Reflexive Leadership

Organising in an imperfect world

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Preface

Leadership is an extremely popular topic. An enormous amount of literature has appeared on the subject. It may seem as though far too much has been published already and that it is impossible to say anything new – at least anything new that is not promising a seductive, novel recipe for effective or grandiose leadership. 'Not another new book on leadership' is therefore a very understandable reaction.

The reader of this Preface can hopefully withhold a sigh when browsing through the text. In our defence of 'yet another book', we have devoted significant time and effort over the last few decades to carrying out in-depth studies of managers trying to 'do' leadership. We have interviewed managers and their subordinates, observed interactions, and tried to get a good understanding of organizational context. All this is rare and means that we are able to claim that we have actually studied leadership, not just listened to managers (or subordinates) talk about leadership or relied on their questionnaire responses. We have also critically interpreted what we have seen – considering both leadership theories and a wealth of other perspectives. We have not imposed leadership ideas and vocabulary on relationships and interactions, but have been open to other ways of understanding organizing processes.

This has resulted in a much richer and more thoughtful understanding than is perhaps common. We celebrate reflexivity – considering and challenging various departures from and lines of reasoning – and use this to question dominant leadership thinking. A key aspect of reflexivity is to consider alternatives to leadership, both in terms of understanding what goes on and when considering how to deal with organizing processes. Effective organizing sometimes also involves the use of management, power, group work or a network, and cultivating professionalism and autonomy.

The reader may now wonder about the backgrounds of the authors. We all have some experience in senior positions – research leader, senior consultant/programme director and director of undergraduate studies – where leadership is or has been an option for achieving influence. More significantly, we have studied leadership for about twenty years. Not all of that time was devoted to leadership – broader research interests are a great plus as it means that we avoid the tunnel vision and ideological commitment to leadership that more single-minded specialists may suffer from. We have also extensively and intensively studied organizational culture, corporate governance, strategic (and less strategic) change, gender, functional stupidity, knowledge work, managerial and professional work, identity in organizations, power, and many other topics. Our leadership research is part of our broader studies of organizations; that is, on the role of managers trying to 'do leadership' in the context of management of knowledge-intensive

firms (high-tech, pharmaceutical and consultancy companies), organizational change or gender issues at work. We have tried to understand what is happening in organizations; leadership and/or managerial interventions are sometimes significant and sometimes less so.

We have also done a number of more focused studies of managers trying to 'do' leadership. These are typically based on a combination of methods aiming to get rich and realistic understandings of leadership efforts and their possible effects. We have: (a) interviewed managers several times; (b) interviewed subordinates; (c) observed managerial actions and interactions between superiors and subordinates (of which some can be seen in terms of leadership); and d) investigated the organizational context. We have also tried to follow managers over some time, not necessarily longitudinally but at different moments, so we are not misled by a snap-shot approach, only capturing leadership in a specific week or month. This book is not a research report, so we do not account for our specific studies. Many of these are, however, mentioned in the reference list. Some relevant and representative studies include Alvesson and Spicer (2011), Alvesson and Sveningsson (2003a), Blom and Alvesson (2014, 2015) and Sveningsson and Alvesson (2003, 2016). In many places we refer to our own studies, but do not want to exaggerate these and instead rely on extensive readings of a variety of leadership and other organization studies of literature over the years. In this way we cover a large part of the entire field of leadership, in particular within a Western European and North American context (recognizing that there are significant differences within this field).

We are however clearly influenced by our own in-depth research, which provides us with a much more realistic and rich understanding compared to research that mainly relies on managers talking about their own leadership or subordinates filling in questionnaires about their managers' leadership. We are thus more sceptical and openminded about leadership issues than many devoted to the topic or belonging to the leadership industry who might benefit from pumping out positive and fluffy messages about the importance and goodness of leadership.

So, we believe that this book has something important and novel to say. We draw upon rich empirical material and have a number of new, provocative, critical and constructive ideas that help to develop sharper and more thoughtful thinking and practice – both in academic and practical contexts.

