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Leaders as organizational authors: What kind of story are you writing?

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“Art is a lie that makes us realize truth, at least the truth that is given us to understand”

Pablo Picasso

INTRODUCTION

If you are a leader in an organization, you are an author of organizational “stories”. The question is, what kind of story are you writing? Anyone who has led a team, unit or organization, knows that leaders and followers work together to produce organizational outputs. It is not easy to determine how much of the final work is the authorship of each specific individual.

In this article we draw on the notion of metaphor as a tool to help you consider your role as an organizational writer. Specifically, we adopt the analogy of leadership as ‘authorship’, as considered within the domain of international copyright conventions, which provide a framework for relations between various stakeholders including the creators and consumers of intellectual property. Previous research on leadership metaphors has observed how leaders draw

inspiration from poets, musicians or painters. Studies have also considered leaders as priests or artists. These analyses delineate what leaders can gain from the various artistic styles: as models, practices and techniques that help managers exercise their leadership. As yet, no one has discussed leadership as “authorship” of an organization’s identity and history. In this paper we aim to help you identify how your leadership style corresponds to authorship within a particular literary genre.

We depart from the notion that organizational authorship extends merely from a leader’s linguistic style, their words shaping their follower’s behavioral responses. The language leaders use to communicate with followers is a common object of analysis, based on the assumption that it is through this communication that leaders shape their organizations. We go beyond analysis of the language used by leaders. Our focus instead is on the leader’s role in writing organizational “history”, in a manner similar to how book authors create fictional ‘stories’.

The question we explore is: In what ways do leaders influence the writing of organizational history? We consider whether the authorship role is based on individual, collective or mixed contributions; as well as who plays the leading role in this writing; and what are the consequences of the plurality of contributors for future of an organization? Using

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the writing metaphor, we develop a model that represents relationships between leaders, followers, leadership styles and literary genres (or sub-genera).

The article unfolds as follows. We begin by walking you through the concept of ‘authorship’, to make clear our analogy comparing the leader to an ‘organizational author’. We then draw on different literary genres to outline a model of leaders as writers. We conclude by outlining several practical authorship hints for you to apply in your own leadership, depending on the genre of organizational history you wish to write.

METAPHORS IN ORGANIZATIONAL STUDIES

Metaphors are a means of illustration that create meaning by associating vague concepts with common items from people’s experiences embedded in their long term memory as cognitive schema. Because metaphors make abstract notions concrete they can also be used as an instrument of organizational analysis. Use of multiple metaphors provides a broad and multidimensional understanding of events, demonstrating their incredible power. It is important to note, however, that although understanding the life of any organization depends on images that facilitate the transmission of messages, the insight gained from metaphors is always partial.

There is a wealth of literature that employs arts-based metaphorical language to consider the role of leaders as artists. Science similarly uses metaphors to help people understand messages more quickly by referencing familiar images and experiences, thereby reducing the uncertainty invoked by the introduction of abstract or unfamiliar concepts. People even unconsciously rely on metaphors drawn from the collective imagination or oral traditions to express their ideas in emotionally appealing and creative ways. The analogy between football and goal-making in any field (‘we scored a goal’) is one such example.

Metaphorical language functions as a cognitive tool that facilitates the interpretation of concepts through association with a framework of mental references. Some studies demonstrate that social perceptions can be automatically affected by metaphoric associations. There is no evidence yet on the mechanism that determines the adoption of metaphorical language or intellectual association.

Despite the richness and color metaphorical language lends to technical or scientific communication, some consider that it devalues the communication. University of Virginia Professor Mary Jo Hatch, however, disregards such criticism using Jazz as a metaphorical tool to analyze organizational structures. She makes an analogy between some basic aspects of musical types (solo, accompaniment, trading fours, question and answer, groove and sensitivity) and organizational structures (ambiguous, emotional and temporal), demonstrating that metaphors engage emotional and aesthetic capacities by working within the analytical framework of the imagination to broaden technical understanding.

