

The Cultural Management of Leadership

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Abstract The purpose of this essay is to analyse leadership from a symbolic point of view, as a decisive action for the construction and management of the meanings and values on which all organizational practice is based. A cultural perspective is valuable in understanding how everything that happens within the organization as a whole tends to be permeated by its culture and, therefore, has to be considered in the framework of cultural data. Moreover, such perspective reveals how the culture of an organization cannot be pre-existent to its actors who are the ones who construct it in their interactions over time. In this sense, the themes of leadership and culture are so closely related that they represent the two faces of a coin. Leadership, therefore, should be regarded as a symbolic action. If it is true that every firm has its own culture intended as the power of a group, then it is the leader who actually constructs and manages it in a sort of “cultural management”, involving the skills of reading, interpreting and making the organizational culture operative. Furthermore, the question of the double nature of leadership is still open in the theoretical debate, where it is considered as innate talents on the one hand, and as an acquired skill on the other.

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1. Introduction

The rich literature on leadership testifies the great relevance of this topic in the main disciplinary areas dealing not only with this fundamental aspect of social behaviour, but also with a great variety of aspects, definitions and orientations which characterize research studies on leadership. The present study privileges a cultural perspective in the analysis of organizations seen as cultural and symbolic entities, which have to be investigated not only in their structural and/or instrumental aspects, but above all in their processual dimension, that is, in their ideational and symbolic aspects. This essay, therefore, specifically analyses organizational leadership by means of a cultural perspective so as to highlight the centrality of this role in enhancing and managing the meanings and the communication codes shared and enacted by the subjects involved. The first section introduces the topic of organizational culture, which constitutes the theoretical background where most of the leadership's actions are placed. In this specific instance, from a comparison with the theory of Corporate Culture, an interpretive-symbolic approach to the theory of culture emerges as a solution in the debate on the possibility of managing cultures within organizations. The second section focuses on leadership in relation to the dimensions of power, authority and authoritativeness. The question of leadership and its best modes of exercise are studied in the light of the latest perspectives of symbolic interpretivism, with special attention paid to the role of the leader as a sense-maker. The focus of the analysis, therefore, shifts from a use of culture as a mere tool, functional to meet the organization's goals, to the processes of construction and exchange of symbolic meanings, as well as to their management and optimization on the part of a leadership able to effectively orientate such symbolic meanings. Aim of the

third section is to understand whether leadership may be regarded as an innate quality or, rather, as an acquired technique, and to what extent a leader can influence the daily life of the organization itself.

2. From Corporate Culture to Organizational Symbolism

The perspective of Corporate Culture, which has become the dominant paradigm in organizational thought, evolved in the United States around the 1980s, as an attempt to find the reasons of the economic stagnation which slackened the economy preventing competition with Japanese firms. The spread of this trend of studies, long supported by the American tradition and steeped in functionalistic doctrines, has brought about the emergence of a number of studies aimed at measuring, through quantitative methods, those technologies, dimensions, structures, regarded as relevant in the effort to manage¹, manipulate and dominate the concept of organizational culture².

In agreement with systems theory, this tradition of research underlines the fact that an organization can exist only in a strong relationship with its environment. The environment involves a series of behavioural imperatives which managers enact in their organizations through symbolic means³. As a result, cultural and symbolic factors give their contribution to the overall equilibrium of the system, as well as to the effectiveness of an organization. Many recent publications show that organizations with “strong” cultures have actually more chances to succeed⁴.

¹ A public debate on the question, “Can organizational culture be managed?” took place in August 1982, on the occasion of the Annual Meeting of the Academy of Management. Among the speakers, Joanne Martin, William Starbuck, Noel Tichy, Caren Siehl, Craig Lundberg and Peter Frost.

² For a quite accurate analysis of the wide and complex concept of organizational culture, see Bodega, (1997), p. 63. Bodega makes reference to a number of surveys carried out in the last three decades, mostly in UK and US contexts.

³ See Pfeffer (1981b).

⁴ See Deal and Kennedy, (1982).

Culture is usually defined as the social and normative glue which holds an organization together. It expresses values, social ideals, assumptions and beliefs shared by the members of an organization. Such values or structures of belief are expressed through symbolic means such as myths, rituals, stories, legends and specialized languages⁵.

This line of research offers the enticing prospect of seeing organizational culture as a key that strategic managers exploit in order to influence and direct the development of their organizations. The present study refers to the idea of culture seen as an organizational variable which may be used to affect internal culture, by changing and guiding it towards the achievement of management objectives⁶.

