Leading in the cage: Managing the tension between reality and employee surveys

Introduction

This paper aims lhghgat an exploration of leadership in the context of pervasive organizational control, in the form of standardized measurement systems. **Measurement practices are proliferating in contemporary organizations, with ever more aspects of both organizational and private life being monitored and measured (Clegg & Courpasson, 2006)**. These systems are generally seen as an important part of organizational control regulating and shaping both actions of organizational members, and their own self-understanding or identity (Alvesson & Willmott, 2002). The image of the iron cage of bureaucracy, where action is tightly regulated, has in part been exchanged for the image of soft controls, regulating values and identities rather than behaviors and actions. Kärreman and Alvesson (2004), however, point out how these two types of control might work in tandem, constituting a strong regulating force.

In contrast to this literature that emphasize the constraints on individual agency, **the leadership literature emphasize the powers of leaders to influence and shape organizations and organizational processes (Yukl,2002)**. Leadership is commonly associated with driving and facilitating change and development. Theories of leadership emphasize (among other things) vision, personal engagement, interpersonal relationships, and ability to empower subordinates.

How, then, can leaders exercise their agency and enable change when faced with systems generally seen as regulating rather than facilitating agency? It is this paradox that we wish to explore in this paper. We take the case of employee surveys, being a common practice in western organizations, that paradoxically constitute a standardized system aiming at change and development, and explore how these are experienced and managed by leaders in various organizations. We wish to analyze in terms of leadership how these standardized systems migh on the one hand constrain leadership action, and on the other hand be utilized in change related initiatives, thereby preserving leadership agency.

Control, regulation and measurement

During the last few decades, **studies of control and regulation have focused a vast variety of forces and mechanisms, as well as strategies for resistance**. Departing from Weber's (1930) original notion of **the iron cage of rationalization and bureaucratic control, a major interest has been on more flexible and "soft" forms of control**. Studies have focused the regulating function of culture (Kunda, 1992; Martin, 1992), discourses (Fournier, 1998 ; Keenoy, Oswick & Grant, 1997), and various forces shaping the identity of organizational members (Alvesson & Willmott, 2002). Kärreman and Alvesson (2004) suggest that rather than replacing the

more traditional technological and rational control systems, softer socio-ideological modes of control might complement them and operate in tandem. Similarly, Brown, Kornberger, Clegg and Carter (2010) argue that far from having vanished, hierarcchy still is a major controlling mechanism, although less conspicous and relatively silent.

An important aspect of control mechanisms is the proliferation of measurement and assessment, leading to increased exposure and scrutiny of individuals (Brown, Kornberger, Clegg & Carter, 2010; Clegg, Courpasson & Philips, 2006; Courpasson & Clegg, 2006). Measurement as such has important regulating functions. Measurement and calculative practices include what Power (2004) call first order measurement, where the variuos phenomena in the world are categorized and made comparable. Further, as organizational measurement are practically enacted in organizational everyday life, they constitute regulation embedded in organizational practices (Schatzki, 2001).

The struggle to retain a degree of agency in the face of these regulating forces has been investigated in terms of resistance (Clegg & Courpasson, 2006; Hardy & Clegg, 2006), in the form av identity work (Alvesson & Wilmott, 2002; Thomas & Davies, 2005), cynicism (Fleming & Spicer, 2003, 2004), and even through paradoxical submission to control (Ashcraft, 2005). In relation to leadership, Collinson (2006) talks about followers constructing selves as either compliant, resistant or dramaturgical (that is, complying while distancing oneself from the actions).

The question of what control means for leaders and for the practice of leadership is, however, less explored. The question we wish to address concerns how a routinized system of measurement control and regulate the space for leaders, that paradoxically are expected to utilize the system for mustering enough agency for facilitating change.

Ledership

In line with Yukl (2002) and others, we see leadership as a process of influence aiming towards organizationall relevant task and goals.

Clearly, leadership as an influence process is seen as closely related to individual capacites for action, choice and commitment. Much of the leadership literature has focused on various aspects of how this influence process might work. While Yukl (2002) discuss various types of influence processes, others have focused on the role of identity (DeRue & Ashford, 2010; Lord & Hall, 2005), of how followers' self-concepts are affected (Lord, Brown & Freiberg, 1999), and of social identities (van Knippenberg, van Knippenberg, De Cremer & Hogg, 2004). Although this literature provide a range of important insights into the influence process, seldom are the question addressed of within which contraints or in which organizational context the leader operates (Bryman, Stephens & Campo, 1996; Fairhurst, 2009). Considering the literature on organizational control and regulation, however, makes it clear that even leaders reasonably face considerable restrictions on their agency.

