

**Researching leadership as a social process**

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Recent developments in the leadership literature have seen a progressive shift from leader-centric perspectives, which are now widely regarded as too asocial and too atemporal, to more contextual (Endrissat & von Arx, 2013; Fairhurst, 2009), plural (Denis, Langley, & Sergi, 2012; Gronn, 2002), critical (Collinson, 2005; Fletcher, 2004), relational (Uhl-Bien & Ospina, 2012), and dynamic (Carroll & Simpson, 2012; Crevani, 2015) approaches towards re-theorising leadership. In this short paper, I will focus specifically on the recently emergent idea of leadership-as-practice (Raelin, 2016), which radically de-centres individual actors in order to engage differently with the contextual and temporal dynamics of ‘how’ leadership work is actually accomplished in the day-to-day unfolding of social practice. Before I proceed though, a caveat: it is not my intention to suggest that other theories of leadership are wrong or even flawed, but rather that all theories, including leadership-as-practice, are inevitably incomplete and limited. However, different theories do invite different types of research questions and they offer differently valuable insights into the complexities of leadership. Furthermore, and importantly for this workshop, different theories are grounded in different philosophical assumptions, which in turn demand careful consideration of methodologies appropriate to the research endeavour.

## **Theory development**

My methodological inquiry begins with a consideration of the theoretical and philosophical assumptions that inform the notion of practice in leadership-as-practice. For Pickering (1995), there is an essential duality in the distinction between practices and practice, where ‘duality’ implies two fundamentally different ways of approaching a phenomenon (e.g. the duality of ostensive and performative aspects of power (Latour, 1986), the duality of structure and agency as aspects of organisation (Giddens, 1984), or the duality of particles and waves as aspects of light (Barad, 2007)). Each aspect offers unique insights into the phenomenon, which are complementary but ultimately incommensurable because they are founded on different ontological assumptions. Teasing out the practice(s) duality, Pickering (1995) argued that practices should be understood as the routines and standard operating procedures that are acquired and learned through life experience. Within any given community, they are the customs and traditions that define norms of thinking and action; they are the very stuff of human activity. Whilst practices are socially constructed, they often take on a certain solidity, a being-ness, that makes them resistant to change. By contrast, practice concerns the ongoing, never-ending, always changing becoming-ness of action as it emerges out of social engagement. It is in the act of constituting this flow that situations are transformed and new meanings are created. Thus practices and practice relate respectively to an ontology of being and an ontology of becoming (Chia, 1995), each invoking different theoretical foundations with different methodological implications.

This distinction between practices and practice is critical in the theoretical elaboration of leadership-as-practice (Simpson, 2016). A ‘practices’ perspective attends to the interactions between pre-defined entities, whether these be ‘leaders’, ‘followers’, or other discrete agents that embody certain attitudes and habits of action (i.e. the stuff of leadership). So, for instance, practices between leaders and followers (presumed to already exist prior to their interaction)

have become a major preoccupation for leadership scholars (Drath et al., 2008; Graen & Uhl-Bien, 1995), while new theories of collective, shared, participative, or distributed leadership also tend to start with the assumption of relatively stable entities, exploring what happens between them as a secondary effect (Denis et al., 2012). Researchers who are interested in practices tend to adopt a methodology that seeks to answer ‘what’ and ‘why’ questions using representational constructs and variance techniques to apprehend a dependable and somewhat predictable reality.

A ‘practice’ perspective, by contrast, affords primacy to a world that is continuously on the move, where stuff does appear, but only ever as a transient phase that provides temporary structuring in the ongoing flow of action. Leadership is evident in the changing directions of this flow, as provisional entities arise and fade away. Researchers who seek to engage with the ongoing emergence of practice tend to invoke a processual alternative to more familiar representational methodologies, one that can move with living experience as it unfolds in real time. Their objective is to open up and explore ‘how’ questions about the continuity and flow of leadership as a social process. It has to be said though, this processual approach is far less evident in the contemporary leadership literature so there is plenty of opportunity for methodological innovation within this approach. Pickering (1995) proposed that researchers wishing to engage with practice as a social process must adopt a performative idiom that sensitises them to the dynamics of perpetually co-emergent worlds and agents, where nothing is permanent or stable, at least not for very long. A performative approach attends to the real-time doings of intertwining human and material agencies as practice proceeds; there is no meaningful starting or ending points in this process, only ongoing unfolding action. What then, would constitute a performative perspective on leadership practice, and how might this inform empirical work?

