

Leadership: The Management of Meaning

LINDA SMIRCICH
GARETH MORGAN

The concept of leadership permeates and structures the theory and practice of organizations and hence the way we shape and understand the nature of organized action, and its possibilities. In fact, the concept and practice of leadership, and variant forms of direction and control, are so powerfully ingrained into popular thought that the absence of leadership is often seen as an absence of organization. Many organizations are paralyzed by situations in which people appeal for direction, feeling immobilized and disorganized by the sense that they are not being led. Yet other organizations are plagued by the opposite situation characterized in organizational vernacular as one of "all chiefs, no Indians"—the situation where the majority aspire to lead and few to follow. Thus, successful acts of organization are often

seen to rest in the synchrony between the initiation of action and the appeal for direction; between the actions of leaders and the receptivity and responsiveness of followers.

In this paper we focus on understanding the phenomenon of leadership, not merely to improve the practice of leadership, but as a means for understanding the phenomenon of organization. For, in leading, managers enact a particular form of social reality with far-reaching, but often poorly understood and appreciated, consequences. We engage in our analysis to reveal how concepts and ideas that dominate management theory and ideology shape managerial practice and the reality of organization. Our approach is to analyze leadership as a

The Journal of Applied Behavioral Science,
Volume 18, Number 3, Pages 257-273
Copyright © 1982 by JAI Press Inc.
All rights of reproduction in any form reserved.
ISSN: 0021-8863

Linda Smircich is an associate professor of organizational behavior in the School of Business Administration, University of Massachusetts, Amherst, Massachusetts 01003. Gareth Morgan is an associate professor of organizational behavior in the Faculty of Administrative Studies of York University, Toronto, Ontario, Canada.

distinctive kind of social practice, present a case study of leadership in an organizational context, and analyze its consequences for understanding the basic nature of modern corporate life.

THE PHENOMENON OF LEADERSHIP

Leadership is realized in the process whereby one or more individuals succeeds in attempting to frame and define the reality of others. Indeed, leadership situations may be conceived as those in which there exists an *obligation* or a perceived *right* on the part of certain individuals to define the reality of others.

This process is most evident in unstructured group situations where leadership emerges in a natural and spontaneous manner. After periods of interaction, unstructured leaderless groups typically evolve common modes of interpretation and shared understandings of experience that allow them to develop into a social organization (Bennis & Shepard, 1965). Individuals in groups that evolve this way attribute leadership to those members who structure experience in meaningful ways. Certain individuals, as a result of personal inclination or the emergent expectations of others, find themselves adopting or being obliged to take a leadership role by virtue of the part they play in the definition of the situation. They emerge as leaders because of their role in framing experience in a way that provides a viable basis for action, e.g., by mobilizing meaning, articulating and defining what has previously remained implicit or unsaid, by inventing images and meanings that provide a focus for new attention, and by consolidating, confronting, or changing prevailing wisdom (Peters, 1978; Pondy, 1976).

Through these diverse means, individual actions can frame and change situations, and in so doing enact a system of shared meaning that provides a basis for organized action. The leader exists as a formal leader only when he or she achieves a situation in which an obligation, expectation, or right to frame experience is presumed, or offered and accepted by others.

Leadership, like other social phenomena, is socially constructed through interaction (Berger & Luckmann, 1966), emerging as a result of the constructions and actions of both leaders and led. It involves a complicity or process of negotiation through which certain individuals, implicitly or explicitly, surrender their power to define the nature of their experience to others. Indeed, leadership depends on the existence of individuals willing, as a result of inclination or pressure, to surrender, at least in part, the powers to shape and define their own reality. If a group situation embodies competing definitions of reality, strongly held, no clear pattern of leadership evolves. Often, such situations are characterized by struggles among those who aspire to define the situation. Such groups remain loosely coupled networks of interaction, with members often feeling that they are "disorganized" because they do not share a common way of making sense of their experience.

Leadership lies in large part in generating a point of reference, against which a feeling of organization and direction can emerge. While in certain circumstances the leader's image of reality may be hegemonic, as in the case of charismatic or totalitarian leaders who mesmerize their followers, this is by no means always the case. For the phenomenon of leadership in being interactive is by nature dialectic-

cal. It is shaped through the interaction of at least two points of reference, i.e., of leaders and of led.

This dialectic is often the source of powerful internal tensions within leadership situations. These manifest themselves in the conflicting definitions of those who aspire to define reality and in the fact that while the leader of a group may forge a unified pattern of meaning, that very same pattern often provides a point of reference for the negation of leadership (Sennett, 1980). While individuals may look to a leader to frame and concretize their reality, they may also react against, reject, or change the reality thus defined. While leadership often emerges as a result of expectations projected on the emergent leader by the led, the surrender of power involved provides the basis for negation of the situation thus created. Much of the tension in leadership situations stems from this source. Although leaders draw their power from their ability to define the reality of others, their inability to control completely provides seeds of disorganization in the organization of meaning they provide.

