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Can Leadership Become a Profession?

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Introduction

Can leadership become a profession identical with, or at least somehow comparable to, the professions of, for example, nurses, carpenters or physiotherapists? This is the question we would like to address in the following chapter. Before doing so, we wish to emphasize that despite, or because of, being employed at a school of business, we agree with Mintzberg (2013) and reject the very idea that leadership is a profession in itself. However, among the number of reasons one could list for not accepting contemporary leadership as a profession is the lack of a community of practice based on a code of conduct and probably also the lack of a code of ethics (cf. Barker 2010). Basically, leadership is connected to a certain way of being in a context, and therefore, a community of practice can only exist on a general level, and not as a universal principle. The lack of a code of ethics is problematic in several ways, and that it is problematic must be understood in connection with the idea of profit,

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power and competition—and thus with the discourse of the company and the market. In his/her everyday practice, a leader is caught in dilemmas and paradoxes, and a code of ethics must therefore be regarded as an aspect of the leader's everyday thinking and actions, and not only an aspect of a certain universal leadership discourse.

Based on Podolny (2009), one might claim that students at business schools, who are going to be future leaders, actually share some common values, but these seem to differ from the values of professionals since they are short-sighted and certainly not aiming for a better world. In addition to this, Vedel and Thomsen's (2017) research indicates that compared to other majors, freshers at business schools have a higher tendency of the "dark triad" (narcissism, psychopathy and Machiavellianism). Vedel and Thomsen (2017) argue that due to the lack of longitudinal studies, it is still unclear whether such tendencies are further developed during studies. On the other hand, our everyday experience, which is supported by Koris et al. (2017), is that students at business schools might be just slightly more diverse, and at least some have a slightly broader approach towards both work and life. However, rather than outlining well-known reasons for not comprehending leadership as a profession, we would like to turn the question upside-down and focus on two interrelated research questions: is leadership an immanent and latent aspect of professions, and could this somehow be one of the important key differences between a profession and contemporary leadership? Inspiration for these research questions derives from Foucault (2009) and Cleary (2004, p. 72), as well as from Lave and Wenger's (2003, p. 58) short remark on leadership and professions.

In order to answer these questions, we analyze a case study based on participatory observation produced in an organization during a period of six months. The case study introduces a new leader in charge of a group of different professionals. The leader, who is a male, describes his own leadership as a profession similar to those presented by the professionals. The professionals, on the other hand, reject this understanding of leadership and somehow seem to be longing for a fellow professional to take control of the organization. When directly asked, the professionals are unable to describe how, where and when they think a professional actually develops the skills and competences required for managing fellow

professionals. After dealing with leadership as an immanent and latent aspect of professions and discussing whether this could be one of the key differences between profession and leadership, we hope to break the spell by offering a paradoxical answer to the utopian question: What would it actually take to make leadership a profession in the future, thereby enabling such professional leaders to meet both the professionals and the challenges of leading organizations of professionals?

Building a New Organization

The case study involves a brand-new organization created by merging independent educational institutions located in the same area. The newly established board breaks with tradition, both by recruiting a new type of leader and by offering him a performance contract expected to ensure continual progression and goal achievements. In this chapter, the leader will obviously be anonymous, but for reasons of convenience we will refer to him here as Richard. The consequence of the board breaking with the principle of professionals leading fellow professionals is a new organization involving two or more different, and often contradicting, principles of leadership. Richard, the new leader, comprehends and publicly declares his leadership to be a profession similar to that of the remaining professions represented in the organization. This understanding means that leaders are expected to acquire knowledge, skills and competences built through education at a business school, for instance. Richard is an MSc in Economics & Business Administration and has leadership experience from different, but still somehow similar, organizations. Since employees apparently assume that leadership should follow the principle of professionals being led by fellow professionals, and since this is how it used to be, the recruitment of Richard marks the beginning of an era with tensions and conflicts. The involved parties are anchored in their own approaches, and they do not appear fully conscious of the main reasons for the conflicts. Despite our knowledge about a number of reasons for the internal challenges, in the present chapter we will deal with the tension and conflicts as a result of leadership and thus the contradicting leadership principles established. The situation escalates, and we note

examples of what we will define here as context-independent leadership, and examples of employees compensating from what they perceive as paradoxical leadership decisions. One of the strategies applied by employees can be described as the production of open interpretations of leadership decisions in order to legitimate what we define here as compensating and context-customized actions. This means that the employees create interpretations of decisions legitimizing actions, which, from their own perspective and experience, they comprehend as most suitable and appropriate.