THE ARTS AS INSTRUMENTS OF LEADERSHIP

Leaders can use arts such as poetry for enhanced communication that inspires subordinates with greater enthusiasm

and confidence. In this, poetry, for example, can be used as a metaphor for generating inspiration and motivation that comes from the empathy the leader establishes with his or her followers. Grint suggests leadership can be seen as a set of arts: (i) philosophical arts — concerned with identity: who are we? (ii) visual arts — concerned with vision: what do we want to achieve? (iii) martial arts — concerned with tactics: how will we achieve it? and (iv) performing arts — concerned with charisma: why would someone want to follow us?

A leader’s strategic vision can equal the imagination applied in the fine arts, as it presents an idealized conception of the world, one not based on experimentation, but instead as a picture of a photograph. The role of creative invention is critical for leadership in general and for the design of an organization’s strategy in particular. In the performing arts the author uses words and props to induce her audiences to believe in the story she wants to tell. The leader may also use those techniques to make her ‘public’ believe in her story.

Leadership requires the combining of various art forms that necessitate the participation of many actors. In this context, stories are a great way of involving others. Story sharing, rather than the mere transmission of episodes, allows participants to create a new collective history through which they become a system of social learning and develop shared sense of belonging.

Stories are thus an important part of organizational learning, acting as a fundamental leadership tool for balancing the past with the present and the future. Routines and norms only assume limited explicit knowledge; they capture neither the past nor the historical course of the organization. They do not apprehend implicit knowledge or the underlying emotions. By recounting stories leaders reinforce organizational identity, building on ‘who we are’ and ‘to where and how we are going’.

Through the stories they tell, leaders can develop imagery that followers feel part of. The storyteller arouses the emotions of their listeners, whether by rejoicing or recreating memories of suffering, or generating feelings of solidarity. Based on her interviews with several CEOs in the late 1980s, researcher Mary Jo Hatch (referred to earlier) and her colleagues, argued that respected leaders may take on the roles of “priests” or “artists”, to draw on spirituality and art as natural realms of creativity and inspiration. The way the leader behaves and “writes” the script of the organization changes according to the “mask” they choose to wear. In their study, Mary Jo Hatch and her team used the mask metaphor to discuss the difference between leaders and managers. It is important to keep in mind that the type of stories leaders tell in their organizations is conditioned by the role they play. As priests they introduce a discourse that appeals to mythology, the epic values of time immemorial. As artists, they rely on the appeal of creativity and innovation.

Another metaphor is presented by Ehrich and English, who compare leadership to dance, deeming it the mother of all arts. They propose a conceptual model based on four aspects: context, music, dance and choreographers. Their central argument presents leadership as more than a mere set of techniques or skills that can be learned. To the contrary, just as dance requires an embodied artistic per-

formance marked by nuance, leaders too must awaken within themselves the ethical and spiritual dimensions.

In all these cases, the leader's 'practical authorship' may be related to how they try to construct perceptions of who they are, generating a sense of sharing, as well as how they are able to condition others to speak or act, through practical dialogue. Along this line of reasoning, metaphorical and poetic forms of communicating can be very persuasive.

If we consider organizations as complex adaptive systems, it seems reasonable to conclude that the interactions of various organizational actors is of fundamental importance. Individual behavior is always conditioned by the behavior of others. The leader's role is creating the context facilitating the interactions and commitment that facilitates organizational development.

LEADERS AS WRITERS: A MODEL OF ORGANIZATIONAL AUTHORSHIP

In a legally defined authorship process, creation can occur individually (single author) or in partnership (co-authorship, with one or more partners). Transposed to the leadership domain, this aligns with what is known as the Leader-Member Exchange Theory (LMX). The central idea of the LMX model is the assumption that the different relationships leaders develop with subordinates is what produces various organizational outcomes.

An important concept of LMX is that leaders and followers establish partnerships that are of value to both parties, as well as to the organization. Leadership from the perspective of LMX is underpinned by a balanced relationship of mutual influence between leaders and their followers. Taking this further, we could even conceive of leadership as a process of co-construction, wherein both sides contribute in a balanced manner towards organizational results.

