Leadership-as-Practice

Theory and Application

Edited by
Joseph A. Raelin

ROUTLEDGE

LEADERSHIP-AS-PRACTICE

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LEADERSHIP-AS-PRACTICE

This book develops a new paradigm in the field of leadership studies, referred to as the "leadership-as-practice" (L-A-P) movement. Its essence is its conception of leadership as occurring as a practice rather than residing in the traits or behaviors of particular individuals. A practice is a coordinative effort among participants who choose through their own rules to achieve a distinctive outcome. It also tends to encompass routines as well as problem-solving or coping skills, often tacit, that are shared by a community. Accordingly, leadership-as-practice is less about what one person thinks or does and more about what people may accomplish together. It is thus concerned with how leadership emerges and unfolds through day-to-day experience. The social and material contingencies impacting the leadership constellation—the people who are effecting leadership at any given time—do not reside outside of leadership but are very much embedded within it. To find leadership, then, we must look to the practice within which it is occurring.

The leadership-as-practice approach resonates with a number of closely related traditions, such as collective, shared, distributed, and relational leadership, that converge on leadership processes. These approaches share a line of inquiry that acknowledges leadership as a social phenomenon. The new focus opens up a plethora of research opportunities encouraging the study of social processes beyond influence, such as inter-subjective agency, shared sensemaking, dialogue, and co-construction of responsibilities.

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ROUTLEDGE STUDIES IN LEADERSHIP RESEARCH

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Philip A. Woods is Professor of Educational Policy, Democracy and Leadership at the University of Hertfordshire, UK, and Chair of the British Educational Leadership, Management and Administration Society (BELMAS). Author of over 120 publications, his work particularly focuses on distributed and democratic leadership, governance, equity, and change towards more democratic and holistic learning environments. Awards include best conference paper at the International Philosophy of Management Conference in Oxford, published in 2010 as 'The Geography of Reflective Leadership: The inner life of democratic learning communities' (co-authored with Dr Glenys Woods) in *Philosophy of Management*. His books include *Transforming education policy: Shaping a democratic future*.

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INTRODUCTION TO LEADERSHIP-AS-PRACTICE

Theory and application

Joseph A. Raelin

Overview

Welcome to our research volume on *Leadership-as-Practice*, a new movement in leadership research and practice destined to shake the foundations of the very meaning of leadership in the worlds of both theory and application. Its essence is its conception of leadership as occurring as a practice rather than residing in the traits or behaviors of particular individuals. The book seeks to assemble what we know about the leadership-as-practice (L-A-P) movement and extend its conceptualization through a number of critical themes that have not been sufficiently explored or, in some cases, not explored at all.

The editor and authors of this volume sincerely hope that this work will provide an indispensable resource for scholars working in the more progressive domains of leadership studies. As an authoritative text on leadership as a social, material, and jointly accomplished process, it seeks to offer greater insights into the realities of leadership than texts focusing on the role of individual leaders. In this way we hope to create momentum for a new movement in the field of leadership that is ripe for a more critical perspective that incorporates the emerging practice view. We refer to our approach as a movement because we are observing some of the attributes of social mobilization from social movement theory (see, e.g., James & van Seters, 2014). In particular, those of us working in the broadly defined practice domain have formed a collective identity that has assumed a normative orientation for changing the conventional view of leadership. In the end, we hope that our collective efforts will continue across time as other adherents join us to advance our agenda of change.

