

DOI 10.2478/doc-2024-0007

This is an open access article licensed under the Creative Commons AttributionNonCommercial-NoDerivatives 4.0 International (<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/>)

---

## Preface

---

# Leadership as a Relational and Discursive Process: Exploring Rhetorical and Material Dynamics

---

**Received** 30 November 2024

**Available online** 16 December 2024

Building on an ontological and epistemological shift away from the essentialization of leadership (Grint, 2000), the works in this issue expand the understanding of leadership as a discursive, co-constructed, and materially influenced phenomenon. The concept of discursive leadership challenges traditional views that focus on individual characteristics or static organizational structures. Instead, it emphasizes leadership as an ongoing process shaped by rhetorical and material dynamics. Fairhurst and Uhl-Bien (2012) highlight how leadership is deeply embedded in socio-cultural and material environments, where interactions between leaders and followers are co-constructed. Rhetoric

plays a pivotal role in shaping these interactions, guiding how leaders influence attitudes, build consensus, and motivate action. In this light, rhetoric is not simply a tool for persuasion but a mechanism through which leaders and followers jointly create meaning.

Understanding leadership through the lens of the rhetorical situation further emphasizes the complexity of this relational process. According to Bitzer (1968), the rhetorical situation comprises the relationships between the speaker, the audience, the purpose, and the surrounding circumstances. In leadership, this requires considering audience's needs, the leader's credibility, and the socio-cultural and institutional environment to gauge the effectiveness of communication. Leaders must skillfully navigate *ethos* (credibility), *pathos* (emotional appeal), and *logos* (logic) to align individual goals with broader organizational objectives. By doing so, they can resolve conflicts, articulate visions, and foster relational cohesion.

To fully grasp the complexity of the rhetorical situation in which leadership is enacted and perceived, it must be viewed as a discursive-material phenomenon emerging from both human interactions and the interplay of objects, environments, and technologies. In organizational contexts, both human and non-human actors—such as technology and institutional frameworks—shape the delivery and interpretation of messages. Actor-network theory (ANT) scholars explore this intricacy by recognizing a broad range of participants, or “actants,” who can be human or non-human (Fairhurst & Cooren, 2009). These actants exert agency through both human actions and material influences, collectively shaping communication and outcomes (Latour, 1986).

Leadership as a relational and discursive process aligns with a broader body of research emphasizing the interconnectedness of leaders and followers (Fairhurst & Uhl-Bien, 2012). For instance, Drath et al.'s (2008) “direction, alignment, commitment” (DAC) framework shifts the focus from individual leaders to collective processes, proposing that leadership emerges from a group's ability to create shared direction, align efforts, and commit to collective goals. Adding to this, Lehman (2024) offers a new perspective by proposing that academic text creation can also be viewed as an act of leadership. She argues that effective scholarly communication involves the skillful use of rhetoric to

engage readers – essentially positioning them as ‘followers’ – and to negotiate meaning within a specific socio-cultural and disciplinary context.

However, rhetoric does not merely respond to context within which the audience is subsequently led – it also constitutes it. We know, for example, that the invasion of Iraq in 2003 by the Anglo-American military alliance was premised on the existence of Iraqi Weapons of Mass Destruction (WMD) and the ability of Saddam Hussein’s forces to deploy missiles in 40 minutes. But no WMD were subsequently discovered, nor have any ever been found since, so the context which legitimated the invasion – the crisis – was socially constructed by the two protagonists that sought the removal of Saddam, President Bush and Prime Minister Blair. Of course, we still do not know whether there will be discoveries of WMD, but that is the point – the supporters and opponents of the invasion both constructed the context to suit their political aims – but only one of these rhetorical constructions was successful (Grint, 2005, 2024, pp. 669–698). Or to take another example, the ‘Gleiwitz Incident’ on the night of 31 August 1939 was a German False Flag attack upon the German radio station situated close to the border with Poland by German SS officers dressed in Polish army uniforms, and it was this that provided Hitler with the excuse to invade Poland in ‘self-defence’ (Zaloga, 2002). In effect, these social constructions, that are always rhetorically embedded, run contrary to contingency theories that purport to suggest that it is the context which determines what leaders ought to do. In this alternative approach, we can see how the context – in itself – is also part of the social construction and not something outside of its rhetorical formation.

Along these lines, Foucault (1976/1979) argues that discourse has both productive and regulatory power: it not only shapes thought but also frames certain claims as “truths,” marginalizing alternative perspectives. This productive and regulatory power of discourse is evident also in academic environments, where Anglo-American rhetorical standards often dictate how scholars, especially those for whom English is a second (or third or fourth) language, express themselves (Boussebaa & Brown, 2017; Cloutier, 2016). Adhering to these norms often leads to substantial shifts in authorial self-representation, shaping the nature of the relationship with the reader (Lehman & Tienari, 2024).