1
Leadership: The Need for a Reflexive Approach

In terms of what is presented as crucial for the success of contemporary organizations, there is hardly anything that outranks leadership. The ambition of improving leadership to address and fix individual, organizational or societal problems seems almost endless. Here for example is a voice about the perceived leadership crisis in British healthcare:

> It is for the achievement of the common goal that we all seek (and pray for) a good leadership in our country, clubs, societies and … organizations. We crave for leaders who will bring out the best in us. We seek a visionary leadership that can see beyond the limitations of today. We seek a leadership that can organize and deploy the available human and material resources for the benefit of all. (*The Guardian*, 2014)

No doubt, leadership can make a difference. Visionary and inspirational leadership can provide purpose and broader meaning to work tasks that might otherwise be seen as repetitive and boring. Leadership may boost morale and ethos in organizations. A leader showing high ethical standards may set a good example and contribute to reciprocity, trust and goodwill among people who identify with him or her. Leadership can also contribute to emotional well-being by recognizing that people are humans rather than simply instrumental resources. Leadership can contribute to the social atmosphere in the workplace, for example by making people feel happy, included and important. Leadership can also contribute to learning and development in various ways – both on an individual and an organizational level.

But successful leadership as described above is also quite complex and calls for reflexivity and thoughtfulness rather than just following fashionable trends and popular recipes about how to act. An illustration and inspirational example could be Jan Wallander, the former chairman of Svenska Handelsbanken (one of Sweden's major and most successful commercial banks). On entering office at the beginning of the 1970s – at a time when the bank was in a severe crisis – Wallander initiated a reduction of costs at the bank's headquarters while at the same time trying to maintain and increase motivation, identification and commitment among employees (Svenska Dagbladet, 2010).

This included a range of reforms, the most significant of which were a strong decentralization to more independent regional branches and a decision to abandon budgeting and formal organizational charts as well as the introduction of a unique profit-sharing model that offered employees the possibility of becoming part-owners of the bank via a newly formed foundation. Wallander intended to change not only behaviour but primarily how people understood and related to work, saying that:

> It is not certain that a change in the outer behaviour also is a change of the inner behaviour, i.e. that people don't just act because they have to but also because they want to … (Wallander, 2003, p. 17)

A key idea behind the changes was to create an organizational context – including culture, norms, and identity – that boosted motivation, commitment and a sense of belonging among the employees. A particular part of this was Wallander's decision to decline the higher salary offered to him on joining the bank, saying that:

> If you require from the employees that they should participate in radical changes and accept cost savings it is not a good idea to start raising your own salary. I managed very well on what I had. Also ethical considerations played a role in my case. (Wallander, 2003, p. 95)

While clearly recognizing the sometimes important role of leadership as described above, it is important to be careful about over-relying on leadership as a panacea for all kinds of organizational challenges and problems. Although leadership, in one sense or another, often plays an important role, the effectiveness and results of organizations are normally an outcome of a variety of organizational and environmental contingencies as well as pure luck. For example, fans and directors of football clubs demand the replacement of coaches once the team exhibits poor performance. However, the success of a football team may be an outcome of a ball going two inches in the right or wrong direction, a key player becoming sick at a critical time or a referee's mistake. If a company's profit is below expectation, the perception is that leadership needs to change (usually by replacing the CEO). A company may however improve its results due to the oil price unexpectedly going down, or the exchange rate becoming more favourable, or a competitor facing a scandal. A CEO may be credited with good results, but might only be benefiting from wise decisions made much earlier in the corporate history that pay off at the time when the CEO is in office.

   The idea that leadership is an answer to all sorts of societal and organizational problems is not without its problems. More often than not it is unclear what leadership means or actually entails in different situations. Often leadership talk is vague, naive and idealistic. 'Leadership' could mean almost everything since it is seldom defined or used in a precise or careful manner. Rather it is treated in very broad and positive terms and can refer to diverse things: from management, managerial work, collaboration and vision preaching to simply influencing, showing some initiative, massage egos or technical problem solving. The problems of the vagueness of leadership and

the difficulties in sorting out its significance in relation to everything else that affects organizations does not prevent most groups from holding and expressing an almost religious belief in it. We need more leadership (leaders) and less management (managers) is a safe statement, likely to lead to agreement, praise and applause. To suggest that we need *less* leadership in organizations would probably raise eyebrows and be seen as a less serious view – perhaps even a joke – in many contexts. Particularly in a book on leadership – such as the one you are reading right now.

Nevertheless, this book suggests that we should be open to other options. Sometimes we might actually benefit from less emphasis, hope and investment (time and money) in leadership in favour of other ways of organizing work. Being aware of different options and thinking carefully about having more or less of leadership or other ways of organizing are vital. Of course this is not to say that we shouldn't also work hard to improve leadership. This book makes a strong case for reflexive leadership, which means that people – senior and junior – think carefully about how to organize work and how to use both leadership and other ways of organizing to make workplaces function well.

