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A Study of the Role of 'Representative' Leadership in Stimulating Organization Democracy

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Abstract *There has been a growing concern among commentators about the disconnection between the apparent increase in the plurality of society, and the relatively limited facets of democracy practised in the corporate work place. Specifically, models of distributed leadership appear at odds with the dominant bureaucratic and unitary model of organizing. In addressing the problem, this article offers a model of Representative Leadership (RL) derived from a political institutional discourse and suggests that in settings of contested plurality, the representation of different organizational constituencies, by a wide range of individuals is central to effective organizing. This model of leadership is explored in the context of data derived from 31 senior managers in five different commercial organizations. Observations are provided about the causal relationships between organization context, managerial cognitions of plurality, personal interest, authority and politics. The potential for RL behaviour to inform future discourse on democratic governance is considered.*

Keywords *democracy; institutional leadership; politics; work identity*

Introduction

There has been a growing concern among some commentators about the disconnection between the apparent increase in organizational plurality, and the relatively limited facets of democracy practised in the work place (Etzioni, 1998; Rousseau & Rivero, 2003). Despite a range of forces promoting greater democratic practice such as changes in technology; greater employee aspirations for choice and autonomy (Gratton, 2004); the increase in, and interdependence of, organizational stakeholders (Caldart & Ricart, 2003; Colbert, 2004); and the need to secure employee commitment through more distributed models of leadership (Butcher & Clarke, 2001) most western organizations still rely on traditional top-down hierarchy for most of their strategic decisions (Powley et al., 2004).

Various explanations are suggested for this disconnection. Rousseau and Rivero (2003) view the increased mobility of employees who frequently swap jobs as being less likely to engage in organizational citizenship. This is considered ever more likely

as the notion of citizenship itself is undermined by approaches to public management that discourage the value of voluntary association (Putnam, 2000; Vigoda & Golembiewski, 2001). Rousseau and Rivero (2003) also argue that the post-Enron effect is reducing levels of organizational trust and thus diminishing a willingness to widen participation. Most fundamentally, however, the drivers for enhanced organizational democracy appear at odds with the dominant bureaucratic and unitary model of organizing (Child & McGrath, 2001). This model has been characterized as a 'rational myth' (Czarniawska, 2003) or 'rational mindset' (Butcher & Atkinson, 2001), one which gives priority to leadership legitimized through the application of technical and economic values, power focused at the corporate centre, and organizational structures and systems that encourage unitary working.

Such a focus is inevitably in tension with the apparent move in both public and private sectors towards distributed models of managing, where agents are increasingly required to work with varied and competing interests. In this model, leaders are allocated individual responsibilities but held accountable for collective outcomes (Hales, 1999; Huffington et al., 2003; Kakabadse & Kakabadse, 2005). This tension heightens managerial feelings of vulnerability because protective processes and structures such as traditional lines of authority become threatened (Bennett et al., 2003; Huffington et al., 2003; Lindgren & Wåhlin, 1999). In such situations, Hales (1999) suggests that in order to ensure an ongoing affirmation of self-identity, managers assuage their resulting anxieties by more closely adopting the dominant bureaucratic logic of rationality. Thus, the adoption of pluralistic models of managing can be curtailed by a logic that actively 'rationalizes' attempts to address the issue.

The evidence from some private sector organizations that appear to work effectively with these tensions (see Gratton, 2004) underscores the question posed by Rousseau and Rivero (2003) as to how the qualities of effective leaders might need to change as organizations attempt to become more responsive to a plurality of stakeholder interests. It is this question which provides the focus of this article; given the dominance of this rational mindset, what sort of behaviours enable managers in corporate settings to work with a complex range of competing interests and what sort of interpretive schemas guide their application?

In seeking to answer these questions, there is an obvious yet under-explored starting point – can the political leadership of democracies provide a useful lens through which to view these kinds of issues (Peele, 2005)? Working from this perspective, this article argues that managers intent on working with, rather than closing off, multiple agency, gravitate towards a form of leading which is not dissimilar to a model of leadership to be found in a political institutional setting. In effect, individuals overcome the dominant discourse of rational management by defining their roles in relation to many constituencies. In practice this means that organizational politics, as with its counterpart in an institutional setting, becomes a 'democratic asset', a necessary and logical process by which the interests of these constituencies are reconciled and promoted (Butcher & Clarke, 2002; Novicevic & Harvey, 2004).

The article first explores the principles of institutional leadership (the political leadership in local and national government) in order to develop a basic conceptual framework for a form of 'representative leadership' that might have salience for organizational leaders working in corporate settings where stakeholders possess

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diverse conceptions about organizational purpose, organizing and intended outcomes (Huzzard & Östergren, 2002). Research data derived from 31 case studies in five UK commercial organizations are used to develop this framework and the resulting analysis provides observations about the relationship between organization context, Representative Leadership (RL) behaviour and its antecedents. The potential for RL behaviour to inform future discourse on governance is considered.

Following Harrison and Freeman (2004), greater organization democracy is viewed, not as a process of extending voting power to stakeholders, but as a vehicle for enhancing self-government and voluntary association. In this context, democratic governance is conceived in terms of enhancing individual autonomy and the legitimization of processes that enable such individuals to be self-reflective – to deliberate, judge, choose and act upon courses of action (Held, 1987) – as free as possible from unequal power relationships. On this basis, the term '*representative*' leadership is used here to emphasize the political dimension of this behaviour in corporate settings rather than a formal process of representation. RL behaviour is conceptualized as being more akin to principles of participative democracy; encouraging difference, voice, self-organization and decision making (Patten, 2001). This article also conforms to the widely held assumption that leadership essentially involves the exercise of power in the pursuit of a direction that is meaningful for others to follow (see, for example, Horner-Long & Schoenberg, 2002; Leach & Wilson, 2000). From this perspective power 'is the means of getting things done' (Giddens, 1984: 283) and is viewed, not simply as a commodity possessed by one group over another, but as a relational characteristic implicit in all social practices.

Institutional leadership

It is clear that certain organizational contexts reflect higher degrees of congruence with democratic institutions than others. For example, in an increasingly plural public sector, managers are legitimately required to act as community leaders representing the needs of whole and diverse communities through an open, flexible and networked pattern of decision making (Hartley, 2002; John & Cole, 1999). As in an institutional setting, coping with varied and competing interests, necessitates public sector managers to rise above sectional interests in the pursuit of a public service ethic (Hartley, 2002). Similarly, voluntary organizations attract a multiplicity of stakeholders at micro, meso and macro levels of society who may hold divergent views on the primary roles of voluntary activity (Kendall & Knapp, 2000). In consequence leaders are faced with the need to represent a variety of communities, in a highly participative manner (Hailey, 2002).

