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Storytelling and Ethics

EDITORIAL

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During the last two decades storytelling has gained a strong position in leadership theory and practice. Stories can be seen as a particular doctrine, even a certain philosophy of leadership. However, stories are used as leadership tools – either as an instrument, or often in a subconscious sense. In terms of leadership theory – diverting from traditional leader-centred approaches – storytelling is interested in discursive resources that construct and convey leadership power. In terms of power, storytelling is not attached to sovereign power but social interaction in organisational processes, where leadership-influenced power is constructed and conveyed, or contested. In any organisation, a wide range of different forms of stories exist, such as myths, sagas, legends of heroes or the defeated, strategic projects and humorous anecdotes. Some of the stories circulating in organisations are coherent, well established and publicly expressed narratives with a clear plot. Some stories, instead, are fragmented, spontaneous or even hidden from public discourse. Regardless, stories are informative-rich entities for organisational values and beliefs, and contain moral positions – dealing with issues such as good and bad. Hence, storytelling is an appropriate vehicle for studying ethics.

Stories may inform us about leadership styles. Often storytelling is seen as an ethical approach to leadership and stories may refer to more democratic, softer and empowering leadership. Instead of straightforward command, the story is latent – it needs to be interpreted with a view to influencing the follower. However, sometimes an empowering story may turn out as disempowering. Stories may also involve attempts to seduce, even manipulate, subordinates. Usually, manipulation is considered as non-ethical leadership, albeit it is complex form of using power, and in some occasions the line between encouragement and manipulation is vacillating. Indeed, in terms of leadership power, stories are seen as a means for leadership and a rather latent way to influence followers, so the use of hidden power must be taken into account.

Plato has stated that the one who tells the story governs. In other words, the owner of the story, the narrator, has the

power to influence others via discursive reality. He/she can create our shared social reality and shape it to the desired direction. This, in particular, addresses the ethical dimension in leadership stories. The narrator may pursue good as well as bad outcomes with his/her story. The narrator may conceal his/her intentions with indoctrination and manipulation, whereupon the listener is not aware of the attempts of power wielding falling on him/her. Thus, such an exercise of leadership power is seen as rather bad and unethical.

But which kind of leader possesses the most powerful storytelling resources? A charismatic leader, perhaps, is the most influential leadership type. A person having a charismatic authority can even build his or her own leader-cult (or, in fact, the charismatic aura is constructed in the consequent storytelling and retelling about the leader's achievements). For example, Adolf Hitler – the German dictator – was seen as the “image of the heroic leader”. His image was largely an artificial product of propaganda; a collective and public storytelling, which took advantage of existing national salvation legends and semi-religious expectations. These expectations were produced and maintained largely by the force of stories. The portrait of a young Adolf Hitler, in Vienna during the 1920s, showed that stories were in a ripening period, and he was preparing for his own destiny – the coming of the fate of the German people. These stories could also be used to create the reality of what would be the “Führer's will” in any given case, as seen from the followers' point of view. By telling stories to each other, his followers tried to find out how they could “act towards the Führer's will”. Hitler assumed that his will had to be conducted and obeyed without commanding by direct or explicit orders. We can say that stories, on their part, paved the way to the evil of Nazism and the Holocaust. However, comparing Germany in 1930 to the present, we can note that public storytelling embracing Hitler has turned contemptuous.

How can modern analytical ethics work against evil and badness? We can talk about ethical theories and ethical paradigms. Ethical philosophy can cre-

ate a good narrative by exploring and opening up the stories in national cultures and organisations. It is important to open up the stories and try to analyse these concepts by means of ethics - e.g. deconstruct the existing stories of the organisation

or culture. The ethics of the concealed influence (e.g. manipulation) in leadership storytelling is still under-researched and more empirical studies are needed.

Selected literature

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