THE CASE FOR REFLEXIVE LEADERSHIP

It is important to acknowledge the often legitimate and important role of leadership. When we refer to leadership in this book we mean *influencing ideas, meanings, understandings and identities of others within an asymmetrical (unequal) relational context* (we will come back to this). Our point in this book is that we need to carefully consider what we mean by leadership, what it can and cannot do, when it might work, when it is not the best option and the alternative ways of organizing work. Sometimes leadership may be central, but so might management, the use of power and less hierarchical modes of organizing, including people being supported by teams, autonomy and professional networks rather than a leader. All this may be indirectly influenced by leadership that is, for example, focused on developing teams or encouraging people to use a broad set of contacts, but various modes of organizing often grow organically and are influenced by cultures, groups and individuals other than leaders.

As with 'non-leadership' approaches of organizing (e.g. bureaucracy, performance management, quality systems, entrepreneurship and professionalism) there are advantages and disadvantages to leadership. Take bureaucracy as an example – and in this context we are talking about the reliance on plans, rules, standard procedures which dominates in most organizations over a specific size and *not* red tape and rigidity. Bureaucracy often works well in standardized contexts; think of 'machine bureaucracies' such as McDonald's and airline companies (Mintzberg, 1983). It normally leads to efficiency and reliability *and* to alienation and a low degree of initiative and creativity. Professionalism is also often a good thing: there is expertise, autonomy and a common identity amongst professionals such as physicians, dentists and social workers. But there is also a monopolization of certain types of work and

experts tend to be inward oriented, focused on status and group privilege and can avoid healthy competition from other groups. There is often a guild mentality, with limited openness and eagerness to distance the group from others. It is, at least sometimes, a mixed blessing.

In some contexts and in some respects leadership works well, sometimes less so. A simple example of the latter is a knowledge-intensive context where most employees are well educated and experienced, rely heavily on their judgement and work independently and/or with peers. Here the idea of emphasizing leadership is often unhelpful. People may not like it or view it as irrelevant. Leadership efforts – the boss trying to turn people into devoted followers – are often counter-productive in such situations, at least under normal conditions. Sure, there is a need for qualified administration and coordination and sometimes for a dose of policing, but this concerns management more than leadership.

So, thinking about leadership and its alternatives is important. Within leadership there are also alternatives. Later we will explore the meaning(s) of leadership and come back to alternatives. For the moment, we offer the reader an appetizer: we suggest the consideration of leadership in terms of the prophet, preacher, psychotherapist, party host and pedagogue, that is, the '5Ps' of doing leadership. These perhaps slightly playful labels draw attention to key activities of leadership: vision, values and morals, emotional support, a positive work climate, and learning and cognitive development. But more on this in Chapter 8.

Our idea is to avoid the inclination to adopt a sweeping view of leadership which equates it with everything 'good' and sees it as representing the solution to all kinds of problems. It is important to think about and use leadership ideas, but equally important to avoid being fixated on these – something that our contemporary leadership-worshipping age and the enormous leadership industry tend to seduce us into. But as the saying goes, if the only tool you have is a hammer, everything tends to be treated as a nail. If leadership is the key concept you are in love with and use then all relationships tend to be turned into leader/follower ones, which may create as much trouble and confusion as the hammer-carrier chasing nails all the time.

This leads us to the case for reflexivity. Like leadership, reflexivity is a buzzword – who does not want to be reflective (and most believe they are)?[1] But here we aim to take the concept seriously and will also discuss it (self-)critically. Being reflective essentially means that you are willing to consider what might be wrong with established ideas and beliefs, including your own. Thinking critically and considering alternatives are key. This will be more thoroughly discussed in the next chapter.

We aim to counter the habit of simply putting the good against the bad, even if we realize that many readers will not appreciate complicated messages. A simple, straightforward message is the key to all bestsellers in leadership. It is, however, also a reason for many problems. The simple solution – the supposedly superior, seductive leadership model – tends to foster unreflective mindlessness: simplistic, naive, over-optimistic beliefs. This is not typically what we need, although we do realize that we should not complicate things too much either.

LEADERSHIP: COVERING (ALMOST) EVERYTHING, BEING GOOD AND – THEREFORE – NECESSARY

In order to make sense of leadership an increasing number of writings have emerged over some three decades. This development has resulted in a large and fragmented field of concepts, models and theories that presents a rather confusing picture. As noted by Kets de Vries (1994, p. 73):

> When we plunge into the literature on leadership, we quickly become lost in a labyrinth: endless definitions, countless articles and never-ending polemics ... it seems that more has been studied about less and less, to end up ironically with researchers studying everything about nothing.

