



**BRITISH ACADEMY
OF MANAGEMENT**

BAM
CONFERENCE

3RD-5TH SEPTEMBER

ASTON UNIVERSITY BIRMINGHAM UNITED KINGDOM

This paper is from the BAM2019 Conference Proceedings

About BAM

The British Academy of Management (BAM) is the leading authority on the academic field of management in the UK, supporting and representing the community of scholars and engaging with international peers.

<http://www.bam.ac.uk/>

Where you tweet, I will follow: digitally-mediated proximal leadership

Marian Iszatt-White, Lancaster University Management School, Lancaster, LA1 4YX.

m.iszattwhite@lancaster.ac.uk

Abstract

Drawing on the twitter feeds of modern ‘thought leaders’ in the field of science outreach and (inevitably) politics, this paper considers the requirement for a synthesis of early, proximal forms of leadership with later, distal approaches to meet the needs of leadership in the digital age. The ability for leaders to influence large numbers of people, at the same time as being required to respond to direct feedback and challenge requires, it is proposed, a new form of digitally-mediated proximal leadership. Again, with current political leaders very much in mind, this raises the question of the purposes to which such extensive influence might be put. Parallels with organisational leadership in the digital age are drawn.

Track: Leadership and Leadership Development

Where you tweet, I will follow: digitally-mediated proximal leadership

A (very) brief history of leadership

Developing on the back of the industrial revolution and the move from craft working to ‘manufactories’, early leadership models were about supervision and control.

Owner/managers exercised proximal leadership over their workers and leadership theorising focused on the traits (Kirkpatrick and Locke, 1991; Zaccaro, 2007) and behaviours (Burke et al, 2006) required for these direct, supervisory relationships. Whilst the style of such leadership was largely ‘command and control’, the context was broadly that of direct, two-way communication between workers and managers, with the span of control of individual

leaders still being relatively small. From these origins grew the types of team leadership we are familiar with in contingency models (Fiedler, 1964) and style approaches. Leadership in this context was still proximal in its reach and essentially supervisory in its aims.

Only following the economic upheavals of the 1970s and early '80s, when disaffected workers needed to be hauled out of the post-rationalisation doldrums, did the focus of leadership thinking shift to articulating a vision (Nanus, 1992) in order to motivate and inspire from a distance rather than supervising and controlling through direct interaction. Senior leaders were now required to be charismatic (Ball and Carter, 2002; Conger and Kanungo, 1987) or transformational (Bass and Riggio, 2006) in order to harness the skills and efforts of the whole workforce to produce more, innovate more and commit more to a competitive vision of the future. Whilst middle managers were still left to interpret the new 'mission' or 'vision' for their teams, the focus of leadership research was now on the more distal concern of winning hearts and minds across the broad swathe of the organisation. And whilst further bouts of recession brought us distributed leadership (Bolden, 2011), collaborative leadership (Huxham and Vangen, 2004) and participative leadership (Huang et al, 2010) to name but three, leadership research still has a tendency to wallow in grandiose approaches to influencing broadly, with only limited focus on the skills/abilities needed to do this. A prominent example of this tendency is the positioning and profile accorded to Authentic Leadership (AL) (Avolio and Gardner, 2005). Explicitly positioned as a response to a troubled world and a loss of faith in previous forms of leadership, said to have resulted in an 'ethical corporate meltdown' (May et al, 2003: 247), AL is also claimed to be the 'root construct' (Avolio and Gardner, 2005) for other forms of 'positive' leadership such as spiritual, ethical and servant leadership. Despite these all-encompassing claims for AL, its accepted operationalization through a reductionist, four-component psychometric, the Authentic Leadership Questionnaire (ALQ) (Walumbwa et al, 2008), has arguably reduced

