Leadership and Learning in-between Politics and Practice.

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In this paper I present a study of leadership and learning in the school sector within a municipality in Sweden. I chose this “organisation” in order to be able to analyse a truly complex situation with many subcultures such as political actors, civil servants and principals (a triad). This choice was the result of previous studies (Hultman, 1989; 1998; 2001 a, b; 2004 b) where different subcultures were studied (principals, teachers, preschool teachers). In this study my focus will be on the interplay and interaction between subcultures and the ambition to better understand how actors learn and how they execute leadership.

Leadership and learning

Against the background of that which I have accounted for above, which I call “the triad theory”, I want to view *leadership* as a process (Bass, 1981; Yukl, 1989) but a process that is not one-way. Many of the definitions that have been formulated over the years have an oriented relationship (the arrow goes from the leader to those led) with pronounced management, goal orientation and power execution. I include the power relationships in my definition but leave open the issue of who has power over whom.

I retain some of the processes and mechanisms that the definitions have in common, namely that they deal with “an interaction between two or more people” and “concern a process of exerting influence with the ambition to influence others”. But I do not assume this is a question of “an influence exerted by the leader directed towards those led”. The fact is that I consider such a directed definition can make us disregard important relationships and loose-couplings in the interaction mentioned.

For Hultman (1998) the definition of leadership is the “relationship” itself and it is created, established and maintained by encounters and interactions that take place in the environment or between the nodes. By relationship is not meant a social psychological relation, although this is part of it too, but I regard it as a reciprocal relationship with some form of exchange relationship. It is built up and contains confidences but the relationship can sometimes be unequal and based on the exertion of power. What defines the relationship is the parties involved. Leadership is not established if one party renounces it. At the same time a boss-employee relation can exist, of course. In my view the latter means that there is a power relationship, which will also be of importance in this study. Concerning leadership, I have earlier (Hultman, 1998) formulated my experiences in terms of “to lead those who lead themselves”, which will be an important metaphor for me in this analysis.

This study will analyse the interaction in an unbiased a manner as possible. And also that the relationship between the nodes in the system can adopt another character than that stated in the classic definitions. For this reason I will connect the study of leadership to the work situation and see leadership in terms of learning, as will be developed below.

Learning is understood as a process of thinking and interacting and as a process of change (Ellström, 2004). For me this process of change may mean different aspects i.e. a change in

behaviour and/or a change in knowledge and understanding. Learning also involves different attitudes for reflecting about the on-going activities. This can concern questioning fundamental values and patterns of action as they e.g. can be perceived as obstacles to change. I start out from three types of learning processes in this study. In “single-loop learning” the changes take place within existing frames, while “double-loop learning” means a change in fundamental patterns and attitudes (Argyris & Schön, 1978). Questioning the authoritarian decision-making and replacing it with more democratic decision-making can be mentioned as an example of the latter case. In “meta-learning” the learning processes involve realising that there are different forms of decision-making and leadership, and that one learns to identify these forms in one’s own organisation. This can apply to the construction of a local organisational theory from one’s own experience. One tries to answer the question: What is it that applies to us and what does it mean?

Other forms of meta-learning are a form of hidden curriculum i.e. one has learnt something by participating in/contributing to a change or what takes place, regardless of if one wants to or not and one is marked by this. One can also say that we learn, we gain knowledge about what we participate in. So meta-learning can be both positive and negative. It is important for me to call attention to this, in particular the cognitive and emotional dimensions. A negative effect could be that one learns that there is no point in getting involved, as it will not lead anywhere. Or that there still is someone else who has already decided how things will be done (power). Positive effects can be that one gains self-confidence by testing previously unknown competences one has, or that one learns how to implement change.

Some circumstances should receive attention here. It has proved to be very difficult to establish and plan double-loop learning (Argyris, 1991; Weick & Westley, 1996; Cohen & Sproull, 1996). The most common form is single-loop learning and we have not learnt to appreciate this form to a sufficiently great extent (Hultman, 2004 a). Hultman uses a quote from Feldman & Pentland (2003: 102, 115) on this matter. They formulate a theory of organizational routines where routines is a social phenomena consisting of two aspects: structure and agency.