During interviews, Richard indicates that he perceives the previous leadership as an example of unprofessional leadership. This is probably caused by the understandable irritation and frustrations one might experience when dealing with new people, organizations and environments (cf. Malinowski 1989), but it is also a clear example of how the previous leadership has been quite radically downgraded. Richard's perception of the previous leadership is a by-product of the storytelling established by Richard and by the board. The story-telling must basically be understood as an attempt to install, legitimate and empower the board as well as the new leader of the organization. The story marks a clear discontinuity from the leadership principles previously applied, but it should also be interpreted in the context of the leadership discourse present in society. This is a discourse establishing leadership as a profession and a discourse with an immanent and latent definition of leadership as the dialectical contradiction to non-professional or unprofessional leadership. An aspect of this contradiction identifies leadership as closely connected with a certain quality, thus separating it from the inadequacy or at least the lack of quality connected to the unprofessional leader. In this perception of leadership, the unprofessional leadership becomes somehow inappropriate since it produces a low profit or a low quality in the products and/or processes of the organization. Obviously, level of quality can also be connected to the evaluation of other types of processes taking place; for example, during development processes, decision making. Moreover, we might also include the ability to develop, maintain and change internal and external relations. This discourse on the quality of leadership (cf. Mintzberg 2013) might develop into a context-independent approach to the leadership concept, rendering it unable to grasp the practice of

everyday leadership. Applying a leadership concept based on an implicit quality assessment might be effective when building a power position for the board and the new leader. This clearly marks a discontinuity with previous principles and a completely different way of defining concepts such as profession, professionals and a community of practice. Thus, new dialectical contradictions are established between the board/new leader and the employees/professionals (cf. Benson 1977).

A deeper understanding of Richard's approach to leadership is produced when we noticed that he rejects taking responsibility for human resource management; this is left to lower-level leaders, who are probably quite pleased to take on this responsibility. However, one of the leaders is actually disappointed to not be offered any supervision or counselling on her own performance. The leader states that she is left with the impression that the new leader does not really care about daily operations. Richard states that he is simply trying to avoid getting caught by daily operations in order to have time and space for being the leader. This indicates another pair of contradicting concepts, that is, the distinction between professional leadership perceived as a full-time job and non-professional leadership understood as part-time work (cf. Poulfelt 1997). This approach presupposes that full-time leadership has a significant impact on the quality of the leadership actions, but this is actually disproved by Mintzberg's (2013) leadership studies. Leaders who are not working full-time as leaders are not necessarily any worse or better.

Richard's approach to professional leadership is not easy to define (cf. Poulfelt 1997). This is probably one of the reasons why Mintzberg (1989, 2013) rejects the very existence of professional leadership and the notion of leadership as a concept that can be studied from a scientific perspective. This rejection of a scientific approach to leadership is quite interesting since it is probably the result of a mismatch between Mintzberg's empirical studies on leadership and his nomothetic definition of science. In our interpretation, Mintzberg thinks that leadership does not follow principles and methods from natural science, but is instead based on intuition, which is in contrast to the ideal of nomothetic research. Since, according to Mintzberg, it is impossible to create a scientific (nomothetic) definition of leadership, it also becomes impossible to create a formal education that might lay the foundation for a specific leadership

profession. This means that Mintzberg also rejects the conceptualization of professional leadership. The rejection of leadership as a profession and of professional leadership is based on the notion that a contradiction exists between non-conceptual leadership practices and theoretical and context-independent knowledge mediated through the traditional scholastic teaching leading to a certain leadership profession.