Based on what we have discussed thus far, we propose a theory of leaders as 'organizational writers' using the metaphorical language of the writing genre. We outline a tentative theoretical model in Fig. 1, using two axes: (i) the 'leader/writer' axis, can be developed either exclusively at the individual level of single author, or broadly at the collective level of co-authorship; and (ii) the 'work' axis, which can similarly be applied at individual or collective authorship levels. The model assumes leaders have different levels of intervention available when 'writing' an organization's history.

In the 'author/writer' axis, the leader's role can be seen as individualistic, enacted as a solo effort, or, conversely, as a

shared collectivistic process. Individualistic leaders seek to retain all decision making authority and power, ensuring their role is indispensable to the organization's operations, even if they might be absentee leaders attempting to manage by remote-control. Collectivistic leaders seek greater subordinate commitment by sharing in a variety of ways, from simple openness in listening to subordinates' views, to a predisposition towards distributing decision making authority and power, or more drastically, to near self-redundancy.

The 'author/writer' axis intersects with the 'work' axis, which can also be individual or collective. In the writing genre, a literary piece may have one or more authors. Furthermore, authors may write a single story or a collection of autonomous stories on a common theme. When transposing this to the leadership domain, work relating to the leader's role can also be individualistic (consider cases where organizational members actively resist the leader's efforts) or as 'co-authorship', wherein organizational members actively collaborate with the leader in achieving organizational outcomes, with different degrees of member participation.

Whether collaboration is recognized by the leader or not, the socialization of individuals into an organizational collective is carried out by co-authoring the social-reality of institutionalized norms of thinking, acting, feeling and behaving. Be it as enthusiastic engagement or passive resistance, the social representation subordinates construct concerning their role of subalternity, further informs their degree of participation in the 'work' of the organization.

To better understand the various leader/follower relations that result from the intersection between the leader-author/work axes we expand upon the various leadership styles that constitute these workplace authorship relations in Table 1. Furthermore, in the section that follows we provide further details about the various leadership/authorship approaches along with examples of recent high profile CEOs. More specifically, with these examples, we summarize media depictions of these CEOs as representatives of the companies they lead, demonstrating the relationship between leadership behavior and the authorship of organizational histories. Understanding the style of leadership that best suits the most effective approach to 'organizational authorship', is relevant to determining the style of leadership that you would most like to cultivate.

WRITING NONSENSE, EPICS, BLACK ROMANCE AND HISTORICAL NOVELS

Nonsense Authored by Absentee Leadership

Where Fig. 1 indicates individual leadership and individual work (in the bottom left-hand quadrant of the model), the leader is decontextualized from the organization, or 'missing in action'. When absentee leaders do provide feedback to their followers, it is generally a hollow platitude such as "you're doing a great job", even if the organization is in disarray with high turnover and rising customer dissatisfaction. Absentee leaders provide leadership in name only, as they are psychologically absent from the role. Promoted into the position, they enjoy the privileges of office but avoid meaningful engagement with their followers.

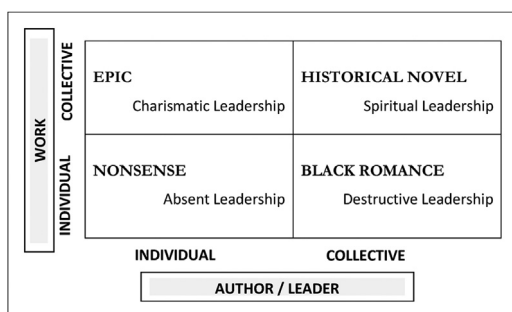


Figure 1 A metaphor-based model between the type of literary work and the type of leadership

Table 1 Expanded characteristics of four literary genres as leadership approaches