its potential from a ‘central organizing principle’ (Driscoll and Wiebe, 2007: 334) for leadership studies to that of a mere ‘technique’ (Algera and Lips-Wiersma, 2012: 120). Even as a technique, it is not unproblematic. The four components of self-awareness, balanced information processing, relational transparency and an internal moral compass (Walumbwa et al, 2008) offer only limited guidance to practicing leaders as to how to enact authentic leadership on a day-to-day basis and are often at odds with other accepted demands of the leadership role (Kempster, Iszatt-White and Brown, 2018). Notwithstanding such critiques, this kind of shift from proximal to distal forms of leadership has coloured the modern genre of leadership research and fundamentally shaped what it is we are trying to understand when we study it. The distal shift in leadership research is of a piece with the increased access to information, ideas and (consciously or not) influence we are all subject to in the digital age. In this context, the current paper posits the need for a return to proximal leadership skills to meet a digitally-mediated form of distal leadership. What’s required here is not the kind of traits, competencies and abilities much beloved of early forms of leadership research and in some forms enjoying a more recent resurgence (e.g. competency frameworks), but an understanding of the moment-by moment *accomplishment* of leadership as an ongoing, relational encounter. The rise of Leadership-as-Practice (Raelin, 2016) stands as a counter-movement to the development of grand theories in attempting to meet this challenge.

Leadership through the ether

The advent of digital media has had a transformative impact on the lives of ordinary people (Papacharissi, 2010), not least in terms of where they look in their search for leadership. The present generation has access to vast amounts of information, from a wide variety of sources, and must choose what to accept, what to reject, and who to trust in an environment where veracity is often hard to determine. At the same time, the population at large expects to have a voice in the ether and to be able to challenge the information in which it is drowning. Both

thought leadership, and more particularly political leadership, are now frequently conducted via digital media. At a more proximal level, the near ubiquitous use of email communication in and between organisations, and the growth of virtual teams which depend on this type of communication for their essential connectedness, has shaped the exercise of organisational leadership. Leaders have needed to learn the different etiquette of email versus face-to-face communication, as well as the skills of using email to influence and motivate as well as merely inform. Even technologically mediated 'face-to-face' communication via video-conferencing creates a different dynamic, and hence requires different skills, from its unmediated counterpart.

The affordances (Chemero, 2003) of digital media as a medium through which to exercise leadership thus suggest the need for a new synthesis between the broad span of access of traditional distal leadership and the two-way communication of early proximal leadership, to create what can be described as digitally-mediated proximal leadership. There are clearly distinctions to be made here between thought leadership (and probably political leadership) exercised through Facebook and the like and organizational leadership exercised through email and video-conferencing, but the affordances of digital media are of significance in both arenas. In concerning itself primarily with organisational leadership, this paper nonetheless sees value in drawing on examples from thought leadership to explore the emergent skills that digital leadership is seen to require. Specifically, it is suggested that leaders need to evince a return to the 'interpersonal' skills of proximal leadership whilst being mindful of the transformational impact they may have through digitally connecting to a larger number of people than they might do otherwise. This synthesis has yet to emerge from, for example, work on leading virtual teams (Malhotra, Majchrzak and Rosen, 2007; Zimmermann, Wit and Gill, 2008).

We can see this new hybrid form of leadership utilised by such ‘thought leaders’ as outreach scientists Professor Jim Al-Khalili and Professor Alice Roberts as well as (arguably – although it is less clear that the communication here is two-way) by political leaders such as Donald Trump. Jim Al-Khalili is Professor of Theoretical Physics and Chair of Public Engagement in Science at the University of Surrey, as well as being a regular face on our television screens bringing intelligent and intelligible science to the masses. He also has a twitter feed which currently has 125,000 followers, whilst himself following 267 other twitter feeds. The style of his tweets is accessible, personal and covers a range of content. The examples below give a flavour of the different ways in which he utilises the access to large numbers of people that this medium affords, at the same time as employing personal and personable communication skills. The first example relates to his core area of expertise, physics:

(14 Jan 2019) Monday Morning Mind-blowing physics: did you know that over the course of my life the Earth's core has aged one second less than its crust? [Time runs a little slower in the centre of the Earth due to relativity]. Physicists please check.

This tweet offers an intriguing physical fact as well as conveying Al-Khalili’s obvious passion for his subject. The language is accessible without ‘dumbing down’ and by calling for other physicists to ‘please check’ he positions himself as a ‘one scientist among many’ rather than a superstar – on a level with his twitter followers rather than in a position of superiority. The range of replies to this tweet, and Al-Khalili’s responses to them, serve to demonstrate the interpersonal skills he uses to engage people with scientific ideas and to interact with them on both a human and an intellectual level. So, for example, we have the following exchange:

(Simon Albright @PhysWiz) Hmm, there's no net gravitational field at the centre, so will there be time dilation?