As Møller (2007) shows in his studies, the notion that small and independent institutions must merge into new and much larger organizations based on professional leadership was not invented by a random board or a new leader. This is quite obviously an essential element in the public leadership discourse, which, according to Møller (2007), derives from the *new public management* trend. The introduction of this NPM leadership discourse marks a major change in the leadership approach from a previous leadership of profession to what is allegedly a more lasting and professional leadership. Richard therefore bases the definition of his own leadership as professional leadership on the leadership discourse created in society by the *new public management* trend. Moreover, this may be an attempt on his part to create an internal discourse legitimating, as well as creating support, understanding and acceptance, for the new leadership. However, it is also an attempt to justify and achieve acceptance of the additional resources required for establishing a new level of leadership. What really challenges Richard is that the Ministry of Higher Education and Science does not cover all costs associated with the merge process and with establishing a new layer of leadership. The effect of this will be clear to the reader in a short while.

Leading Professionals

As mentioned above, the employees want to return to the principle of professionals leading fellow professionals. This is probably not a major surprise since creating a new organization by merging independent organizations is a quite challenging process for all involved. Richard spends time holding meetings to inform the staff about the challenges faced and to encourage everyone by telling them about better times to come. He advocates that coping with and overcoming today's challenges will most

certainly pay off for all involved in the end. The essential argument presented by Richard is that of a much better and more professional future organization governed by a professional leader. Richard is either unaware of, or disinterested in, employees being provoked by the claim of equality between their professions and his leadership. Open staff meetings are introduced in order to improve the connection between leadership and employees and to circulate the information required for developing a new organizational strategy. Developing a new organizational strategy is quite challenging since it involves a range of stakeholders with contradictory interests, and this is probably the reason why the final strategy appears slightly blurred. The employees state that deteriorated working conditions make it difficult for them to engage in and focus on the future organization. One of the reasons for work conditions being affected is the lack of funds for the merge process, and this becomes a vehicle for increasing turnover and decreasing organizational costs. Richard launches initiatives to increase the turnover, encourages all members of the organization to decrease spending, centralizes the financial management, and hires a new CFO to manage the overall budget. Moreover, an external consultant is hired to examine the employee's job satisfaction, and the first-year report shows poor job satisfaction, while the following shows slight improvements. Reports on the employees' job satisfaction force Richard and the leadership group to monitor the employees' exit in order to ensure that core employees with key competences, skills and knowledge are retained. This might be comprehended as a reactive act, but staff meetings and meetings on general collaboration is way to offer employees some room for voice in order to avoid their exit.

Employees might be unable to explain precisely how, where and when leadership of their profession is being developed, but they still have an understanding of leadership which involves self-management, managing one's own practice and that of others. This understanding of leadership is deeply connected with the learning and socialization processes making newcomers part of the community of practice. Leadership is partly immanent, implicit and therefore a tacit knowledge closely connected to a specific community of practice (cf. Lave and Wenger 2003).

The leadership of professionals is probably most visible during the socialization processes leading newcomers to become members of the

community. Such socialization processes are described by Lave and Wenger (2003) as processes in which the newcomer gains a legitimate peripheral position from where the collaboration of more experienced professionals can be observed. The peripheral position also offers newcomers the opportunity to fight for and gain a less peripheral position from where they can interact with, and learn from, more experienced professionals. Basically, a profession requires that members share a certain mindset (for example, a certain vocabulary, ethos, logos etc.), which is adjusted and maintained through social control, and such social control can obviously be comprehended as part of the leadership aspect included in a profession. In essence, social control is a matter of self-control (cf. Mead 2002, p. 196). In this context, it means that self-control or self-management is the tool professionals use in order to ensure that their acts are in accordance with the ethos and the values of the community of practice.

Another leadership aspect runs from professionals coordinating, planning, acting and evaluating their own work. Obviously, this type of leadership is not only produced by members of the community of practice; it also involves interactions with other professionals, patients, clients or customers. Plato (2004) offers an interesting example, describing the relation between the patient and the physician. Undoubtedly, the patient submits to the leadership of the physician but only because the patient accepts the rationality of doing so. Plato stresses, therefore, that rhetoric is an essential skill which must be mastered by the physician and applied in order to convince the free man about the advantages of submitting to the leadership of the physician. When exploring the relation between the physician and the patient, we notice two important aspects. The first is obviously that rhetoric, ethos, values and the specific jargon are essential for the profession in order to dissociate from other professions and subjects. Secondly, we mark what we will define in this context as a profession, based on the recognition produced mainly in the interactions between the essential actors (cf. Honneth 1995). In the present context, the expression *profession-based recognition* is intended to describe the mutual recognition of the positions or roles occupied by the parties involved in the interaction. Moreover, it describes recognition of the actors' contributions to the common goal achievement. Obviously, the

expression *profession-based recognition* also implies its opposition (cf. Honneth 1995), which could be described as a type of misrecognition of the contribution, position or profession. This is what is at stake whenever Richard begins to talk about professions.