Literary genre	Nonsense	Epic myth	Black romance	Historical novel
Leadership style	Absentee	Charismatic	Destructive	Spiritual
Orientation	Individual	Collective	Individual	Collective
Relation to followers	Distance	Challenge	Control	Inspire
Relation to work	Calculation	Quest	Exploitation	Service
Power source	Fame	Confidence	Expertise	Purity
Credo	Avoidance	Hero	Decision-maker	Facilitator
Vision	Dream	Victory	Power	Transcendence

One of the biggest employee complaints about their bosses from a 2015 US survey, concerned their being absent. Research further suggests followers experience being ignored by their boss as far worse than being treated badly. Absentee leadership, as a type of laissez faire leadership, is associated with role ambiguity, poor health, and bullying from colleagues. Unlike constructive leadership which quickly enhances workplace satisfaction, or destructive leadership which quickly erodes confidence but where the effects also dissipate quickly, with absentee leadership work satisfaction erodes slowly and the effects are long lasting. Absentee leadership is leadership fiction, as such, we designate this quadrant as related to the ‘nonsense’ literary genre.

Ron Johnston, the former CEO of the US department store chain JC Penny, illustrates the absentee leader in the nonsense genre. He came to the job with high credentials, having helped create Apple’s world leading retail store concept. Rather than consult with JC Penny customers, however, he sought to implement preconceived solutions that had worked for Apple, irrespective of their practicality or relevance to a mid-tier retail apparel company. As he implemented changes, customers voted with their feet. His 17 month tenure saw the company’s stock price decline by some 50 per cent. Following his firing by the board, analysis of his downfall highlighted his frequent physical absence from the company’s Texas headquarters as a primary reason. Living in Silicon Valley, he commuted each week by company jet. Even so, his efforts to connect with rank-and-file JC Penny employees were minimal. Many found his webcasts to employees, particularly those recorded from his Palo Alto residence, as self-promotional rather than motivational; the one titled “Ron Johnson’s 50th Day at JC Penney” being a case in point. As Johnson’s approach was failing, he argued the fiction that customers needed to be “educated” about the strategy, as opposed to the forming a strategy around the customers.

Epic Myth Authored by Charismatic Leadership

Observing the correspondence between an individual leadership and co-authored work (top left-hand quadrant), we see the leader acting individualistically, sometimes even in a narcissistic manner, protective of their assumed superior authority/power. Such leaders project high levels of confidence and charisma to challenge and mobilize their followers towards achieving collective objectives. Applying our literary styles metaphor to charismatic leaders sees them associated them with the ‘epic’ genre. The hero in an epic

tale is an individual who embarks on a quest and overcomes insurmountable obstacles against impossible odds to be victorious in achieving a defined objective. Epics also tend to be told in the voice of a narrator, the entire story heard from their perspective. Accordingly, the narrator takes the major role, with the characters reduced to playing the parts of a minor players in the narrator’s tale.

Steve Jobs, an inspiration for millions of people worldwide, is an example of a charismatic leader who authored Apple’s history in the epic genre, co-founding one of the world’s most successful companies from his garage. An article published in “Mirror Business” (26.05.2015) is illustrative of the Jobs mythology, describing him as having invoked personal charisma, combined with a radical world changing vision of making life easier through high quality technology design, to create one of the world’s most profitable companies that has a cult-like following. The key to Jobs’ achievements, on full display during his legendary product launch events, was a combination of a salesman’s enthusiasm for the Apple brand, an evangelist’s bible-thumping passion, a zealot’s singularity of purpose, and a poor kid’s determination to be victorious in making his business successful.

Black Romance Authored by Destructive Leadership

The correspondence between individual leadership and collective co-authorship (bottom right-hand quadrant) indicates destructive leadership, a style characterized by manipulation, control, and coercion, rather than development, empowerment and persuasion. The destructive leader’s task oriented approach can generate short-term results, but tends to compromise performance in the longer-term. Although destructive leaders may appear to value their follower’s contributions, in reality, they tend to pursue a personal agenda, devoid of any genuine commitment towards their subordinates or the organization.