At times, leadership is differentiated from management, in the sense that while leadership concerns change, management concerns maintaining the existing status quo (Zaleznick, 1977). Clearly, it might be difficult to identify this change oriented agency in the midst of everyday organizational practice. Alvesson and Svenningson even talks about a "disappearing act" where leadership vanishes in the face of the mundane and routine. The question thus remains, **where in the face of ever incrasing controlling routines might a space for agency be found.**

That is precisely our question. However, rather than discarding of engagement with the systems, we are interested in the strategies and practices through which systems are utilized for facilitating and mobilizing change, that is, for leadership purposes.

One recent theoretical advancement that seems to offer theoretical tools for exploring this tension between routines and change, is complexity leadership theory (Marion & Uhl-Bien, 2001; Uhl-Bien & Marion, 2009; Uhl-Bien, McKelvey & Marion, 2007). By broadening the perspective somewhat, leadership is here seen as consisting of three different functions: an administrative function, engaging with the top-down control aspects of hierarchy; an adaptive function, engaging with processes of emergence in complex adaptive systems related to practical tasks; and an enabling function, through which the relationship between the first two functions are managed (Uhl-Bien & Marion, 2009).

Change and innovation is the result of emergence in the complex adaptive systems that constitute the adaptive and often informal part of an organization. However, with the employee survey, change is associated with a standardized structured system, part of the administrative rather than adaptive function. How then might leadership be performed in the paradoxical situation of facing control that aims toward what it takes agency to accomplish? **In other words, how might the control function of the practice of the employee survey be managed and even utilized to foster creativity and emergence?**

Method

This study relies on case studies in five different organizations, where organization wide employee surveys are utilized. The organizations are a retail chain, a chemical factory, a food processing industry, a hospital, and a regional council.

The empirical material consists in interviews and observations. HR-staff and managers at various hierarchical levels were interviewed concerning their general experiences of employee surveys and more specifically experiences of conducting feedback sessions of results. A total of 46 interviews have been conducted, lasting between 30 mins and almost 2 hours. HR-staff and managers at various hierarchical levels. All interviews except one have been audio recorded.

Observations have covered various types of feedback sessions, as well as some project meetings, in all 12 different meetings. Observations were audio recorded and extensive field notes were taken.

All recorded material were transcribed verbatim and a software for qualitative data analysis (NVivo, ref) used to structure the material. It should be noted that this is an ongoing study, the results are preliminary and further analysis may bring forth a richer and more nuanced picture, we find that the main points of the paper have been recurring in the different cases as well as in interviews and observations. As the patterns occur both in different cases and when studied by different methods we claim that the main argument of this paper has relatively robust empirical support.

Results (preliminary)

The practice of working with the employee survey consisted of a number of activities that had to be performed in order to do what was expected with the ES. This practice had effects in terms of shifting the role of the managers. The image of the organizational structure became simplified as each employee had to be assigned one place in the organization (and one place only) in order to link answers to questions about managers and their work units. Employees also had to figure out what unit they belonged to. The demand that managers present the results to their employees led to slightly new accuontabilities in relation to employees work experiences. A common experience was that it was the managers that was exposed by the survey, and the managers felt a clear and strong responsibility for the results.

New administrative demands on managers

The new administrative structure placed ***new demands on the administrative function*** of the managers, clearly experienced through their practical engagement with it:

Interview extract A

> I was reading [the summaries of the indices] and then I thought but what about this, so I read where it was [in which index] … but this is a question about how the manager communicates, should not that be over there instead?

In her own wiew, she would want to group the items differently, as she interprets them based on her own understanding of the dynamics of the workplace. This means that she needs to translate the survey results to match something that make sense to herself And this is not a trivial task. Her preparation for presenting the results to her group took some effort. She needed to spend a full evening at home, to interpret the result and to be able to present it to her group. Clearly this task places new demands on her, not only in terms of discussing results, but in being able to interpret them in a way that is credible and make sense to the group.