However, the validity of an approach that takes the governance of democratic institutions as a legitimate starting point for business leaders appears dubious. For example, in an institutional setting, the electorate has a right to participate in decision-making processes, whereas corporate employees usually have this privilege bestowed on them by senior managers (Etzioni, 1998). Perhaps unsurprisingly then, Peters and Williams (2002) see the most distinguishing feature of institutional leadership in democratic systems being the autonomy of representatives, and their link to external forces via the electoral connection. Kerr (2004) supports this view and is highly critical of the assumption that, as a method of governance and decision

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making, democratic values and practices can be applied in business settings. In short, corporate organizations do not reflect the structural characteristics of democracies; representation, accountability and participation are not intrinsic to their governance.

However, as these structures themselves are rarely rationally enacted (Barry, 2002; Patten, 2001), I propose that for the purposes of comparison, to better understand the process of institutional leadership, it is it more instructive to examine the value premises underlying these structures. Although there are many different conceptions of democracy (Held, 1987; Lijphart, 1999; March & Olsen, 1995), at the heart of the democratic ideal lies the notion of equal freedom for all to deliberate the aims of society. The value premises that underpin this ideal are threefold. First, democracy is designed to realize the desire of individuals for meaningful control over their lives (Held, 1987; Patten, 2001; Starrat, 2001). Second, as a consequence of the desire for individual autonomy, competing interests, conflict and competition for scarce resources are also central to the enactment of democracy (Barry, 2002; Jones, 1989; Müller & Strøm, 1999). Lastly, reasoned debate over alternatives is an integral and essential value for the resolution of these differences (Held, 1987; Stuckey, 1999).

From a pan historical viewpoint, the stewardship of these value premises by institutional leaders has become central to the role of democratic government (Burns, 1978; Ruscio, 2004). Thus over time, societies have enshrined them in roles, rules and procedures that provide the practical frameworks for the mechanisms of representation, inclusion and accountability. It is therefore the interaction and application of these roles, rules and procedures that, for practical purposes, forms the context for institutional leadership (Elgie, 1995; March & Olsen, 1995). In this context, studies of institutional leadership have explored the impact of a wide variety of influences such as style (Simonton, 1988), psychological disposition (see Preston & 'tHart, 1999 for a good summary), and in different settings such as party leadership (Müller & Strøm, 1999), lobbying (DeGregorio, 1997), local authorities (Leach & Wilson 2000), and public sector organizations (Vigoda, 2002). However, this work indicates that generic issues are recognizable across different democratic systems (Elgie, 1995; Müller & Strøm, 1999), and therefore that similar types of leadership behaviour are observable.

This literature suggests that in stewarding the value premises of democracy, the enactment of institutional leadership is characterized by the need to work with two distinct sources of stress: first, between the drive for cohesion and the productive exploitation of differences; second, between the exercise of bureaucratic politics and civic virtue. In effect, the manner in which leaders address these tensions amounts to processes-in-use that are in practice the mechanisms for enacting and repairing democratic value premises. Thus the mechanisms of representation, accountability and inclusion provide a formal expression of what, in actuality, are elaborate social processes. Through these social processes, the structures of democracy and their enactment through political leadership mutually influence each other over time (Skowronek, 1993).

Effective institutional leadership is thus characterized by a continual process of securing cohesion among inevitably diverse interest groups, lobbies and electorates (Burns, 1978; Gormley-Heenan, 2006; Leach & Wilson, 2000). For institutional leaders, these differences are also often seen as a healthy stimulus that can make a positive contribution. In order to maintain enthusiasm among immediate followers,

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leaders need to be able to encourage such differences (Burns, 1978; Leach & Wilson, 2000). Approaches to managing this diversity in cabinet settings include developing relationships with key factions, encouraging interdependence and empowerment among cabinet colleagues, preparing the ground before meetings, and rewarding allies (Kaarbo & Herman, 1998). This tension between the drive for cohesion and the productive exploitation of differences also serves to emphasize the pervasive existence of micro politics in the leadership process. Actors with mutual and competing interests are continually bargaining, coalition building, pulling and hauling (DeGregorio, 1997; Peele, 2005; Preston & 'tHart, 1999). Such activity can of course be destructive (Nice, 1998), but is nevertheless endemic to leadership in an institutional context and a potentially valuable source of pluralist checks and balances (Preston & 't Hart, 1999). However, such behaviour can only be predicated on the assumption that political leaders possess 'civic virtue' (Starrat, 2001: 337), the ability to forego, at least on some occasions, self-interest on behalf of others or on behalf a wider common good. For without civic virtue, democracy disintegrates (Renshon, 2000). If successful political leaders are those that are able to create cohesion from diversity, such leaders must demonstrate their ability to balance self-interested behaviour with broader policy goals.

The parallel between institutional and business leadership

Notwithstanding this analysis, there are clearly inherent limits to which this institutional model of leadership is appropriate to the business context. The idea of business leaders representing the interests of a constituency, other than that of shareholder, seems as yet embryonic (Cragg, 2000). Furthermore, despite the alleged post-Enron focus on governance (Tourish & Vatcha, 2005), accountability is not subject to the same high degree of public scrutiny required of political leaders (Morrell & Hartley, 2006). Similarly, the inclusion of constituent views in business decision-making processes remains limited, despite significant and widespread effort to introduce formal participatory mechanisms (Heller, 1998; Thompson & Davidson, 1995). And most fundamentally, while protecting the rights of democratic participation is an immutable aspect of institutional leadership, it is not reflected in a business context (Coopey & Burgoyne, 2000). The stewardship role of business leaders has become institutionalized as a concern for organizational wealth and shareholder return, rather than democratic principles of governance (Cragg, 2000).

Nevertheless, it is arguable that these are mostly differences of degree rather than substance. If, the modern corporation is also increasingly characterized by tensions of conflicting interests like those of public institutions (Peele, 2005; Pfeffer, 1992; Rousseau & Rivero, 2003), an appreciation of how to manage the conflicts between cohesion and productive differences, and between self-interest and 'civic virtue', potentially offers a useful parallel to consider.

For example, from a stakeholder perspective, the formal authority of business leaders co-exists with their role as *de facto* representatives of constituent interests. As organizations become more complex and fragmented, the role of informal power derived from relationships and networks across the organization increases in importance (Lin, 2001; Tsai & Ghoshal, 1998) and business leadership thus becomes ever more the product of an informal social process (Barker, 1997; Ray et al., 2004). The

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appointment of leaders to senior positions is therefore dependent upon representing the interests of a whole range of relationships, which if not recognized can lead to political turnover (Comtois et al., 2004; Denis et al., 2001). Business leaders are therefore required to become representational in their approach.

