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### BOOK CHAPTER

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# 12

## An Overview of the Leadership Discourses

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### Introduction

Chapter 12 will summarize the leadership discourses, and show how they relate to each other and to leadership practice. It is important to highlight that while these discourses emerged at different social and economic periods, each are now familiar and have become normative. Each discourse dominated a historical period, in contemporary organizations, each one has its strengths and weaknesses, which will be explored in this chapter. Each discourse may stand alone and dominate different sectors and organizations, but they also co-exist, within organizations and within individual leaders and leadership teams. However, one discourse is usually dominant in any given situation at any given time. In leadership practice, co-existence usually means one of two things:

- 1 a strategic leadership synthesis of skills and culture to maximize organizational efficiency and enhancement of member engagement;
- 2 competing cultures and visions of how to lead the organization.

I will now summarize each discourse:

### Discourse 1: Leader as Controller

The first leadership discourse that emerged at the beginning of the century epitomized by Frederick Taylor's scientific management is the Leader as *Controller*. This character is very similar to A. MacIntyre's social 'manager' character, which he claims signifies the tension between manipulation and non-manipulation, and I would add between control and autonomy. The Controller leadership discourse is born from scientific rationalism and the industrial revolution, which, in the name of the Enlightenment and progress, relegated the worker to being a cog in a machine, mirroring standardization and mechanization within the mass production of the factory. The leader as Controller operates as a technocrat leader focusing on efficiency. In Etzioni's (1961) taxonomy of control, this leadership character is based on an overt system of coercive and utilitarian control, using reward and deprivation (transactional leadership). In the leadership discourse, covert control is applied from beyond the workplace. The political/economic and social leadership supports the drive for worker efficiency, leveraging worker productivity through class power relations and the threat of unemployment, poverty, healthcare and pension benefits. Political leadership always retains the

leader as Controller discourse in the background alongside other leadership discourses, using the threat of job loss and welfare to work benefit links etc., as social control mechanism (healthcare linked to paid employment is very important in the USA).

## Discourse 2: Leader as Therapist

The second discourse is the leader as *Therapist*. This discourse signifies the dominant therapeutic culture in contemporary Western society and highlights the tension between individualism and alienation, personal growth and workplace efficiency, well-being and mental/emotional health. The leader as Therapist discourse represents the subtlety of therapeutic governance as opposed to coercive control. This leadership reflects the wider social trends of atomization, self-concern, and the post-war individualistic expectations of being fulfilled, successful and happy (Rieff, 1966; Lasch, 1979; Furedi, 2003).

The Therapist leader emerged from within the Human Relations movement and encompasses the work of theorists such as Mayo, Lewin, Maslow, Frankl and Rogers. Their focus on individual personal growth and self-actualization was readily translated to the workplace, through techniques to motivate individuals and teams, through job re-design and job enhancement to make work more satisfying and to produce work-group cohesion. Employers and theorists believed that happier workers would be more productive than unhappy, coerced workers. This approach in essence was seen as more progressive and productive. It aimed to overcome the alienation created by the machine-like efficiency under the leader as Controller discourse. Work became a site for personal growth and achievement, a place to create meaning and identity. Under the leader as Therapist, people 'went to work to work on themselves' (Rose, 1990), embracing therapeutic culture in society at large.

Personnel departments were established, management consultants and new texts, theories and a huge training and development industry flourished. The leader as Therapist still flourishes often alongside the later Messiah character; a common scenario is the HR Director acts as the Therapist character and the CEO as leader as the Messiah character. Recent examples of the therapist discourse are the interest in emotional intelligence and the huge growth of executive coaching. However, this discourse lost its potency in corporate life, as it could no longer deliver the economic benefits across global business.

## Discourse 3: Leader as Messiah

The third discourse is the leader as Messiah. The term leader has been elevated in recent years, challenging the dominance of the term 'manager' and signifying more social change. Coming to the fore since the early 1980s and most clearly articulated within the Transformation leadership literature, the *Messiah discourse* provides charismatic leadership and vision in the face of a turbulent and uncertain environment. The Messiah character signifies the tension between salvation and destruction, between the technocrat and the moral visionary, and between hope and despair. The Messiah discourse appeals to individuals and society, promising

salvation from the chaotic world in which a lack of control is experienced and where traditional community is diminished. As the workplace rises in importance as a site of community, replacing institutions such as the church and family, so the manager/leader replaces the priesthood as a social character of influence.