If we look at various versions and views of leadership, the list seems almost endless: task-oriented, relations-oriented, laissez-faire, charismatic, transformational, transactional, servant, authentic, practice-based, relational, emotional, distributed, shared, strategic, administrative, complex, coaching, symbolic, visionary, etc. And with this book the reader can add reflexive leadership to the perhaps already too long and complicated list. The reader may now feel that this book just adds another label and offers a pseudo-innovation. Hopefully not – we are pretty sure that we approach the topic in a rather new and constructive way and at least partly solve the problem of dealing with all this confusing mass (and mess) of leadership views and labels. But we will come back to this.

Much contemporary literature portrays leaders and leadership as strong and determined, with the ability to challenge, influence and change. In many descriptions of contemporary leaders – although not always explicit – there is a glow of heroism. These are people doing *high-powered influencing*. Success – and also failure for that matter – are regularly attributed to the leader and his/her traits, behaviour or style. Traditionally, leadership related to people expected to carry out supervision in one sense or another in relation to their subordinates. Now, the leadership industry is much more into targeting broader and more abstract organizational issues such as culture, identity, vision and strategy. The focus has moved from supervisors and middle-level managers to CEOs and other senior people. A popular variant of the hero theme is how leaders' behaviour, traits and abilities help to develop organizations in light of difficult challenges. Visionary and strategic leadership linked to radical change and development is often in focus. Leadership is about highly significant issues, forming the overall organizational direction, and is key for organizational survival.

But the field is broad and complex and there are also low-key, 'post-heroic' ideas on leadership. Leadership is here viewed as less spectacular and consisting of *more mundane actions*; the everyday managers are portrayed as humble and hardworking heroes who manage to accomplish change – or maintain high quality and efficiency – and business success incrementally. In a bestselling management book about how to be better than good it is suggested that the difference between excellent and mediocre

organizations is intimately related to leader traits such as humbleness, endurance, professional will and a strong determination to contribute to creating organizational rather personal wealth (Collins, 2001).

This view is also expressed in leadership that involves listening, small talk, showing recognition, coaching and other ordinary activities. It is often suggested that leaders should have close contact with organizational reality and be engaged, supportive and positive – sometimes framed as varieties of post-heroism. Occasionally well-being among subordinates is made central – it is expected that the leader should contribute to a stimulating, fun, friendly and cosy working atmosphere. To this we can add that leadership also includes personal development, ethics, diversity, equality and organizational health.

Based on this brief overview of some common themes in leadership it is clear that there is a multitude of demands and expectations on leaders and on what leadership can (and should) accomplish. Normally we expect managers at a variety of different levels – including middle management – to exhibit a host of skills and traits to meet these demands in modern organizations. However, often there is a mismatch between demands and what the great majority of managers are capable of doing. They lack the skills, time and interest to do all this. And they are expected to do many other things, including carrying out regular managerial work in administration as well as the operative work that is necessary for complex organizations to function.

An important development over the last two decades or so is that junior and middle managers are exposed to mixed messages about what is commonly known as *micro-management*, that is, the supervision or control of detailed behaviour and predictable deliveries.[2] All managers, regardless of their position in the corporate food-chain are nowadays more or less assumed to exercise leadership. Thus they are all expected to take charge of accomplishing change, facilitating engagement and formulating vision and strategy (Alvesson & Spicer, 2011). People's work as leaders rather than traditional managers is now regarded as paramount in managerial work. At least this is the case on the level of rhetoric. In practice it is – as we will see in this book – often quite different. Making sure that everything works and that there are deliveries of products, services, reports, etc. are key for most organizations. This is often hard to do without a strong focus on operative management.