As it is for political leaders in democratic institutions, this requirement both to coalesce and distribute power can only be achieved on the assumption that the leadership of organizations is intrinsically a micro-political process. Since the studies of Jackall (1988), Watson (1994) and others have provided ample evidence that this is the case (see Buchanan & Badham, 1999, for a thorough review), it follows that business leaders also need to, and indeed, appear to embrace behaviours that include covert discussion, lobbying and coalition building. In other words, if some level of cohesion around core organizational values is to be achieved, these behaviours need to become as integral to business leadership as open dialogue and debate about differences. As has increasingly been recognized (Buchanan, 1999; Treadway et al., 2004; Vigoda, 2003), such micro-political behaviour in organizations, far from being dysfunctional, is central to the achievement of managerial goals. However, as with the leadership of political institutions, responsible micro-political behaviour can only be predicated on the assumption that business leaders possess 'civic virtue'. While some authors argue that the dominant economic model of business is intrinsically hostile to notions of ethical leadership (Hendry, 2001; Philips et al., 2003), there seems little justification to suggest that managers are any less motivated by just causes or any less willing to forego self-serving ends, than elected politicians (Michalos, 2001).

Case study evidence suggests that organizational behaviour which reflects the tenets of RL described earlier, while as yet in its infancy, is nevertheless observable in some organization contexts. For example, Clarke & Meldrum (1999) highlight examples of embryonic RL in four case studies where the tensions created by multiple interests were mediated by behaviours that included vision, personal risk taking, subversion and political astuteness. Denis et al. (2001), in their study of leadership and strategic change note how the use of power through constructive political activity, in terms of compromise, lobbying, alliances and collaborative solutions is central to the leadership process. In a situation where power was diffuse and objectives divergent, levels of coherence were achieved by constellations of leaders who were sensitive to the needs of different constituencies in order to gain credibility and support. In particular, Denis and colleagues note the role of 'creative individuals and committed unified groups in proactively moving to make change happen' (p. 834) in situations where the legitimacy of change initiatives was not taken for granted.

However, despite this nascent body of literature there is little research as to why leaders should work in this way, especially in corporate settings where the pressures to adopt a rational bureaucratic approach to organizing are considerable. This article now focuses on this issue: to develop a better understanding about the application of these behaviours in corporate settings where interests are varied and competing, and to surface the antecedents of such behaviour as such insights may well provide one vehicle for accelerating processes of democratization.

Researching representative leadership

In the following study, leadership is conceptualized as a socially constructed and multi-level activity that both shapes and is shaped by its context (Giddens, 1984). The processes of leadership are thus explored as being at the centre of a complex pattern of contextual relationships from which identity and work meanings are negotiated (Knights & McCabe, 2003; Lindgren & Wåhlin, 1999; Robertson & Swan, 2003). Self-identity and individuality are the products of an interpretative and reflexive grid of schemas forged by never-ending experiences of individuals and societal institutions (Alvesson & Willmott, 2002; Blaikie, 1993; Giddens, 1984). RL therefore reflects a bundle of such schemas or cognitions about organizational working that enables some managers to create and sustain viable definitions of who they are and what they do.

Methodology

In order to explore both the behaviours and the antecedents of institutional leadership in a corporate setting, an initial conceptual framework for RL was developed from the literature discussed here. Four behaviour sets were hypothesized as being central to balancing diversity and cohesion of agenda and self-interest and civic virtue: (1) Representing the interests of constituencies not immediately connected with a leader's own formal responsibilities – leaders who value diversity of view are hypothesized as being concerned to bring together a wide variety of constituencies to pursue interests through collective action, thereby creating a sense of involvement (Kakabadse & Kakabadse, 2005); (2) in turn, this requires leaders to provide such constituencies with space, autonomy and power to act and experiment. This behaviour is premised on the idea that, in practice, the participation of unofficially constituted groups in organizational settings can provide the level of self-control necessary for the maintenance of organizational congruence (Ashmos et al., 2002; Caldart & Ricart, 2004); (3) in order to encourage cohesion, RLs need to facilitate debate and challenge. This orientation is similar to the notion of an 'arena' (Burgoyne & Jackson, 1997: 61) in which differences meet, are fought over, reconciled and reconfigured into new groupings, factions and alliances; (4) in practice, this means that organizational politics – defined here as 'those deliberate efforts made by individuals or groups in organizations to use power in pursuit of their own interests' (Butcher & Clarke, 2001: 19) – as with its counterpart in an institutional setting, is a necessary and logical process by which diverse interests are resolved (Butcher & Clarke, 2002; Held, 1987). Political behaviours such as networking, positioning causes, lobbying, and coalition building (Ammeter et al., 2002; Denis et al., 2001) constitute a significant subset of RL behaviours. These four behaviour sets were viewed as recursive, both shaped by, and shaping, social structures.

In order to understand the influence of context/structure on the enactment of such behaviours, five privately owned organizations were selected from different industries using data from publicly available sources such as annual reports and websites. The concepts of complexity absorption and complexity reduction (Boisot & Child, 1999) were used as a template for this selection. That is, organizations that reflected public statements of intent concerning levels of complexity absorption (local

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autonomy, diversity of strategic activity and more informal and decentralized structures) were deemed to reflect a willingness to embrace pluralism. Organizations that reflected public statements of intent concerning complexity reduction (fewer goals and strategic activities and which tended to formalize and centralize structures and decision making) were considered to reflect a level of intolerance towards plurality. The extent to which this link between complexity, structure and plurality was actually reflected in managerial behaviour and cognition formed part of the analysis, and was used here only as a theoretical starting point from which to create the organizational sample.

The sample thus reflected a continuum of public responses to pluralism ranging from 'democratic ownership' by a diverse array of members, to one company describing its leadership as the product of the CEO and the leadership team operating as one in making decisions for the 'entire [company name] group'. These were as follows: a conglomerate from the cooperative movement (Congco), a food manufacturing business (Foodco), a building supplies organization (Buildco), a publishing company (Bookco), and a financial services organization (Finco).

Multiple case studies were selected from this sample to assess the validity of the initial conceptual framework and to generate data that would enable the exploration of the potential antecedents of these behaviours. Thirty-one cases were eventually selected for interview using three criteria: first, that they were senior managers who in theory would have opportunity to exercise representative behaviours; second, that they had around 10 years service, which, when combined with their seniority, would suggest a level of knowledge about how to work effectively within their organization's culture; and third, that they were familiar with each other so as to permit a level of triangulation in their reported behaviours (Bacharach & Bamberger, 1996). The resulting sample contained 7 women and 24 men of which 17 held line responsibilities and 14 functional or corporate responsibilities.