When Richard claims that his leadership is a profession comparable to other professions, his main intention seems to be to identify with the employees in the organization. However, this is not the only instance in which Richard applies the comparison since he occasionally also uses it as a response to employees who annoy and/or provoke him. In a front-stage situation when Richard seems unable to react directly, he sometimes launches an indirect attack. A final use of the comparison seems to be Richard's attempt to tease employees who speak or think too highly about their own professions. However, the comparison triggers employees since it unintentionally deconstructs the employees' implicit definition of a profession. The profession concept applied by the employees' must be defined **negatively** by what it is not. A number of things that are non-identifiable with a profession might be mentioned, but in the case study, one of the most obvious examples of non-identifiability is actually the very image of a business school and its graduates. The latter also includes the lack of a community of practice based on a common code of ethics and short-sighted values not aiming for a better world.

The Immanent Aspects of Leadership

Now seems to be the right time to return to the questions asked in the introduction of this chapter. Here we will deal with leadership as an immanent and latent aspect of the profession. We will also discuss whether the close connection between leadership and profession is actually one of the main differences between profession and contemporary leadership. The analysis of the case study presented above shows that in this case, we are dealing with at least two very different approaches to essential concepts such as leadership, profession, practice and probably also to the community of practice. While analyzing professionals' understanding of their own professions, we can see that leadership is an immanent aspect of a profession and consequently of a practice. The

immanent aspect of leadership is apparent in the socialization processes taking place in the community of practice. It is linked to the relation between newcomers and more experienced professionals. Another important leadership aspect seen in the socialization processes is the internalizing of self-management required in order to become a professional and to be accepted as a professional and consequently as a member of the community of practice. The conceptualization of a profession presented in the case by Richard is founded on an attempt to legitimize his own leadership and gain acceptance from professionals. However, it is also based on the contemporary leadership discourse, which seems to be inspired by and emanating from *new public management*. It is an understanding seen as a conscious or unconscious attempt to re-frame the existing use of concepts such as profession, practice and the very community of practice. In the next section, we will focus on what will be required to develop a future leadership profession enabled to lead professionals and organizations of professionals.

A Paradox Named the Professional Leader

In this section, we make an attempt to break the spell and find an answer to the question: what would actually be required to turn leadership into a profession, thus enabling professional leaders to meet the challenges of leading organizations of professionals? Based on our analysis of the case study, we can somehow conclude that enabling a professional leader to lead an organization of professionals requires a leader who is able to establish a position quite different from that taken by professionals and from the position taken by Richard. The position of a professional leader appears to be somehow paradoxical since it cannot be any of the two positions introduced, nor can it be a position produced as a result of the dialectical law of the negation of the negation (cf. Adorno 2008). If such a position were to be established, it would result in an entirely new type of meeting between leader and employees. In this context, a meeting is a concept developed by Buber (2004) and describes different types of interactions between human beings. However, if such a meeting were ever to be possible, it would probably appear to be a highly paradoxical

meeting. In the following paragraph, we will explain why such a meeting and approach cannot be based on the positions introduced in the case study.

The professionals are obviously longing for a professional to take the position as leader. However, the type of meeting between leader and professionals we are searching for cannot be based on simple identification with the professionals since this would reduce the leader to an ordinary member of the community of practice. A leader who only reproduces the logic of the community of practice is quite comparable to what anthropologists intend to describe using the expression "go native". This means eliminating one's own character of otherness, which, for anthropologists, results in vanishing in the culture one is supposed to be studying. Going native makes the anthropologists unable to disseminate the knowledge produced during their ethnographic field studies. A leader who goes native abandons the very idea of being a professional leader. A professional leader must somehow be able to differentiate themselves from the community of practice they are expected to lead. The acting must somehow reflect the leader's ability to produce an entirely new type of meeting based on a logic which is radically different from the logic already presented by the community of practice and its members.