Managers struggling to find ways to lead and support the process

Managers experienced the new accountability and the new demands as challenges, and struggled to find ways to utilize the system in constructive ways, that is, to support local needs and development initiatives. Managers put a lot of effort into finding ways to connect to the results of the ES and use it in dialogues with their co-workers.

Strategies and tactics in managers' work with the employee survey

In practical work with the results of the survey, managers utilized a range of different strategies and tactics for managing the tension between the administrative system and the local activities and dynamics. Strategies and tactics seem to focus on either **simplifying or structuring** what is going on in the unit, thereby diminshing the distance between the variability of this world and thus more easily linking with the ES, or to add variation to the ES results and thereby better fit them with the work experiences. Noteworthy that these are strategies of influence, that is, strategies that has to do with framing a phenomenon or a situation, as a means of facilitating a certain type of activity. It concerns actively engaging with the sensemaking process, and as such goes beyond charing or process facilitation as it also includes intention and a more proactive stance.

Prioritization consisted in focusing on highly selected aspects of the ES results, on the basis of the understanding of the dynamics of the local situation. Prioritization is a strategy that is best illustrated through a contrast. In one section of a clinic, the results were presented in full, indeed as the presentation was designed to be done. This meant that problems in reconciling the abstracted and simplified results of the ES with the actual local experiences.

> Manager: if we continue to the next, that is the work tempo and that one is yellow in both places there, but it is lower, now let's see, I guess it is, there it is yellow because it goes a bit above the [reference mark] here and there it is yellow because it is too low, it seems as if the work tempo is not that high
> Woman3: that is just crazy [laugh] yes, since you are in both places so [laugh]
> Manager: it does not really represent reality for some of you while for others it might be like this but again we can't say who it is [reads the questions]
> Woman1: but is that really the way to interpret it that the work tempo is … lower, I don't think you should interpret it like that
> Manager: it says here, you can't read that, only I can read this, high levels are preferred except on challenges where low values indicate low levels of challenge and with work tempo where 35-40 is optimal

The problems in reconciling and linking the results with the variety of experiences triggered a significant amount of discussion, and placed rather heavy demands of interpretation on the section manager. Rather than being able to utilize the results for constructing action plans, and thereby engage in the intended development work, this was

delegated to other structures, like the management team. In a way, this means reducing the variability of the ES even more, however, by selecting what seems to make sense locally, this actually improves the feeling of fit between the survey and the local experience. The flip side of the prioritization is a filtering out of more confusing or problematic results of the ES, that would be harder to reconcile with the local experience and thus more difficult to react to. In another department this was evidenced by the singular focus on goals and what in the survey was called goal quality. This could fit quite easily with the ongoing process of developing a business plan (more about this below), and indeed function as constructive input to this process.

In some cases, the ES itself provides a prioritization. If a reference value exists, deviances from this might be indicated by different colours: green for being close to the reference value, yellow for scoring at some distance, and red for even bigger difference. These colours were often utilized as a given prioritization, in the sense that results that were red were focused on, while green results were given far less attention. This also illustrates how the ES package performatively influences the organization and the managerial agenda.

In another case, a prioritization was given by a previous discussion about important areas to improve, and the dimensions in the ES that linked to these areas were prioritized by most managers. This is also one version of aligning the ES process with already ongoing development processes, something we will return to below.

Embedding consisted in utilizing an already existing administrative structure to embed the ES results, using the latter as input in the former process rather than as a free standing process in itself.

In one department, the manager followed a rather clear strategy in relating to the employee survey, that consisted in focusing on another process, construction of a business plan, that was an already known process and that was ongoing. The department had been reorganized, in effect being merged with another unit. In her work to manage this merger, the manager had already utilized the business plan process as a means of working on the tasks and goals of the new unit. Now, she utilized the employee survey as input in yet another turn on this process. This was experienced by one of her section mangers as a constructive process:

> D: I mean, it feels like she's had a plan all the time how to engage with these difficulties, we have worked a lot with our business plan, we have worked with putting the new orgainization together with coordinator and other stuff, and then we have worked with the business plan for 2011 /.../ we take small steps all the time, and that is what I think is the strength, that [the manager] connects closely to the survey...

Instead of placing the focus on the ES, the focus was on utilizing the results for creating better goals, that is, to work with the business process, thereby embedding the survey results in an already well-known process.