The theatrical analogy (Goffman, 1967), applied to an organizational setting by Mangham and Overington (1987), efficiently interprets the image of organizational life as a performance of roles, derived from Corporate Culture. Like in a play, leading, supporting and walk-on actors, through a subjective interpretation of their own organizational script/role, cooperate in order to stage an already foreseen performance. The top management plays the role of director.

The impossibility to establish sound structural connections in organizations, as well as the failure of a number of surveys to provide an exhaustive explanation of organizational phenomena, justify the rise of another cultural perspective, the theory of organization symbolism, marked by newer priorities when compared to Corporate Culture.

According to the perspective of Corporate Culture, culture functions as a mechanism of adaptation and regulation connecting the individuals within social structures. Culture, in this instance, constitutes a mere functional tool among the others at the firm's disposal.

In symbolism, instead, the emphasis is placed on the symbolic dimension and on the processes of construction of organizational culture. The subjects are

⁵ See Morgan, (1997).

⁶ See Smircich, (1983).

those who actually perpetuate or recreate meanings and systems of reality. These artifacts are changed from passive reflexes of culture into active symbols, thus giving more emphasis to the processes of formation and attribution of meaning to social behaviour, i.e., to the subjects. Consequently, organizations are referred to as cultures, in order to assert that an organization has no culture, it is culture⁷.

Whereas for Corporate Culture perspectives, culture is an external datum, an independent variable capable of influencing the structural and behavioural set-up of a firm, for organizational symbolism, culture represents the inspiring principle, the dependent variable that creates and identifies that firm in every manifestation. The two perspectives do not represent two different assessments of the extent of importance of the organization cultural dimension; rather, they are two different levels of study within the organizational thought, two different views, the first, more traditional, grounded in functionalism, and the latter, conceptually richer, resulting in organizational symbolism⁸.

The new perspective introduced by symbolism sees “the individual as the mainstay of organizational culture, rather than the tool of organizational culture”⁹. Even if, for mental economy, we tend to think that the reality we live in possesses objective characteristics, it is the individual who plays an active role in the process of concretization of reality. Every individual within a firm interacts with multiple elements: spaces, specialized languages, and tools. The combination of such elements produces a unique and unrepeatably cultural system, which belongs to and moulds only that organization¹⁰.

A symbolic-interpretive approach to theory of culture, therefore, provides a solution in the debate on the possibility of culture management within an organization. As leaders are individuals with the strongest influence on the organiza-

⁷ Smirchich, L., cit.

⁸ Bodega, (1997), p. 56.

⁹ Bodega, (1997), p. 103.

¹⁰ Oggero, (2004), p. 171.

tional culture, they have to be able to manage rules and values in order to obtain expected behaviours capable of maximizing the profit of a firm.

A symbolic-interpretive approach, moreover, underlines the need to focus on what culture actually does, by privileging once more an analysis of the processes rather than thinking of culture as an entity and focusing on a description of its structures. As a consequence, rather than simply trying to manage culture, we need to think of it in terms of the context where meanings and interpretations are created, with cultural awareness of its differentiation and fragmentation, and taking into account the multiplicity of meanings which can potentially be ascribed to culture¹¹.

3. Leadership in Organizational Culture. The Leader as Creator of Sense

What has been said above on the cultural variable underlines, on the one hand, its centrality in organizational practice, on the other, its close connection to the role of leadership, which can be regarded as “management of culture” in organizations, because leadership organizes its contents and manages its modes of construction. It is in this sense that the concept of organizational culture is so closely related to the concept of leadership, that the two notions can be regarded as the two sides of a coin. If it is true that every firm possesses, more or less consciously, its own culture intended as the power of a group, then we can say that the leader plays the role of leading actor in this process, the point of reference of the social and organizational set-up, that is, “the one who actually builds and manages it [culture] in a sort of ‘cultural management’, involving the skills of reading, interpreting and making the organizational culture operative”. Therefore, the main task of the leader is the “management” of culture¹².

¹¹ Hatch, (1997), p. 235.

¹² See Schein, (1985), p. 317.