The issue for practice theorists is to find a way of sensitising themselves to the becoming-ness of leadership. Building on the seminal work on linguistic pragmatics by John Austin, who famously recognised that talk is performative because “by saying something we are doing something” (1962, p. 12), I propose that leadership practice is constituted in, and by, the social to-ing and fro-ing of talk in contexts of change. Mead (1932) suggested that novelty and change emerge in conversation when an existing state of affairs and a potential alternative condition are juxtaposed. He departed from the familiar ‘arrow of time’ in which past, present and future follow in clock-ordered sequence, to develop an experiential understanding of temporality, where a ‘present’ is constituted as an active turning point in the flow of social practice. It is “the occurrence of something which is more than the processes that have led up to it and which by its change, continuance, or disappearance, adds to later passages a content they would not otherwise have possessed” (Mead, 1932, p. 52). Remembered pasts and anticipated futures are, in Mead’s formulation, epistemological resources that are continuously reconstructed to inform present action; however, it is in these present action turning points that ontological reality resides. By bringing together a particular past and a particular future, present action is generated. This juxtaposition affords a reflexive opportunity to mediate between pasts and futures, potentially generating modified or different actions. Without the future dimension, we are doomed to the unchanging replication of pasts, and without the past, practice becomes a matter of speculation and untethered imaginings (see also Simpson, 2009, 2014).

Summarising my argument so far, I am suggesting that a practice lens (as opposed to a practices lens) on leadership calls out a performative methodology that can engage directly with the flow of leadership as it is constituted in, and emerges from socially engaged talk. Combining Austin and Mead, I offer a performative theory of talk in which the juxtaposition of remembered pasts and anticipated futures generates turning points in the trajectories of leadership practice. Identifying turning points in leadership talk is a way of sensitising researchers to the ongoing

production of direction. I now move on to consider the implications of this methodological argument for an empirical study of the leadership talk of a senior management team that was faced with a leadership conundrum.

### **Empirical context**

This research was carried out in a small, arts-sector company that was responsible for the management of three busy performance venues in a culturally vibrant city. I attended 20 of the regular weekly meetings of the senior management team over a period of six months, during which a wide range of business-related issues was discussed. In one of the early meetings, the Managing Director announced her wish to resolve a long-neglected structural issue concerning the function of duty managers in the company. *'We need to have a look at the duty management ... I think we need to, as a team, assess what we've got, what we can do, how much it would cost, whether we want to do it, and then either make a plan to do it, or not. I think this is one of these issues that comes up every couple of years and we kind of fudge it. I think now is the time that we actually look at it and decide how we're going to move on.'*

A duty manager is the person on the spot who carries overall responsibility for any given event staged by the company, including resolving technical glitches, soothing unhappy performers, anticipating problems during the performance, and ensuring that customers enjoy themselves. This role had always been undertaken by members of staff moonlighting over and above their daytime jobs in the company. Indeed most of the senior management team members had been duty managers at some stage in their careers, and some still were. This arrangement was no longer adequate for the company's changing needs, but if the duty manager role was to be declared redundant, this would result in the very unusual situation that affected staff would still remain in the company doing their daytime jobs. As the Managing Director observed, *'Normally speaking, you make someone redundant, it's very uncomfortable, they hate you,*

*you're sorry for them, but you never see them again*'. It was imperative therefore, that the relational aspects of change were handled with utmost sensitivity. Over the ensuing meetings, the senior managers completely redesigned this role to become a fully professionalized function under the control of a senior Customer Services Manager. It is this restructuring process that provides the empirical setting for this paper.

### **Data Analysis**

The data that inform this study are extracted from the verbatim transcripts of the senior managers' conversations over the course of the 20 meetings I attended (more than 220,000 words of transcript). The real-time, episodic nature of this data permits examination of the unfolding of events as they actually happened, and provides direct access to the performative actions that arose in the managers' talk. It is always difficult to know when to stop gathering data in a processual study because there is no definable end-point; just ongoing practice. However after six months, although the restructuring had not been finally implemented, it was no longer a major strategic issue on the senior managers' agenda so I decided to finish data collection at that point.

Obviously the meetings traversed a whole range of issues related to running the business, so I began the data analysis by eliminating any topics in the meeting transcripts that concerned issues other than the duty management restructuring. This produced a reduced dataset of more than 45,000 words (1097 speaking turns) across 12 meetings. I then set about identifying instances within this dataset where turning points arose performatively in the juxtaposition of remembered pasts and anticipated futures. I focussed exclusively on instances where remembered pasts and anticipated futures were immediately adjacent in the same speech act. This is not to suggest that immediate adjacency is a necessary requirement for all turning points, but rather to provide methodological and analytical clarity. It is perfectly conceivable that a

past examined in one speech act and a future expressed in another may constitute a turning point, but the analytical links become more tenuous as past and future utterances are more widely separated in the conversational flow.