Much of the contemporary writing on leadership – authentic, coaching, transformational – focuses on trying to identify the specific traits and styles that make an effective leader in terms of *being good*. Leadership is almost always used as a 'hurrah' word. Leaders do good things such as improve business, health care, schools and generally make sure that organizations are working properly. Leaders are associated with positive things such as having vision, being bold and good at communicating, and exhibiting good judgement, integrity and self-confidence. Rather than pointing at fanatic dictators and terrorists such as Hitler, Mussolini, Stalin or Osama bin Laden as illustrations of leaders who were extraordinarily successful in mobilizing followers, we often see other more popular and positive people in business and society portrayed as leaders, even though the former fanatics were successful in inspiring and influencing followers to sacrifice their own interests and subject themselves to the cause of the leader, both enthusiastically and voluntarily. In the great majority of

contemporary leadership literature leaders are assumed to be good people with noble intentions who produce excellent results (Bass & Steidlmeier, 1999). The idea of leadership as inherently good is explicitly formulated by one of the most influential leadership writers of the last decade, James Burns (2003, p. 2):

> I believe leadership is not only a descriptive term but a prescriptive one, embracing a moral, even a passionate, dimension. Consider our common usage. We don't call for good leadership – we expect, or at least hope, that it will be good. 'Bad' leadership implies *no* leadership. I contend that there is nothing neutral about leadership; it is valued as a moral necessity.

By confining leadership to good and moral things leadership writers may be able to offer lofty and beautiful stories and images of leadership in a fairly uncomplicated and positive world in which good people lead others to produce good results. The development of leadership as something inherently good and connected to some extraordinary individuals also makes people more inclined to subordinate themselves to leadership without perhaps problematizing or reflecting on how it is presented. Often it is addressed tautologically: leadership is good in terms of morality and effectiveness, and can be observed through good outcomes (problem-solving, people thinking that their needs are fulfilled, a positive meaning has been expressed and consumed by transformed followers). This reflects our inclination to avoid connecting supposedly good things – such as how we like to see leadership – with bad things such as tyranny and bullying, or people having bad ideas or being seduced by wishful thinking and excessive positivity (this will be elaborated on in Chapter 4). The result is that if we believe that leadership by definition is good, we also want to understand the result of it as good (Burns, 2003). And if we want to understand something as bad, then we search for other explanations than leadership. Or use vocabulary that this is not 'real' leadership, but 'toxic', 'inauthentic' or something else bad. We are governed by our assumptions and ideologies and tend to be reluctant to observe, interpret or remember things that contradict our worldview. This is deeply problematic.

As ideas on leadership cover so much – from vision and overall organizational direction to mundane, everyday interactions with followers – and leadership is so good and powerful, it becomes clear that *leadership is necessary*. It is extremely important; it can – if carried out according to the right formula (or done in the superior artistic, creative way) – turn the lazy, stupid and bewildered into a group of committed, competent and vision-guided people and lead to corporate excellence. In other words, leadership is crucial for people's improvement and performance and for the success of organizations as a whole. This is the overall message of the leadership industry. We are wise to take this message with some caution. It is seductive but often deceptive.

Leadership as a way to accomplish influence has its place – in a variety of forms – but so do other modes of organizing work. Rather than assuming that good things always go together in harmony, this book aims to facilitate a more reflective view of leadership, by considering alternatives and taking a more restrained and focused view of the phenomenon.

LEADERSHIP – A MORE FOCUSED VIEW

The dominance of leadership as a solution to all kinds of problems in contemporary organizations counteracts reflections on alternative ways of approaching problems of coordination and influence. Both managers and others tend to employ leadership as a means of heroism and self-aggrandizement:

> [Leadership] may be more enticing (than the nuts and bolts of the down-to-earth-manager), but that has led to an awful lot of hubris in organizations these days: heroic leadership disconnected from the requirements of plain old managing. (Mintzberg, 2012, p. 327)

What makes this view on leadership problematic is that, as already pointed out, leadership has come to mean basically anything and everything that has a positive ring to it. We need to think in more precise and differentiated ways about organizing in order to mitigate muddled thinking. The fusion of leadership and management has been mentioned above. Post-heroic concepts like delegating or distributed leadership indicate a significant level of subordinates' autonomy, but this is viewed as an outcome of the leader's decision (or lack of time or even laziness), and therefore still leadership-driven.

An alternative view is of course that autonomous, resourceful or counter-dependent people give managers little choice than to abstain from doing much leadership. That is not to say that management or even the exercises of power/brute force are irrelevant, unimportant or not requested by the same people. But leadership is usually put forth as the superior solution almost independently of what the problem is or how challenging the reality might be. Indeed, it is a label that has attained a threatening hegemony in terms of how we think about organizational processes and results. Following this dominance of leadership, we suggest that there are good reasons to be cautious and reflective about the image of leadership and its significance for the organizations that we develop. The risk of leadership, even though well-intended, being a source of stupidity is profound (Alvesson & Spicer, 2016).