As a constitutive element of every social group, leadership represents a central topic for the major representatives of organizational thought. Leadership means the “ability to influence the members of an organization in order to achieve a certain goal, by making purposes clear, by providing the means to achieve them, by appealing to motivations”¹³. The purpose of leadership is to maximize what is defined as “area of willingness” of the individuals in order to pursue the organization’s goals, with sense of duty and professionalism, but mostly with satisfaction. Yet, as this is one of the most investigated organizational behaviours and is the subject of a great number of theoretical and empirical works, assigning an unambiguous meaning to leadership is far from being an easy task. The early theoretical studies on leadership focussed mainly on the subjective component, that is, on the personal qualities of a successful leader. Later, starting from the late 1940s, researchers have begun to take into consideration the relational aspect of leadership, moving from a traditional vision which viewed the group’s performance as a function of the leader’s personal traits (inborn approach¹⁴) and managerial style (behavioural approach¹⁵), to a conception which analyzes leadership on the basis of situational or systemic models, underlining the interdependence between the different structural components (leader, group, context). A situational approach

¹³ Battistelli, (2008), pp. 55-56 [Italian in the original].

¹⁴ The inborn approach dominated the studies on leadership from the late 19th to the middle of the 20th century. See Stogdill, (1948). From a number of studies, emerge some dimensions of personality, closely linked to a genetic-evolutionist point of view on leadership, as expressed in the Big Five, that is, the identification of five relevant factors of personality. The Big Five are: neuroticism, extroversion, openness to experience, agreeableness, and conscientiousness. According to this study, particularly extroversion seems to be the most recurrent trait in successful leaders, who tend to be agreeable, energetic and pleasant with others. For a close analysis of the various studies based on the relation leadership-traits of personality, see Tosi and Pilati, (2008), pp. 10-12266.

¹⁵ Within this type of approach, Lewin *et al.*, (1939), identify three main styles: a) autocratic, consisting in a high degree of control over the members of a group, and in their exclusion from the decision-making process; b) democratic, when a leader exercises the function of guidance, encouraging full participation of the group in the different stages of the decision-making process; and c) *laissez-faire*, characterized by little control on the part of the leader, and wide spaces for the subordinates’ self-determination.

assumes that leadership becomes efficient when it devotes time to examine aspects such as the climate of interactions, the necessary resources, clarity, and the achievement of goals. The attention is, therefore, turned from the leader's personality and behaviour to the contextual variables, regarded as crucial for his emergence among the others. As a result of the multiple variables affecting the leader's achievement, there are a great number of scholarly interpretations which differ according to the aspect taken as topic of analysis (from the role of the leader, to the people who accept or are affected by the leader's power to influence, to the social or situational context where power is exercised).

Whereas early studies saw the group as a decisive factor, for a situational approach each follower becomes actually crucial. Leadership is, therefore, the function of each individual with whom the leader interacts: the individual follower's performance is directly proportional to the appraisal the leader shows for each individual. A situational approach is highly valuable to researchers in highlighting the flexibility of the leader, who has to be able to adapt to any peculiar situation, even at the risk of overestimating the context, thus playing down the very leader's role, regarded as a passive actor.

Starting from the 1990s, "... the increasingly fast pace of innovations and globalization has made it imperative for organizations to be ready to interact consistently with the new environmental complexity"¹⁶. Hence, the rise of a further line of research which underlines the leader's ability to bring about social change. The transformational leader's influence is based on his ability to inspire and increase the consciousness of each individual follower, by appealing to his highest ideals and values. What makes leadership transformational is the leader's ability to be attuned to the other members of the group, thus creating a bond of motivation and morality. What connotes a leader as transformational is, therefore, his ability to promote radical changes in the culture of the organization, as well as in

¹⁶ Battistelli, cit. p. 57 [Italian in the original].

the management of human resources. According to Bass, what is central to transformational leadership is not so much the leader's ability to optimize the quality of the social exchange between two players (leader and collaborator), rather, it is his ability to influence the human and professional growth of his collaborator, through an extension of his system of needs, a change of organizational values, and a transformation of attitudes¹⁷. Karl Weick states that in every company the appropriate role for the true leader is not an "accountant", but rather the role of evangelist, the one who points out the meanings of things to the others. In other words, in order to accomplish the needed commitment, every actor must be involved in the symbolic, rather than operative life of the organization¹⁸.