The Messiah character leads through their signifying capacity, symbolism, ritual, myth and language. Their focus is to act on culture change and the Messiah leadership discourse relies on 'normative control', which is self- and peer-control through surveillance and internalization, emotionalism and cultural norms. Followers of the Messiah character work hard because of an internalized belief system aligned to the leader's vision and values.

The earnings of leaders graphically represent the new values and expectations on leaders since the Messiah discourse arrived. In the 1980s, in the USA, CEOs earned 40 times the average wage (as the Therapist character), in 2000 (as the Messiah character) they earn over 475 times (*Business Week*, 'Executive compensation scoreboard', 17 April 2000).

Table 12.1 shows an overview of the signifying qualities of each discourse, clearly demonstrating the differences between them and how they impact on leadership practice. This table provides a useful reference point to situate your individual leadership practice and your experience of the leadership around you. It is an interesting exercise to be playful with these three discourses, to observe leadership and the language leaders use, seeing if they fit into one or more of these discourses. Also look at vision statements, company websites, newspaper articles and try to identify these discourses. When you have identified a leadership discourse, look for any patterns and the context in which they occur. Practising this alerts you to the underlying discourses in any leadership situation, which then enables you to take a critical stance, and ask why a certain discourse is favoured, and what implications this has for the employees and the organization.

## The leadership discourses in practice

The embodiment of the leadership discourse by a leader character brings the concept of a discourse into the lived workplace. It provides a tangible and observable leadership practice to engage and negotiate with. It reveals to those who take a critical perspective how a discourse impacts and influences organizations, managers and employees. It reveals the constantly changing tensions and desires within the social realm and how this impacts on leadership at work. There is a dynamic interaction between the character (the discourse-filled role) and the actor inhabiting the character. The interaction extends also to those interacting with the leader or leadership team.

### *Discourses preference*

Individual leaders, leadership teams and organizations rarely consciously choose their preferred leadership discourse as these are hidden with normative behaviours and expectations. However, they are drawn to discourses for various reasons.

**Table 12.1** The signifying qualities of the leadership discourses

Discourse	Controller	Therapist	Messiah
<b>Vision aims</b>	<b>Iron cage</b> Maximizes production through control	<b>Comfortable Iron Cage</b> Maximizes production though increased motivation and promoting personal growth and team work	<b>Internalized Iron cage</b> Maximizes production through belief in personal salvation via new meanings found through following the leader's values and vision
<b>Source of authority</b>	<b>From above <i>Science</i></b> The Boss/Owner passes authority down the pyramid (position power) and the techniques of management control gain authority from scientific rationalism	<b>From within <i>Humanism</i></b> Drawing on personal internalized authority and the power gained through self-actualization and collaborative teamwork	<b>From beyond <i>The Godhead</i></b> The source of authority is transcendent whether secular (through morality) or quasi-spiritual. The leader embodies the particular culture they signify, from this they gain authority
<b>Perceptions of workers</b>	<b>Robots</b> Work on production lines or as one of a mass of other workers, with little personal identity	<b>Patients/Clients</b> Be healed and made whole through reparation at work	<b>Disciples</b> Follow the leader and learn to be more like them and create a meaningful identity within a community of believers
<b>Leads what?</b>	<b>Soma</b> Controller focuses on the body to maximize efficient production, via incentives and coercion (e.g. piecework and discipline)	<b>Psyche</b> Therapist focuses on the psyche to understand motivation, designs job enrichment, creates spaces for self-actualizing behaviours	<b>Soul</b> Messiah works with the soul. Followers align themselves to the vision, a cause greater than the self (the company). The Messiah is role model, linking success with personal salvation
<b>Organizational metaphor</b>	<b>Machine</b> Takes technical and rational view of world, thinks in closed systems, tries to control internal environment to maximize efficiency	<b>Organism</b> Principles of growth both personal and social (learning organizations). Optimizes growth potential	<b>Network</b> Leads through connections and linking the network. Organization is seen as a network of dispersed leadership held together by strong cultures
<b>Leadership style</b>	<b>Cogs in wheel</b> Ensures each individual, team, department works optimally, keeping to strict tasks. Cogs are oiled, maximizing efficiency and performance	<b>Relationships</b> Managing emotions and relationships and the boundaries between individuals, teams and across functions	<b>Symbolic and cultural</b> Creates images, markets and a vision. Communicates and promotes a culture using symbols, myths, morality and rituals