Data were collected via semi-structured interviews, questions being loosely designed around 10 broad themes (Laukkenanen, 1994), such as 'role', 'change', and 'influence'. Derived from the initial conceptual framework, these themes were designed to surface the constructs that each manager used to make sense of and negotiate their environment. The interviews lasted between 60 and 90 minutes, all were recorded and transcribed. In order to minimize the tendency for socially desirable responses, confidentiality and anonymity were assured (Johnson & Johnson, 2002).

The interview was divided into two parts. The first part focused on ascertaining each manager's perception about the enactment of key organization activities such as change management and strategy development. Such issues can be contentious and thus responses would be indicative of perceptions of plurality and political activity (Pettigrew, 1995). Intra-organizational descriptions were analysed and mapped onto Boisot and Child's (1999) complexity reduction/absorption model to reflect a continuum of tolerance towards plurality.

The second part focused on surfacing how each manager went about his or her work within this context; what behaviour did they use to negotiate this environment? For example, questions included, 'How would you describe your role?', 'To whom do you see yourself responsible and for what?' to surface thinking patterns about perceptions of personal autonomy. Using a laddering technique (Easterby-Smith et al., 2002), 'how' questions were used to surface behaviour, followed by questions

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such as 'What causes you to work in this way?' or 'Why?' (Ambrosini & Bowman, 2002) to surface a logic of action (Bacharach & Bamberger, 1996; Buchanan, 1999), that is, to illuminate linkages between 'If I do this then . . . X will result'. The answers given in the first section, which focused on perceptions of organizational issues, also served to ensure that the analysis of this second set of responses could be understood in context, and thus reduce any tendency to make simplistic cross-case generalizations (Johnson & Johnson, 2002).

Validity was further enhanced through interviewees being encouraged to illustrate responses with anecdotes, as these can reveal tacit thinking and organization routines not easily surfaced through other methods (Ambrosini & Bowman, 2002). In addition, each in-company case was constructed to permit a degree of triangulation of reported behaviours by other members of that sample. Using these data, a portrait of each manager was constructed for comparison with that manager's own description.

The data were analysed using standard practices for qualitative data described by Miles and Huberman (1994) (see also Milliken et al., 2003). Preliminary coding of behaviours was undertaken using the constructs from the initial conceptual framework. These were refined after several iterations by emerging themes that were subjected to review by others not involved in the data collection, and a list of significant variables created for each case. These were used as the basis for initial causal 'cognitive' mapping. A representative selection of these maps was turned into short profiles that were then presented to the interviewees for feedback. Comments were noted and incorporated back into the overall analysis. Cross-case maps were constructed using variables estimated to be the most influential in accounting for the behaviour described by each manager and their colleagues.

Findings

The findings are analysed first by organization context, second, by different patterns of behaviour (Table 1), and third, by the clusters of cognitions which seem to underpin these behaviours. These three elements are developed into a potential explanatory framework (Figure 1) which seeks to draw together perceptions of organization context to potential causal cognitions of leadership behaviours.

Organization context

Although the cases from each organization were limited, it was possible to identify a range of orientations towards plurality of interests. Bookco portrayed the highest degree of plurality in the way it operated, characterized by considerable informality and decentralization. Managers made frequent reference to the company being 'an opinions business' where divergence of opinion was expected. This situation was considerably amplified by the omission of coordinated strategic activity and in consequence, managers frequently gave priority to differing organizational objectives. Foodco also reflected a strongly decentralized business, but on a more formally agreed basis. Conflicting priorities were expected and the heads of business units were encouraged to be 'mavericks'. However, several managers noted that recent organizational changes had contradicted these core values, and some were questioning Foodco's commitment to this approach.

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Table 1 *Leadership behaviours*

From (Rational Leadership)	To (Representative Leadership)
■ Preference for formal meetings and processes ■ Focus on senior management approval/buy-in ■ Relationship building focused at senior levels ■ Debating and challenging among small coterie ■ Carefully prescribed delegation and empowerment ■ Tendency to influence through operational control ■ Working on formally agreed priorities/issues ■ Challenging through established processes ■ Exclusive and involving of few ■ Representing legitimate organization interests, e.g. own department, customers	■ Extensive use of informal processes, e.g. covert activity, corridor meetings ■ Focus on working with personal agendas ■ Relationship building and networking at all levels ■ Encouraging debate and challenge at all levels ■ Providing others with space and autonomy to experiment, stimulating bottom-up change ■ Influencing by focusing on broad direction ■ Working outside of agreed responsibilities, often on unofficial initiatives ■ Challenging the status quo, irreverent and subversive ■ Inclusive and involving of many ■ Representing the interests of quasi-legitimate constituencies, often external to own responsibilities, e.g. other functions, unofficial issues

Buildco lay in the middle of the range. It was characterized by a strong CEO, who was seen by many to be autocratic in setting strategic goals. Nevertheless, structures were decentralized and local autonomy encouraged, which facilitated diverse and innovative behaviour. Congco, the democratically owned business was actually moving from a highly decentralized structure with diverse strategic activity to one in which centralized planning and integration and structural alignment were now a priority.

Finco reflected the highest degree of centralization: structures and processes were highly formalized, and usually centralized. Some of this might be accounted for by the highly regulated nature of the industry, but nevertheless the company was described thus: 'it's very traditional, it's very structured, it's very hierarchical, it's risk averse, it's bound by process . . . there's a language of control, and linearality' (George, Finco).

Behaviours

Despite these differences, across all the cases there were both similarities and contrasting approaches to leadership. These behaviours can be represented on a continuum ranging from 'rational' to 'representative' (see Table 1). At one end, leadership behaviour reflected the use of formal processes such as meetings and senior management presentations to position causes and influence colleagues. This was also characterized by a tendency to limit debate and challenge to a small coterie of senior managers and to prescribe delegation and empowerment within well-controlled guidelines.

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At the other end of the range there was evidence to support the enactment of the initial conceptual framework of RL, although the priority given to each of the four behaviour sets varied. Six managers employed behaviours consistent with these four categories. For example, Jim (Buildco) was described by his colleagues as 'a great leader', 'a good role model' who was 'very good at getting people to work for him outside of his own function'. This later description was reflected in Jim's own approach to representing the interests of others by

> pointing to examples where people have achieved things because they hadn't stuck to the rules, by opening communication and saying to people, 'well look, if you've got an idea and you think you're struggling to get it through and you want someone to bounce it off, feel free to ring . . .'