I found 253 instances where the remembered past and the anticipated future were immediately adjacent in the same speech act. These 253 turning points were then coded using the following coding scheme to classify the performative effect of each turning point: ‘problematizing’ recognises an unsatisfactory present situation, ‘committing’ concretises the present action required, ‘justifying’ normalises the present action as the right or best thing to do in the circumstances, ‘imagining’ considers the future potential and broader possibilities of the present situation, and ‘recalling’ draws on past patterns as a resource to inform present actions. Table 1 illustrates the coding of turning points in terms of each one of these five distinctive types of action. All 253 of the turning points identified in the data could be categorized as one of these five actions so there was no need to formulate additional codes.

**TABLE 1**  
**Examples of how turning points were coded**

<b>Juxtaposed past and future</b>	<b>Performative effect</b>
<i>'That's one very good thing about the current system. You're very stable for a long time.[past] Customer Service Managers that we bring in will gain experience and leave all the time. It will be 18 months, 2 years tops, so it will be a continual turn around.[future]'</i>	<b>Problematizing</b> Changing the current system will increase staff turnover
<i>'it's like the look of the place. You need somebody ...[future] I mean I walk around here and you're forever putting stands away, flowers at the top of the main stairs [past]'</i>	<b>Problematizing</b> There's no-one who currently has responsibility for the appearance of the facilities
<i>'And we've lost all that. [past] I think we need a strong person, I think, to bring that back. [future]'</i>	<b>Committing</b> Appoint a different sort of person to do the job
<i>'They need to be their own department. [future] At the moment they feel that they're this department supplemented by everybody and ... [past]'</i>	<b>Committing</b> Redefine the structure and function of the department
<i>'I don't think there's a single person who would defend the system as being the way we should be working [past], so I think it's a basis we all agree we want to improve this [future]'</i>	<b>Justifying</b> Consensus about the rightness of the present action
<i>'The attitude I'm taking is that you know I'm the person that's been charged by the board to run the business [past] and this is the way I'm going to do it. [future]'</i>	<b>Justifying</b> Moral authority to act
<i>'What do you think we should do for the next step then? Someone is going to have to pull all this together.[future] I can't see Frank typing up an action plan of events.[past]'</i>	<b>Imagining</b> Anticipating obstacles to future action based on past experience
<i>'we're in a big process of transition here [past] so maybe we say to people maybe we don't give them full time [future]'</i>	<b>Imagining</b> Tentatively suggesting a way forward from the current situation
<i>'She is a good front person. [past] That's what you need. [future]'</i>	<b>Recalling</b> Past experience as an exemplar for the future
<i>'from the current duty managers' point of view you could get people going, well what's in it for me [future], as opposed to what I'm doing just now [past], which means I'm working a bit harder but I'm not getting any more?'</i>	<b>Recalling</b> Past practice is more attractive than an uncertain future

