

LEADERSHIP IN CROSS-SECTORAL COLLABORATION FOR SUSTAINABILITY – A HOMOSOCIAL EXAMPLE

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Research question. There is wide-spread agreement that collaborations are needed to tackle the grand challenges of sustainability (Ferraro et al., 2015; Selsky and Parker, 2005), yet collaborations bring their own challenges (Bryson et al., 2015, 2006). As often is the case, such challenges are met with the call for more and better leadership (Purdy, 2012). In this paper I critically engage with leadership in collaboration as I ask:

How does leadership unfold in a collaboration aiming for sustainability?

Theoretical framework. Leadership studies have been criticized for its thinly veiled obsession with heroic leaders' traits, styles and authenticity (Alvesson and Spicer, 2010). An alternative to such essentialist theorizing lies in seeing leadership as a contextually embedded relationship between those with more or less influence (leaders and followers) that may develop over time (Alvesson et al., 2016). This alternative recognizes the tensions involved as leadership is possibly and mutually co-produced between potential leaders and followers (Collinson, 2005), for instance the project managers that govern collaboration.

Method. I make use of a case study (Flyvbjerg, 2006) of an unusually close collaboration between civil servants (planners) and representatives of real-estate/construction firm (developers) involved in planning mobility solutions for the brand new residential area Santalodge in Sweden. I follow intense and emotion-filled real-time discussions in over 40 meetings over more than 18 months. Here planners and developers argue, agree and work through a myriad of issues, inspiring me to develop a processual account (Langley et al., 2013) of how leadership unfolds.

Findings. I encounter a story about leadership that plays out amidst dialectical tensions between the opposing interests of planners (to reduce car-based mobility) and developers (making sure that what they perceive to be attractive housing is built). Here the male project leader of Santalodge manages to work through tensions by making sure that developers' views are continuously heard, at the same time maintaining his influence by controlling the formal process as it moves ahead. Thus, over time, a leadership of sorts unfolds between this initially bureaucratic and anti-heroic planner and the tough gang of all-male developers. Yet as a sort of side-effect of this unfolding homo-social leadership, and the solutions it produces, the two female members of the collaboration are increasingly marginalized, and also the sustainability solutions they champion (c.f. Hultman, 2013). From these empirical observations my aim is to bring forth a processual theory capable of positioning leadership in relation to this context of collaboration for sustainability.

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