The emergence of leadership in unstructured situations thus points toward at least four important aspects of leadership as a phenomenon. First, leadership is essentially a social process defined through interaction. Second, leadership involves a process of defining reality in ways that are sensible to the led. Third, leadership involves a dependency relationship in which individuals surrender their powers to interpret and define reality to others.¹ Fourth, the emergence of formal leadership roles represents an additional stage of institutionalization, in which rights and obligations to define the nature of experience and activity are recognized and formalized.

LEADERSHIP IN FORMALIZED SETTINGS

The main distinguishing feature of formal organization is that the way in which experience is to be structured and defined is built into a stock of taken for granted meanings, or "typifications" in use (Schutz, 1967) that underlie the everyday definition and reality of the organization. In particular, a formal organization is premised upon shared meanings that define roles and authority relationships that institutionalize a pattern of leadership. In essence, formal organization truncates the leadership process observed in natural settings, concretizing its characteristics as a mode of social organization into sets of predetermined roles, relationships, and practices, providing a blueprint of how the experience of organizational members is to be structured.

Roles, for example, institutionalize the interactions and definitions that shape the reality of organizational life. Rules, conventions, and work practices present ready-made typifications through which experience is to be made sensible. Authority relationships legitimize the pattern of dependency relations that characterize the process of leadership, specifying who is to define organizational reality, and in what circumstances. Authority relationships institutionalize a hierarchical pattern of interaction in which certain individuals are expected to define the experience of others—to lead, and others to have their experience defined—to follow. So powerful is this process of institutionalized leadership and the expectation that someone has the right and obligation to define reality, that leaders are held to account if they do not lead "effectively." Those expecting to be led, for example, often rational-

ize their own inaction or ineffectiveness by scapegoating through statements such as "she is a poor manager" or "he is messing things up." On the other hand, occupancy of an authority role presents the leader in every situation with an existential dilemma—how to define and structure the element of organizational reality encountered at a given time. Formal organizations are often heavily populated by those who feel obliged to define the reality and experience of others in a way that is consistent with their idea of "being a good leader." To fail in this obligation is to fail in one's organizational role.

In these ways, patterns of formal organization institutionalize aspects of the leadership process within the context of a unified structure that specifies patterns of desired interaction, sense making, and dependency. As in the case of leadership as an emergent process, formal structures of organized action also contain a dialectical tension between the pattern of action and meaning that the structure seeks to establish, and the tendency of individuals to reinterpret, or even react against, the structure thus defined. While submitting to the dominant pattern of meaning, individuals frequently strive to develop patterns of their own, a phenomenon well documented in studies of the so-called "informal organization" (Roethlisberger & Dickson, 1939).

It is this inherent tension that calls for the development of a mediating form of leadership, bridging the gulf between the requirements of institutionalized structure and the natural inclinations of its human agents. It is this form of leadership that we most often recognize as leadership in informal organizations—the interpersonal process linking structure and the human beings who inhabit this struc-

ture. The person that is most easily recognized as an organizational leader is one who rises above and beyond the specification of formal structure to provide members of the organization with a sense that they are organized, even amidst an everyday feeling that at a detailed level everything runs the danger of falling apart.

Similarly, successful corporate leaders who give direction to the organization in a strategic sense frequently do so by providing an image or pattern of thinking in a way that has meaning for those directly involved (Quinn, 1980). This is reflected in part in Selznick's (1957) conception of leadership as involving the embodiment of organizational values and purpose. Strategic leadership, in effect, involves providing a conception and direction for organizational process that goes above and beyond what is embedded in the fabric of organization as a structure, i.e., a reified and somewhat static pattern of meaning.

Formal organization thus embodies at least two distinctive, yet complementary aspects of the phenomenon of leadership: (1) the structure of organization institutionalizes the leadership process into a network of roles, often in an overconcretized and dehumanizing form; (2) mediating or interpersonal leadership—what is most evident as leadership in action, operationalizes the principles of leadership as an emergent process within the context of the former. This is usually as a means of transcending the limitations of the former for containing the dialectical tension that it embodies, and as a means of giving the whole coherence and direction over time. These two aspects of leadership have been well recognized in leadership research (Katz & Kahn, 1966) and are frequently interpreted and studied in

terms of a relationship between "initiating structure" and "consideration" (e.g., Stogdill, 1974).

The phenomenon of leadership in formal organizations has been conceptualized and studied in many ways. Leadership research has sought for an understanding of leadership in terms of the personal traits of leaders (Mann, 1959), in terms of situations in which they lead (Fiedler, 1967), in terms of what they do (Mintzberg, 1973) or some combination thereof. Such approaches to the study of leadership tap into important attributes of what leadership may involve in day to day practice, particularly in terms of action requirements, and identify those practices most likely to work in different situations. Other approaches have viewed leadership as a process of exchange and influence (Barnard, 1938; Jacobs, 1971), and attempts have been made to understand the nature of the interactions and transactions necessary for effective leadership to occur (Bougon, Note 1). In the remainder of this paper, we wish to supplement these views with an approach to studying leadership that focuses on the way detailed interactive situations acquire meaningful form.

