Heroes, fathers and good mates: Leadership styles of men at work

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Abstract

The perception of leaders as normatively masculine has been justifiably critiqued, and the single aspirational ‘hero’ figure has been challenged in favour of advocating for transformational and authentic leaders. The importance of communication skills to effective leadership practice is also well recognised in the leadership literature. To date, however, there is little empirical investigation of how effective leaders communicate in their organisational contexts. The emerging tradition of discursive leadership is a positive step towards discovering how the concepts of abstract academic discussions are manifest in action. As discourse analysts we welcome a closer focus on everyday leadership practices to explore the theory-practice divide and to provide justification for both new models and existing critiques.

Using a discursive approach to leadership, one obvious source of critique for the ubiquitous masculine hero leader is to consider how effective feminine styles of leadership are enacted in talk. Earlier research proposed labels for a range of feminine styles based on extensive analysis of workplace recordings – the queen, the mother, the battleaxe. Male leaders in our data set also seem to instantiate broad categories. As a complementary analysis to our earlier research, this paper considers a range of socially acceptable roles for male leaders – the hero, the father and the good mate. These styles emerge from the practices of leaders in a range of New Zealand workplaces and will be illustrated by extracts of naturally occurring interactions. By identifying features which characterise a range of leadership styles we provide empirical support for the claim that there are many different ways of enacting effective leadership.
Introduction

The stereotype of a single masculine ‘hero’ model of leadership has been justifiably critiqued by leadership scholars (Jackson & Parry, 2007; Sinclair, 1998). One obvious rationale for such critiques is provided by a consideration of normatively feminine models, personified in the leadership styles of effective New Zealand leaders. This was a focus of our earlier research, where three roles often adopted by female leaders were identified on the basis of our analyses: the queen, the mother and the battleaxe (Holmes, 2005). A fuller picture of masculine styles of leadership is also warranted and is the goal of this paper which aims to complement the findings reported earlier.

Effective leaders are expected to provide vision and inspiration, to be knowledge experts in their area, and to have well-honed relational skills enabling them to interact successfully with their followers (see e.g. Antonakis, Avolio & Sivasubramaniam, 2003; Cameron, 2000, 2005; Hede, 2001). Emerging from the critique of a simplistic conception of transformational leadership, and especially the rather constraining notion of the ‘hero’ leader, is the focus on ‘authenticity’ which offers yet another dimension to the consideration of what defines effective leadership (Avolio, 2005; Bass & Steidlmeier, 1999; Gardner, Avolio, Luthans, May, & Walumbwa, 2005; Guthey & Jackson, 2005; Jackson & Parry, 2007).

Communication is clearly at the heart of the leadership process (Berson & Avolio, 2004; Ford, 2006; Hackman & Johnson, 2004). In a recent text, however, Fairhurst (2007) argues that for too long those who theorise leadership and those who use discourse analytic techniques to investigate leadership communication have been operating in isolation. Others have strongly advocated the importance of communication skills for good leadership practice, but have left the issue of what counts as communication skills largely unexplored (see Berson & Avolio, 2004).

As discourse analysts interested in communication at work, we have been applying various discourse analytic techniques to a corpus of audio and video recordings of ‘effective’ communicators in New Zealand workplaces (where these individuals and teams have been identified for us as exemplary by internal and external colleagues). The current focus of our research is the language of leadership and we use discourse analysis to examine how people actually do leadership rather than how they talk about
doing it. The research has an interdisciplinary focus; active links with leadership scholars at both Victoria University and the University of Auckland provide depth in the areas of leadership psychology and communication. This fruitful collaboration provides for an enriched picture of leadership practice. The emerging tradition of discursive leadership and the call by Fairhurst (2007) described above provide positive incentives to discover how the concepts of abstract academic discussions are manifest in action. As discourse analysts we welcome a closer focus on everyday leadership practices to help explore the theory-practice divide and to provide justification for both new models and existing critiques.

**Analysis**

In this paper we explore three different ways that men lead in the New Zealand workplace. The three styles we illustrate are: (i) the authoritative style: the leader as hero (ii) the paternalistic style: the leader as father (iii) the egalitarian style: the leader as a good bloke or mate.

We demonstrate each style with a different leader. Each of these leaders draws on different styles in the course of their daily interactions, according to the interactional context in which they are operating. No leader uses just one style exclusively. It is possible to find instances of the same person behaving in an authoritarian or kingly way at one moment, and a fatherly way at another. Similarly the ‘good bloke’ may adopt a much more authoritarian stance when required to make a decision or respond to a decision of which he disapproves. In our data, however, the illustrative leaders discussed below tend to have one predominant style.