And just as musical improvisation involves listening to what others are playing, improvisation in organizational routines involves attending to the actions taken by relevant others and the details of the situation.

...

... organizational routines always have the potential for change. A theory of organizational routines that includes agency, and, therefore, subjectivity and power, enables us to understand more about the dynamics of organizational routines and how these relate to stability, flexibility, and change in organizations.

Different types of learning can appear simultaneously e.g. so that meta-learning exists but double-loop learning does not. This means we have failed with what we wanted to achieve (the double-loop) but still get meta-learning. The effect on our daily work has not previously been paid attention to, so distinctly. Meta-learning becomes the most important dimension to me.

Research on municipal leadership cultures

A precondition and departure point for the studies is the idea that the “political project” is built upon and demands the different traditions’ (cultures in the triad) knowledge for its execution.

By traditions and cultures I mean genuinely different perceptions and experiences of the municipality's idea. For natural reasons, the participating actors quite simply have different values and practical experiences. But we assume they are genuinely different and both stable and undergoing change. In an extreme case one can actually imagine that they really do not understand one another (Siskin, 1994) at all (which remains to be seen). In reality it is probably the case that they understand one another in different ways as regards different issues and work tasks. The formulation is shown more as a way of illustrating the idea behind the notion of zoning (Peterson, 1984) and mutual influence. Learning and leadership become something that is influenced by the interaction with other traditions.

The theories on leadership (Hultman, 2001b; Spillane, 2006) and learning (Lave & Wenger, 1991) that is used, state that knowledge is something contextual, i.e. woven into our everyday work. Human beings are active and create, for the most part, their own knowledge, which is not something passively received. This is why I want to focus on the creation of meaning and meetings as the main arena for this study. Furthermore, human beings are, in their learning, dependent on the situation, i.e. the work tasks as such, colleagues, clients, professional tradition, the spirit of the community and experienced frame factors.

Aim of the study and underlying hypotheses

The idea behind this study and its execution, deals with the study of a number of different, traditional activities that have ambitions to realise formulated visions, as well as the field of politics and its harsh reality. The data that are presented focus on learning and leadership with an orientation towards the "flows and interaction in multi-organisational contexts". In actual fact, a study of many organisations and their interactions. In other words the encounter between different traditions and cultures. The core questions becomes: What do the actors in the triads learn and how is this related to their respective culture and tradition? How are leadership and learning strategies created? In the prolongation of these questions lies the earlier stated interest for the "triad theory".

The study of leadership and learning processes is focusing on the overlap between the political intentions and their practical realisation, which means a focus on organisational linkages (Goodman et al, 1994; Hultman et al, 2002). The transition between these domains is not perceived as one-sided, i.e. from politics to practice, but is assumed to be an arena for negotiations or as has been formulated above. By negotiations is meant an exchange of management signals, perceptions, knowledge and ambitions, between the actors in different arenas. Others have used metaphors such as games (Lindensjö & Lundgren, 1986; Firestone, 1989). The latter speaks of the "Ecology of Games" and refers to individual games or "policy games" as well as the different games that are part of a system, which will be of interest in this study.

When I discuss leadership I view it as a phenomenon and a practice that to a great extent is all about learning, this becomes central in the study (Ellström, 1999). Hultman (1998, 2001 b; 2004 b) have shown that it becomes meaningful to perceive leadership in terms of learning. And then learning should be understood as a form of learning in complex environments where there is a completely different learning situation than that which recurs in learning rhetoric. Instead we see parallels to the theory of complexity and quantum mechanics with their self-organising systems. A study of horizontal organic structures and not a ratification of established hierarchies.

Tentatively I will start from an analysis of the content (the exchange and interaction between the nodes) in terms of power, learning and legitimisation (Firestone, Fitz & Broadfoot, 1999). I assume that the interaction between the nodes can be characterised by 1) competition and a

win-lose line of thinking (power) 2) compromise and curiosity (learning) and 3) rhetoric and loose-couplings (legitimisation). And these dimensions will constitute a proposal for the analysis. The dimensions are in line with my theoretical exposition above.