LEADERSHIP AS THE MANAGEMENT OF MEANING

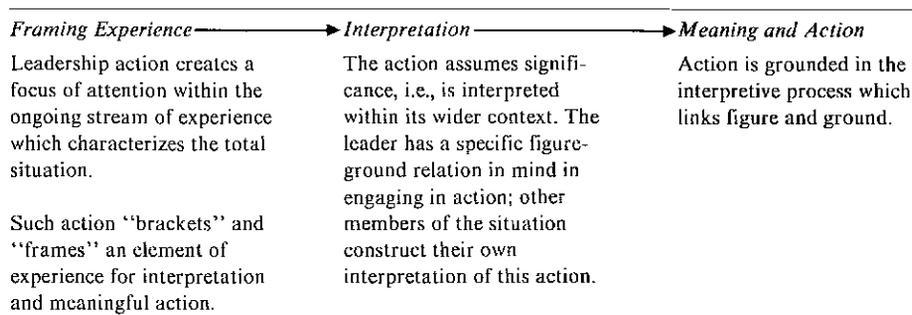
A focus on the way meaning in organized settings is created, sustained, and changed provides a powerful means of understanding the fundamental nature of leadership as a social process. In understanding the way leadership actions attempt to shape and interpret situations to guide organizational members into a common interpretation of reality, we are able to understand how leadership

works to create an important foundation for organized activity. This process can be most easily conceptualized in terms of a relationship between figure and ground. Leadership action involves a moving figure—a flow of actions and utterances (i.e., what leaders do) within the context of a moving ground—the actions, utterances, and general flow of experience that constitute the situation being managed. Leadership as a phenomenon is identifiable within its wider context as a form of action that seeks to shape its context.

Leadership works by influencing the relationship between figure and ground, and hence the meaning and definition of the context as a whole. The actions and utterances of leaders guide the attention of those involved in a situation in ways that are consciously or unconsciously designed to shape the meaning of the situation. The actions and utterances draw attention to particular aspects of the overall flow of experience, transforming what may be complex and ambiguous into something more discrete and vested with a specific pattern of meaning. This is what Schutz (1967) has referred to as a "bracketing" of experience, and Goffman (1974) as a "framing" of experience, and Bateson (1972) and Weick (1979) as the "punctuation of contexts." The actions and utterances of leaders frame and shape the context of action in such a way that the members of that context are able to use the meaning thus created as a point of reference for their own action and understanding of the situation.

This process can be represented schematically in terms of the model presented in Figure 1. When leaders act they punctuate contexts in ways that provide a focus for the creation of

Figure 1. Leadership: A Figure-Ground Relationship Which Creates Figure-Ground Relationships



meaning. Their action isolates an element of experience, which can be interpreted in terms of the context in which it is set. Indeed, its meaning is embedded in its relationship with its context. Consider, for example, the simple situation in which someone in a leadership role loses his or her temper over the failure of an employee to complete a job on time. For the leader this action embodies a meaning that links the event to context in a significant way, e.g., "This employee has been asking for a reprimand for a long time"; "This was an important job"; "This office is falling apart." For the employees in the office, the event may be interpreted in similar terms, or a range of different constructions placed upon the situation, e.g., "Don't worry about it, he always loses his temper from time to time"; "She's been under pressure lately because of problems at home."

The leader's action may generate a variety of interpretations that set the basis for meaningful action. It may serve to redefine the context into a situation where the meeting of deadlines assumes greater significance, or merely serves as a brief interruption in daily routine, soon forgotten. As discussed earlier, organized situations are often characterized by complex

patterns of meaning, based on rival interpretations of the situation. Different members may make sense of situations with the aid of different interpretive schemes, establishing "counter-realities," a source of tension in the group situation that may set the basis for change of an innovative or disintegrative kind. These counter-realities underwrite much of the political activities within organizations, typified by the leader's loyal lieutenants—the "yes men" accepting and reinforcing the leader's definition of the situation and the "rebels" or "out" groups forging and sustaining alternative views.

Effective leadership depends upon the extent to which the leader's definition of the situation, e.g., "People in this office are not working hard enough," serves as a basis for action by others. It is in this sense that effective leadership rests heavily on the framing of the experience of others, so that action can be guided by common conceptions as to what should occur. The key challenge for a leader is to manage meaning in such a way that individuals orient themselves to the achievement of desirable ends. In this endeavor the use of language, ritual, drama, stories, myths, and symbolic construction of all kinds may play an important role (Pfeffer, 1981; Pondy,

Frost, Morgan & Dandridge, 1982; Smircich, 1982). They constitute important tools in the management of meaning. Through words and images, symbolic actions and gestures, leaders can structure attention and evoke patterns of meaning that give them considerable control over the situation being managed. These tools can be used to forge particular kinds of figure-ground relations that serve to create appropriate modes of organized action. Leadership rests as much in these symbolic modes of action as in those instrumental modes of management, direction, and control that define the substance of the leader's formal organizational role.

