Introduction: Writing differently about leadership

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This issue of our journal is different. A good reason for this is that leadership studies has much in common with the wider field of organization studies. I do not mean this as a compliment. Neither does enough to address really important issues – poverty, climate degradation, the 2007/8 banking crisis and much more. There are at least two other related problems.

Firstly, most scholars remain wedded to positivist methodologies and functionalist perspectives. The insights produced from this work seem increasingly trivial, as method takes precedence over substance. It has also led to growing concern over the validity of the data and analysis on which many of these papers depend. Retractions in the literature are becoming more frequent, including in leadership journals. As Spoelstra et al. (2016) have argued in this journal, these retractions show the necessity for all of us to reconsider our approach to leadership scholarship.

I would suggest, at a minimum, that the distinction between the humanities and social sciences has been overblown. It is no longer helpful to us in pursuing questions that really matter. We need to embrace different methodologies, different traditions of scholarship and different theoretical orientations. As Ciulla (2008: 393) observed: ‘Leadership is a human phenomenon that is embedded in culture, which includes art, literature, religion, philosophy, language, history, and generally all those things that constitutes what it means to be and to live as a human being.’ Acknowledging this might lead us to explore more interesting issues than those that currently dominate our journals.

Secondly, the quality of much academic writing is terrible (see Grey and Sinclair (2006) for an insightful and hugely amusing discussion of the problem). Most papers in mainstream journals are formulaic, cautious, uninspiring and unreadable (Alvesson and Gabriel, 2013). They are the literary equivalent of painting by numbers. Many are evidently composed to the following formula

Obscure prose + Jargon x Trivial subjects – humour

Humungous list of references

In critical work, bonus points are awarded if you can find a long dead French philosopher that no one has ever heard of, but fashion a claim that the implications of their writings for organization/leadership studies has been ‘unjustly neglected.’ Jackpot.

We need to call time on this kind of pretentiousness. In a fascinating discussion of why we write so badly and what can be done about it, appropriately entitled Why Academics Stink at Writing, Steven Pinker (2014) argues that

Our indifference to how we share the fruits of our intellectual labours is a betrayal of our calling to enhance the spread of knowledge. In writing badly, we are wasting each other’s time, sowing confusion and error, and turning our profession into a laughing stock.

It is hard to escape the conclusion that, for many scholars, publication has become an end in itself. There seems to be little interest in contributing to public discourse, raising import- ant issues and changing the world. It doesn’t matter that readers won’t understand what you write, much less take pleasure in it. Heaven forbid. If they did understand they might realise how trivial our research has become – and the game would be well and truly up.

Of course, individual academics are not wholly to blame for this. We are measured, monitored and ‘directed’ as never before. Virtually none of this is concerned with what we have to say. Rather, the only thing that counts is publication in a ‘top’ journal. Those brandishing Impact Factors and positions in journal ranking systems are essentially saying that size matters more than performance. But, in going along with these performative pressures to the exclusion of all else, how low our ambitions have sunk!

This makes it an even greater pleasure to publish this issue of Leadership. None of what follows is conventional leadership scholarship. It is all the better for that. Rather, the authors draw on opera, novels, the staging of a play, a discussion of how art can improve our understanding of rebel leadership, jazz music as a metaphor for leadership, a close study of a play at least partly written by Shakespeare and Greek mythology informed by feminism to raise fundamental issues about leadership, how we study it and the nature of academic life. The writing is often both passionate and entertaining – and why shouldn’t it be? None of us came into academia driven by a commitment to be boring. Bad habits are drummed into us by our doctoral training, journal editors and those who review our papers. Collectively, they often seem determined to drain every last vestige of fun from academic life.

The papers in this edition are a challenge in substance and in form to our conventional publishing norms. I hope you enjoy them, that they lead you to discover fascinating new ideas, and that they encourage you to experiment with different subjects and forms of writing that you then feel inspired to send to our journal.

References

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