(JA-K) Yes there will. You would indeed be weightless as no force acting (cancels out from all directions) but you are still in the deepest part of the gravitational well. Technically, $V \neq 0$ but $\nabla V = 0$.

(Simon Albright @PhysWiz) And that's why you are a professor.

This shows one of Al-Khalili's followers seeking to understand the science behind the original tweet and to engage with it at an intellectual level. The resultant exchange draws PhysWiz into a deeper understanding of the underlying physics, without patronising him. The combination of the lay language explanation and the 'technical' formula is nicely balanced, such that PhysWiz can acknowledge Al-Khalili's superior knowledge as a 'professor' without feeling put off from continuing the exchange.

In a contrasting exchange, Al-Khalili shows his human side through his openness to humour:

(Simon White @simoninthelakes) Hmm... I make it that you must be 29. Obvs something wrong with my arithmetic 😊

(JA-K) I'll take that!

@simoninthelakes has, on other occasions, joined in more technical/intellectual exchanges with Al-Khalili, but on this occasion chooses to play on the 'personal' relationship his followership has created in order to make a flattering joke, which Al-Khalili accepts. This exchange serves to reinforce @simoninthelakes' feeling of a relationship with Al-Khalili and hence enhance his sense of followership. The platform for his ideas that Al-Khalili has developed through both informing and entertaining his 125,000 followers gives him substantial power to shape the thinking and attention of those he is in 'conversation' with –

far more than if his span of influence were limited to those with whom he came into personal contact. It is interesting to see the different spheres in which he chooses to exercise this power. So, for example, he uses it to promote his own forthcoming foray into the world of fiction writing:

(20 Nov 2018) HUGELY, HUGELY excited that my publishers (Transworld: Bantam Press) now have a cover for my forthcoming first novel, Sunfall – a sci-fi thriller set in the year 2041. The book is out in five months time.

More seriously, he uses it to tweet or retweet on issues well beyond his arena of scientific expertise, including, in the following case, politics:

(retweeted by JA-K; tweeted by James O'B, 13 Jan 2019) It has taken just two and a half years for Brexiters to move from arguing that we have to leave the EU because our Parliament is not sovereign to arguing that our Parliament **is** sovereign and that this is a **bad** thing. Incredible.

What we see here is a very human, albeit disembodied, style of communication: a style that uses humour, self-disclosure, humility and personal passion to influence followers. In Al'Khalili's case, he is reaching people in their thousands, but an organisational leader needs the same skills to reach tens or even ones within their sphere of influence. The 'followers' within that sphere could include a wide range of stakeholders to the organisation - team members, peers, senior management, customers, shareholders, etc – but the need to connect, both literally and figuratively, remains the same.

Al-Khalili's style of influence through his tweets is largely what one might call benign. His posts are informative, engaging and, where they reach beyond his core areas of expertise, thoughtful rather than didactic. But the potential to utilise the power afforded by the digital

medium in very different – and potentially less benign – ways is clear. This potential for more outspoken or deliberately polarising usage is starkly exemplified by US President Donald Trump. Trump is a prolific tweeter (15-20 tweets a day appears to be his norm) and a couple of examples will be sufficient to give a flavour of his output. Take, for example, the following:

(15 Jan 2019) Great being with the National Champion Clemson Tigers last night at the White House. Because of the Shutdown I served them massive amounts of Fast Food (I paid), over 1000 hamburgers etc. Within one hour, it was all gone. Great guys and big eaters!

