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Reflexive Leadership

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Book Review of

Mats Alvesson, Martin Blom and Stefan Sveningsson 2017 *Reflexive Leadership*, Sage

Mats Alvesson is a thinker and writer who invites us to take unorthodox and revealing perspectives on organisations and what goes on within and without them. In recent times he has produced, alone and with various co-authors, a number of illuminating publications on leadership and on organisational culture. Here, with his colleagues – Martin Blom and regular co-author Stefan Sveningsson – Alvesson puts forward the view that 'leadership is a suggestive, fashionable and broad term that easily attracts and seduces. It is thus a source of much naivety, wishful thinking and even stupidity.' (p15). The authors are highly critical of those writers who have attributed only good things to leadership and leaders, and who have argued that the success of organisations is all down to leadership. Part of the problem, the book argues, is that 'leadership has come to mean basically anything that has a positive ring to it.' Alvesson, Blom and Sveningsson seek to rectify that by producing a more limited, precise definition of leadership, and then by showing how reflexivity can help leaders (and followers) to behave in more thoughtful and useful ways.

Leadership is defined as 'influencing ideas, meanings, understandings and identities of others within an asymmetrical (unequal) relational context' (p.3). Leadership is thus about influence, as many other writers have suggested (Yukl, 2013), but restricted to being influence of a certain kind (about meanings and understandings) and to being about influence in a certain context (between what Alvesson, Blom and Sveningsson call a 'high influential person' and a 'low influential person'). The exercise of hierarchical authority in organisations is not leadership, but management. And both leadership and management are distinct from the exercise of power.

Leadership, management and the exercise of power are three of the six 'modes of organising' that Alvesson, Blom and Sveningsson identify (the other three are group work, network-based peer influencing, and autonomy). These different modes are explored in a little more depth in chapter 7. Not everything within organisations needs to depend on leadership – the other five modes present alternative ways of organising collective work. However, although these six modes of organising are distinct, the authors admit that 'in many cases it is difficult to separate leadership, management and power' (p.20).

There is a difficulty in trying to redefine a concept such as leadership, as the authors attempt to do here, which is that so many others have tried to do the same thing, each in their different ways. As Ralph Stogdill (1974) famously said: 'There are almost as many definitions of leadership as there are persons who have attempted to define the concept' – and there have been many more definitions since he made that observation. This definition appears to separate leadership from actions that provide direction for individuals and groups - unless those actions involve influencing meaning, such as linking plans to higher purposes, what Mumford (2006) would call visionary leadership - and thus departs from common understandings of a central element of leadership.

Reflexivity is defined as the 'ambition to carefully and systematically take a critical view of one's own assumptions, ideas and favoured vocabulary and to consider if alternative ones make sense' (p.14). Reflexive leadership – as in the title of the book - is thus engaging in exercises of influencing followers about meanings and understandings, whilst thoughtfully reviewing one's own thoughts and actions (and those of others involved in the situation). Deep in the book, in chapter 12, there are

four very interesting case studies of reflexive and unreflexive leadership, which bring these ideas to life, and which could be the focus of group discussions on executive management development programmes about the part that reflexivity can play in effective leadership actions.

Between the defining of terms in chapter 1 and 2, and the case studies on reflexive leadership in chapter 12, there are several chapters that consist mainly of critiques of leadership theory and practice. Chapter 3 provides brief summaries of the main theories about leadership, organised chronologically in a way that will be familiar to readers of texts on leadership, together with critiques of the theories. Chapter 4 argues that much leadership theory is ideologically-bound, emphasising good intentions, good relations, consensus, harmony and achievement. Chapter 5 discusses leadership and organisational culture, but there is more interesting and in-depth material on this in other publications by these writers (Alvesson, 2013; Alvesson and Sveningsson, 2015). Chapter 6 discusses the possible roles of followers in leadership, and the extent to which followers may construct, or co-construct, leadership.