The contributions in this volume highlight the diversity of perspectives and methodological approaches that can be applied to discursive leadership. Janne Tienari and Paul Savage's "Leadership and Humor, the Moomin Way" explores how humor functions as a discursive tool within organizational leadership, revealing how it both enables and challenges the relational aspects of leadership practices in a context shaped by Moomin values. The Authors examine how humor operates as a double-edged sword, fostering connections yet also generating tensions within organizational interactions.

Michał Szostak, in his contribution "Phenomenological perspectives in dialectical leadership: Influence of aesthetic experiences on managing organisational complexity and paradoxes," turns to aesthetic experiences to explore how leaders' sensory and emotional perceptions influence their capacity to navigate the paradoxes and complexities inherent in organizational settings. This article underscores the subjective and embodied dimensions of leadership, emphasizing the importance of multisensory engagement and aesthetic judgment in fostering creativity and resolving tensions.

Gail Fairhurst and Spencer Hall's contribution, "Discursive leadership and material concerns: The union context," provides a comprehensive review of discursive leadership in union leadership contexts. Their study identifies critical material themes, such as economics, bodies, and technology, and shows that these material elements are vital to understanding leadership discourse in unionized settings. This article encourages further exploration of how discursive and material forces intertwine in the shaping of leadership practices.

Finally, Piotr Cap's article "Faces of populism in the rhetoric of governance in post-2015 Poland" provides a critical analysis of populist leadership discourse within the context of Polish politics. Cap examines the contrasting discursive strategies employed by the ruling Law & Justice party and opposition parties in the lead-up to the 2023 elections. His study reveals the power and longevity of polarized populist discourses in sustaining political leadership, while also suggesting that such rhetoric risks exhaustion over time, opening the door to more pragmatic and forward-looking leadership approaches.

Collectively, the articles in this issue illuminate the myriad ways leadership is co-created through discursive practices that are relational, context-dependent,

and culturally situated. We invite readers to engage with these contributions and to reflect on the implications for leadership research and practice, particularly in light of the growing recognition that leadership is not simply about individuals in positions of authority, but a complex social construction continuously shaped through discourse.

We would like to express our sincere thanks to all the contributors for their insightful and innovative work, as well as to the reviewers for their thoughtful feedback and guidance. We hope this issue stimulates further exploration into discursive leadership and inspires new research that bridges disciplines and methodologies.

**Iga Maria Lehman,**  
**WSB University, Poland**  
**iga.lehman@wsb.edu.pl**  
**ORCID ID: 0000-0002-2092-8119**

**Keith Grint,**  
**Warwick Business School, Great Britain**  
**keith.grint@wbs.ac.uk**  
**ORCID ID: 0000-0002-5796-8990**

**Warsaw, October 2024**

## References

**Bitzer, L. F. (1968).** The rhetorical situation. *Philosophy & Rhetoric*, 1(1), 1–14.

**Boussebaa, M., & Brown, A. D. (2017).** Englishization, identity regulation and imperialism. *Organization Studies*, 38(1), 7–29.

**Cloutier, C. (2016).** How I write: An inquiry into the writing practices of academics. *Journal of Management Inquiry*, 25(1), 69–84.

**Drath, W. H., McCauley, C. D., Palus, C. J., Van Velsor, E., O'Connor, P. M. G., & McGuire, J. B. (2008).** *Direction, alignment, commitment: Toward a more integrative ontology of leadership.* *The Leadership Quarterly*, 19(6), 635–653.

**Fairhurst, G. T., & Cooren, F. (2009).** Leadership as the hybrid production of presence(s). *Leadership*, 5(4), 469–490.

**Fairhurst, G. T., & Uhl-Bien, M. (2012).** Organizational discourse analysis (ODA): Examining leadership as a relational process. *The Leadership Quarterly*, 23(6), 1043–1062.

**Foucault, M. (1976/1979).** *The History of Sexuality: An Introduction (Vol.1).* London: Allen Lane.

**Grint, K. (2024).** *A Cartography of Resistance: Leadership, Management & Command.* Oxford University Press.

**Grint, K. (2005).** Problems, Problems, Problems: The Social Construction of Leadership. *Human Relations*, 58(11), 1467–1494.

**Grint, K. (2000).** *The Arts of Leadership.* Oxford University Press.

**Latour, B. (1986).** *The powers of association.* In J. Law (Ed.), *Power, action and belief: A new sociology of knowledge?* (pp.264–280). London: Routledge & Kegan Paul.

**Lehman, I. M. (2024).** *Charismatic Leadership in Organizations: A Critique of Texts* (1st ed.). New York: Routledge.

**Lehman, I. M., & Tienari, J. (2024).** What do you mean? Linguistic sensitivity and relational reflexivity in scholarly writing. *Organization*, 0(0). DOI: 10.1177/13505084241233956.

**Zaloga, S. J. (2002).** *Poland 1939: The Birth of the Blitzkrieg.* Osprey Publishing.