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Leadership On Demand: Followers as initiators and inhibitors of managerial leadership



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Summary A key aspect of leadership is the followers' constructions of its value and relevance. Based on two empirical, qualitative case studies, this paper highlights the importance of the 'demand' for leadership when leader–follower relationships are established. We further discuss how followers influence, inhibit and initiate managerial leadership (i.e. leadership acts from their formal superior targeting themselves), and suggest 'Leadership On Demand' as a useful metaphor when trying to conceptualize the leader–follower dynamics in our study.

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Introduction

Leadership is often described in terms of influencing meanings, norms, feelings, thinking and values, mainly through interpersonal, non-coercive means (Kotter, 1985; Ladkin, 2010; Smircich & Morgan, 1982; Zaleznik, 1977). Influencing thoughts and meanings involves a voluntary side; followers need to be persuaded, not just enforced by formal authority of management. You can order people to do a particular task or to comply with standards, but not to alter their moods or buy into a certain value or definition of reality. In organizational settings, this makes the members' *demand* for managerial leadership crucial. With *managerial leadership* we refer to leadership (in the way previously described)

exercised by people holding a managerial (appointed or elected, but formally superior) position, targeting formal subordinates (Yukl, 1989). It is here important to bear in mind that many aspects of everyday managerial work therefore fall outside the scope of 'leadership' as described above. Demand indicates the interest in 'receiving' managerial leadership, i.e. taking a clear (but possibly temporal, conditional or situation-specific) followership position in relation to a formally superior manager and viewing him/her as a leader, i.e. a significant source for meaning-making, support, and/or direction.

Understanding the subordinates' demand for leadership is a challenge facing many organizations and managers. The important and fairly recent turn in leadership research with an increased interest in and focus on *followers* as important co-constructors of leadership processes (e.g. Carsten, Uhl-Bien, West, Patera, & McGregor, 2010; Collinson, 2005, 2006; DeRue & Ashford, 2010; Hollander, 1992; Kelley, 2008; Riggio, Chaleff, & Lipman-Blumen, 2008; Shamir, Pillai, Bligh, & Uhl-Bien, 2007), opens up new possibilities to explore this issue. In this paper, we build on this body of literature that deals

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with the views and roles of ‘non-leaders’, and their agency when it comes to how acts of leadership are framed, conducted and evaluated. Despite the growing interest in followers and followership during the last years, ‘the vast majority of research continues to focus on leaders and leadership’ (Bligh, 2011, p. 426) and as Carsten et al. (2010) writes: ‘we still know very little about how followers enact their own roles as part of the leadership equation’ (p. 544). Hence, there are many aspects of followership that remain to be addressed (Kelley, 2008). One such followership-related research question that remains ‘relatively unexplored’ (Bligh, 2011, p. 432) is how leaders and, perhaps especially, followers play an active role in ‘managing’ dynamic leader–follower processes (see also Baker, 2007, p. 56). We claim that one important aspect of this complex question is related to the understanding of followers’ demand for leadership, since it most likely affects how leadership initiatives will be perceived and received by the targets, i.e. the followers. A ‘demand’ perspective gives here a new angle, contributing to (a) a downplaying of a leader-focus and (b) to a more open view of the experienced need for managerial leadership as a helpful organizational practice.

The aim of this paper is to contribute to the question of how subordinates, as potential followers, ‘manage’ dynamic leader–follower processes, and especially how they can be involved in the very initiation of managerial leadership processes.

In this study, we therefore investigate and pay careful attention to followers’ views on leadership, what leadership (if any) they expect from their superiors, when leadership is called for, how it is influenced and initiated. We also investigate how their superiors understand and relate to their subordinates’ demand for leadership. It is important to note that we are studying the perceived or experienced need for and interest in managerial leadership, and *not* managerial leadership processes per se, or how they are enacted and negotiated in specific instances (e.g. real time conversations). It is rather the overall constructions and the negotiated nature of the relationship (potentially in terms of leaders and followers) that we are interested in. Approaching leadership–followership as a complex and socially constructed phenomenon (Bligh, 2011; Fairhurst & Grant, 2010), we ask not only how followers contribute to the construction of leadership, but we are also open to the whether they are interested in constructing their relations in terms of leadership–followership at all?

We do not want to pigeonhole the study too narrowly (Sandberg & Alvesson, 2011), but position it in the context of follower-centred approaches to leadership and leadership theories that privilege the role of followers from a constructionist perspective (e.g. Carsten et al., 2010; DeRue & Ashford, 2010; Meindl, 1995). We further locate the study within a ‘moderate’ (rather than radical) constructionist stance (Barlebo Wenneberg, 2001). The paper contributes by empirically investigating the followers’ *demand* for (interest in and receptivity to) acts of managerial leadership, in contrast to the numerous studies of the construction (the meanings) of leadership per se, or how different follower traits, attitudes, and emotions influence their perceptions of certain types of leaders (see Bligh & Schyns, 2007 for an overview). We see our contribution as of broad relevance to the understanding of how subordinates, as potential followers, influence managerial leadership.

This introduction section of the paper will now be followed by an overview of literature that deals with followers’ potential need for and active part in managerial leadership processes. The review of the literature is structured in three related subsections: (a) the dynamic construction of leaders and followers, (b) followers in less need of managerial leadership, and (c) (pro)active followers as co-producers of leadership. After this literature review, we present two empirical case studies. The findings from these studies are then compared and discussed.

Followers’ ‘need’ for and active part in managerial leadership

The dynamic construction of leaders and followers

The discursive and fluid construction of leadership and followership (the latter more or less explicitly) has been explored and emphasized in various ways by scholars such as Bresnen (1995), Carsten et al. (2010), Collinson (2005), Cunliffe (2001), Fairhurst (2007), Gemmill and Oakley (1992), Grint (2000, 2005), Kelly (2008), Ospina and Sorenson (2006) and Vine, Holmes, Marra, Pfeifer, and Jackson (2008). The meanings and reasoning of followers are crucial for when leadership relations are established, emphasized respectively de-emphasized and marginalized (DeRue & Ashford, 2010; Hollander, 1992; Howell & Shamir, 2005; Shamir, 2007). We agree with Fairhurst and Grant (2010) when they write: ‘... leadership [as well as followership] is co-constructed, a product of sociohistorical and collective meaning making, and negotiated on an ongoing basis through a complex interplay among leadership actors, be they designated or emergent leaders, managers, and/or followers’ (p. 172).

Leadership/followership-relations are therefore not just simply prescribed or determined by formal hierarchical positions, but are dynamically claimed/granted (DeRue & Ashford, 2010). Subordinates are not always followers, just as managers are not always leaders (Bedeian & Hunt, 2006). Leadership and followership should rather be seen as ‘reciprocal and mutually reinforcing identities... endorsed and reinforced within a broader organizational context, and is dynamic over time’ (DeRue & Ashford, 2010, p. 627). How people in formally subordinate positions construct their work situation and organizational context is therefore vital, being a key part in the formation of a possible demand for managerial leadership. This demand for (and potentially positive reception to) leadership interventions is not given, but follows from the subordinates’ views of themselves, the situation and the relationship with their superior (DeRue & Ashford, 2010). Powerful managers can persuade subordinates that they ‘need’ (experience that they strongly benefit from) leadership (Gray & Densten, 2007), i.e. that the visions, value propositions, cognitive framings, moral and psychological support, advice and instructions offered by the manager/leader is highly valuable. But still, when it comes to leadership, subordinates need to accept these suggestions and understand themselves as followers: ‘[I]f a person claims leadership in a setting but others do not reinforce that claim with supportive grants... [It is] insufficient for a

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