(Continued)

**Table 12.1.** (Continued)

<b>Discourse</b>	<b>Controller</b>	<b>Therapist</b>	<b>Messiah</b>
<b>Signifier</b>	<b>Coercion and scientific efficiency</b>	<b>Reparation, therapeutic governance</b>	<b>Personal salvation/hope and faith</b>
The social tensions signified by each discourse	Between coercion and choice, dependency and autonomy. Holds the tensions between scientific progress and humanism	Between wholeness and fragmentation. Therapeutic governance i.e. taking private emotion and utilizing it as a social tool	Between personal/social salvation and destruction. Between prophetic vision and technical jargon, hope and despair, mythos and logos. Puts faith back in business
<b>Control</b>	<b>Bureaucratic</b>	<b>Humanistic</b>	<b>Culture</b>
Axtell Ray (1986)	Control via manipulation and strict policing	Control by emotional management and therapeutic governance: managing the need for reparation: a paternalistic overseeing	Culture control. Workers internalize the cultural norms which become an internalized organizational ideal. Policing is via self and peers: open plan office, lack of privacy and peer surveillance
Etzioni (1961)	Coercive/utilitarian	Utilitarian/normative	Normative

Sometimes leaders and organizations are 'trapped' within a discourse, others change between leadership discourses under certain conditions. Individuals and groups can be attracted to different discourses depending on their personal social location and how they perceive the world from this location.

Often individuals have an internalized 'idealized' leadership stance, which relates to their social location, and their personal experience of leadership, beginning from their parenting. If a person has a very strict mother or father, or they are brought up in a strict religious culture or a harsh boarding school, this may influence the leader they identify with later in life. They may assume that all leaders should be in the Controller discourse, as this is the norm to them. Alternatively they may internalize a view that this early experience was damaging to them and they may seek reparative leadership model that would situate them in the 'therapy discourse'. Individuals, who doted on their parents or another early leadership role model, may identify with the Messiah discourse, relating to the special leader who presents as a saviour. In psychoanalytic terms, this process is called valency, individuals carry with them a valency for certain group cultures (Bion, 1961) and I would suggest also for leadership discourses.

Change in leadership discourses often arise due to external pressures. An individual leader can be pulled by competing discourses. As British Prime Minister, Tony Blair embodied the Messiah discourse, talking passionately, with vision, with persuasion, attempting to modernize and change the culture of his political party, the country and beyond, but every so often he reverted to the Controller leadership discourse. His desire seems to be visionary, but his instincts seem to be the controller, the interventionist leader, setting a target and audit culture of micromanagement in the public sector.

Anxiety over performance often distorts a leadership team who favour the Messiah discourse and all the company rhetoric supports transformational leadership, but then return instinctively to the controller discourse, when they receive poor output figures or share prices drop.

Understanding the leadership discourses makes it easier for leaders in practice to recognize these processes. When they are recognized, leaders can act to ensure that reactivity to short-term pressure doesn't alter their strategic course.

Different geographical, historical and socio-cultural contexts will also favour different leadership discourses. For example, in my observations it appears that in the USA leadership seems more generically accepted than in Europe where it seems more distrusted. The Messiah discourse is therefore more likely in the USA, and the Therapist discourse more likely in Europe as it has less of an overt leadership feel to it. In the UK, my experience is that the public and voluntary sectors prefer the leader as Therapist discourse as it fits with the employees' public service and vocational ideals.

The British National Health Service (NHS) is an interesting example of a large public sector institution which has experienced all three discourses. It was dominated by hierarchy and control in the early years and until the 1970s was led by the leader as Controller discourse with severe matrons, rigid role definitions, a bureaucratic structure and medical personnel acting with omnipotent power. This shifted towards the leadership as Therapist discourse as new management/leadership techniques filtered in from the private sector, and it was realized that leadership and motivation were key issues as employee morale waned in an under-resourced and underpaid service. In the late 1980s, greater reforms began to take place and again following the corporate lead (public sector leadership often follows the perceived 'glamorous' corporate sector with a delay factor of a decade). The leader as Messiah discourse became prominent, with the aims of modernizing the NHS and changing the culture to enable flexible and adaptive working. Huge sums were spent on leadership development using competency frameworks designed to support the change using the Messiah discourse. Symbolic culture changes took place, which were/are hotly contested, for example, to make patients into customers with choices and create an internal market. Interestingly, while the espoused leadership was the Messiah discourse and CEOs have been given more positional power to change culture, the reality on the ground has been one of competing discourses. The health workers' favoured discourse is the Therapist discourse, which relates closely to their clinical roles and vocations, and that is what clinical leaders attempt to provide. The senior management attempts (with different success rates) to create culture change through the Messiah discourse, but complain that the government is so anxious about its modernizing reforms that it reverts to the leader as Controller discourse, micro-managing CEOs' performance. This is due to the government anxiety that if the reforms fail they would themselves lose office, this anxiety is passed down throughout the institution and the experienced leadership is the Controller discourse. An ex-colleague of mine spoke of her experience as a clinical leader:

**My job used to be caring for people, now I feel like I am running a production line, all we are concerned about is getting the waiting times down, if we don't, our**

funding is reduced. The leadership here talks about creating a culture of trust, empowering us to do our jobs, but in reality they are the most controlling leaders we have had in my 24 years of service. (Ward Charge nurse, NHS hospital, September 2005: Anonymous)

The result of an espoused Messiah leadership discourse colliding with the experience of a Controller discourse creates cynicism and distrust, resulting in low morale.

Positions within hierarchies, and location in functions and departments, also impact on the leadership discourse. The Messiah leadership discourse is more favoured, the higher in the organization one climbs. The Therapist leader has changed from being the dominant leadership discourse, to become favoured in the realms of aspiring middle managers, HR departments and the public sector. Human Resource departments often fluctuate between the Controller discourse, when operating on transactional and contractual concerns, and the Therapist discourse, when dealing with leadership development. This split is unhelpful and many HR teams' focus is over-influenced by the former which hinders their performance in the latter. They can be perceived as Controlling characters from below, and as Therapist characters from above. Structurally within companies the HR leadership becomes split between discourses which is unhelpful as they are in a vital influencing position and should be working towards the company's strategic leadership vision.

Leadership development, often instigated through the HR function, is a very risk-adverse process, because the deliverers worry about having safe and measurable outcomes to justify their work. Also when working with senior personnel, the risk is increased because of the power held by these executives, 'Don't do anything to upset the leaders!' This often influences choices and the deliverers revert to individualist, reductionist and formulaic solutions: competency frameworks setting universal leadership goals, followed by individual 'tests' to 'scientifically' measure skills and identify gaps. The weakest part of this process is usually the follow-up, sometimes it is missing altogether or the individual is given token leadership development, other times it is more thoughtful. This approach is situated in the Therapist discourse, attempting to change individual behaviour through modification using a technician-rational approach. What is missing is a coherent systemic approach with an organizational development and strategic vision.

Leadership discourses can be used heuristically to help understand organization individual leadership assumptions. If an HR leader can understand the tensions in their roles, they can resist the pull to the Therapist discourse and take a more strategic view alongside the individualist rational approach.

To make progress in the emancipatory role of leadership in organizational life the discourses help identify normative assumptions, social relations and beneath-the-surface structural dynamics. They also help to reveal how power, authority, control and influence are exerted. The leader is as ensnared in the dominant discourse as are the followers; nobody is acting as a free agent unless they are aware of the dominant discourses which create the boundaries and norms in which we all act.

## Working with leadership discourses

Each discourse has its merits and its weaknesses. Discourses are not right or wrong, they exist, representing wider social phenomena. However, once aware of the discourse, we can make some judgement and assessment as to how each discourse affects leadership and organizational culture. While we are all in a sense captured by a particular discourse, we are also able to negotiate, individually and collectively, to change the discourse and our relationship to it. Collectively, the discourse can be transformed, and with it the power and social relations that emanate from it. It is through this social construction (of which we are all active agents) that negotiation takes place and social change occurs.

Boxes 12.1, 12.2 and 12.3 offer examples of how each leadership discourse might impact within different work situations (which often reflects how they emerged). These boxes are not finite or definitive but there to open dialogue as to which leadership discourses, and the accompanying assumptions, fit to different situations and contexts. As stated previously, discourses can and often do co-exist within organizations, sectors, but one is usually dominant.