In this book we therefore suggest a more restrained view of leadership that does not include everything in terms of influencing or give the impression that the choice is between leadership and leadership. We therefore restrict leadership to be about people involved in an *asymmetrical* (unequal) *relationship* (formally or informally, permanently or temporarily, but not only momentarily) *involving followers*. Leaders are *interpersonally trying to define meaning/reality for others who are inclined to (on a largely voluntary basis) accept such meaning-making and reality-defining influencing acts*.

Where people are more or less on an equal footing there is no point talking about leadership. When the focus is less on meaning and more on behaviour, rules, output and other issues, leadership is not a productive term to use. This is broadly in line with most of the literature which tries to distinguish leadership from management (e.g. Ladkin, 2010; Smircich & Morgan, 1982; Zaleznik, 1977). We do, however, dissociate ourselves from all the distinctions between leadership and management where leadership is said to be about doing the right thing or creating change, while allegedly

unsexy management is about doing things right or creating stability. Leadership can mean doing what later turns out to be the 'wrong' thing and much leadership is about maintaining morale, influencing meanings, ideas, values and emotions, so that organizations function well in everyday life, not just creating radical change.

This view of leadership recognizes the social, relational and processual character of leadership. It involves both leaders and followers engaged in mutual interaction based on the influencing of meaning and understanding. It goes beyond a static attention to the individual leader and his/her ideas, convictions and personal psychology. In contrast, leadership can productively be seen as a social phenomenon, something expressed in asymmetrical but mutual and voluntary relations between individuals labelled leaders and followers, depending on the directions of influence. Management contrasts to leadership in that the latter demands efforts at influencing meaning – dealing in interpretations, emotions and understandings. Leadership as influencing meaning is thus closely related to efforts in influencing culture. This influence is intentionally directed, relatively systematic and built upon asymmetry – but not necessarily in a formal sense – between individuals. In an interpersonal relationship someone that we see as a 'high influential person' (HIP) takes on a leader role in terms of influencing, while another person, a 'low influential person' (LIP), takes on a follower role in terms of holding back independent views and opinions. Of course relations shift. A senior manager or a leading professional may be a HIP in relation to junior people, but a LIP in relation to top management or a world authority within the profession.

This view of leadership is mainly based on voluntary compliance. People position themselves as followers based not on legal requirements or out of fear of negative sanctions, but because leadership acts provide some form of meaningful as well as practical, emotionally and morally convincing, direction. In this way leadership forms the basis for motivation since it provides some sensible idea or purpose in terms of performing specific work tasks.

It is also important to acknowledge the context in which the leadership processes are situated. The local organizational or workplace context is crucial. But so are other levels; industry, professional and broader cultural, societal and ideological contexts matter. It is however important to bear in mind that when we talk about leadership in this book, we primarily refer to leadership in modern corporate and public sector organizational contexts and not to political leadership, leadership in social movements or military combat situations. This is reflected both in the practical examples provided as well as the theories and academic studies referred to throughout the book. At the same time, most of what we say is also relevant to understanding informal and 'non-regular organizational' contexts.

A key quality of this more restrained or precise view of leadership is that it becomes something distinct from management, professional autonomy, group work and other alternative forms of achieving influence. For example, the conventionally powerful hierarchical situation of managers does not necessarily imply that they are also leaders in terms of influencing people's understanding of the significance of accomplishing specific work tasks. The latter may be related to the exercise of power or the workings

of professional norms. Leadership occurs when people voluntarily let themselves become led in terms of understanding and interpreting what it is necessary and desirable to accomplish. This often includes more subtle and less spectacular actions influencing social processes and organizing relations. The interaction of leaders and followers is key, not only for leaders acting but for followers responding. This restrained and contextually sensitive approach to leadership demands a more reflective and finely tuned understanding of the phenomenon rather than the assumptions that are taken for granted and pervasive in much contemporary leadership literature.

THE PURPOSE OF THIS BOOK

The general purpose of this book is to support a more reflexive attitude towards leadership in organizations. As discussed, in this context reflexivity refers to thinking broadly and critically about one's thinking and one's self in relation to others. This includes critically examining the vocabulary on important subject matters such as leadership and considering alternative positions. Even if leadership is important and relevant it still needs to be approached in a reflexive manner in order to allow for the consideration of alternatives to leadership (being one of several modes of organizing) and of different versions of leadership. In this book we refer to two forms of reflexivity: the first as 'extra-leadership reflexivity' (ELR) and the second as 'intra-leadership reflexivity' (ILR). These two concepts, as well as the very notion of reflexivity in relation to leadership, will be explored in more detail in Chapter 2.