**The leader as hero**

The traditional hero leader is authoritative, decisive, inspirational and charismatic, people like Richard Branson and Bill Gates (see Jackson & Parry, 2001). Men in our workplace dataset who adopted this style had narratives to recount which constructed them as heroes who had, against considerable odds, and at substantial costs of various kinds, successfully established or revived a company.

The leader we use to demonstrate this style is Seamus, the Managing Director and owner of a commercial company. Seamus was initially brought into the company as
an advisor when the company was close to going under. Extract 1 is a brief excerpt from Seamus’ hero story. He describes the state he found the company in.

Extract 1: Interview with Seamus.
Seamus: he, from what I could see, was rearranging the deck chairs on the Titanic… they just weren't doing anything about it, they were paralysed and heading down hill … I asked all the questions that I needed to ask … I pretty quickly got a very good um knowledge of how things were supposed to work … I suddenly had an idea as to how I could um er + get involved and make decisions and make something happen.1

Seamus thus presents a hero story in which he saved what has now become a very successful company through careful planning and hard work. In other words, this can be considered a typical masculine narrative of contest, where the heroes succeed despite formidable hurdles (Coates, 2003; Johnson, 1997). And it clearly constructs Seamus as a visionary, decisive business leader.

One way in which a hero leader can construct their identity through their control of the discourse is through challenging and confrontational behaviour. This feature is especially evident in meetings where the leader questions and contests statements and decisions made by others. Seamus generally attempts to play a back-seat role during meetings. In interview, he claimed to be just a participant in meetings, and to leave his general manager to handle matters relating to the day-to-day running of the business. Consistent with this stance, he sat not at the head of the table but along the side. Nonetheless, a discourse analysis of what is going on suggests that, despite the managing director’s assertion, it is not the general manager in the chair but the managing director-company owner who has most influence on proceedings. This is most evident from the frequency and focus of the managing director’s questions (see Holmes, in press). So, for example, from a total of 76 questions in half an hour of meeting talk, Seamus, the Managing Director, asked 31, almost twice as many questions as Jaeson, the chair, who asked 16. No one else asked more than 7 questions.

1 See transcription conventions at end of paper.
Extract 2 illustrates how this dominance of the discourse is exercised through Seamus’s questions. Preceding this excerpt, Jaeson, the general manager, introduces the topic of the selling off of old photocopiers and the purchase of new ones. After expressing surprise (is that all) at the price Jaeson is expecting for selling an old photocopier, Seamus begins asking about the purchase of a new one (his questions are in bold italic type).

Extract 2²: Meeting of management team. Jaeson is the meeting chair and general manager.

1. Sea: Tommy that’s did you buy that photocopier?
2. Tom: no
3. XM: [voc]
4. Tom: oh the
5. Sea: we were talking about buying a photocopier down at
6. Tom: we are buying it ( ) oh we have bought one
7. Sea: you have bought one?
8. Tom: yep
9. Sea: okay it’s about fourteen wasn’t it?
10. Evan: and who’s that are we buying it from Xerox?
11. Tom: yeah
12. Evan: are we leasing it or are we buying it
13. Tom: I don’t know you and Deb sorted that out
14. Sea: has that deal been done?
15. Tom: pretty much //( )\n16. Sea: /okay so\ is it a programmable photocopier does it have?
17. Tom: yeah
18. Sea: okay so it’s got a movable back gauge and all of that?
19. Tom: yeah
20. Sea: okay how physically big is it?
21. Tom: oh it wouldn’t be more than a metre square
22. Sea: and how much did it cost?
23. Tom: probably about I thought I thought it was about twelve

² See Holmes (forthcoming) for an elaborated discussion on the role of questions.
In this excerpt, Seamus asks 8 of the 10 questions, and they progress from questions requesting confirmation of information that he wants to check (lines 1, 7, 9), to questions requesting new information (lines 14, 16, 18, 20, 22); in other words, the questions become increasingly demanding of the addressee. It is quite evident that even in this exchange about a routine matter, Seamus controls the topic and the development of the discourse. In later exchanges, his dominance is even more explicit. So, for example, commenting on something he disapproves of (the use of a rusty and dented truck for deliveries), he is explicitly challenging who’s letting this happen … why wasn’t it fixed initially. Such questions force others to be explicit about complex issues, or about the thinking which has led to a decision. Such contestive and challenging questions are, then, another distinctive discursive feature of the normatively masculine management style of authoritative hero leaders.