> I think individual directors, as you go into their functions at first they're suspicious . . . I don't think they're comfortable with that. They're not comfortable with you on their turf and the only thing that keeps me on their turf is to shift them off their turf, so they work with me. I think the people that you actually work with in these functions welcome it greatly.

These statements are also reflective of the second behavioural set, providing others with space and autonomy to experiment:

> part of the leader's job is to fight the business off and we do that a lot. Part of my brief is don't let [the company] anywhere near this . . . There's enough space within the strategy to try all sorts of things . . . I think sometimes people are doing it beneath me and before I know what's happened, it's taken on legs of its own and it's gone past me and I didn't even know they were doing it. Sometimes I know the best thing I can do as a manager is stay out of the way. (Jim, Buildco)

This approach was also associated with behaviour that was indicative of the third category: encouraging debate and voice. Sally (Bookco) provides a good example of this behaviour, and was described by her colleagues as 'massively democratic . . . and she makes it work', 'a brilliant leader, open to dialogue with whoever, and it interests her' and 'the most stimulating, exciting person I could think of working for'. Sally deliberately built an 'unofficial' silo around her business unit in order to enable it to form its own distinctive identity and value set and to 'protect' it from 'interference', while also contributing to the success of the wider group in difficult times: 'We try to make enough profit for them to leave us alone to do our thing, for us to consider our own approach. But I will contribute, I will make sure my division contributes enough profit to keep the show [Group] on the road'. The eventual success of this silo approach led to its formal adoption as a new 'business model'. In order to achieve this she had to justify its value to a broader number of constituents, 'to have the [my] division seen as an example of how we might work better'.

This goal was achieved through a covert agenda, indicative of the fourth category, political activity, and included working on unofficial initiatives, use of personal alliances and lobbying to position causes, and providing others with space and autonomy to pursue innovation and bottom-up change, often without any form of formal sanction.

Cognitions

The full range of behaviours in Table 1 were related to four different 'cognitive clusters', albeit that within each there were variations in the priority given to different types of behaviour. The word 'cluster' is used to reflect the view that it is far too simplistic to suggest that thinking 'this' leads to 'that' action (Johnson & Johnson, 2002). The clusters represent 'approximated displays of elements of manager's thoughts at a specific point in time, noted in particular ways, in particular environments' (p. 232). These four clusters were differentiated by perceptions about the legitimacy of organizational pluralism (see Figure 1). All interviewees acknowledged the legitimacy of plurality in their organizations to some degree. However, this varied from an acceptance of the inevitability of plurality in which differences should be minimized, or at least heavily aligned in the interests of organizational effectiveness, to a view where plurality of interest was viewed as a critical organizing principle, to be encouraged in order to enhance organizational effectiveness. The former view is termed 'bounded plurality' and most closely reflects an orientation towards complexity reduction and codification. The opposite end of the continuum is termed 'extended plurality' and reflects a disposition toward complexity absorption.
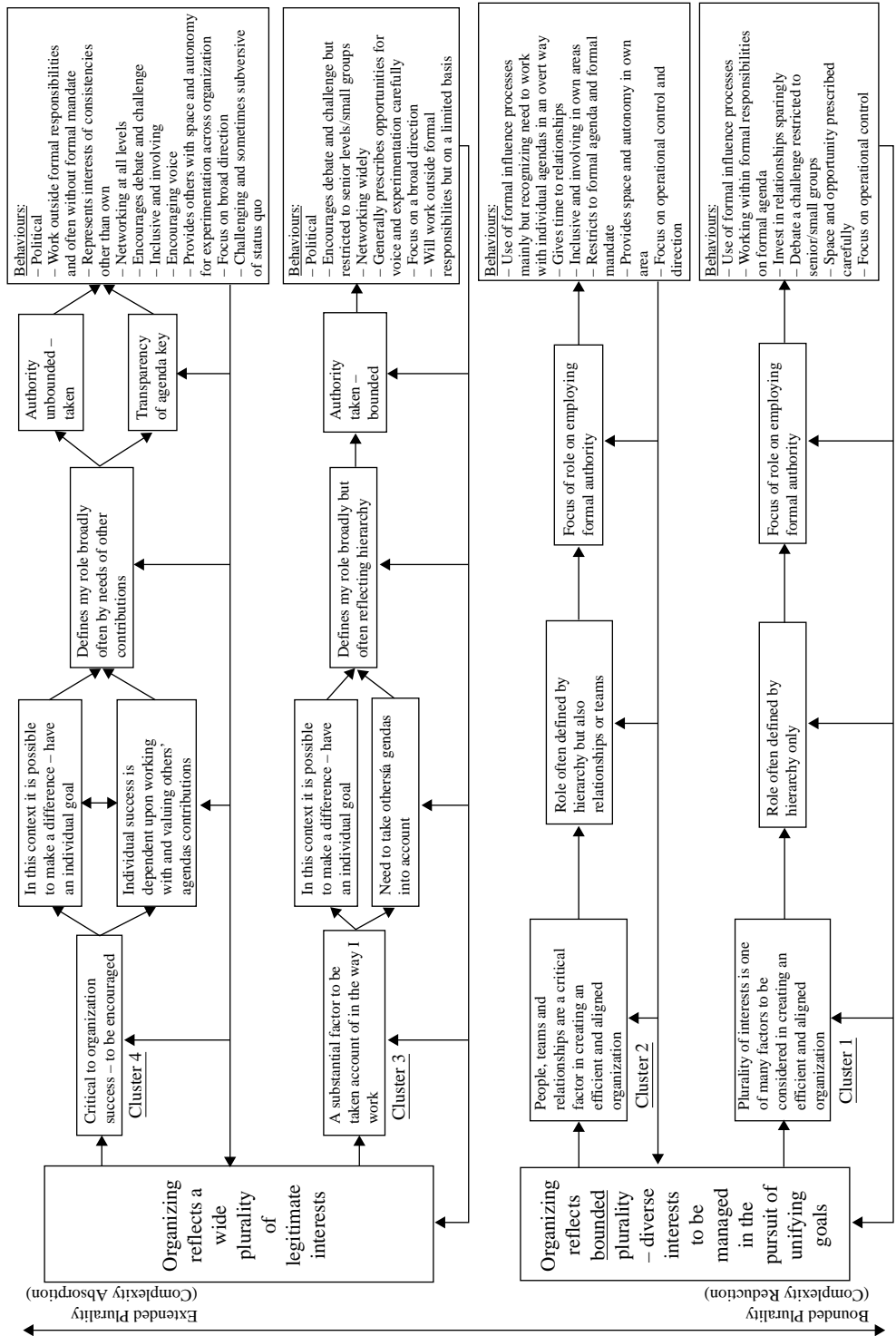
Bounded plurality

Where plurality was seen as bounded, managers recognized the centrality of individual needs but viewed them as largely inappropriate, to be subjugated in the interests of organizational alignment. In practice therefore, individual agendas were viewed as illegitimate if they were seen to contravene institutional definitions of unity. This bounded plurality took two forms. First, with 10 of the cases, differences of interest were rationalized as being just one of many factors that needed to be taken into account in establishing effective organizations. Indeed, for Steve (Buildco) – described by his colleagues as 'risk averse', 'straightforward' and a man who 'agrees with what he knows he should agree with' – these individual interests were seen to 'cloud' unity of purpose:

> The primary reason we're here is to make money for the shareholders, I know that sounds a little trite, but if you start off with that, even if it's clouded by the leadership of stakeholders, then what do I need to do to get that result, and therefore my role is to support the guy who's leading.