Within classic theories of organization, Chester Barnard is one of the first scholar to analyze the general concepts of culture, the importance of norms, of moral codes and of the organization manager's responsibility for defining and spreading a system of values¹⁹. Barnard has a holistic conception of organizational culture, regarding it as a set of assumptions which condition the organization's choices²⁰. Like Barnard, Selznick maintains that the spread of values within an organization creates a peculiar identity which enables it to become an institution. In introducing a distinction between organizations and institutions, Selznick makes it clear how these latter - even if they are not conflicting with the first - differ from organizations because they embody values which give them a distinctive identity, thus overcoming the level of mere technical and anonymous tools. According to Selznick, if the logic of administration efficiency prevails at an organizational level, as we go up towards the top management, the logic of

¹⁷ See Bass, (1973).

¹⁸ See Weick, (1995), p. 57.

¹⁹ Barnard, (1938). See also Bodega, (1997), p. 50, and Bonazzi, (2003).

²⁰ There is a strong relation between Barnard's thought and Schein's. The latter defines organizational culture as "A pattern of shared basic assumptions that the group learned as it solved its problems of external adaptation and internal integration, that has worked well enough to be considered valid and, therefore, to be taught to new members as the correct way to perceive, think, and feel in relation to those problems." (Schein 1984).

efficiency will have to yield to another kind of logic. At top administration level, a good technical management is not enough, as the leader has to be able to assert himself as leader²¹.

When dealing with leadership, therefore, the reference to the dimension of power cannot be avoided, yet the two concepts are far from being synonymic. Rather, whereas leadership is more centred in the process of influence, persuasion and involvement of other individuals, the concept of power evokes, more specifically, the idea of coercion and control. The term “power” can take on different meanings. From an organizational point of view, the term means the ability of a subject to influence others’ behaviours within social relationships. First of all, power expresses always a relation, a connection between two or more subjects. Yet, power does not express simply a relation, it can also represent an objective position, empirically verifiable, within every organizational structure. As a consequence, power does express a relation, but also a structure, and a tangible position.

Even if the two words may be seen as belonging to the same semantic area, the term leadership should not be confused with the term authority, excepting a particular form of authority, or charismatic legitimacy which goes together with authoritativeness.

Authority is what gives an organization its formal structure. It can be defined as “the power to make decisions which guide the actions of another. It is a relation between two individuals: one ‘superior’, the other ‘subordinate’²²”. The first frames and transmits decisions expecting that they will be accepted by the subordinate; the latter, in his turn, anticipates such decision and his behaviour will be in function of the superior’s act of decision-making. Thus, the distinctive feature of authority, when compared to other kinds of influence, lies in the fact that “a subordinate holds in abeyance his own critical functions for choosing

²¹ See Selznick, (1957), pp.1-28.

²² See Simon, (1945), p.179.

between alternatives, and uses the formal criterion of the receipt of a command or signal as his basis for choice”²³.

The concept of authority is linked to the following features:

- It is conferred by the position in the organization, that is, the person who has authority as a result of the position he holds, not for his personal traits or resources;
- It is accepted by subordinates, as these believe that the holder of that position has a vested right to exercise his authority;
- It runs along a vertical hierarchy, that is, it is enacted following a formal chain of command, and the positions at the top are invested with more authority than those at the bottom.

This would lead the subordinates to comply with this form of power out of obedience and loyalty to authority, without even asking why and whether they ought to obey or not. This propensity to compliance is such that social groups tend to suspend their critical judgement to recognize, in a quite natural way, that it is right and appropriate that someone should issue commands and someone obey, so as to regulate social dynamics within the organization²⁴. This is what Weber defines process of legalization, distinguishing between three pure forms of legitimacy of public authority, corresponding to three pure types of legitimate domination, traditional, charismatic and legal-rational authority²⁵. However, these are mere ideal types, as in the present historical-social circumstances, it is easier to find mixed forms of authority than totally pure forms of power, even if we may say that today’s society is characterized by the pre-eminence of the legal-rational authority.

As already stated, the distinctive peculiarity of authority, when compared to other types of influence, lies in the fact that a subordinate tends to set aside his

²³ Ibid, p. 180.

²⁴ Ferrante and Zan, (1994), p. 142.

²⁵ See Weber, (1978), 212-301.

own critical faculties in his choice among a number of alternatives, by using the formal criterion of reception of a command as the basis for his own choice. The extent of the sphere of compliance depends on the sanctions at the authority's disposal to enforce commands. However, explaining the whole system of authority and responsibility in terms of sanctions would be too limitative. In Simon's words, "the person who accepts the authority of a legislature, a property holder, or a father within a particular institutional setting, is probably motivated much more by socially indoctrinated ethical notions than by the fear of sanctions"²⁶.