Methods and approaches

The arenas in the study was composed of different meetings within the triads, both formal and informal ones. At a later stage, in the process, the informal dimension was focused on more, through participation in different meetings leading forward in a natural manner. The methods that primarily was used was interviews and participant observations in activities as well as feedback seminars (practical dialogues). The actors that was focused was local actors (principals, political actors and civil servants). My methodical approach is steered by theory and earlier research, but is at the same time inductive and qualitative. I utilise a “snowball” technique in our choice of method, which means that I seek proximity to the phenomena and processes studied and allow this to influence some parts of the continued choice of methods.

This study was performed during September 2003 to September 2004. Participant observations for 40 weeks (two researchers and 100 days each) and 14 contextual interviews (see below Figure 1). Data are composed of field notes and transcribed conversations and transcriptions of interviews from two different triads. Each actor/node was shadowed for three to four months. We visited each actor and participated in the work process approximately three days a week, in meetings (formal and informal) and in everyday activities. Most days started at 07.30 a.m. and ended at 5.00 p.m. Sometimes half-days were spent, depending on the agenda. We tried to sample a broad range of situations as well as everyday activities. In the latter case hoping to catch the informal dimension, day-to-day events and face-to-face interaction, the stream of immediate events and the flow of work. We were spending time with different persons and trying to participate in the space in-between actors. During spring 2005 we gave feedback and conducted interactive seminars to different groups of actors in our triads.

I was searching for the arenas that contain “leadership”, above all, that which is enacted between the nodes in the triad. Furthermore, the study of transitions by means of a method that we have developed during the study of processes of implementation and change, where one follows an issue through the entire process (Hultman & Klasson, 1998; Hultman, 2004). I use the expression “linked process interviews” (Hultman 2004 b) to describe participation and the contextual interviews (for the latter see Hultman 1998, 2001a). The idea is to follow an issue into and between the nodes in the triads. My experience, from previous studies utilising this method, is that one gets a feeling for what is connected to the issue at hand (values etc.) and how that is changed during the process. This method also provides an illustration of the transitions (organisational links) between the nodes. Parallel to these opportunities the method gives a natural entry into the focus of the study. At the same time as one follows the issue, it becomes natural to collect data on different cultures/nodes. It was a participative observation of and in the transition between the cultures.

An important part of our analyses is an active engagement from the participants. From my viewpoint, they are perceived as co-constructors in the research process. This means that they not only receive feedback but that they are an integral part of the studies. An interview does not merely become a “collection of data”, but those who take part in the interview are parties in a problem-solving conversation, to a certain extent a reciprocal process. It is not only the words and sentences that are important in interpretations, but also what happened between the parties in the interview/observation. The interaction is “played back” when one read the exact transcription of the interview and thereby receive valuable information that not only lies in the words themselves. I call these contextual interviews (Hultman, 1998; 2001a), which are accounted for in the figure below.

/Figure 1 here/

This is an interview that follows a content structure that the researcher bring to the dialogue. But it is only as support in order to remember a number of themes. It is built upon a dialogue being created between two people who are interested in the same thing and who have both similar and different experiences of this phenomenon, e.g. politicians' learning or principals' leadership. The transcribed interviews show a conversation, not a question and answer pattern. The dialogue or the contextual interview gives continual feedback on the dialogue, keeping to the theme, giving possibilities for validation and a control by paraphrasing (repetitions) that can either be a positive answer or the interviewee's correcting the interviewer (for a more in-depth critical discussion see Hultman, 1998, 2001a). The method or approach gives opportunities for mutual discoveries, "making things visible" and "making processes conscious" and can in its turn give suggestions for theoretical findings.

This method facilitates a form of "hypothesis testing" during the interview, i.e. one tests one's preconception (preliminary theory), or tests emerging fragments of theory, which later are seen more clearly in the transcripts and give hints to empirical findings, thus the "every-day" shows its theoretical character that emerges via an interpretation. In the organisational system with nodes, the dialogue becomes a mutual researching of the culture and its relationship to the system. The design of this study emanates from my experiences from earlier analyses (Hultman, 1989; 1998; 2001 a, b; 2004 b; Hultman & Robertson Hörberg, 1998) as was mentioned above.

