

Leadership and Temporal Practices in a Military Staff Exercise

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Abstract

A central aspect of leadership work is the production of direction for an organization (Crevani, 2018, see also Drath et al., 2008). Within the field of leadership research, this work has historically been associated with the transformational leader (Díaz-Sáenz, 2011). Instead, newer post-heroic research has argued that both setting direction and other leadership work activities are shared, collective and processual activities (Wood, 2005; Fairhurst, 2009; Denis et al., 2010; Crevani, 2018) rather than the responsibility of a single charismatic leader or a hierarchical authority.

In general, talking about organizational direction draws on other concepts. Direction implies both a) teleology: purposes, strategies, desired outcomes and goals, and b) change: movement and time. In this study, we are interested in how an organization aims to take control of its future and how leadership both emerges and influences such processes. Our primary focus is on the temporal practices an organization adopts in trying to plan its current and future direction. On an empirical level we study how the bureaucratic hierarchies, rules and procedures entangle with the leadership activities of individuals and groups in an impermanent organization.

The paper is based on the author's experiences from 2016 and 2017 when he participated in an international crisis management exercise in the role of an ethnographic researcher. The crisis management exercise in question is a yearly organized 10-day exercise hosted by the Swedish military. The exercise gathers over 1200 military officers, government officials and civilians representing humanitarian organizations from circa 20 different countries to train peace keeping and society building roles and skills in a sophisticated computer-aided simulation. The author followed a particular military staff unit (circa 120 members) in their daily tasks through the exercise, with the aim of understanding how the staff organization works in practice and how the organization members make sense of their work.

A military staff unit is an organization tasked to plan the future activities in a military operation. Formally, military organizations enforce a shared leadership model (Denis et al., 2012). A chief of staff is in charge of the staff organization and its job is to support the operation commander in charge of the executive organizations. The staff is involved in gaining awareness of the current situation, in forecasting, preparing for contingencies, and creating strategies and plans to gain competitive advantage over the enemy in the battle space. To be able to do this, the organization needs situation awareness (Endsley, 1995; Lundberg, 2015). However, what is still vague, is how organizations promote situation awareness in practice and how leadership is involved in the process of helping or preventing situation awareness from emerging.

The research results are presented in the form of vignettes. The research shows how the organizational practices are premised on both cyclical and linear temporalities. The organization applies cyclical entrainment practices to provide shared daily rhythms for the organization members, and linear sequential practices to coordinate workflows. Furthermore, the research shows how the disparity of formal documents representing past futures and current operational realities representing present futures can create networks of indecision in the organization hindering the planning effort.

Many of the staff organization's direction planning activities are formally organized according to bureaucratic rules and business processes. The staff organization is organized similarly to industrial organizations: the coordination of knowledge work follows the logic of traditional production planning. These standard operating procedures (SOPs) act as substitutes of human leadership (Kerr & Jermier, 1978). Yet, in certain situations these organizing principles may hinder the emergence of collective situation awareness. In such situations, the leadership activities initiated by the senior officers attempt to supplement the collective direction setting processes.

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