The cooperative foundation of the organization, as well as the search for an equilibrium between contributions and incentives, define the theoretical horizon within which Barnard deals with the problem of authority. According to him, authority is not the expression of power as an end in itself, but the exercise of a necessary and legitimate function, characterized by two features. First of all, it does not lie with the leader's power to assert himself, but with his being accepted by the subordinates, who are however required to tacitly comply. In Barnard's words, "... as we observe if it in principle and in fact the determination of authority lies with the subordinate individual"²⁷. As a result, by using inefficient tools such as coercion, authority runs a serious risk of failing to be met by compliance; on the contrary, authority is more effective when in the organization prevails a climate of consensus. Moreover, according to Barnard, authority does not lie in holding a hierarchically superior position, but in the fact that subordinate individuals perceive a communication coming from that position as authoritative.

Another aspect which has to be analyzed when dealing with the topic of leadership is the outcome of the combination between the two variables, authority and

²⁶ See Simon, (1945), p. 187. Simon defines authority as a relationship which ensures a coordinated behaviour of the group, by subordinating the individual's decision to those communicated by other individuals. The result is a "vertical specialization in decision-making". "Three functions of authority deserve special notice: 1. It enforces responsibility of the individual to those who wield the authority; 2. it secures expertise in the making of decisions; and 3. it permits coordination of activity".

²⁷ Barnard, (1938), p. 165. See also, Bonazzi, (2002), pp. 89-90.

authoritativeness. The first is regarded as the recognition of a top-down power, the second as the recognition of a bottom-up power. Therefore, we may assume four possible scenarios: 1) a top authority crosses a lack of authoritativeness, defining the moment when leadership is left to a hierarchical leader who, if he is not able to develop a dimension of guidance and support for his collaborators, will find himself competing with a possible subject among those he is supposed to lead; 2) true leadership is exercised by an antagonist, where the leader has no formal power, yet he possesses strong and recognized authoritativeness; 3) the simultaneous presence of top authority and strong authoritativeness, combining personal competence and charisma with the role performed in the firm, thus expressing the dimension of a hierarchically recognized leader; and 4) the absence of both authority and authoritativeness, where the individual is just one among the others. These four possible scenarios indicate that the concept of leadership is not so close to the concept of authority as to the concept of authoritativeness, intended as a bottom-up form of power, which is linked to the persons and their particular qualities, rather than to their roles, and does not necessarily imply belonging to a high level in the organizational hierarchy. Playing an important role within an organizational hierarchy - although it ensures respect for the norms - does not automatically involve that the most competent and able person holds the position of chief executive. The esteem in which the executive is held within an organization is highly important and can influence an organization's climate and productivity. In Simon's view, "An individual who does not have a recognized status, or who is not recognized by his associates as expert with respect to a certain kind of knowledge, will have a more difficult time convincing his listeners that a recommendation is sound than one who possesses the credentials of expertness"²⁸.

²⁸ Simon, H., cit. p. 181.

Taking on the role of leader, therefore, presupposes knowledge of the context where one works, high self-confidence, and an awareness of his own behaviour towards his collaborators. Moreover, a leader has to differentiate between a formal and an informal scheme in an organization. “Procedural coordination - the specification of the lines of authority, and the spheres of activity and authority of each organization member - creates a formal organization, a set of abstract, more or less permanent relations that govern the behaviour of each participant”²⁹.

First of all, in a formal scheme we may identify the lines of authority and the distribution of work as observed in the exercise of organizational activity; moreover, it is the scheme of formal organization to set out practices and lines of communication. The formal scheme of an organization will always be different from the way in which the organization itself operates, that is, through a number of interpersonal relations, which are absent from a formal scheme. The informal aspect of organizations is actually related to those interpersonal relations which - although strongly influencing organizational decisions and life - are omitted from the formal scheme, as they do not conform with it.

Regarding culture and leadership as potential factors influencing the firm’s success suggests and underlines a conceptual shift from the metaphor of “organization as machine” to a conception of the firm seen as “social construction”.

Schein suggests that in a firm read as a collective and as an aggregation of social energies, the leader loses his connotation as hierarchical head, who pays attention to formal processes, rules and efficiency, to become a point of reference for collective strategies, the one who sets energies in motion, channelling them towards the achievement organizational goals³⁰.

This perspective is useful in the analysis of the peculiar power of leadership, whose specific nature can be better investigated on the ground of the current cultural and ethical parameters of the organization, rather than on the ground of

²⁹ Ibid, p.197.

