does not happen and it poses more serious problems. The leadership discourse sustains and facilitates fantasy creations and reproduction: managers today want to be seen as strategists, visionaries, and entrepreneurs (du Gay, 1996; Scarborough & Burrell, 1996). However, as indicated, this kind of symbolic
identity work may sometimes have relatively little substantial effect in terms of middle managerial influence in decision making. We suggest that the contemporary leadership discourse could be seen as a fantasy substituting for substantial and real influence. When functioning as a substitute for real influence the leadership discourse may even be considered dangerous, at least if one believes that knowledge workers (or any worker for that matter) may constitute a core competence (as it is commonly stated in ceremonial contexts) and are important in order to accomplish cultural change, learning and strategy making (Mintzberg, 1998; Senge, 1996). Rather than stimulate involvement, in the case studied here, we observed how the abstract vocabulary, including leadership, created forms of exclusion and marginalization. We suggest that the leadership discourse actually played an important role in preventing change, rather than being that which is associated with accomplishing change.

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