### Box 12.1 Controller leader discourse

<b>Strengths</b>	<b>Weaknesses</b>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Focus on output and task</li> <li>Results driven</li> <li>Improves efficiency</li> <li>Empirical and measurable targets</li> <li>Decisive leadership in a crisis</li> <li>Creates clear boundaries between work and home identity</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Creates employee alienation, resentment and resistance</li> <li>Poor use of human resource: Does not utilize employees' knowledge, skills and creativity</li> <li>Creates inflexible and rigid 'them and us' workforce relations</li> <li>Often leads to disputes</li> </ul>
<b>Useful settings</b>	<b>Less useful settings</b>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Production line, old manufacturing</li> <li>Workplaces where efficiency and control are vital</li> <li>Nuclear industry, projects which require high security, and high levels of checking</li> <li>Accounting departments</li> <li>Construction industry</li> <li>Task-focused project management</li> <li>First line leadership</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Post-industrial workplaces</li> <li>Knowledge-led industries</li> <li>Education sector</li> <li>Entrepreneurial business</li> <li>Innovation and creative sector</li> <li>Senior strategic leadership</li> </ul>

**Box 12.2 Therapist leader discourse**

<b>Strengths</b>	<b>Weaknesses</b>
<p>Individual and team focus Emotional awareness Builds trust Empowers through engaging individual and team through building rapport, listening and finding ways to offer personal growth and development opportunities</p>	<p>Lacks big picture, strategic focus Lacks dynamism and energy Doesn't build strong cultures Individual focus rather than systems focus Organization can become introverted and narcissistic, focusing on employee needs rather than an external focus</p>
<b>Useful settings</b>	<b>Less useful settings</b>
<p>Steady state organizations Education, health, public and not-for-profit sectors Value focuses in organizations with an ethos of human development Middle management-leadership roles, supporting individuals and teams Human Resource function</p>	<p>Fast changing organizations Multinationals with complex structures, requiring more of a systemic and culture-led approach Manufacturing sector, building industry which require robust task focus Senior leadership requiring strategic focus Asian cultures which are less culturally embedded in therapy culture than Western cultures</p>

**Box 12.3 Messiah leader discourse**

<b>Strengths</b>	<b>Weaknesses</b>
<p>Builds strong aligned companies Dynamic energized cultures Innovative, dispersed leadership Builds in dispersed leadership and autonomous teams Strategic and visionary</p>	<p>Unsustainable over long periods totalizing-fundamentalist cultures Leaders can become omnipotent, dependency then becomes an issue Conformist homogeneous cultures can stifle innovation and creativity</p>

*(Continued)*

*(Continued)*

Useful settings	Less useful settings
Post-industrial companies Knowledge-based companies Global multinationals, large corporations Senior strategic leadership	Steady state organizations Industrial, manufacturing sector Organizations reliant on continuity rather than transformation, e.g. health-care, banking Middle management/leadership Organizations with resistance to 'leadership cultures' (public sector organizations)

When thinking about leadership in one's own workplace, or when visiting another organization, these boxes can highlight a few of the relevant issues to consider. If a discourse exists in the wrong context, there will be increased tension, and the leader character will experience the full effects of this tension. If as a leader, you experience such tensions, then look at conflicts in discourses as a potential way of understanding and getting to the source of the problem.

## Conclusion

The discourses outlined can be an important factor in how a company is led, how change takes place, and why tensions occur in organizational cultures emanating from these leadership discourses. Equally, working in the most appropriate discourse, and using the leadership discourse to offer the appropriate leadership in practice, and create the best culture for a department or an organization is vital to organizational success. Critical theory helps leaders, followers and participators understand these underlying discourses and from this informed position, members of an organization have more freedom of choice as to how they act.

The following questions are to help you think about the discourses in your own workplace:

- What is your leadership valency (your internalized preference and assumptions)?
- From which leadership discourse do you operate?
- Does this discourse emanate from your valency or from the organization in which you work?
- How does the leadership discourse inform your leadership approach?
- How do you notice others engaging with the leadership discourse you or your senior executives inhabit?
- What expectations and what responses do they have?



- Who at your work are powerful and who are marginalized and how does the leadership discourse empower and disenfranchise them?
- How are boundaries, limits and control applied at work? Through normative and peer control, coercive control, or therapeutic governance? Or perhaps a mix?
- What happens to those who resist the leadership discourse?
- See if you can identify different leadership discourses in your organization, e.g. in the finance department and the sales department. If there are differences, why is this and what effect does this have?
- What leadership discourse would best fit your organization to achieve success?
- Watch the news and read the newspapers and try to identify in political and business leaders the different leadership discourses they operate from.

