

# **Equalising Power, Respecting Differences and Changing the Conversation: Using a Discourse Lens to Explore Collective Dimensions of Leadership-in-Interaction**

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## **Abstract**

The quantity and breadth of theoretical work in Leadership Studies which focuses on collective dimensions of leadership is growing (Ospina & Foldy, 2015). The concept offers a big tent for scholars whose work addresses different aspects of 'leadership in the plural' (Denis et al., 2012). This work offers a rich conceptual mix from many schools of thought including Relational Leadership (Uhl-Bien, 2006), Leadership-as-practice (Raelin, 2016a), critical approaches (Collinson, 2014), Discursive Leadership (Fairhurst, 2007), networked approaches to leadership (Ospina & Foldy, 2015), and including notions of distributed, shared and collaborative leadership. More recently scholars have begun to consider commensurate research designs and methods to instantiate these ideas and strengthen the empirical base of the work (Ospina et al., 2017). Discourse analytic approaches represent one such development. Discourse analysts working from a number of subdisciplines of Linguistics such as Critical Discourse Analysis (for example, Wodak et al. 2011), Sociolinguistics (for example, Holmes & Marra, 2004, Schnurr, 2009) and Conversation Analysis (for example Clifton, 2006, 2012) have turned their attention to leadership. However much of this work takes an individual leader as the analytical point of entry. Against this backdrop further work from a leadership-in-interaction perspective (for example, Clifton, 2017; Larsson et al., 2018; Larson & Lundholm, 2010; Schnurr & Chan, 2011) is taking the research implications of the collective dimensions of leadership seriously by applying a fine-grained discursive analytical lens to the collective construction process. This paper makes a contribution to this stream of work.

Combining a dual perspective of organisation studies and discourse analysis, two interconnected questions guide the research:

1. What collective leadership practices and behaviours are identified in the literatures of organisation and discourse studies?
2. What can be learnt about these collective dimensions of leadership from the close study of interactional data?

The paper firstly explores key literature on collective dimensions of leadership, synthesising perspectives from organisation studies and discourse studies, before setting out the methodology and approach to data. Early findings are discussed next and expected developments and implications presented.

A first comparative reading of a number of Leadership Studies and Discourse Studies articles which explore aspects of collective leadership, yields five interconnected and overlapping themes. The five themes are power, difference, identity, meaning and conversation. Key literature reviewed includes work from scholars working from a leadership and organisation perspective (for example, Fletcher, 2004, 2012; Ospina, 2017; Ospina & Foldy, 2015; Pearce & Conger, 2004; Raelin, 2016b, 2018; Uhl-Bien, 2006; Yammarino et al., 2012) as well as scholars whose work takes a discursive approach (for example, Clifton, 2006; 2012, 2014; Fairhurst, 2007; Fairhurst & Uhl-Bien, 2012; Holmes, 2005; Holmes et al., 1999; Schnurr & Chan, 2011; Schnurr & Zyats, 2012; Vine et al., 2008; Wodak et al., 2011.) The disciplines approach the topic with different questions and different traditions of interacting with data. Organisation scholars often seek alternative ways of conceptualising leadership which are not wholly dependent on identification of a leader embodied in a single individual. Discourse scholars for whom achieving shared meaning is always a conjoint activity, tend to be more interested in fine-grained analysis of empirical interactive data. In spite of these not inconsiderable differences, strong areas of connection and agreement emerge. These are summarised before a selection and more detailed exploration of three of these key themes is

made. The selection, informed by meeting participant orientations to power (Murphy, 2017) and views of difference (Deering & Murphy, 1998) are synthesised as 'equalising power, respecting differences and changing the conversation'.

The paper is informed methodologically by linguistic ethnography (Blommaert & Rampton, 2011; Rampton, 2007; Rampton, Maybin & Roberts, 2014; Snell et al., 2015; Tusting & Maybin, 2007) which combines an ethnographic, field-based approach to investigating and comprehending tacit and articulated understandings of participants' perspectives and activities, with the empirical procedures and analytical tools of linguistics. The data analysed in this paper are organised around the notion, or research object, of the work professionals do to change ideas and practices around leadership. They are selected from a corpus of interviews, participant observation (workshops), field notes and 15 hours of recorded and transcribed one-to-one and meeting interactions. This selection comprises field notes taken during a day's shadowing of a senior manager during a strategy day involving professionals from across the business, alongside 87 minutes of audio recorded, and later transcribed, interactional data from four syndicate group meetings convened to discuss different aspects of a strategic challenge. Taking the three broad areas of interest identified above as 'directions along which to look' (Blumer, [1969] 1986, p. 148), the interactional data are analysed using movement or changes in direction in the conversation (and not leaders) as focal points in order to identify relevant episodes of talk. These episodes are further analysed using the tools of Interactional Sociolinguistics (Gumperz, 1982) specifically the notion of contextualisation cues (Gumperz, 1982, 1999) to explore how leadership is read off particular linguistic devices and conversational moves. I suggest this reading shapes and is shaped by fleeting and instantaneous interpretations of power relationships in their process of instantiation.

The paper makes comparisons and connections between organisation and discourse orientations to studying collective dimensions of leadership. Two related areas of interest are identified from the analysis: first how leadership is 'read off' specific conversational moves and second, what kind of leadership this is deemed to be. The data show that equalising/defending power, respecting/minimising differences, and changing/containing the conversation are useful framing devices to help articulate collective dynamics involved in the construction of leadership.

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