Results

The relationship between politicians, civil servants and principals and that leadership system has not been studied frequently before. Yet some researchers, e.g. Siskin (1994), Sahlin-Andersson (1999, a, b), Blomgren, Lindholm & Sahlin-Andersson (1999) and Hultman (1998, 2001 a, b) have studied aspects of these triads and in particular contributed with interpretations and theoretical fragments that lead to new reflections. Hultman (2001 a, b) has e.g. analysed part of the system and been able to illuminate leadership paradoxes.

In the figure below, I make the assumption that it can be productive to understand an actor's learning and creation of meaning in terms of "measuring" and "meetings", here shown as an example from the perspective of the politician. In the triad, this actor is part of a system that comprises the other actors in the triad. Thus a complex system of meaning-making processes is created, which in this case will be interpreted in terms of leadership. My own research (Hultman, 1998, 2001 b) and that of others (e.g. Gronn, 1983; Yukl, 1989) shows that it is the interaction or "meeting" dimension that dominates the work of leaders and the execution of leadership. And this is illustrated in this study:

... sometimes it is better to talk with people instead of e.g. sending a mail. In the latter case you miss the opportunity to situate your answer or opinion. (interview with politician)

"Talk" facilitates understanding, influence and the receiving of new viewpoints. This system can be studied in terms of relations, negotiations and loose-couplings as a manifestation of the interaction between different, genuine cultures i.e. their ideals, values, traditions and working environment. It is this system I will give a deeper elucidation of in order to generate an understanding for the leadership and learning in complex systems.

/Figure 2 here/

The three dimensions are all important, but I will focus on the creation of meaning via meetings. My data show that the actor's "leadership" is formed through a natural creation of meaning via reflections-in-actions. There, situations and meetings enter as a powerful component in the interaction with the others in the triad. As is shown in the above figure, the person is also engaged in interaction with other important actors outside the mentioned triad. It may be more meaningful to see this interaction as a mutual process of influence. Sometimes it is hard to discover – who is leading whom?

It can also be productive to understand leadership in another way than we normally do. I have (Hultman, 1998) suggested that it can be profitable to perceive leadership as: "the art of leading others who lead themselves". And to problemise this even further, then the "relationships" themselves can be of interest. By relationships is meant the most central fields in the interaction between the nodes in the system. It is here that politics and leadership are enacted. Data, in this study, reveal a similar structure as suggested by Paradise (1996) when she talks about "separate-but-together".

Hence a combination of what has been said up to now can be illustrated by the figure below where the triad is perceived as a "relationship" between the different actors or cultures. These relationships are of two kinds, at the same time. For some situations and questions relations are tight/close, but for others loose/distant.

/Figure 3 here/

The interplay and dialogues are determined by the different "worlds" that they define. In a political organisation this concerns the different interests and values that its actors hold.

Data show that there is a special interplay between actors in the triad. I have seen this in different situations. This interplay can be understood as a problem-solving process. Thus, a meeting is characterised by an exchange of interpretations, expressions and observations of ongoing activities. Work and learning become interwoven and understanding is created by means of listening, adaptation (to new information etc.), interpretation and the testing of ideas against others. One example can be the situation where one launches ideas verbally and waits for different reactions and so on. This can be a deliberate "test" that is performed in a safe environment with lots of space for moderations and adaptations, without narrowing options. The way I understand it, it is not opportunistic but that could also, sometimes, be part of it. To me it seemed like a strategy that was learned over time. Sometimes this strategy was not in harmony with the situation at hand, due to conflicts and values, structure (improper design of new organisation) and distance (few interactions).

In each node of the network (see figure above) the actor is situated in his/her culture with a work situation that can be characterised by the expression social ambiguity, see below. That becomes a structure for the actor's "meetings" that I discussed above. The actor lives in a flora of logics that creates another type of rationality than that we usually perceive as valid. This was noticed early on by Lightall (1973), who named it multiple realities. A contextual rationality as a foundation for acts of leadership and learning processes. The different actors, in the figure above and the interests they represent, can result in different emphasises as I have attempted to illustrate in the above figure. They have different ideals shown here as Goals, Economy and Pupils, respectively, but here more as a way of dramatising the picture of the differences between the nodes. All of them showed a profound interest in pupils' well-being.