In the case study, the opposite situation is noticed when Richard introduces himself as a professional leader with a significantly different profession. Lévinas (1996) shows how meeting others can result in comprehending the other/s as a matter of pure otherness and thus as somehow significantly different from the subject involved. He also shows how a person can reduce the other/s to pure firstness, as noticed in the case study. This refers to a leader being unable to recognize the other/s as unique and thereby significantly different from the leader him- or herself. According to Lévinas (1996), this is what happens when the subject's experience takes command and reduces the face, and thus the character, of the other to an image already present in the mind of the subject. In Lévinas' (1996) ethics this becomes an example of how, intentionally or unintentionally and consciously or unconsciously, the subject ends up colonizing the other.

Lévinas' (1996) ethics is founded on the subject being responsible for the other. Transferred to our case, this means that we are searching for a

leader with a sincere interest in the other person for the other person's own sake. If ever possible, this would require a leader who was able to attend meetings with others without letting their previous experiences frame and thereby overshadow the meetings. This would result in a distinct new type of meeting which would produce radically new experiences for all involved. We understand this as a meeting where the leader perceives the professionals' utterances as a number of apparently independent islands located in a large sea (cf. Andersson and Furberg 1979). When first observed by the leader, each island might appear as an independent and isolated island. However, underneath the surface of the water, the islands might be interconnected by underwater mountain ranges. The leader would leave it to the others to lead a dialogical investigation of how they would consciously or unconsciously connect the apparently independent islands. This investigation would be an attempt to fully comprehend their own assumptions and presumptions as well as those of the others. It would require a dialogue to reach this point, and it would result in the production of a deeper understanding of one's own and the lifeworlds of the others. This would be a sincere meeting between subjects, or, using the expression of Buber (2004), a meeting between I and you.

As we learn from Socrates (Xenofon 2000), it is not enough for a professional leader to investigate the understandings and assumptions of others. A leader must know him- or herself in order to obtain the self-reflection required for rejecting pure egoism and fulfilling Socrates' important demand of acting well in relation to others (Xenofon 2000, p. 138)—in the case study, the professionals and their community. This self-reflection consists of the combination between self-governance and knowing one's own matrix of perception (Bourdieu and Wacquant 2004, p. 104). The latter is a matter of how the leader perceives the social world as a consequence of their symbolic capital in a specific field. Symbolic capital includes cultural, social and economic capital and probably also other types of capital recognized in the specific field. This also means that the matrix of perception is a result of habitus—the internalizing of the social from a highly specific position. Self-reflection also requires self-governance, which is a matter of the leader applying the technologies of the self (cf. Foucault 1997, p. 223). The leader must observe her or his

own inner processes and acts by creating a distance to him- or herself (cf. Foucault 1997). It obviously takes time to conduct such observations, but it also takes a reflective discourse of the self to analyze and comprehend the observations. These processes can be described as a form of self-meditation and enlightening of the leader. Enlightenment must be followed by self-discipline, self-control, empathy and social intelligence, enabling the leader to adjust the ongoing inner processes and acts. If all this was possible, it would certainly create a professional leader able to lead professionals and their communities.

Conclusion

In this chapter, we have analyzed a case study on the leadership of an organization consisting of professionals and their communities of practice. We used the case analysis to show that the ongoing discussion on leadership as a profession must be understood as part of a more general discourse in society on concepts such as profession, practice and leadership. We could probably claim that several of the issues we have uncovered in the analysis are interrelated with challenges produced by the traditional discourse on the role of the leader. Rather than doing so, we applied the case study in order to show the type of challenges occurring while trying to turn leadership into a profession. This is not a matter of Excel-leadership and cannot be reduced to a matter of the ability to apply Excel. The concept of a professional leader presupposes a person with the ability to understand his or her own practice as a certain way of being-in-the-world. It involves essential themes from management philosophy (Kirkeby 2010) such as self-knowledge, sincere curiosity and ability to get to know others. This certainly involves the leader's ability to attend dialogues, to remain reflective and continue to act ethically. It also involves a fundamental discussion of consciousness, the ability to reflect, the development of a leadership community of practice and probably many other skills that the leader will need to learn during his/her leadership. We doubt that these requirements can be met, and our conclusion is therefore that leadership will probably never become a profession comparable to the professions of, for example, nurses, carpenters and physiotherapists.

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