A CASE STUDY IN THE MANAGEMENT OF MEANING

In order to illustrate the way leadership involves the management of meaning, we present here a case study drawn from an ethnographic study of the executive staff of an insurance company. The company was a division of a larger corporation (10,000 employees), was 11 years old, and employed 200 people. The case focuses on the way the president of the insurance company, Mr. Hall, sought to structure the experience of staff members by creating a particular figure-ground relationship—"Operation June 30th" (OJ30). OJ30 emerged as a prominent organizational event during the fieldwork and provided a focus for studying the process of leadership in action, in this instance, one of limited success.

Methodology

The research was conducted by one of the authors during the summer of

1979. An agreement was reached whereby the researcher was invited to spend six weeks in the insurance company as an observer of the executive staff. The purpose of the research was to learn about the ways of life within the 10-member top management group, to uncover the structures of meaning in use in the setting, and to synthesize an image of the group's reality.

The specific techniques used to gather data in the setting, consistent with the ethnographic tradition (Bogdan & Taylor, 1975; Schatzman & Strauss, 1973; Smircich, Note 2), were oriented toward understanding the realms of intersubjective meaning which gave that organization a semblance of unity and character to its membership.

In this study the researcher maintained the work hours of the organization. Early on she met individually with each of the staff members and explained the project as an attempt to learn about their organization. Each day's activity consisted of observing the management staff in a variety of situations: staff meetings, planning sessions, interactions with their subordinates, on coffee breaks, and in casual conversation. The guiding principle in this endeavor was to obtain a multi-sided view of the situation in order to build a holistic image of the group's understanding of itself. Toward the end of the stay in the company, tape recorded conversations/interviews were held with all staff members, including the president. The raw data from this study consist of daily field notes, documents, tapes of conversations, and the researcher's experience of the situation.

During the field work, the organization was in the midst of OJ30, and it was a prominent topic of discussion by the staff and in the researcher's con-

versations with the staff. For the purposes of this paper, the data were culled for all references to the OJ30 program so that an account of the situation from multiple viewpoints could be presented.

Ideally, the research would have proceeded in a way that allowed the researcher to reflect back to the group the many-sided image of the meaning system in use that had emerged. As the case study shows, the president's unwillingness to proceed with this aspect of the research was representative of the way of life he strived to maintain in the organization and in that sense provides a form of validation for some of the data presented here.

The background to Operation June 30th

"Operation June 30th" was instigated by Mr. Hall, the president, in direct response to complaints by the district sales managers that the agents in the field were not getting adequate service from the home office. Insurance claims, applications, endorsements, and renewals were not being handled promptly. The agents were getting complaints from their custom-

ers about long delays; consequently, they submitted second and third work requests that only served to make the volume of paperwork greater. The slowdown in processing of paperwork also meant that the agents' commission checks were slow in going out so that they did not receive their commissions in the month of sale.

After hearing the frustration of the Sales Department, Hall considered what might be done.² He conferred with the vice-president of administrative operations and the vice-president of claims and asked them if they thought it would be possible to have processing operations current by June 30th, the end of the fiscal year. President Hall then wrote an announcement (Figure 2), showed it to the vice-presidents for their comments and approval, and released it to the district sales managers.

With the initiation of OJ30, make-shift posters proclaiming "Operation June 30th Goals Week of June ____" were attached to file cabinets in the operations area. To bring the workflow up to date, overtime work (evenings and Saturdays) was expected, and other departments were encouraged to help out wherever possible by

Figure 2. Operation June 30

WHAT:	A special program designed to bring all insurance processing activities up to date by June 30, 1979.
WHY:	The present work backlog is having an adverse impact on total insurance operations.
HOW:	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. All departments will make a concerted effort to eliminate all backlogs. The goal is to have work conditions current in all departments by June 30. 2. All insurance home office employees who have the time will be expected to "volunteer" to assist other departments by performing certain assigned processing tasks until June 30. Procedures relative to this will be developed.
TIMING:	Operation June 30 will commence on Monday, May 14 and will terminate on Saturday, June 30.
PRIORITY:	This program has the highest priority. Nothing else in insurance is of more importance.
REPORTS:	Each staff member will report in writing weekly to Mr. Hall on the status of work conditions in his or her department.

loaning people during the week or by urging their people to come in on the weekends. Each week at the staff meeting a status report was made by the vice-president of operations on the number of files that had been processed through each of the operating units.

At Hall's staff meeting of July 2nd, the vice-president of operations declared OJ30 a "success." During that meeting an energetic discussion about how to express gratitude to the employees took place. The company ultimately provided a free lunch for the employees to thank them for their efforts, and a written statement of progress was prepared for the district sales managers. But privately some staff members expressed quite differing views about what had occurred. In fact some held the opinion that the whole affair was a failure because it did not address the real problems in the company.

OJ30 was a focus for the construction of different interpretations of reality. While the president and some of his staff constructed the situation in one way, other members forged their own view of the situation through the interplay of quite a different figure-ground relationship. It is instructive to examine the way the dynamics of the leadership process in this situation are reflected in the constructions of those involved.