³⁰ Schein, (1985).

rules and procedures. It is a form of power which exercises control no longer, and not so much, on working practice as on achievements, and which totally redefines the dimensions and the modes of communicative interactions that represent the very foundational core of an organization, thus characterizing its identity and goals. Hence the strength and the growing relevance of a function capable of influencing the organization towards the goal of organizational change, through an action aimed at strengthening firstly the relationships that keep the subjects together, secondly, the different organizational units which are responsible for the success of a project and, as a consequence, for the success of the organization itself. In particular, in managing the organizational dimension, and even more at an institutional level of any system of activities, what is needed is the role of a person able to assert his action by moving on a complex and sophisticated ground suspended between authority and authoritativeness, and who, in so doing, reveals his own peculiar ability. A person able to unify projects and goals, to create cohesion of prospects, by focussing efforts and creating consensus on specific values and assumptions.

4. Are Leadership Traits Innate or Acquired?

One of the relevant questions examined by organization theories is to what extent leadership can be regarded as innate or rather, as an acquired technique, and to what extent a leader can influence the daily life of the organization itself. The idea of leadership, of course, is closely related to charisma, whose Weberian conception, referred to its original meaning of a gift of grace, defines leadership as an exceptional, superhuman characteristic, assigned to one person who is, as a consequence, recognized as leader.

In spite of the significance of Weber's seminal work, the conceptualization provided by Etzioni is closer to an analysis of charisma as applied to an organizational setting. In Etzioni's view, seeing charisma as an extraordinary quality is

not enough; it is better to talk in terms of “the ability of an actor to exercise a diffuse and intense influence over the normative orientations of other actors”³¹.

Authority, in its turn, can be bureaucratic and charismatic at the same time. This means that the origins of charisma can be found within the organization, not exclusively outside, as expressed in Weber’s thought. There are a number of examples of organizational actors who gained their position without any particular quality, yet, over time, they developed a strong charisma, thus giving prestige to their firms. It follows that charisma is not a prerogative of top management, since situations of power can be found at all organizational levels, and sometimes there are even states of friction caused by the simultaneous presence of both bureaucratic and charismatic forms of power.

The question of leadership and its best modes of exercise have been significantly tackled in studies conducted on groups in working environments, because the need to coordinate and control the relations with the subordinates, as well as the need to perform certain tasks, require an in-depth analysis of the modes of command management.

Leadership derives undoubtedly from innate, naturally possessed talents, on which is very difficult to intervene. This characteristic becomes crucial, because it represents the sum of those personal traits, values and expertise, which enables one particular person to handle and control the worst situation thanks to his appropriate competence³². This approach, called “personality trait approach”, is grounded on the notion that personal attributes, such as reliability or physical energy, actually influence the effectiveness of leadership. According to this approach, several leadership features that are innate in the individual can identify a leader. Yet, leadership is also made up of technical skills which can be acquired and transmitted from teachers to pupils, and consequently improved over time.

³¹ See Etzioni, (1961), p. 305. See also Bonazzi, (2002), p. 342.

³² On the distinction between talents and technical components of leadership, see Battistelli, (2008, p. 56.

This approach is defined situational, as it is based on the characteristics of leadership itself, regarded as a dynamic process, which can vary in different situations, taking into account the leader's subjectivity, the qualities of his collaborators, and the different spans of time. It is a systemic view of the relationship between leader and his subordinate, which serves to analyse how each person in an organization influences and, at the same time, is influenced by the behaviour of the other. This view takes into consideration the context, or situation, in which the relation develops, seen as the third occurring variable. As this approach is based on observed behaviour, it assumes no innate potentials, so that, potentially, an individual can be trained to acquire leadership styles appropriate to any situation.

Leadership seen as "the art of command", is certainly a blend of innate qualities and acquired techniques. Nonetheless, according to the perspective of symbolic interpretivism, it is the aspect of acquired techniques to assume a relevant role. Every leader has always to cope with the temporary nature of situations, and with the subjectivity of collaborators, trying to be sympathetically and empathically attuned to these latter in their daily social interactions.

Recent studies have showed how competences and technical skills alone cannot bring about working excellence, as they have to go together with character, personality, and emotional intelligence, because "... they found emotional intelligence, not technical expertise or book learning to be what mattered most for excellence"³³. Goleman, the main advocate of emotional intelligence, recognizes the importance of emotions as essential parts of every human action. Thus the importance of paying attention to the so-called "soft qualities", even if "hard qualities" are not underestimated, as they are crucial in increasing the organizational effectiveness; a good leader is required to possess an ability to combine both qualities.