As this extract suggests, managers reflecting this orientation towards bounded plurality tended to define their role in terms of formal structure and hierarchical responsibilities. Circumscribing responsibilities in this way limited opportunities for them to influence others via formally agreed processes which tended to diminish the role of political activity: 'To get heard you've got to put something in writing, raise it at a meeting' (David, Finco). The resulting behaviours most readily reflected those in the rational leadership column of Table 1.

The second cognitive cluster, represented by eight managers, reflected higher levels of tolerance towards plurality in so much as managers adopting this perspective tended to view people and their individual contributions as being more central to organizational success. Nevertheless, this approach was still heavily bounded by an implicit requirement for organizational alignment: managers limited their zone of

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Figure 1 *A continuum of perceived plurality*

Extended Plurality (Complexity Absorption)

Organizing reflects a wide plurality of legitimate interests

Cluster 4

Critical to organization success – to be encouraged

In this context it is possible to make a difference – have an individual goal

Individual success is dependent upon working with and valuing others' agendas contributions

Defines my role broadly often by needs of other contributions

Authority unbounded – taken

Transparency of agenda key

Behaviours:
– Political
– Work outside formal responsibilities and often without formal mandate
– Represents interests of consistencies other than own
– Networking at all levels
– Encourages debate and challenge
– Inclusive and involving
– Encouraging voice
– Provides others with space and autonomy for experimentation across organization
– Focus on broad direction
– Challenging and sometimes subversive of status quo

Cluster 3

A substantial factor to be taken account of in the way I work

In this context it is possible to make a difference – have an individual goal

Need to take others'a gendas into account

Defines my role broadly but often reflecting hierarchy

Authority taken – bounded

Behaviours:
– Political
– Encourages debate and challenge but restricted to senior levels/small groups
– Networking widely
– Generally prescribes opportunities for voice and experimentation carefully
– Focus on a broad direction
– Will work outside formal responsibilites but on a limited basis

Bounded Plurality (Complexity Reduction)

Organizing reflects bounded plurality – diverse interests to be managed in the pursuit of unifying goals

Cluster 2

People, teams and relationships are a critical factor in creating an efficient and aligned organization

Role often defined by hierarchy but also relationships or teams

Focus of role on employing formal authority

Behaviours:
– Use of formal influence processes mainly but recognizing need to work with individual agendas in an overt way
– Gives time to relationships
– Inclusive and involving in own areas
– Restricts to formal agenda and formal mandate
– Provides space and autonomy in own area
– Focus on operational control and direction

Cluster 1

Plurality of interests is one of many factors to be considered in creating an efficient and aligned organization

Role often defined by hierarchy only

Focus of role on employing formal authority

Behaviours:
– Use of formal influence processes
– Working within formal responsibilities on formal agenda
– Invest in relationships sparingly
– Debate a challenge restricted to senior/small groups
– Space and opportunity prescribed carefully
– Focus on operational control

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discretion/authority to formally agreed responsibilities and issues. However, in contrast, this second group were more likely to define their role in terms of teams or relationships and employ processes of influence that explicitly acknowledged individual agendas and interests:

> I would . . . float it past my director to say, 'look, this is something I'm thinking about doing'. Any problems or objections that you can see? You then have to go out and talk to customers more to make sure that this is something that they want, and when you've done that it probably becomes more of a worked-on proposal and it's back to the Director and the leadership team to make sure that all the business are going to buy into that. (Jonathon, Congco)

However, as this extract highlights, such approaches are still heavily influenced by cognitions of organizational unity, legitimacy of agenda, and consensus. This orientation was reflected in behaviour characterized by higher levels of networking and inclusion than those in the first cluster, but still broadly consistent with rational leadership behaviours.

Extended plurality

The third and fourth cognitive clusters reflect an increasing legitimacy of plurality in organizational working and a positive attitude towards complexity absorption, particularly in terms of reducing structures, rules and procedures, to facilitate local involvement and viewing paradoxes and contradictions as inevitable. In the third cluster (seven managers), the pursuit of individual interests and the ensuing political activity are viewed as necessary processes for mobilizing organizational resources. As Russell (Finco) highlights,

> This organization works by politics, – politics is business . . . It is dealing with other departments, dealing with people as individuals, how they operate, and also what is their role. Politics is how we, I, get through the day. If you say I don't hold with organizational politics, that's bollocks, everything's politics.

The consequence of holding this starting point is that managers were more willing to see personal agendas as legitimate and were able to take authority, usually aligning their own positions with those of others through a process of political negotiation. However, this orientation tended to reflect an instrumental approach to the enactment of power and the value of others' agendas, rather than a personal belief in the centrality of working with others goals. This often led to a calculative orientation. Russell, describes it thus:

> It is about understanding what the hot buttons are for the senior management, what actually turns them on and it's just kind of ensuring that you're got those covered. A lot of it is about apparently listening to them and then working out your strategy about how you're going to deliver that and covering what they need.

However, this cluster is still heavily influenced by institutional conceptions of organizational working such that roles are also orientated by agreed organizational priorities. For example, Russell, describes his identity in the following context: 'I'm here as part of this organization. We're here to make money, we're here to serve our

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customers, therefore it is not about me, it's organization. I've chosen to be a corporate individual'. His colleagues described him similarly as 'someone who likes to fit within the corporate hierarchy', and who sometimes 'hides behind structure'.

In this cluster, an appreciation of the value of self-interest appears to create a tension with the rational 'myth' of unity such that while authority is taken, it is still constrained, resulting in behaviours that occasionally reflect covert and unofficially sanctioned behaviour but more generally adhered to formally agreed issues. Similarly, debate and challenge are encouraged, yet usually restricted to small groups, and opportunity to express voice carefully delineated.