/Figure 4 here/

The social ambiguity arises by there being many “goals” that constitute the complex environment. From my data it is not possible to reduce this to e.g. “goal-management” i.e. only one relationship/”goal”. Instead there is an abundance of influencing factors. It is in this environment that the foundations of leadership and learning are laid and in the interaction with the other actors in the system. In this line of reasoning I perceive that leadership co-varies with learning and this concerns a learning situation in everyday life for the different actors in the system. I even notice that in reality this involves a very autonomous leadership for the individual actor with loose-couplings towards the others. At the same time this individual actor is part of a network i.e. a joint system that is the municipality and the political system. But the different actors must handle these “double” relationships that I understand as “embedded” and “related” (compare Siskin, 1994; Hultman, 1998). They are embedded in the sense that they are loosely related to others and in the middle of multiple realities in the local arena. They are at the same time “related” to actors in the triad, which means that they are related (of the same kind) without having a relation (physical contacts).

What is it that really happens in what seems to take place? The breach can be perceived in many different ways. Let me take just one example. Should one perceive the triads as management structures that exist in harmony? Or can it be productive to ponder over this system in terms of loyalties (Hultman, 1998, 2001 a, b) and parallel discourses? Data in this study inspires to reflections in these directions. A concern for the study of the interactions where politics meets administration at the same time as they meet local activities i.e. everyday activities in schools.

Conclusions

How can we understand leadership and learning in complex organisations if we discover triads that do not “stick together” at the same time as they constitute a system? Few studies earlier has chosen this method of approaching leadership and learning. But in classic leadership research and in theories from “observational studies of leaders” we find theories of interest, yet they seem to be partially forgotten. I refer mainly to “idiosyncrasy credit theory” (Yukl, 1989), “instead of leadership” theories (Kerr & Jermir, 1978), theory of grass root bureaucracy (Crowson & Porter-Gehrie, 1980), micro-political actors (Cohen & March, 1974), zone theories (Peterson, 1984) and theories on buffers and meaning-creating actors (Willis, 1980 and Pitner & Ogawa, 1981).

According to Peterson (1984) complex organisations can be described as zoned. In my data I also see that interaction in the system is two-fold. At the same time we have formal traditional hierarchies and an phenomenon that I call tilted or horizontal hierarchies:

Decision-making in interaction but with the preservation of political power and local discretion is how we can understand this dynamic process. In the local arena there is a constant need to adapt decision and action to evolving circumstances. A similar dynamic was discovered early in implementation research (Lipsky, 1976; McLaughlin, 1998). In my case this adaptation is often in a feedback loop involving civil servants and politicians. And they can

adjust their behaviour and talk to local frame factors and values. In Figure 3 the proper view would be to “see” this graph as horizontal.

This adaptation in daily work is created in a sophisticated interaction between actors at different levels and professions. Single actors learn about others’ preferences and duties over time and in formal meetings and informal conversations. They become sensitive to options and that which is impossible to do.

In turn, this is also an important part of the leadership process. You cannot lead and get things done if you do not know what can be done. And you have to learn that via conversations and interaction with people in the triad. It is important that each of the nodes meet with the others to exchange attitudes, values and preferences all the time. Actors’ official talk also has another function to perform so it is not only that message, that one can listen to, you have to know what they really want and would like to do.

System leadership is in-between, so to speak, and that means that it is not like mechanical compliance and routine directives. In order to influence this system you have to live in interactions. And of course, different forms of power (political, expert and professional) can, to a great extent, explain why things happen or not. In this interaction and face-to-face meetings each actor’s learning is to a great extent forms of meta-learning. In such situations many things are said in different ways. One listens and notes body-language and gets valuable information about others and how they think. It is a sort of a mutual giving and taking with the preservation of roles and duties.

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