In chapter 8, Alvesson, Blom and Sveningsson present one of the main contributions of the book, suggesting five varieties of leadership activity, five approaches to influencing others about meaning. In this, the longest chapter in the book, they argue that people with leadership ambitions in organisations typically need to deal with:

1. Overall purpose and meaning beyond the here and now
2. Issues to do with values and morals that guide everyday activity
3. Personal, emotional problems and conflicts in the workplace
4. Good group relations and climate at work
5. Supporting the development of more junior members of the organisation

Varieties of leadership to focus on each of these issues are represented by the 5 Ps: prophesying a vision; preaching values and morals; psychotherapeutic interventions; party hosting, to create a good work environment; and pedagogical work to support learning. The chapter provides positive examples of each variety of leadership, followed by a critique that indicates potential problems with each type. Perhaps the authors miss a variety here – there is an opportunity to add another P to deal with a sixth issue faced by many leaders, that of representing their group or department to others, and of influencing others to realise the value and importance of the group's contribution and achievements: the sixth P would be 'promoting the group'.

Chapter 9 moves back to critique again, focusing on constraints on leadership in managerial work, observing that 'the majority of managers cannot do the leadership they claim to do particularly well' (p.142). Chapter 10 makes a more positive contribution, asking whether, in particular situations, leaders and followers may have a shared understanding of leadership, or whether there may be differences. Alvesson, Blom and Sveningsson provide a simple and useful two-axis model: one axis represents whether leader and followers have a shared perception or a different perception of what is going on; the other axis represents whether they have a similar or different perception of the quality or value of what is going on. Short case studies drawn from earlier published material from these writers give examples of each of the four possible combinations. This is a good chapter for practitioners.

Chapter 11 aims to focus on how misalignments between perceptions of leaders and followers can be identified, clarified and improved upon. It begins by exploring the circumstances under which leaders should adapt to folllowers' ideas about leadership, and the circumstances under which they should impose their own ideas, and presents a practical model to aid thinking about this. It then

make some suggestions about how to encourage collective reflexivity and genuine dialogue on modes of organising, but this latter part of the chapter seems too short, and lacking in detail.

Chapter 12 – on reflexive leadership – is followed by a chapter on reflexive followership, which would have been improved by the kind of case study material that makes chapter 12 so interesting. A final chapter is headed 'Conclusions', but contains not only conclusions but also warns of traps that leaders may fall into (such as the trap of continual positive thinking, the trap of needing to be liked, or the trap of excessive self-confidence).

The book contributes a number of ideas of interest and value for those who seek frameworks that may usefully be applied to understanding and improving behaviour in organisations. The case studies on reflexive leadership are thought-provoking, the varieties of leadership – the 5Ps – are memorable and interesting, and the idea of alignments and misalignments of understanding between leader and followers of the business of leadership is perceptive and practical.

However, much time and many pages are spent in criticism of the ideas of others about leadership, and this material is presented in ways that come to appear repetitive. For example, Alvesson, Blom and Sveningsson have no truck with the popular 'leader as hero' discourse, but they also have no time for the idea of dispersed or relational leadership either, finding it 'a somewhat confusing literature' (p.93) and preferring to call these processes 'group work'. A case for this is made at several points in the book, in different chapters, when it would be more satisfying to see the arguments brought together in one place – say in chapter 3, where other leadership theories are critiqued – and for the authors to make a thorough case and then move on. Jeffrey Pfeffer's 2015 critique of current leadership theories is more pointed, better structured, and more convincing.

In much of the criticism of other ideas about leadership, Alvesson, Blom and Sveningsson appear to accept the meaning of 'leadership' framed by these other writers. It might have been interesting to read a more systematic application to these studies of the more restricted definition that Alvesson and colleagues suggest here. What proportion of how many of these studies could be said to adopt a similar definition? Where do the conclusions of these studies coincide with, where do they differ from, those of this book?

For readers of this journal, the book offers useful ideas and illustrations about practising reflexivity when taking action in organisations. Reflexive thinking can provide the challenge to assumptions and beliefs that can also be found in the working of action learning sets. Are we thinking reflexively about our own behaviour and that of others – or are we working on the basis of mistaken assumptions and faulty assessments? The case studies in chapter 12 offer good illustrations. Sadly, the book does not mention action learning, although the title of one chapter – 'Reflexive group work on leadership and its alternatives' – gave grounds for hope that it would. Perhaps an opportunity to be taken if there is a second edition?

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