Through embeeeding the survey results worked as a constraint on the groups, fostering rather than blocking creativity and emergence. Feeding highly selective results from the ES into work with the business plan actually fostered creativity. The chosen aspects of the results demonstrated a low level of what was called "goal quality" and that this applied to all levels of the organization. This constituted a motivator for engaging once again with

constructing goals for the unit. While the lack of a clear goal structure for the hospital as a whole easily could have been perceived as a problem, indicating that this type of work was not valued in the organization, this situation was now reconstructed as more of a challenge and even an advantage. The lack of clear goals was now interpreted more as a sign of how well on their way and relatively sophisticated this department was.

Another version of embedding consists of linking the ES results to already ongoing change projects. The manager contemplates how to connect the results of the survey to various changes. She emphasizes how to she believes it is important to keep talking about the survey in this way, and utilize it to motivate changes, despite the fact that they were started independently of the survey.

Det finns flera stories om hur de handlingsplaner man gör handlar om saker som man redan visste och redan ville göra. Det som ES bidragit med är ett tillfälle att diskutera det och en struktur som hjälper till att få det gjort, kanske lite snabbare än annars (både från sjukvården och ICA, t ex frågan om tillgänglighet och närvaro, tavlor med chefens veckoschema mm)

Reinterpretation consisted in adding new information to the ES results, and both making them more relative and less comparable. In essence, this is the opposite of the first-order measurement that the survey logic is based on, where local meaning is focused and comparability is lost. In the cases where interpretation problems arose, a common strategy to manage these was to relativize and reinterpret the results. Two slightly different strategies seems to have been employed: introduction of new facts and recontextualization; and a general relativization of the results.

One example of this was provided by a first-line manager (supervisor) who planned to avoid to do a presentation for the whole department. The results were very "bad" (low ratings on almost everything), and according to the manager due to circumstances beyond his or his superiors's control, and were driven mainly by strong emotions. His tactic was therefore to discuss the survey in individual meetings with all employees. This tactic can clearly be seen as a way reinterpret and recontextualise the numeric and aggregated results within the context of the individual's task, immediate work situation, individual characteristics and in a one-to one setting where the relation between manager and coworker more easily could contain the more emotional aspects of the survey.

Här är det lätt att utveckla lite. Vi har gott om exempel och stories

Discussion

The strategies for engaging with the measurement system of the employee survey described above, shows how the system does present constraints and pressures on the agency of leadership, but also that this agency to varying degrees might be preserved.

The ES package constitute control and regulation in a number of ways. First of all, the managers were exposed to scrutiny, feeling responsible and accountable, and as if being graded through the survey. One consequence was a strong incentive to improve the state of affairs. In other words, the survey controlled the managers in the sense of instilling a clear intention to improve in areas measured by the survey (regardless of whether these areas were felt important before the survey). Similarly to Kärreman and Alvesson's (2004) study, the "hard" system of measurement resonates with the "soft" system of cultural values, placing the responsibility for the measurement/results with the managers.

Secondly, the ES package regulated activities of the managers through the need to design a way to present the results to the group of subordinates. For many this was a challenging task, both in terms of making sense of the survey and in finding a way to present it. While Anderson-Gough et al (2000) describes excess work load to be produced "in the name of the client", where the construction of the demanding client legitimized demands on the employees to exert considerable effort in meeting these demands, the managers in our study produced a considerable amount of work hours to meet the demands of the ES process, and to be able to facilitate a constructive development process on the basis of the results.

Thirdly, the ES exercised control on the managers by presenting a rather authoritative view of how the organizational landscape should be interpreted, through the dimensions provided in the survey. Low levels of "goal clarity" in the hospital did not trigger questioning of the dimension as problematic or potentially irrelevant in this kind of work, but rather to be indications of an area where focused attention was needed. (reference in the literature to the mapping of the landscape? Kunda? *The package and the practice establish dimensions and coordinates which allows for ranking and comparison at the organizational level in ways that are analogue in its effects to the functions of individually oriented HRM-practices like tests of mental abilities, and personality discussed by Townley (xxxx) in her Foucauldian analysis).* **Verkar vara en bra idé – kan du utveckla detaljerna lite? Vad behöver komma in I teorin för att det ska fungera? ÅTERKOMMER MED NÅGRA RADER OM DETTA!**

In the face of these different regulatory forces, the managers utilized various action strategies. To varying degrees, these strategies seemed to construct a space for agency for the managers.
The first strategy, prioritization, engages with the map of the organizational landscape provided by the survey, and by selecting just a portion of the results for a closer examination, a new version of this map is constructed. Agency here consists in selecting and deselecting among the dimensions and results provided by the survey.