We aim to reach three large audiences. The first is people who want an advanced theoretical understanding of leadership and other organizing issues beyond the introductory level, that is, scholars and students. The second is the leadership industry – those interested in selling leadership and claiming to improve leaders and leadership through advice, training and recipes. The third is practitioners expected to contribute to leadership in various organizations, for example managers (not political leaders and not primarily CEOs, presidents or other top executives, but rather more 'average' managers in modern organizations), senior professionals and also subordinates or junior people, who are always more or less actively and thoughtfully influencing leadership relations, that is, by taking or not taking follower positions. We thus cast a rather wide net.

The three groups overlap, many academics are also part of the leadership industry – leadership development is a source of income (and sometimes of intellectual corruption) for many – and those in the leadership industry are also often practitioners – HR Managers and publishers also do leadership. Practitioners are students of leadership on MBA programmes, in executive education and other contexts. The three groups nevertheless differ in some key respects – not least by their interest in theoretical sophistication, the time available for reading and thinking, and in their eagerness for the take-away or pay-off of reading a text like this.

The book is therefore a balance between different readers' needs and wants. Our aim is to make it a bit more provocative and characterized by strong points

than is perhaps common in academic literature. We do not aim to reproduce the assumptions and seductive nature of most texts aiming to appeal to the leadership industry and managers. We hope thereby to be much more useful than most of the leadership literature.

One modest ambition of the book is to contribute more good than bad – although this depends a great deal on the efforts of the reader to think and reflect when reading the text. As we demonstrate in the book, much leadership thinking does not seem to make people smarter or organizational life easier, but rather seduces managers and others into naive and overoptimistic beliefs that lead to clashes between great hopes and imperfect reality (Sveningsson & Alvesson, 2016).

THE STRUCTURE OF THE BOOK

We start with our key concept of reflexivity (Chapter 2), before we provide a slightly critical overview of established leadership theories (Chapter 3). Reflexivity is motivated by the need to be careful about seductive ideologies and vague language use (Chapter 4), as well as the overall influence of culture on leadership (Chapter 5) and the significance of followers for leadership (Chapter 6) – how people respond to leadership efforts is partly a matter of relations and interaction within the organizational and professional cultural context. (The same leadership behaviour can be viewed as democratic or laid-back in the military and rather authoritarian in a professional organization where peer relations dominate.) In Chapters 7 and 8 we address alternative ways of organizing and doing leadership, for example extra- and intra-leadership reflexivity (ELR, IRL). Chapter 9 deals with the complexities and imperfections of organizational reality and argues for a more realistic view on leadership. In Chapters 10 and 11 the theme is how to make the people involved view relationships and organizing work in broadly similar ways and how to encourage good communication and mutual understandings as well as adjustment. The focus is on the joint doings of ELR and IRL. In Chapters 12 and 13 we address reflexive subjects and groups, both in senior and junior positions, under the labels of, respectively, reflexive leadership and reflexive followership – although we also indicate the need to be reflexive 'outside' leadership and followership and to organize in other ways than through leadership/followership. The final chapter concludes and discusses further practical possibilities. We here return to the importance of realism. Demands on reflexivity that are too high can lead to problems – 'reflexive heroism' is a trap we want to avoid. A balanced and pragmatic view is needed.

The structure of the chapters listed above is a mix of a logical order and our wish to address some key themes that do not necessarily build directly on other themes. Some chapters can therefore be read independently of others.

We have in an appendix a number of questions aimed to stimulate reflexivity for readers that are involved in leadership and/or managerial practice, as leaders or followers. Many of these can also be used in organizational and leadership development projects.

NOTES

1. Reflective for us means carefully thinking and perhaps re-thinking how to deal with a prob-lem or how to generally relate to a theme. Reflexivity stands for multi-level or broader forms of reflections. Being reflexive addresses the issues and also how you think about issues, e.g. reflections on reflections or meta-reflections. 'How can I improve the vision? 'is reflective. 'Where is this idea of working with visions coming from and is it a good idea?', is reflexive. More about this in Chapter 2.
2. The early leadership studies mainly studied supervisors, including their micro-management, and not directly leadership as typically understood today, e.g. broader influence on ideas, meanings, values, and so forth.