The fourth cognitive cluster represented by six managers, reflects attitudes of extended plurality, and is strongly linked to the behaviours of RL in Table 1. Rather than viewing plurality just as a significant aspect of organizational working, these individuals were most likely to see diversity of interests as *central* to organizational success, and therefore to be encouraged in the pursuit of organizational effectiveness.

This orientation appeared to further encourage a mindset in which individuals felt able to make a difference, to legitimately pursue their own goals. However, in contrast to the third cluster, this set of cognitions comprises a perspective in which individual success is inextricably interwoven with the success of others' agendas, and suggests that RLs attach a real value to the achievement of others' goals:

> There were some individuals, some of them stakeholders, who I'd think well, I don't really like this person but I've got to force myself to get that win–win. I worked bloody hard on that issue in the first six months. I've got to tell you, there were times I was about to give up. But I persevered with it, it's not finished but I'm working on it, it's probably the thing that gets me up in the morning. (Alex, Buildco)

This orientation, set within a mindset that genuinely valued plurality of interest, had cognitive consequences that were different from those of managers expressing concerns for others within a mindset of bounded plurality. In particular, it encouraged them to define their role very broadly, often by reference to the needs of other constituencies. From this perspective authority was taken rather than simply received in a way in which individuals seemed to place few restrictions on who they worked with, and on what:

> A big part of my role is just facilitating and trying to bring people together and almost acting as a consultant, and that's the way I think of it, especially when I move outside of my direct responsibility. My biggest role then is almost just like a healing hand, bringing people together. (Jim, Buildco)

> My understanding of what I'm responsible for has changed enormously over the last year and I tell this to other people in the [sister] business. I can help develop it, I can help change it through the work we do. And I've gone out of my way to give more time to that, and I think that's given some success. (Alex, Buildco)

Inevitably, this apparently deviant approach brought these RLs into conflict with their colleagues. In order to ameliorate this concern, individuals attached importance to building legitimacy of action through transparency of motive. For Jim, for example, while colleagues were sometimes critical of his direct style they nevertheless described him as 'honest', 'a good example to others' and 'balanced in his views':

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People have to see you as you are and see that you're trying to do something for the right reasons and that can be quite difficult. How do you do that? By spending time with them and going around finding out what they do, trying to understand what drives their lives and what makes life difficult for them. (Jim, Buildco)

Discussion

In what way then does this help us to understand what sort of behaviours enable managers to work with a complex range of competing interests, and what sort of interpretive schemas guide their application? First, the findings serve to extend and refine the RL behaviours identified in the initial conceptual framework. In particular, although some level of political behaviour was expected, the findings emphasize how these leaders often used covert and irreverent approaches, and worked on unofficial initiatives in order to promote their causes. The potential for this behaviour to be interpreted negatively appeared to be minimized by a cognitive framework that legitimized individual interests when balanced with others agendas, a willingness to take authority in the pursuit of these interests and a concern to be (selectively) transparent about this agenda with others. In this way, individuals appeared to be able to both balance the need for cohesion and diversity, and self-interest and civic virtue. The data were also indicative of a causal flow of cognition from legitimacy of plurality to transparency of motive, albeit that these links were highly recursive, emphasizing their reflexive nature. But what does this tell us about why individuals in corporate settings might work in this way in contravention of dominant unitary definitions of managing?

From a structuration perspective social action is the product of both structure and agency (Giddens, 1984) and the interaction and impact of these were evident in several ways. For example, in the two clusters working with cognitions of bounded plurality, managers appear to have been influenced by institutionalized definitions of managing and leading. Here, cognitions embodied a sense of duty to the pursuit of unitary goals. This 'obedience' was enforced by legitimate authority structures (Courpasson & Dany, 2003). The dissonance between the inevitability of individual needs and collective outcomes was assuaged by an identity formation that blurred the boundaries between manager and the organization, such that managers, as in the case of Russell, came to see themselves *as the organization* (Ford & Harding, 2003). The effect is that managers control both others and themselves, restricting the opportunities they have for working with greater levels of autonomy (Ford & Harding, 2003; Hales, 1999).

Formal role, too, may have influenced responses, as some positions necessarily reflected greater scope for taking authority (Wrzesnieski & Dutton, 2001). Nevertheless, this did not appear to be a primary determinant of behaviour. In two cases, senior managers defined their roles with less discretion than their subordinates. Initial theorizing suggested that RL behaviour would be directly influenced by senior management encouragement, although no direct support for this was evident from those portraying RL behaviour.

RL behaviours were identified in each of the five organizations suggesting that RL cognitions emerged largely independent of their organizational context. For example,

managers reflecting RL behaviours often interpreted their priorities very differently from colleagues in the same organization. In one instance, Jim in Buildco was pursing an agenda of decentralization and diversity, while his colleague working from the first cognitive cluster was occupied with developing a more homogenous and structurally aligned organization.

Where plurality was considered most legitimate, the cognitive clusters were delineated by the degree to which individuals perceived their own agendas as being interwoven with those of others. Where this did not occur, cognitions still reflected a priority for autonomy and discretion, political activity, debate and challenge. However, these aspirations were still constrained by institutional interpretations of unity. This was particularly marked in one Foodco director, who was clearly committed to extending plurality through values and structures that encouraged senior management ownership. Yet he also felt that 'there can't be a load of different visions of where the group's going, you've got to lead with one vision', and 'they [line managers] can decide not to comply, they can decide not to take the synergy that's available, they can decide to be parochial'. Here 'parochial' and 'synergy' were used in a pejorative sense to reflect concerns of control and unity. This orientation is suggestive of Robertson and Swan's (2003) notion of 'dependable autonomy' where identity control is exercised through a form of enforced democracy in which managers adopt apparently independent behaviours but which ultimately align with the firm.

In contrast, RL appeared to develop in contravention of institutionalized interpretations, but which still enhanced affirmation of self (Hales, 1999; Knights & McCabe, 2003). Thus, within the fourth cluster, an emphasis on individual agency seems to offer the most likely explanation for the adoption of RL behaviours. Of the six managers who reflected RL, four attributed their approach to development experiences, either on formal programmes, or as the result of career experiences or job transitions that had forced new approaches to leading. In particular, these transitions enabled individuals to view their own independence as being strongly linked to those of others. This supports the notion that individuality is a social, not individual outcome (Knights & McCabe, 2003) and is reflective of the institutional leadership notion of 'civic virtue'. The managers who adopted RL behaviours maintained a sense of identity by pursuing their own goals and ambitions, while balancing these with those of others around them. By placing aside an ideal of autonomy, they created space to explore and enact opportunities for micro-emancipation (Alvesson & Willmott, 2002). Those reflecting RL behaviours tended to see themselves as independent of the goals of the organization, while also working within them, but equally at times undermining them by behaviours and activities that were seen as irreverent by some colleagues. Sally's silo approach to her business and its adoption by the wider group is such an example and reflective of Watson's (2001: 182) notion of 'ethical assertiveness' in which conflicting pressures are seen as opportunities for managers to fulfil elements of a personal ethical agenda.