The second strategy, re-interpretation, engages with the reduction of complexity inherent in the exposure of the managers. By inviting a discussion where results were re-interpreted in the light of the extensive complexity of everyday work, exposure of the manager was also weakened. For example, by closely examining the content of questions about feedback, some discussions led to a greater appreciation of the importance of other sources of feedback than the manager, such as peer feedback, or customer or patient feedback.

Finally, embedding the ES in other processes is the most elaborate of the strategies identified here. In this strategy,

the controlling function of the ES is to a certain degree not countered nor resisted, but deflected in a different direction and utilized as input in another process. Embedding was always combined with selection, and in that way also contained a resistance to the organizational map provided by the ES.

These strategies provide some space for agency for the managers, more so the more experience the manager had of employee surveys. The agency is visible through a clearly expressed intention and felt engagment with the issues. It could be argued that this is compliance (Collinson, 2006xx) in the sense of taking on board the projected responsibilities. However, we wish to emphasize that even if it is, there is a clear sense of agency expressed by the managers, and what they did cannot simply be reduced to a mechanical compliance. Surely the agency is constructed in the face of the regulation, and is shaped by it, but it is still meaningfully a form of agency.

What is seen here is further different from the more commonly described resistant agency (refs xxx), in the sense that it does not seek to distance itself from the organization. Instead, it is a form of agency that engages with the organizational reality, attempting to improve it. Rather than being **resistance, we see this agency as leadership. T**he strategies are based on attempts to influence the group of subordinates, and either improve what was measured, or develop a different understanding of the organizational landscape through re-interpretation, as an occasion for sense-making. As being intentional attempts to influence someone to work towards organizationally relevant goals, this is meaningfully seen as leadership.

Why then, is this not "mere management"? Drawing on the common distinction between leadership and management (refs xxx), since what is done here engages with administrative systems, it could be consider to be part of management and thus not leadership. However, as we focus on agency and influence as the core of leadership, we see this distinction as less relevant. Indeed, our argument focuses on the possibility to exercise leadership in the midst of the administrative maze of management. In other words, we argue that this is a case where leadership, as agency and influence, is exercised through and with the aid of administrative systems and tools. More specifically, the administrative system introduces a tension and a need for sensemaking (Weick, 1995), whereby leadership as management of meaning (Smirchich & Morgan, 1982) is effectuated. Even more to the point, what the managers do can be seen as an example of what Uhl-Bien and Marion (xxx) calls enabling leadership, that exists in and draws on the tension between administrative systems on the one hand and the complexity of adaptive systems on the other.

In summary, the action strategies we describe demonstrate how a space for agency indeed can be constructed in the face of a standardized measurement system, either deflecting and dampening its controlling force, or even utilizing it for influencing purposes.

We have shown that the ES provides an opportunity for managers to exercise leadership in a way that is somewhat contraintuitive. On can speculate about the implications of this observation for the way that organizations use ES. Ironically, the ES may provide opportunities for managers to develop their leadership abilities – in dealing with ES. It might be well worth asking whether some of these efforts could better be used in focusing on some other issues that can strengthen the organization's capability of solving it's tasks.

Conclusion

The employee survey is one example of how administrative systems contribute to control through measurement. Our interest lies in the strategies and practices through which systems are utilized for facilitating and mobilizing change, that is, for leadership purposes. We show that managers actively engage with the employee survey and that they We identify strategies in the form of *prioritization*, *embedding* and *reinterpretation*. These strategies in dealing with the employee survey, are examples of how agency and leadership are enacted in close contact with an administrative system. Rather than excluding the possibility for agency, the employee survey instead provides an arena in which managers devise ways to influence employees and enable links between a formal administrative practice and processes of emergence in the complex adaptive systems that constitute the adaptive part of an organization.

These findings have important implications for the study of control in contemporary organizations as well as for the way that leadership is conceptualized. Leadership, as a process mobilizing and facilitating change, needs to be understood as part of, rather than distinct from, the organization and the control and measurement systems in question.

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