Whilst there is nothing ‘unpresidential’ about congratulating a successful sports team, the flippancy with which this tweet deals with a national crisis (the longest government shutdown in history) and the blatant self-publicity (‘I paid’) inherent in the claims made could strike a wrong chord in the context of a historically revered office. That the original tweet had a basic spelling mistake (‘hamberder’ instead of ‘hamburger’) suggests a thoughtless approach to communication that is worrying in one with such a large audience. From a political perspective, it is unclear what the motivation is for this tweet, or how it is intended to influence public opinion. What is worrying is that this kind of ‘authenticity’ – authenticity that consists of the unedited expression of often ill-informed opinions in an apparently self-obsessed ‘fire and forget’ manner – is currently enjoying huge popularity. It is, perhaps, symptomatic of the modern ‘post truth’, ‘fake news’ world of today, where everyone’s opinion is ‘true’ and each new ‘truth’ is quickly superseded by another. In the context of this post-truth relativism there is an ironic paradox between our increasing desire for authenticity and the shallowness of current ideas of what it might mean to actually be authentic.

A second example reinforces the characteristics of Trump's so-called 'authenticity'. Two tweets relating to the FBI's investigation as to whether Trump could be working with the Russians against US interests emphasize his tendency for self-justification and the bad-mouthing of others:

(15 Jan 2019) The rank and file of the FBI are great people who are disgusted with what they are learning about Lyin' James Comey and the so-called "leaders" of the FBI. Twelve have been fired or forced to leave. They got caught spying on my campaign and then called it an investigation. Bad!

(12 Jan 2019) Lyin' James Comey, Andrew McCabe, Peter S and his lover, agent Lisa Page, & more, all disgraced and/or fired and caught in the act. These are just some of the losers that tried to do a number on your President. Part of the Witch Hunt. Remember the "insurance policy?" This is it!

Compared with the reflectiveness of Al-Khalili's thought leadership, these tweets show a worrying indication of Trump's tendency to use strong rhetoric to stir up (in this case) ill-judged support for near libellous attacks on officials of a legitimate national law enforcement agency. Taken more broadly, the power of digital media to disseminate unsubstantiated views and 'fake news' is, one suspects, one of the factors feeding the current shift towards alt-right style nationalism around the globe – including our own attempts to exit the EU (in chaos at the time of writing!). That it is, in some senses at least, effective leadership is amply demonstrated by the number of Likes (109,597) and Retweets (27,597) the latter of these tweets from Trump received. What is concerning for digitally-mediated authentic leadership is the immense power and seeming lack of accountability which 'fire and forget' use of digital media – the digital equivalent of talking without listening as a style of communication – can have. Its success in the case of Trump and others in the political field rests on its ease

of use as an outlet for the growing protest vote against deep-seated societal ills and inequalities, but how does this translate into meaningful organisational followership? And if it doesn't, then what are the risks for organisational leaders in employing similar tactics and calling it leadership?

Implications for theory and practice

It is clear that the demands of the digital age can offer us both an imperative and a life-line. The intimacy and accessibility of digital media leaves the distal leader nowhere to hide: a return to the direct communicative skills of proximal leadership – albeit mediated by technology – could be imperative as the only way to build credibility and trust, and hence influence, for the would-be leader. But equally, digitally-mediated leadership offers the potential of immense, and largely unchecked, power for good or ill. The responsibility which accompanies that power is not universally well-used. This suggests two potential implications for the study of leadership – and a potential life-line for refocusing how/where we direct our leadership research efforts. As a direct consequence, we need to better understand the affordances of digital media for leadership (and particularly organisational leadership), and the skills which digitally-mediated proximal leadership might require. Indirectly, both the examples above – albeit from very different perspectives – highlight the need for more attention to be paid to the purposes to which leadership is put (Kempster et al, 2011) and our ability, if it exists, for self-regulation in this regard.

Future development

This paper was developed as a personal 'think piece' following a corridor conversation with a colleague who is a keen follower of science outreach projects, including the work of Professor Al-Khalili discussed above. In chasing down the various connections suggested by the initial conversation, the idea of digitally-mediated proximal leadership emerged as a

source of both positive and negative influence on modern leaders, with the potential to operate on a more massive scale than previous modes of communication. The importance of working through the implications of this idea – as one strand amongst many in our ongoing bid to harness digital technology for the good – cannot be underestimated. For the current author, this is likely to include a more fully developed think piece for journal submission, the development of a case study for the 3rd edition of a leadership textbook currently in progress, and a new perspective on the scope and mechanisms of modern leadership. More broadly, the notion of digitally-mediated proximal leadership adds to the growing awareness of the power of digital media and the need to reflect on who is able to exercise such power and who, if anyone, should control that right.