³³ Goleman, (1998), p. 5.

In the never-ending comparison between rationality and emotion, the concept of emotional intelligence seems to represent a recipe to best combine the two dimensions, ever regarded as irreconcilable, for a successful management of inter-subjective dynamics³⁴. Observations have showed that the best leaders are those who,

- demonstrate their ability in plain and proactive communication;
- are able to clearly articulate the rationale and the need for change, in spite of the difficulties deriving from periods of transition;
- possess a listening ability and show sensitivity when dealing with their collaborators.

A good leader has to be able to manage the emotions of the group, and guide its members towards the achievement of shared goals, creating a positive atmosphere and a climate of mutual help and support. This will have a positive impact on the organizational culture and will influence the employees so that they can work with a stronger motivation and more commitment, thus preventing the risks of burn-out and mobbing, two phenomena often brought about by today's organizational pace. Uncovering the emotional level in organizational analysis is one of the primary requisites of a paradigm meant to represent an alternative to the dominant rationalism. An organization is not a container devoid of passion: joining a firm means activating a series of feelings, from one's personal involvement in the job, to envy, or simply to indifference towards one's own and/or others' work. An analysis of leadership, therefore, cannot disregard the emotional dimension which informs it, and is decisive in the construction and undertaking of roles, in the performance of tasks, in the exercise of power, as well as in the decision-making process.

The long-lasting conflict between the need for a leader who will be able to change himself into a shrewd manipulator of organizational actors, so as to guide

³⁴ On these topics, see Fireman, (2000). See also Lodedo, (2005).

them easily towards the achievement of organizational goals, or rather, the need for a leader who can adopt a more permissive style, seems to find an answer in the more recent role of organizational coach.

Whereas many scholars had long been focussed on personal traits of leadership, as they were persuaded that the existence of specific features was essential for an effective leadership, more recent studies have been advocating managerial coaching as a new style of leadership.

The coach is an expert who has the task to provide support to coaches, training and helping them to make behavioural changes needed for the success of the organization³⁵. Coaching - developed into a discipline and a methodology in the USA during the 1970s - has become popular in Italy only in the last decade. It is based on the coach's ability to guide coaches towards the achievements of specific goals and skills, developing their natural, yet never exploited, abilities.

The implementation of coaching in the style of leadership and in managerial action enables the leader to develop his collaborators' abilities and performance, giving more strength to the leader's and manager's proxy power and empowering their ability to stimulate motivation³⁶. Following this view, a leader, who can be compared to a sports coach, has to possess specific individual competences, such as the ability to establish interpersonal relations, to use a simple and intelligible language, a strong ability to listen, to handle conflict situations, to provide guidance towards the achievement of results, to have a lot of life experience, as well as to be ready to put forward personal values and beliefs. Decisive are, moreover, organizational competences such as mastery in running an organizational system, knowledge of how to organize a business, as well as knowledge in the various areas of management.

In a leadership style based on coaching, crucial relevance is given to the identification of a person who can be entrusted with the task of finding ways for

³⁵ See Cocco, (2008).

³⁶ Ibid, p. 157.

the firm's growth. The interest is no longer focussed on the leader, but on his relations with the people he leads. In other words, leadership is no longer seen as "power on", but as "power with": a leader does not have to influence or persuade the other to act in a certain way, rather, he has to implement team work, where the "coach" knows how to transform the potentiality of each coach into expertise.

In this sense, the sensational power on which a leader's effectiveness is centered is actually a symbolic cultural power, the only kind of power capable of spreading unifying meanings and to positively infect others, in order to achieve a more confident and creative participation in common actions.

Managerial action can be regarded as symbolic, since everything that happens inside or outside the organization is symbolic. Like a human being who, living [in] the world, marks and re-draws it, decodes and re-interprets it so that he can read it, a leader provides the others with a sort of sign system, needed in order to move in the jungle of symbols. Underlining the symbolic nature of an organization does not mean highlighting the attribute of arbitrariness; rather, it means identifying the mechanism of control and the procedures which consolidate its sense. Symbols are the outcome of a process which reveals stories and ideas shared over time, and constitute the messages which convey an underlying value system.