Operation June 30: An attempt to manage meaning

How OJ30 structured meaning is reflected in the way it was created, named, and managed as a significant event within day to day work life. OJ30 was presented to staff members in a way that attempted to orient attention

away from the current situation to a desired future state. No attempt was made to analyze or interpret the significance of the backlog of work; the intent was just to eliminate it. This is reflected in the president's choice of language in the creation and naming of Operation June 30th. In the announcement the backlog was labelled "adverse," but not otherwise interpreted. The backlog is defined as the problem, and OJ30 was conceived as a military style operation to overcome it, implying a gathering of troops for an all-out assault. The name chosen by the president was not oriented to an explanation of the present conditions (e.g., "Operation Backlog" or "Operation Clean Sweep") but instead served to focus attention on a desired future state. Moreover, the inclusion of a date gave the program the status of a concrete event with an end point.

In this effort the president chose to emphasize certain temporal, perceptual ("special program," "highest priority") and interpersonal horizons ("concerted effort," "volunteer") to serve as context. By choosing a future time horizon, a perceptual space of tightness/closeness to respond to urgency, and an interpersonal horizon of smoothness and nonconflict, the president implied that the message of Operation June 30th was one of a forward focus. He placed no blame for current conditions and viewed the organization as a team, each member having an important role. When the vice-president of operations declared Operation June 30th a success, Hall saw the free lunch as an appropriate way to draw the event to a close.

This same pattern of emphasis was reflected in other examples of the president's talk, as in this instance of elaborating his management philosophy:

We all need each other. You really don't go very far unless everybody's got their shoulder to the wheel. . . . You can't overdo this (teamwork) to the point where you threaten to suppress some spirited debate in an organization. . . . You could have people not speaking their minds just because they feel they might undermine the teamwork philosophy, or the image you're trying to build. That would be wrong, because you've got to have some confrontation between people as you go along, as long as it doesn't get personal. This is what I keep saying to the staff. You can't get personal about these things, because once you get personal and take on a person individually and affect your relationship, then you've injected a little poison into the outfit. But as long as you're sincere and you're talking about the issues instead of personalities, then debate should be encouraged if you're going to make the best decisions . . . and the main thing is just to keep the personalities out of it.

The president does not speak of his role in terms of charting the direction of the organization but instead focuses his efforts at establishing and maintaining internal harmony. His approach toward OJ30 was quite consistent with this focus.

The staff members' reactions

Although the president sought to shape a reality of cooperation and urgency in the face of adverse conditions, it is apparent from the talk of executive staff that he did not succeed in generating these feelings among these staff members. Indeed, the reality for them was basically one of disharmony, disaffection, and noninvolvement. This is evidenced by remarks of the vice-president of operations, whose department was the main focus of Operation June 30th.

Tom (the president) talks about "sprinting to the finish," "we all have to put our

shoulder to the wheel," but you know nobody responds. . . . To tell you the truth, I'm pretty fed up, I'm agitated by working every Saturday that I've been working, and to see very few other people who are helping or anything. . . ."

The vice-president of operations maintained a chart to keep track of who had been helping during Operation June 30th and expressed dissatisfaction with what it showed. "See, Director of Personnel, all dashes by his name, he hasn't helped out. . . . We have no team around here."

The president's use of military imagery was noted by the director of personnel but not seen as effective.

It's (OJ30) probably a good thing in a lot of ways because say somebody attacked our country, we got called into a world war. . . . I kind of thought that when this initially came out it would serve as a common cause, a unification of the different forces we have in the company. It started off in that direction, but it's cased up quite a bit.

There was no urgency about OJ30 for the staff members. "We'll be in the same boat on July 30th," said one executive and he explained why.

As long as . . . the president or someone else that has some involvement with that department doesn't challenge them, everyone's going to think everything is fine. And it will be, until some agents or some insured . . . begin to ask more questions as to why this isn't being done. I know for a fact that they aren't up-to-date. I could go over there and find errors.

But at the July 2nd staff meeting this same executive did not question the vice-president of operations' description of OJ30 as a success, justifying his own behavior by saying his department was not directly involved and

that it was the president's responsibility to check and ask questions. But he believed the president incapable of doing so because he didn't know what to look for. In his own way, this executive also participated in burying the problems, but he saw that as the only option available to him.

The staff members' interpretations

The executive staff members rejected the meaning that the president sought to attach to the OJ30 program. They made sense of the project not in terms of some desired future state of task performance, but against the background of what they knew and felt about their organization.³

They were not a team, but instead a group in which conflict was repressed but close to the surface. Their group enacted a continued pattern of not dealing with problems effectively. The executive staff attributed this pattern to the preferences and style of the president. They considered him "too trusting" and "not wanting to hear if things are bad." Although he espoused that "you have to have some confrontation between people," he and the staff participated in avoiding confrontation.