In the current volume, we seek to present an integrated and coherent thematic assemblage of chapters that build on one another and fill out a needed

conceptualization in leadership-as-practice. In places, readers will notice that authors approach our movement from somewhat different perspectives, but it is thought that any exposition of contentions and variations (some of which will be referred to below) will only serve to enrich the movement by encouraging continuing research and development in a spirit of transparency. Among the themes that we will explore are:

- The distinctions between L-A-P and other collective and relational perspectives of leadership as well as between L-A-P and other "as-practice" approaches;
- The historical, philosophical, critical, and ideological foundations of L-A-P that make it exigent in understanding the contemporary organization and workforce;
- The complex site where activity and its representation embodied in leadership practices intersect;
- The artifacts, symbols, material, and language games that establish identity and achieve leadership in L-A-P;
- The nature of agency including the inter-active and trans-active agency underlying L-A-P;
- The dialogic patterns that produce sustainable collective practices;
- The methodologies that in attempting to capture L-A-P change the tools, methods, and technologies underlying the study of leadership and leadership development; and
- The change in leadership development when conceived as a practice rather than as a psychological parameter within the consciousness and behavior of particular individuals.

Finally, we hope you will find that the selected authors of this book are among the most prominent and highly cited progressive scholars in the world undertaking critical studies in the field of leadership. What is also compelling about these authors is that none of them is merely a transcriber of thoughts, rather each is actively involved in the practice world through their own empirical studies, although most indicate a preference for qualitative ethnographies over a priori theory construction and quantitative testing. The chapters thus combine the authors' applications with theory. As the editor, it will be my pleasure to introduce these chapters later in this Introduction. At this point, I will provide a brief introduction to leadership-as-practice to orient the reader to this emerging and what we hope you will find exciting movement in leadership research and practice. Following a preamble to the "practice view," I will cover some of the basic parameters of the L-A-P movement: its prior traditions, the problem of structure and agency in L-A-P, its enumerated activities, and end with its development orientation, research, and ideology.

Introducing the "practice view"

The foundation of the leadership-as-practice approach is its underlying belief that leadership occurs as a practice rather than from the traits or behaviors of individuals. A practice is a coordinative effort among participants who choose through their own rules to achieve a distinctive outcome. Accordingly, leadership-as-practice is less about what one person thinks or does and more about what people may accomplish together. It is thus concerned with how leadership emerges and unfolds through day-to-day experience. The social and material-discursive contingencies impacting the leadership constellation—the people who are effecting leadership at any given time—do not reside outside of leadership but are very much embedded within it. To find leadership, then, we must look to the practice within which it is occurring.

The practice view may consequently upend our traditional views of leadership because it does not rely on the attributes of individuals, nor does it focus on the dyadic relationship between leaders and followers, which historically has been the starting point for any discussion of leadership. Rather, it depicts immanent collective action emerging from mutual, discursive, sometimes recurring and sometimes evolving patterns in the moment and over time among those engaged in the practice. This definition suggests an ecumenical approach to practice because at times it refers to routine activities; at other times, it suggests a more perpetually unfolding dynamic. Perhaps the simplest way to account for this difference is to compare the concepts of practices and practice.

Practices, as per the definition of Pickering (1995), refer to specific sequences of activities that may repeatedly recur, whereas practice refers to emergent entanglements that tend to extend or transform meaning over time. In Chapter 8 of this volume, Simpson links practices to an inter-actional mode of activity in which pre-formed entities—be they people or discourses or institutions—vie for influence over other "inter-actors." Practice, on the other hand, is associated with a more trans-actional mode characterized by a continual flow of processes where material-discursive engagements produce meaning that is emergent and mutual. Practices, therefore, as Crevani and Endrissat point out (Chapter 2, this volume) rely on an entitative ontology of subject-object or subject-subject relations in which individuals may be viewed within fields of relationships. Practice, on the other hand, is processual and thus considered more situated and recursive. Another way to differentiate these two forms of activity is to use the philosophical language employed by Cunliffe and Hibbert (Chapter 3, this volume) in which practices may be considered objectivist or subjectivist, depending on whether the practices in question are studied as objects separate from the people engaged in them or whether they are subject to the intentions and interpretations of the actors who experience them. Practice, meanwhile, may be considered intersubjective in character because it is interwoven not between people but "within" the dynamic unfolding of their becoming (see Shotter, Chapter 7, this volume).

When we associate leadership with practice, we think of it as not only material-discursive but shared or collective (Bolden, Petrov & Gosling, 2008; Pearce &