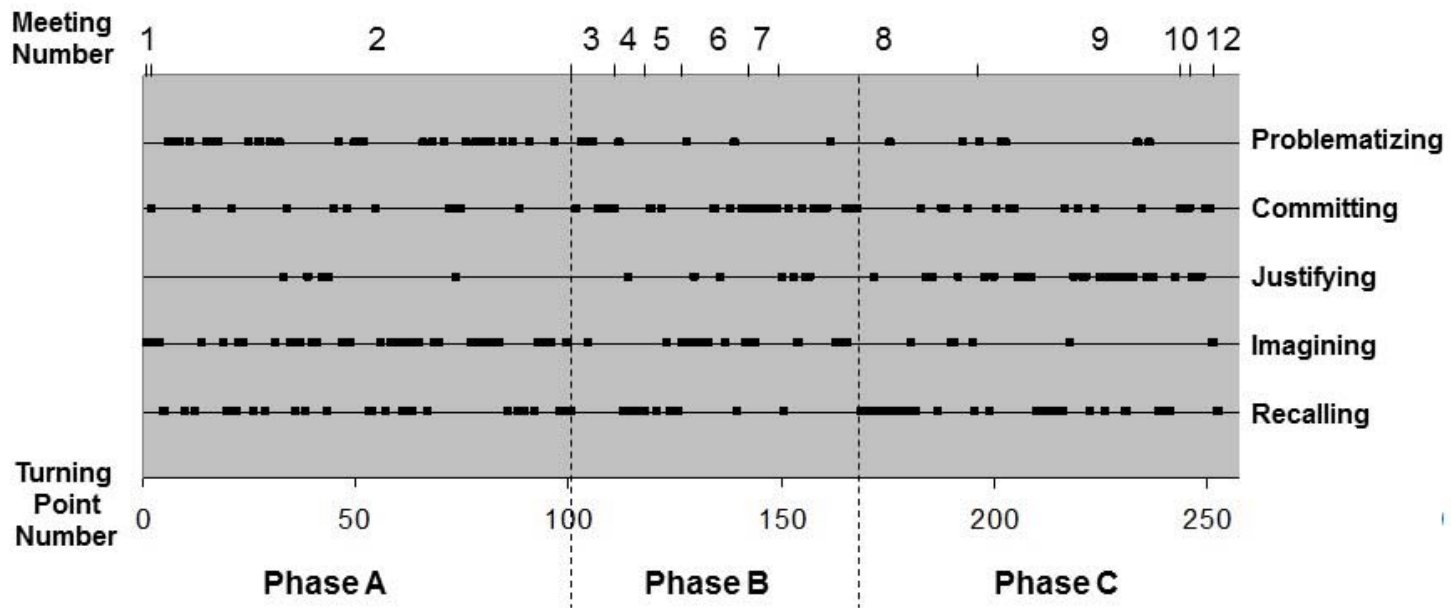


## Findings

Figure 1 summarizes the findings from our data analysis. The horizontal axes represent the temporal dimension of the restructuring process using sequential order rather than clock time: the lower axis shows the sequence number of turning points from 1 to 253, while the upper axis shows the sequence of meetings, from 1 to 12 (note that the duty management restructuring was only one of many different topics discussed at most of these meetings). The five types of performative action appear on the vertical axis, and square dots represent the performative codes assigned to every turning point. A useful metaphor for understanding this Figure is to see it as a musical staff, where each of the performative action types signifies a unique pitch, and each turning point is a musical note that resonates outwards, creating harmonies and rhythms in its interplay with adjacent notes. This musical metaphor emphasises the continuity of performative actions in the temporal unfolding of practice. It also invites an improvisational attitude that allows the music to develop its own unique expression in the context of performance.

Glancing across the whole dataset, there are several interesting patterns that are immediately apparent. Firstly, problematizing and imagining actions dominated the first two meetings, but thereafter their intensity declined. Conversely, the justifying actions that are dominant towards the end of the restructuring process built up progressively from the beginning, while committing actions reached their peak intensity in the middle of the record. In contrast to these rising and falling patterns of activity, the intensity of recalling actions remained fairly steady throughout the process. Although recalling actions are clearly important as a resource for the restructuring talk, it is the other four action types, problematizing, imagining, committing and justifying, that punctuate the change process and propel it forwards. Based on these broad patterns of performativity, I identified three different phases of talk during the restructuring process:

**FIGURE 1**  
**Turning Points and Phases in the talk of a Senior Management Team**



Phase A is generative talk in which the entire senior management team engaged in successive problematizing and imagining actions. Their talk is abductive as they seek to form the problem that they are charged with solving.

Phase B is more convergent, deductive talk during which the managers use committing actions to negotiate their preferred way forward. Only a subset of the management team members engage in this conversation, with some voices falling silent.

Phase C is normalising, inductive talk that serves to reassure the managers that their restructuring plans are both necessary and fair by using justifying actions. This phase is dominated almost entirely by the Managing Director's talk.

## **Discussion and Conclusion**

This study examines how the performative effects of leadership talk in a senior management team vary over the course of an extended and very sensitive restructuring process. The data analysis shows an overarching pattern that moves from abductive problematizing and imagining actions (Phase A), to deductive committing actions (Phase B), and finally to inductive justifying actions (Phase C). In parallel, there is an evolution from free-flowing and generative talk that engages all of the senior managers (Phase A), to a more contested and adversarial form of talk involving a select power coalition within the senior management team (Phase B), and ultimately to talk that is dominated by the Managing Director alone (Phase C).

In making sense of these findings, I draw on Dewey's (1938 [1986]) logic of Inquiry, which proceeds through phases of abduction, deduction and induction to transform an equivocal situation of doubt into one that is sufficiently coherent to allow the flow of practice to continue (Locke, Golden-Biddle, & Feldman, 2008). I also draw on Dewey & Bentley's (1949[1960]) distinction between three forms of action – self-action, inter-action, and trans-action – to define three different images of leadership – leadership-in-the-flow-of-practice, leadership-as-a-set-

of-practices, and the leader-practitioner (Simpson, 2016) – and I link these to the three phases of leadership talk identified in Figure 1.

This paper makes contributions firstly to theory by elaborating the implications of the practice(s) duality for leadership-as-practice, secondly to methodology by developing the notion of turning points in talk as a sensitising technique to take into the field, and thirdly by empirically demonstrating the potential for fresh insights into leadership afforded by this combination of theory and methodology. The argument is threaded through with ideas drawn from American Pragmatism, which offers a comprehensive and coherent philosophy of practice from which to develop a coherent integration of theory and methodology. In this manner, I seek to respond to the growing awareness in the leadership literature that theoretical innovation must be accompanied by methodological innovation (Dinh et al., 2014).

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