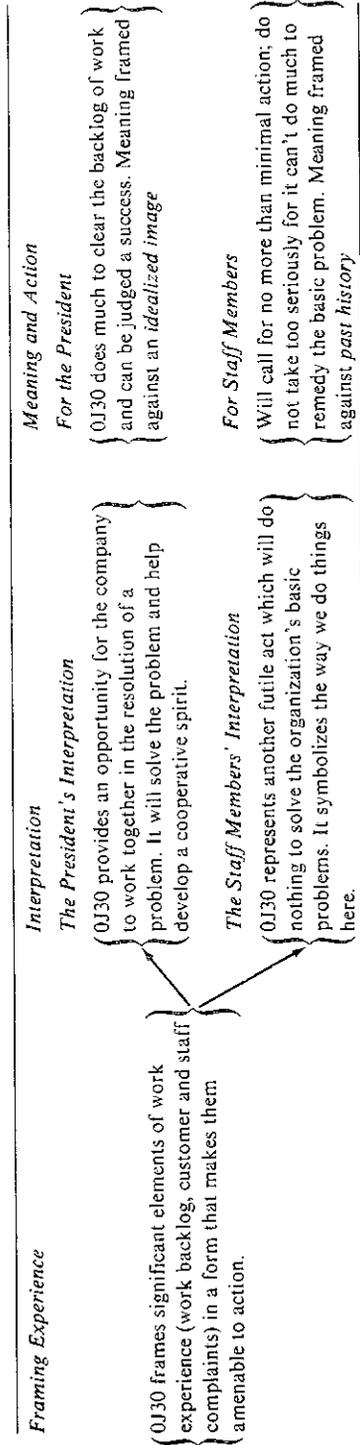
To the executive staff, OJ30 was symbolic of the way of life in their organization. It represented one more instance of the president's continued reluctance to deal fully and directly with problems. He may have labelled OJ30 "highest priority" and attempted to mobilize their energies, but he got little more than business as usual. For the staff did not interpret it as an occasion in which to behave in tight and helpful coordination. They made sense of OJ30, not as an organizational imperative emphasizing interdependence, but as an organizational malaise encouraging an isolationist response.

The executive staff expressed feelings of powerlessness; they saw no way to do things differently. For them it was a choice of resigning or going along with the way it is. Neither alternative seemed attractive. They shared a common understanding of the expected mode of behavior, basically a passive posture and a shared perception of the president's preferences. Paradoxically, the president's attempt to manage the meaning of OJ30 ("everybody get their shoulder to the wheel") was actually sabotaged by his staff's adherence to what they saw as the "real" organizational value—the value which Hall, to them, embodied: If you do nothing, no harm will come to you.

The competing interpretations of reality

Figure 3 presents a summary of the competing interpretive schemes through which the president and his executive staff made sense of the OJ30 project. For the president, OJ30 sought to define the situation in a way that created a high priority, future-oriented program addressed to the question, "What do we do now?" His interpretation of the final "success" of the program was framed against the relative success of OJ30 in getting rid of the backlog of work. For the staff, OJ30 was framed against an understanding of why they were "in a mess" and had a very different significance. It was just another sign of the inadequate way the fragmented organization was being run. They saw it as the act of a manager who was afraid to confront the real issues, who insisted on seeing the organization as a team, whereas the reality was that of a poorly managed group characterized by narrow self-interest, and noncooperation at anything but a surface level. OJ30 for

Figure 3. Competing Interpretations of OJ30



them was symbolic of the status quo, and hence they were not effectively mobilized into action.

IMPLICATIONS FOR THE THEORY AND PRACTICE OF CONTEMPORARY ORGANIZATION

The OJ30 case illustrates a leadership action concerned with managing the meaning of a particular situation. As an action designed to catch up on a work-flow problem, OJ30 was partially successful, for it did generate extra work from many staff who felt obliged to do something in conformity with the president's wishes. As an action designed to define the meaning of a situation, it was for the most part a failure, for it was interpreted by the executive staff in a manner that ran counter to what the president desired. Indeed the president's most powerful impact on the pattern of meaning within the organization was of a negative kind—his inaction and avoidance of problems creating an atmosphere of drifting and inaction.

At the surface our analysis may lead to the conclusion that Hall was a weak and ineffective leader. But to quickly judge him so is to risk losing sight of the larger dynamics that are at work in this leadership situation. Although Hall's view of organizational reality is not shared by the executive staff, he exerted a major impact on the broader definition of the situation. His style and presence provided the most powerful point of reference for action. The executive staff in this case adopts a passive nonconfronting posture, living a somewhat uncomfortable organizational reality defined and symbolized by the president. Hall provides evidence of how even weak leadership, by its

fundamental nature, involves the definitions of situations.

Leaders symbolize the organized situation in which they lead. Their actions and utterances project and shape imagery in the minds of the led, which is influential one way or another in shaping actions within the setting as a whole. This is not to deny the importance of the voluntary nature of the enactments and sense-making activities initiated by members of the situation being managed. Rather, it is to recognize and emphasize the special and important position accorded to the leader's view of the situation in the frame of reference of others. Leaders, by nature of their leadership role, are provided with a distinctive opportunity to influence the sense making of others. Our case study illustrates the importance of the leader recognizing the nature of his or her influence and managing the meaning of situations in a constructive way. At a minimum this involves that he or she (a) attempt to deal with the equivocality that permeates many interactive situations; (b) attend to the interpretive schemes of those involved, and (c) embody through use of appropriate language, rituals, and other forms of symbolic discourse, the meanings and values conducive to desired modes of organized action. A focus on leadership as the management of meaning encourages us to develop a theory for the practice of leadership in which these three generalizations are accorded a central role.

