

Critical leadership - a challenge in the development of a hybrid organization – exemplified by a public sector case study

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Abstract

During the last twenty years, we have in Norway experienced several public sector reforms. Various forms of inter-organizational partnerships intended to increase quality at a lower cost, have grown considerably in importance (Powell and Grodal 2005). Academics and practitioners have struggled with new conceptualizations of organizational structures and leadership behavior, to innovate the understanding and the management of the public sector. Concepts like; network, governance, co-production and co-creation has been coined in order to grasp the many and complex relationships that are developed between municipalities and between municipalities and businesses. (Sørensen and Torfing 2005; Brandsen et al. 2009; Karre 2011; Battilana et al. 2012). Empirical research underlines the importance of networks, showing how inter-organizational relationships lead to various benefits with respect to information diffusion, resource sharing, access to specialized assets, and interorganizational learning (Powell and Grodal 2005).

Marques Ribeiro and Scapens (2011) points at an urgent need for increased knowledge of public organizations' role as coordinators in such networks. In short, the increase of relationships creates a complexity that calls for leadership competence. In the paper, we will present findings that underlines the benefits of critical leadership knowledge in order to successfully manage such situations.

In our research project, we explore challenges in the cooperation between two municipalities, Levanger and Verdal, in Nord-Trøndelag County (Mid-Norway), The Innherred Samkommune (ISK). More specifically, in this paper, we intend to examine the mind-sets of key players in top leadership positions in the new organization. From which theoretical leadership positions are they inspired in their thoughts and actions? How do they relate to the concept of power in their role as municipality leaders? Further, what are the consequences of their actual leadership behavior?

To answer these statements, the paper draw on sensemaking theory (Weick 1995) and network theory (Callon and Latour 1981; Latour 1988; Callon 1991; Law 1992) even when positioning the concept of power. Moreover, we follow arguments from critical theory (Barker

1997, 2001; Alvesson and Spicer 2003; Collinson 2011; Tourish 2013), pointing at leadership as collective and situated practices as opposed to functional understandings.

Collinson (2011) maintain that critical studies challenge hegemonic perspectives in the mainstream literature that tend to underestimate the complexity of leadership dynamics. According to him critical leadership studies have the potential to broaden understanding of leadership dynamics, developing new forms of analysis, as well as opening up innovative lines of enquiry. Collinson further, draws on Lakomski, (2005) in underlining that this tradition invites us to rethink leadership as socially and discursively constructed and reject the positivist method which underpins the mainstream paradigm. As a contrast to mainstream leadership theories, Collinson (2011) refers to Fairhurst and Grant (2010) who argues that we have learned that critical perspectives are more focused on the socially constructed and multiple discourses that tend to characterize leadership dynamics. Accordingly, the proponents of critical leadership thinking frequently draw on qualitative, interpretive and case study research methods that address the shifting possible constructions of leadership located within their complex (and often asymmetrical) conditions, processes and consequences.

Leadership is viewed as a dynamic, collective and community-based achievement. Arguing that leadership is ‘intrinsically relational’ and ‘rooted in context or place’, Ospina and Sorenson emphasize that a constructivist lens provides an opportunity to reveal ‘the multiple sources of leadership, the multiple forms leadership may take, and the multiple places where it can be found’ (2007, p. 189)

Power in organizations may be regarded as an inherent capacity located to essential elements or as an effect of a relational interplay. This distinction presented by Latour (1988) when distinguishing between power as a result of diffusion or an effect of translation. Leaders can exercise power, control and influence in many ways: for example, by constructing strategies and visions, shaping structures and cultures, intensifying and monitoring work, providing rewards and applying sanctions, and through hiring and firing. They can also exercise power by ‘managing meaning’, and defining situations in ways that suit their purposes (Smircich and Morgan, 1982). Establishing and managing new organizational structures requires therefore a change and alignment of people’s mind-set. (Anderson and Anderson 2017).

According to Pondy (1978), organizations with access to several pictures of what new organizations might be, participates more actively in sensemaking process than those with a more limited vocabulary. How many alternatives, and how were these alternatives conceptualized by the leaders in the establishment of the ISK? Sensemaking is a process of interpretation. And as Feldman (1989:19) underlines; “If organizational members are to

understand and share a common sense of the mission of the organization, what it performs good or bad, what kind of problems it faces and how to solve these problems”, you have to direct sensemaking processes. Weick (1995) adds to this that there are more to sensemaking than interpretation; it is also about construction and authorization. Therefore, we might hypothesize that when the leaders of ISK negotiated about the new organization, it was not about discovering a new phenomenon just waiting to be discovered, but a construction of this new entity called ISK, and about giving their perspective authority. This way of reflecting is supported by Schön (1983) when he maintains that problems in the practical world must be constructed out of the material that are given, and which often are confusing, unpleasant and uncertain. We have to establish a common understanding in a complex situation, and the definition of problems are a process where we through interaction gives names to what should be the focus of our actions.

The leader is a person who gives meaning or sense to what we experience, and what we see (Thayer, 1988). Not primarily through a description of how a situation looks like, but in telling what it could be. In our study, we examines how the leaders in ISK performed their roles as sense-givers.