Application of the literary genre metaphor to destructive leadership sees it correspond to ‘black romance,’ a literary subgenre that emerged in England in the mid-eighteenth century. Black romance is fundamentally characterized by terror, villains, unbridled passion, immorality and hatred. Plagiarism, illegitimately claiming the authorship of another’s work, is also relevant in this quadrant of the model. Sadly common practice in publishing, plagiarism also occurs within the leadership context when leaders illegitimately claim credit, and proprietorship of ideas and results

created by their subordinates, gaining personal advantage at the subordinate's expense.

Travis Kalanick, who was forced from the position of the CEO of Uber in June 2017 following a series of scandals that had engulfed the company, provides an example of a destructive leader authoring the organization's history in the black romance genre. The media reported that Kalanick's downfall began earlier in the year when a former Uber engineer alleged sexual harassment at the company. This initial complaint opened the floodgates of more complaints and spurred internal investigations. Dozens of employees were fired or resigned after a review of hundreds of complaints of sexual misconduct within the organization. At around the same time a film surfaced of Kalanick in the back seat of an Uber car arguing with Uber driver Fawzi Kamel over the fare: "Some people don't like to take responsibility for their own shit," Kalanick yells at Kamel, "They blame everything in their life on somebody else."

Uber was additionally dealing with an intellectual property lawsuit from Waymo, the self-driving car business that operates under Google's parent company, as well as a federal inquiry into a software tool that Uber used to sidestep some law enforcement. Rather than recognising that his destructive leadership informed a toxic culture that had become a liability for the company, Kalanick, who frequently boasted of his sexual conquests, initially responded was that the company had a PR problem. It was for the investors, employees and the media to demand that the black novel of Kalanick CEO tenure come to end, forcing his resignation.

Historical Novel — Spiritual Leadership

Finally, the correspondence between co-authored leadership and co-authored work (top right-hand quadrant), indicates spiritual leadership. Spiritual leaders recognize that leadership is shared, they seek to lead by example and to genuinely care for their subordinates, thereby conveying a message of dedication that goes far beyond the formal obligations of the job. These leaders embody moral, ethical and spiritual virtues such as integrity, accountability, and humility. Grounded in faith and hope, spiritual leaders act with a sense of mission and calling. Employees participate actively and cheerfully in pursuing the common goals espoused by spiritual leaders, that tend to emphasize overlaps in the common interests of the organization, stakeholders, and the broader community (if not society itself). Spiritual leadership is an important addition to recent developments in leadership theory emphasizing components such as the sense of calling by leaders and followers, along with the creation of an organizational culture based on selfless love wherein members are encouraged to manifest mutual affection, concern and appreciation for one another.

Looking at spiritual leadership through the literary metaphor sees a correspondence with the "historical novel", a genre that blends history and fiction. Historical novels diligently draw on the historical record to reconstitute actual historical events, while also imagining details concerning the possible motives, challenges and dialogues that drove the heroic achievements of their great subjects. The historical novel thereby is a collaboration between heroic actors, investigators and authors.

Howard Schultz, CEO of Starbucks, provides an example of spiritual leadership authoring organizational history in the historical novel genre. In 2015 *Fast Magazine* ranked Schultz one of the world's 10 best leaders based on, among other things, his commitment to the well-being of his employees. For Schultz, values are a big part of both Starbucks' balance sheet and income statement. An indicator of this commitment is the benefits provided to its "partners", as employees are called at Starbucks, similar to people working full time jobs, although they only work 25–30 h per week. Among these are the life skills, decision-making and inter-personal relations training all employees receive from the company. The training begins from the employee's first day and continues throughout their career, spending some fifty hours in the classroom in their first year. The program is structured for employees earn college credits as they complete each module. An additional initiative announced in 2015 was that Starbucks would cover college tuition for its U.S. employees working more than 20 h per week who enrolled in an online college degree program from Arizona State University.

Our review provides clear associations between different types of leadership and organizational authorship. The role of the follower should not, however, be overlooked in this co-creative writing process, as it so often is. It is therefore to followership that we next turn our attention.