Our analysis also draws attention to the role of power as a defining feature of the leadership process. With the OJ30 case we see the way the power relations embedded in a leadership role oblige others to take particular note of the sense-making activities emanating from that role. We have

characterized this in terms of a dependency relation between leaders and led, in which the leader's sense-making activities assume priority over the sense-making activities of others.

The existence of leadership depends on and fosters this dependency, for insofar as the leader is expected to define the situation, others are expected to surrender that right. As we have noted, leadership as a phenomenon depends upon the existence of people who are prepared to surrender their ability to define their reality to others. Situations of formal leadership institutionalize this pattern into a system of rights and obligations whereby the leader has the prerogative to define reality, and the led to accept that definition as a frame of reference for orienting their own activity.

Organized action in formal settings constitutes a process of enactment and sense making on the part of those involved, but one shaped in important ways by the power relations embedded in the situation as a whole. Leadership and the organizational forms to which it gives rise enact a reality that expresses a power relationship. An understanding of the power relationship embedded in all enactment processes is thus fundamental for understanding the nature of organization as an enacted social form, for enactments express power relationships.

Thus our analysis of the leadership process tells us much about the nature of organization as a hierarchical phenomenon. Most patterns of formal organization institutionalize the emergent characteristics of leadership into roles, rules, and relations that give tangible and enduring form to relationships between leaders and led. Our analysis of leadership as a social phenomenon based on interaction, sense

making, and dependency implies a view of much modern organization in which these factors are seen as defining features. To see leadership as the management of meaning is to see organizations as networks of managed meanings, resulting from those interactive processes through which people have sought to make sense of situations.

This view of leadership and organization provides a framework for re-considering the way leadership has been treated in organizational research. By viewing leadership as a relationship between traits, roles, and behaviors and the situations in which they are found, or as a transactional process involving the exchange of rewards and influence, most leadership research has focused upon the dynamics and surface features of leadership as a tangible social process. The way leadership as a phenomenon involves the structuring and transformation of reality has with notable exceptions (e.g., Burns, 1978), been ignored, or at best approached tangentially. The focus on the exchange of influence and rewards has rarely penetrated to reveal the way these processes are embedded in, and reflect a deeper structure of power-based meaning and action. Leadership is not simply a process of acting or behaving, or a process of manipulating rewards. It is a process of power-based reality construction and needs to be understood in these terms.

The concept of leadership is a central building block of the conventional wisdom of organization and management. For the most part the idea that good organization embodies effective leadership practice passes unquestioned. Our analysis here leads us to question this wisdom and points to-

ward the unintended consequences that leadership situations often generate.

The most important of these stem from the dependency relations that arise when individuals surrender their power and control over the definition of reality to others. Leaders may create situations in which individuals are crippled by purposelessness and inaction when left to guide efforts on their own account. Leadership may actually work against the development of self-responsibility, self-initiative, and self-control, in a manner that parallels Argyris's (1957) analysis of the way the characteristics of bureaucratic organization block potentialities for full human development. These blocks arise whenever leadership actions divert individuals from the process of defining and taking responsibility for their own action and experience.

Leadership situations may generate a condition of "trained inaction" in the led, a variant form of Veblen's (1904) "trained incapacity," observed by Merton (1968) as a dominant characteristic of the bureaucratic personality. This trained inaction is clearly illustrated in the OJ30 study where the executive staff experienced problems in their work situation as something beyond their control. The situation here emanates from the way a relatively weak leader defines the situation; but it is equally evident in situations of strong, dominating leadership illustrated in a graphic but extreme way in situations such as the tragedy in Jonestown, Guyana.

An awareness of the dependency relationships that characterize leadership situations sensitizes us to potentially undesirable consequences and also points toward ways in which leadership action can be directed for the avoidance of such states through the crea-

tion of patterns of meaning construction that facilitate constructive tension and innovation rather than passivity. In this regard our analysis points toward an important focus for both the practice of contemporary organization and for future research—on the processes through which the management of meaning in organized situations can develop in ways that enhance, rather than deny, the ability of individuals to take responsibility for the definition and control of their world.

It is important to investigate forms of organized action that depart from the traditional leadership model. We are persuaded to suggest that the study of nonleadership situations would focus attention on a phenomenon of some importance.

Patterns of organization that replace hierarchical leadership with patterns of more equalized interaction in which each has an obligation to define what is happening, and respond accordingly, changes the very basis of organization. Such arrangements increase the adaptive capacity of organization through what Emery and Trist (1972) have described as a redundancy of functions. These embody a model of human development in line with the ability of human beings to take responsibility for their actions. In situations characterized by hierarchical dependency, those in leadership roles are obliged to interpret and assimilate all that there is to observe and understand about a situation before initiating the action of others. In situations of more equalized power, this obligation and ability is more widely spread. Members of a situation are unable to look to authority relations to solve problems; adaptive capacities have to be developed at the level at which they are needed, increas-

ing the learning and adaptive ability of the whole. Autonomous work groups and leaderless situations of all kinds present concrete opportunities for the study of emergent principles of organization that offer alternatives to the dependency relations that have permeated Western culture as an organizational norm.