References

- Algera, P.M. and Lips-Wiesma, M. (2012) Radical authentic leadership: Co-creating the conditions under which all members of the organization can be authentic. *The Leadership Quarterly*, 23(1), 118-131.
- Avolio, B.J. and Gardner, W.L. (2005) Authentic leadership development: Getting to the root of positive forms of leadership. *The Leadership Quarterly*, 16(3), 315-338.
- Ball, K. and Carter, C. (2002) The charismatic gaze: Everyday leadership practices of the ‘new’ manager. *Management Decision*, 40 (6), 552–65.
- Bass, B. M. and Riggio, R. E. (2006) *Transformational Leadership* (2nd edn). Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum.
- Bolden, R. (2011) Distributed leadership in organizations: A review of theory and research. *International Journal of Management Reviews*, 13, 251–69.
- Burke, C. S., Stagl, K. C., Klein, C., Goodwin, G. F., Salas, E., and Halpin, S. M. (2006) What type of leadership behaviours are functional in teams? A meta-analysis. *The Leadership*

Quarterly, 17 (3), 288–307.

Chemero, A. (2003) An Outline of a Theory of Affordances. *Ecological Psychology*, 15(2), 181-195.

Conger, J. A. and Kanungo, R. (1987) Toward a behavioural theory of charismatic leadership in organizational settings. *Academy of Management Review*, 12, 637–47.

Driscoll, C. and Wiebe, E. (2007) Technical spirituality at work: Jacque Ellul on workplace spirituality. *Journal of Management Inquiry*, 16(3), 334-348.

Fiedler, F. (1964) A contingency model of leadership effectiveness. In L. Berkowitz (ed.), *Advances in Experimental Psychology*. New York: Academic Press.

Huang, X., Iun, J., Liu, A., and Gong, Y. (2010) Does participative leadership enhance work performance by inducing empowerment or trust? The differential effects on managerial and non-managerial subordinates. *Journal of Organizational Behaviour*, 31, 122-143

Huxham, C. and Vangen, S. (2004) Doing things collaboratively: Realizing the advantage or succumbing to inertia? *Organizational Dynamics*, 33 (2), 190–201.

Kempster, S., Iszatt-White, M. and Brown, M. (first published online 3/4/18). Authenticity in leadership: Reframing relational transparency through the lens of emotional labour.

Leadership: <https://doi.org/10.1177/1742715017746788>

Kempster, S., Jackson, B., and Conroy, M. (2011). Leadership as purpose: Exploring the role of purpose in leadership practice. *Leadership*, 7(3), 317–334.

Kirkpatrick, S. A. and Locke, E. A. (1991) Leadership: Do traits matter? *Academy of Management Executive*, 5 (2), 48–60.

Malhotra, A., Majchrzak, A., and Rosen, B. (2007) Leading virtual teams. *Academy of Management Perspectives*, 21 (1), 60–70.

May, D.R., Chan, A.Y.L., Hodges, T.D. and Avolio, B.J. (2003) Developing the moral component of authentic leadership. *Organizational Dynamics*, 32(3), 247-260.

Nanus, B. (1992) *Visionary Leadership: Creating compelling sense of direction for your organization*. San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass.

Papacharissi, Z. (Ed.) (2010) *A networked self: Identity, community and culture on social network sites*. New York: Routledge.

Raelin, J.A. (2016) *Leadership-as-practice: Theory and application*. Routledge.

Walumbwa, F.O., Avolio, B.J., Gardner, W.L., Wernsing, T.S. and Peterson, S.J. (2008) Authentic Leadership: Development and validation of a theory-based measure. *Journal of Management*, 34(1), 89-126.

Zaccaro, S. J. (2007) Trait-based perspectives of leadership. *American Psychologist*, 62 (1), 6-16.

Zimmermann, P., Wit, A., and Gill, R. (2008) The relative importance of leadership behaviours in virtual and face-to-face communication settings. *Leadership*, 4 (3), 321–37.