These opportunities were extended by the very agency of representative leadership, namely, representing and working with a wide range of constituencies that offered different circumstances in which to negotiate their identity (Alvesson & Willmott, 2002; Hill & Stephens, 2005; Perriton, 2000). For example Kevin (Finco) described himself as a 'marriage guidance counsellor' working with 'organizational

couples' Justin in Congco defined his role in terms of 'a prompt to the organization to actually do something about the future . . . I see my role very much as a way of challenging people about what the future's going to be like', and consequently involved himself in many relationships. These relationships appeared to help those embodying RL behaviour to create and sustain different notions of what their work was and also their identity in doing that work (Wrzesnieski & Dutton, 2001).

Defining one's own identity and autonomy in relation to others is also suggestive of a predisposition towards social fairness. Galunic and Eisenhardt (2002) view this as a key element in the development of organizations as social communities. Courpasson and Dany (2003: 1249), quoting Selznick, note that for a community to be strong, there must be a desire to further the interests of others, not merely to give them the consideration they deserve as moral equals. In effect, this distinction reflects the division between the third and fourth cognitive clusters. By working in a way that reflected the implicit mutuality of individual goals, and thus the need to further the interests of others rather than merely taking others' views into account, the behaviour of those operating with cognitions of RL might be seen as indicative of encouraging the formation of just such communities (Barker, 1997; Courpasson & Dany, 2003; Knights & McCabe, 2003).

However, within each cluster and across the whole sample, there was an understandable variety in the way RL was enacted and perceived. Much of this variation can be seen as a product of the innumerable contradictory experiences of identity formation itself (Alvesson & Willmott, 2002), and thus variations in behaviour and cognition are only to be expected. These contradictions also create 'organized dissonance' – the 'strategic union of forms presumed to be hostile' (Ashcraft, 2001: 1304). In this study, a mindset that held legitimacy of individual goals and reciprocity of success as key appears to be significant in enabling managers to work with contradictory interests as a form of 'organised dissonance' (p. 1304) – going beyond the notion that more of one necessitates less of the other. This suggests that, while the expression of RL will not resolve the tensions between competing interests, the wider adoption of RL may help to make the tension more constructive.

Conclusion

Like most studies in the field of leadership, some connections can be drawn between aspects of RL and other literatures. However, it is not my intention here to develop yet another theory of leadership but to consider the value of an institutional leadership lens in understanding how to encourage the development of organizational democracy. What appears to distinguish this approach to leading is a disposition which combines a facility to work with 'organized dissonance', an irreverent or constructively deviant orientation, political acuity and a democratic orientation.

This disposition suggests three contributions to the literature on stimulating greater organization democracy. First, despite apparent pressures to close off the contradictions between distributed power and rational organization, some managers were able to negotiate this dissonance in a way that encouraged a democratic orientation to leading. Central to this disposition was the representation of, and working with, a wide range of constituencies that offered varied opportunities by which to negotiate identity and encourage an affirmation of self. That is, these managers

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conceived their role, not purely in terms of treating others as moral equals, but as an activity to further the interests of others, as well as themselves. Contrary to the views of authors such as Gratton (2004) and Cloke and Goldsmith (2002) who emphasize the importance of a similarity between individual and organizational values, democratic behaviour here was facilitated by a disposition in which individuals often saw themselves as being independent of the goals/values of their organization, sometimes working within them but equally at times undermining them.

Second, the findings in this study provide greater insight as to the role of organizational politics in democratic activity and lie in contrast to the idea of politics undermining workplace democracy (Rousseau & Rivero, 2003) or largely omitted from its discussion (see Gratton, 2004). The orientation of RLs towards politics is supportive of Novicevic and Harvey's (2004) view of organizational politics as a 'democratic asset' which represents the varying capacity of employees to influence the way they are governed. The use of political negotiation, rather than rules and structures, seemed to serve as a check and balance against the undue influence of self-serving interests rather than reinforce them. As Stuckey (1999) highlights in the context of political institutions, tightening formal accountability may only force leaders to resort to less acceptable means of micro-political behaviour. This constructive approach to politics was achieved by behaviours that included transparency of motive (Jim), searching for win–win solutions (Alex), and an openness to dialogue (Sally).

Third, the research also provides insight as to how this disposition may serve to facilitate progress towards more democratic forms in circumstances where such ambitions are far from being perceived as legitimate. For some authors, such as Coopey and Burgoyne (2000) this goal is seen as being heavily dependent upon establishing formal systems of political, social and civil rights. This exploratory study suggests that progress towards democratized forms may still be made through private projects and personal passions (Kreiner, 1992): actions that can create pockets of participation, which in turn may act as role models for further action. Specifically, this study emphasizes how progress was made by encouraging voluntary processes of group formation and identity that did not create untenable chaos. Levels of control were still achievable through behaviour that sought to balance individual and organizational agendas. This is supportive of the idea that informal groups are able to provide levels of self-control necessary for the maintenance of good governance (Caldart & Ricart, 2003), because these groups, by participating in decision making, express voice about the values that are important to them (Cludts, 1999). As Jim's insights in Buildco indicate, these unofficial groups enable people to pursue individual interests through collective action, thereby creating a sense of involvement. This disposition is suggestive of Alvesson and Wilmott's (1996: 171) theory of 'micro emancipation', in which individuals are able to exploit the 'loopholes and contradictions' of rational organizations in order to secure greater personal autonomy.

However, these exploratory findings are based on the analysis of a relatively homogenous sample of managers, that is, the analysis was restricted to senior hierarchical levels and exclusively to UK managers in commercial organizations. Clearly, further work is required to identify the extent to which these behaviours are observable in alternative settings. For example, are they more likely in younger hi-tech industries where more devolved organizational forms tend to be prevalent or perhaps in public sector organizations where a level of representation is required by both

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politicians and managers? National cultures too may have influenced the research findings. Or might these behaviours simply be a feature of senior and experienced executives? While there is some evidence to support the idea that these types of behaviour are organizationally beneficial (see for example, Ashmos et al., 2002; Ravasi & Verona, 2001) much more research is required to identify the relationship between such leadership behaviour and organizational success (Butcher & Bailey, 2003).

Acknowledgements

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