LEADERSHIP IS OVERRATED: LET'S TALK FOLLOWERSHIP

Arguing that leadership is collaborative, rather than the achievement of an individual "lone wolf", Drath and research team advocate replacing the classic tripartite: leader-follower-shared-goal, with a new trilogy: direction-alignment-commitment. This alternative ontology is concerned with three outcomes: (i) direction, representing a generalized consensus on the common mission, goals and objectives; (ii) alignment, which proceeds from the collective definition, organization and coordination of work; and (iii) commitment, indicated by the willingness of members to give up personal selfish interests towards the realization of common objectives. This model raises an important question, modifying the vision that Leadership and Leadership Exchange usually address: How does leadership take place without leaders or followers?

The "traditional" tripartite leadership ontology (leaders, followers, objectives), sees the distinction between leaders and followers as stemming not so much the difference in authority or power, or even from differences in characteristics, as from asymmetric influences. Another view holds that since there is constant change between individuals within the group context, it does not make sense to speak of influence or even reciprocal influence, but rather of mutual adjustment, of collective learning, and of reciprocal transformation. It is from here that arises questioning of the very existence of leadership. If leaders are influenced, perhaps induced, by followers, can they be considered as "authors of their organization" or is it the followers who should be considered conjointly as "co-authors and readers"?

Researchers Martin Blom and Matts Alvesson, consider the followers' construction of their relevance and value as a key

aspect of leadership. With metaphorical language, they show how followers influence, inhibit, or stimulate leadership. They further demonstrate how followers “demand” leadership, placing themselves in a position of subordination, desiring to be guided in their organizational activities.

Other researchers emphasize that in the interrelations between leaders and followers, both influence each other, albeit in different ways. Leaders communicate their expectations of followers, assuring tangible and intangible rewards for those who meet their expectations. Followers likewise set expectations concerning the leaders’ role, including their treatment of the followers. Followers should not be viewed as playing a passive role in this process. They may reject, embrace or even renegotiate the roles determined by the leader. There is, accordingly, an ongoing process of dyadic exchanges between leader and followers. Each party contributes different resources to the relationship, either explicitly or implicitly through a permanent process of negotiation.

CONCLUDING REMARKS

Previous research has determined that leaders are in some sense artists. It would be reasonable to conclude then that a leader can also be viewed as an organizational author. We have sought to explore leadership as authorship by analyzing various leadership and literary genres and developing the model presented in Fig. 1. The model suggests different ways that leaders can construct autobiographical accounts of their companies to produce a coherent picture of the organization’s identity and the roles of the characters who work within them. By successfully constructing a coherent and

comprehensive narrative, you as a leader can empower your organization in rising to new challenges.

Despite the proliferation of literature on leadership and the leader’s role, it is necessary to look further and, above all, to see differently. We have sought to do this by asking about the relationships between leadership, authorship, work, collaboration. In emphasizing leadership as co-authorship, we have gone against the established grain. Leaders, especially senior leaders, tend to nourish the theories of researchers who insist on ‘looking under the lamp’, since it enhances the leader’s central role, conveying the feeling that their contribution to the organization is unique and rare. We have suggested, in contrast, that leaders cannot actually function unless other people perform various necessary activities, probably in a distributed and non-cumulative way.

As elucidating as is the metaphor of the leader as an organizational author drawing from a variety of literary genres, it nonetheless gives rise to other questions for further research: (i) What are the necessary conditions and prevailing characteristics of effective leadership as authorship (Is it the sense of legacy? Is it the calling?); (ii) Who contributes more to the organization’s history (leader? or followers?); and (iii) What is the influence of context?

We started this exploration of your leadership role as organizational author with creative copyright law. In the process, we have presented a model that has enabled you to consider your leadership style as related to various literary genres informing different types of leader-follower relationships. It seems relevant for you to recognize your role as the ‘author’ of your organizational history. We hope that more researches and practitioners can join us in co-writing this research avenue.



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