2

On Reflection and Reflexivity

Reflection can be understood as: '[A]n important human activity in which people recapture their experience, think about it, mull it over and evaluate it' (Boud et al., 1985, p. 19). Most people are to some extent reflective and many probably believe they are well above average on this quality. In contemporary society we have access to a variety of information, viewpoints and experiences. We are seldom locked up in a closed world. We draw inspiration from various sources that can trigger reflection. We consult mass media, listen to lecturers, we talk to people and receive new experiences when we face various situations. We act, see what happens and try to learn. Circumstances and conditions change and can act as triggers to think a bit more deeply about various matters; from the meaning of life to what is worth doing and how I can deal with people in my surroundings – subordinates, superiors, colleagues, friends, network contacts. Sometimes things stay the same, which can also trigger reflection. Saturation, boredom, the limited effects of one's ideas and efforts may also offer food for thought. Generally, we live in an age that scores high on reflexivity in key respects (Giddens, 1991).

Reflection is important and a feature of being human, although the interest and ability to engage in it varies enormously. Besides individual cognitive capacity and ambitions, contextual conditions can also serve as important barriers to reflection. Those contextual barriers can be structural, for example narrow role descriptions, limited time to think, performance management systems that do not reward radical thinking, limited contact with other units and peers. They can also be cultural, for example strong orientation towards consensus and wanting to agree with others, respect for authorities, strong traditions. People can also deliberately refrain from reflection – even if they have both the capacity and the opportunity – in order to make life easier, which is an example of 'functional stupidity' (Alvesson & Spicer, 2012). Functional stupidity means that one complies with available truths and norms – and goes with the flow, doing things in the 'right' way rather than asking if this really is the right thing to do.

Reflective practice (Schön, 1983) is often described in terms of reflection-in-action (thinking what one is doing while one is doing it – thinking on one's feet) and reflection-on-action (after the experience one analyses one's reaction to the situation and explores the reasons around, and the consequences of, one's actions). Some also add reflection-before-action, meaning 'thinking through what one wants to do and how one intends to do it before one actually does it' (Greenwood, 1998, p. 1049).

In this book we refer to reflection but we are not interested in the more limited and narrow forms that dominate, for example whether I should use a small or big hammer or ask the boss for a pay rise before or after the weekend, or trying to find out why a subordinate is so grumpy. We aim for, and try to encourage, something more ambitious: reflection plus or even plus-plus, meaning thinking deeply *and* broadly about issues. Often reflection is based on a certain framework and some specific assumptions guide thinking. People reflect on tactics and actions, on how to reach a specific objective, or the consequences of a decision.

There is a large literature dealing with issues like this, for instance by Argyris, Boud, Kolb, Schön and others. Argyris (1982), for example, talks about single-loop learning, where people try to learn but are caught in a framework, trying to solve a problem without varying the method or questioning the overall goal. A relevant example would be how an organization that feels that the leadership is not delivering demands *more* (of the same) leadership or better performance from management, or more intensively hammers out the preferred core messages in order to get the proper effect. This tendency to think 'within the box' is often contrasted with double-loop learning, where not only the method but also the ultimate goals and assumptions you proceed from are questioned. As said, we are mainly interested in broader and more ambitious forms of reflection and a particular ideal for how to relate to reality as well as one's own thinking, values, objectives and self-view. We refer to this as reflexivity. It is, in the present context, very much about being capable and interested in both intra- and extra-leadership reflexivity.

REFLEXIVITY

We define reflexivity as *the ambition to carefully and systematically take a critical view of one's own assumptions, ideas and favoured vocabulary and to consider if alternative ones make sense* (Alvesson & Sköldberg, 2009). Reflexivity is then the antithesis of thinking as a reflex (i.e. leaning towards standard interpretations or predictable lines of thinking) and at the same time more than simple reflection (just thinking about things) since it involves interpretations of our interpretations. Reflexivity means a willingness to scrutinize and challenge one's position – image, sense-making and vocabulary on a subject matter (such as one's work and one's self) – and consider alternative positions (Bourdieu, 1992). Reflexivity means an effort to avoid cultural conventions and truths associated with tradition, fashion and what is institutionalized. It means working with – reflecting upon and problematizing – assumptions and counter-assumptions. In other words not just focusing on a specific problem but more broadly engaging in meta-reflection. How do I think about these issues? Where do my ideas come from? Am I seduced by a particular vocabulary? Are there favoured terms that may hide contradictions and problems? What may be problematic about my assumptions and convictions? Do I have fixed ideas? Do I have ideological or cultural blinders? How come I have been convinced that a particular framework, key idea or norm is the right or the best one?