The conventional wisdom that organization and leadership are by definition intertwined has structured the way we see and judge alternative modes of organized action. Approaching this subject from a perspective that treats organization as a phenomenon based on the management of meaning, we can begin to see and understand the importance of developing and encouraging alternative means through which organized action can be generated and sustained.

NOTES

1. A minor qualification is appropriate here in that certain charismatic leaders may inspire others to restructure their reality in creative ways. The dependency relation is evident, however, in that the individual takes the charismatic leader as a point of reference in this process.

2. The president of the insurance company had been involved in the day to day management of the company for 18 months. Previously, all nine executive staff members had reported to an executive vice-president so that the president could devote his attention to external relationships. When the executive vice-president died in January 1978, a decision was made not to replace him. Instead, all executive staff members reported directly to the president. The executive staff was a stable group; all had been employed in the company for no less than seven years.

3. The staff members were concerned about the equivocality surrounding the cause of the backlog. In a conversation with the researcher, the director of sales asked himself, "How did the company get into this position?" And replied, "It started two years ago with the decision to microfilm. It ate us up. I could have my head handed to me for this, the president backed

it." The sales director expressed the view that the past decision to install microfilming equipment and to microfilm all stored records as well as microfilm all incoming work had been the major factor in the operating department's falling so far behind in the processing of work. The other executives agreed with this interpretation.

REFERENCE NOTES

1. Bougon, M. *Schemata, leadership, and organizational behavior*. Doctoral dissertation, Cornell University, 1980.
2. Smircich, L. Studying organizations as cultures. In G. Morgan (Ed.), *Organizational research strategies: Links between theory and method*. Unpublished manuscript.

REFERENCES

- Argyris, C. *Personality and organization*. New York: Harper, 1957.
- Barnard, C. *The functions of the executive*. Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1938.
- Bateson, G. *Steps to an ecology of mind*. New York: Ballantine Books, 1972.
- Bennis, W. G., & Shepherd, H. A. A theory of group development. *Human Relations*, 1965, 9, 415-457.
- Berger, P., & Luckmann, T. *The social construction of reality*. New York: Anchor Books, 1966.
- Bogdan, R., & Taylor, S. J. *Introduction to qualitative methods*. New York: Wiley, 1975.
- Burns, J. M. *Leadership*. New York: Harper & Row, 1978.
- Emery, F. E., & Trist, E. L. *Towards a social ecology*. Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1973.
- Fiedler, F. E. *A theory of leadership effectiveness*. New York: McGraw-Hill, 1967.
- Goffman, E. *Frame analysis*. New York: Harper Colophon Books, 1974.
- Jacobs, T. O. *Leadership and exchange in formal organizations*. Alexandria, Va.: Human Resources Organization, 1971.
- Katz, D., & Kahn, R. L. *The social psychology of organizations*. New York: Wiley, 1966.
- Mann, R. D. A review of the relationships between personality and performance in small groups. *Psychological Bulletin*, 1959, 56, 241-270.
- Merton, R. K. *Social theory and social structure*. (enlarged ed.). New York: Free Press, 1968.
- Mintzberg, H. *The nature of managerial work*. Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall, 1973.

- Peters, T. J. Symbols, patterns and settings: An optimistic case for getting things done. *Organizational Dynamics*, 1978, 3-22.
- Pfeffer, J. Management as symbolic action: The creation and maintenance of organizational paradigms. *Research in Organizational Behavior*, 1981, 3, 1-52.
- Pondy, L. R. Leadership is a language game. In M. McCall & M. Lombardo (Eds.), *Leadership: Where else can we go?* Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 1976.
- Pondy, L. R., Frost, P., Morgan, G., & Dandridge, T. (Eds.). *Organizational symbolism*. Greenwich, Conn.: JAI Press, 1982.
- Quinn, J. B. *Strategies for change*. New York: Irwin, 1980.
- Roethlisberger, F. J., & Dickson, W. J. *Management and the worker*. Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1939.
- Schatzman, L., & Strauss, A. *Fieldwork*. Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall, 1973.
- Schutz, A. *Collected papers I: The problem of social reality*. (2nd ed.). The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1967.
- Selznick, P. *Leadership in administration*. New York: Harper & Row, 1957.
- Sennett, R. *Authority*. New York: Knopf, 1980.
- Smircich, L. Organizations as shared meanings. In Pondy, L. R., Frost, P., Morgan, G. & Dandridge, T. (Eds.). *Organizational symbolism*. Greenwich, Conn.: JAI Press, 1982.
- Stogdill, R. M. *Handbook of leadership: A survey of theory and research*. New York: The Free Press, 1974.
- Veblen, T. *The theory of business enterprise*. Clifton, N.J.: Augustus M. Kelly, 1975 (originally published 1904).
- Weick, K. *The social psychology of organizing*. Reading, Mass.: Addison-Wesley, 1979.