In contrast with traditional research approaches, which tend to emphasize social actions and behaviours, a cognitive perspective in organizational studies insists on the importance of symbols and languages, starting from the assumption that reality is a social construction, and that organizations, like other social entities, can be regarded as systems of shared meanings.

In analyzing managerial action, an example of this kind of approach is provided by Pfeiffer who, dealing with the issue of managerial control, identifies two forms of organizational management: *instrumental*, related to the allocation of resources, sales etc.; and *expressive*, related to feelings, expressions, and beliefs of

the organizational actors³⁷. As organizations are “social systems made up of individuals who bring with them norms, values and expectations and have the need to work out schemes of understanding the world that surrounds them in order to foresee events to such extent as to undertake action”³⁸, according to Pfeffer, a managerial task of critical importance lies “in the construction and conservation of systems of meanings, paradigms, languages and common cultures”³⁹.

From this point of view, a leader’s activity involves eliciting social consensus on what happens inside and outside the organization. What makes this activity viable is the non-immediate evidence of situations and their meanings, as well as their needed subsequent interpretation, definition and socialization. Hence, the symbolic action aimed at their institutionalization. Within a wide range of methods for the creation of meaning, the author examines those which, in his opinion, are more significant, such as organization restructuring, which has the power to direct the members’ attention to change and to the ceremonies of managers’ turnover. These events go often hand in hand with the identification of a scapegoat as a symbol of what is negative, thus stressing the decision of change. Further methods of symbolic construction are the planning of physical space, the creation of committees, or the recourse to surveys and opinions aimed at emphasizing the wish for transformation. Finally, the manager’s real sphere of action is represented by the field of symbolic resources. The consequences of such interpretation on organizational practice prove to be anything but an illusion, and they are not even trivial because, as Pfeffer says, “The symbolic component of managerial action [...] may have actual results. [...] the individuals respond on the basis of their perceptions, independently from their truth. Symbols and perceptions of reality, once created, socially shared and institutionalized, may become a basis on which to make decisions and undertake action”⁴⁰.

³⁷ Pfeffer, (1981a).

³⁸ Ibid.

³⁹ Ibid.

⁴⁰ Ibid.

5. Conclusions

The discourse of leadership was analysed in its close relation to the topic of organizational culture. A foundational element of all social groups, leadership has been the focus of attention for the major theorists of organizational thought. From the different theories emerges the predominant significance of the expressive dimension of leadership when compared to the technical dimension, more specifically aimed at effectiveness. The wide-ranging theoretical debate on this topic reveals the centrality of the guiding role a leader is required to perform within the organizational system, since he is responsible for “shaping the ‘character’ of the organization, sensitizing it to ways of thinking and responding”⁴¹, thus creating moral codes, viewed as the “construction of common values and reference points, around which a cohesive team is formed, [...] the result of critical, not just routine, choices, which go hand in hand with the transformation of the organization into an institution”⁴².

A great number of metaphors have been employed in sociologic and management literature to describe leadership’s actions: the leader as an orchestra conductor, a coach, a guru, etc. Yet, whatever the allegory employed, the secret for a model of excellent leadership, seen as “the art of governance”, seems to be kept in the hands of an individual who simultaneously embodies two distinct persons coexisting in harmony: a rational person who, as in Weber’s imagination, acts following his logic, and an emotional person who, as expressed in Barnard’s theory, is more sensitive to social dynamics and their results.

In this sense, as asserted by several theorists, the actual sensational power on which the leadership’s effectiveness is grounded, is represented by cultural symbology, the only power capable of spreading unifying meanings and to positively infect others, in order to achieve a more trustful and creative participation

⁴¹ Selznick, P., (1957), p. 63.

⁴² Bolognini, (2003), pp. 93-94. [Italian in the original].

in the programme of common action. It is a planning skill which can motivate the members of a group to overcome the many obstacles inherent in any project during its implementation, by aiming at the solution of problems and trying to inspire values aimed at involvement and identification with the organization's goals which represent central topics in theoretical works on organization studies. In other words, as the very literal meaning of the term suggests, true leadership, far from lying in power or in the ability to prevail, consists in an ability to guide the others in the transformation of reality, or in the capacity to change dreams into projects, as several successful managers state⁴³. This is what we mean by "cultural management of leadership".

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⁴³ See Chelo, (2002), where the author, one of the new post-industrial managers, talking about his own successful experience, strongly asserts that the true power of a leader lies in his ability to dream and to drive others to support his dreams, even before they come true.

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