**The leader as father**

Another way in which male leaders may lead is by adopting a paternalistic, mentoring approach to their staff. In general this paternalistic style was most evident in our data in interactions involving male leaders and female employees, and in workplace cultures which could be characterised as “ethnicised” (Schnurr, Marra & Holmes, 2007) or relatively ‘feminine’ (Holmes, 2006; Holmes & Stubbe, 2003) in their overall style of interaction.

We have defined an “ethnicised community of practice” as one where, drawing on a shared set of interactional or communicative norms, participants discursively construct their group membership in ways which are consistent with the cultural attitudes, values and norms of a specific ethnic group (Schnurr et al., 2007, p. 716). An appropriate demeanour for male leaders in such workplaces is a fatherly approach, looking after the welfare and interests of younger members of staff.

The leader we use to demonstrate this style is Quentin, a manager in a small commercial Māori company. Quentin was widely perceived to behave in fatherly and caring (and distinctively Māori) ways towards members of the company. He protects and defends members of his team from criticism, and in interaction with his team members, where he mentors and guides, often demonstrating great patience with staff who are learning aspects of their job. Extract 3 is an excerpt from a meeting between

ANZCA08 Conference, *Power and Place*. Wellington, July 2008
Quentin and the company owner. They are discussing an issue around the quality of the work of the company.

*Extract 3*: Meeting between managing Yvonne the Managing Director and company owner, and Quentin the most senior company manager.

1. Yvo: during the spot checks she finds a [laughing]: problem
2. every time: and so that makes her nervous
3. and then she starts going back through all of them
4. um like that item without a credit
5. I mean that’s just a simple little thing
6. but something like that just automatically
7. seems to cause worry //cos\n8. Que: /yeah\ and I mean it doesn’t have a credit
9. in the guidelines and that’s what we go by
10. //+ you see\ so I mean
11. Yvo: /[laughs] mm\
12. Yvo: well, well in that case //you see\
13. Que: /yes I realise that\
14. Yvo: it’s just a matter of just saying that to Laura
15. um cos Laura’s the one who’s doing that sort of checking
16. Que: when I saw it this morning and I, I thought
17. oh you know we should have ( ) checked it through
18. but I went back to our guidelines
19. it doesn’t have a credit in the guidelines
20. and I mean we’re trying to be consistent
21. + and (that’s what) our guidelines say + so and that=’ just it

In this excerpt Yvonne and Quentin are discussing the quality of the work of one of Quentin’s team. Yvonne describes a problem which suggests that the work is not meeting professional standards: the client has been spot checking the quality of the

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3 This extract has been edited for ease of reading, to save space, and to protect the identity of the company eg. the very frequent minimal feedback from both contributors has been removed since it is not relevant to the point being made, and the focus issue has been changed to a similar one which will not identify the company.
company’s work and she has identified errors (lines 1-2). She gives a specific example of a missing credit as one instance of a cause of concern (lines 4-7). Quentin responds, defending his staff member by pointing out that she has precisely followed the guidelines they have established, and this is therefore not her error: *it doesn’t have a credit in the guidelines and that’s what we go by* (lines 8-9). Yvonne takes the point and notes that they should give this information to the client’s checker, Laura (lines 14-15). Quentin then expands on his defence, making it clear that he had himself mistakenly thought this was an error, but on checking had identified it as an instance where the staff member had exactly followed the guidelines (lines 16-21). He repeats *it doesn’t have a credit in the reference material* (line 19) and emphasises the fact that the staff member behaved correctly by adding *and I mean we’re trying to be consistent* (line 20).

In another interaction Quentin explains to one of his team members, Renee, how to complete a task for which she is responsible. When she does not immediately grasp what needs to be done, he patiently repeats aspects of the task more explicitly and in greater detail. Throughout he checks her understanding: *okay? you understand? you see what I mean?*, and *eh?*, a distinctively New Zealand pragmatic particle (see below for discussion of *eh*).

*Extract 4: Meeting between Quentin, the section manager, and a member of his team Renee.*

1. Que: you know what the guidelines are eh
2. Ren: mhm
3. Que: we do that at the same time
4. Ren: mhm
5. Que: cos this seems to be + this is the first one +
6. In terms of + from your point of view eh
7. Of understanding //eh yeah entitlement eh\
8. Ren: /yeah yeah yeah yeah\"
her encouragement and indicates a sympathetic rapport, as in this short excerpt where he expresses understanding of the difficulties she is facing with a new and demanding task. He states explicitly that he realises this is the first time she has been required to understand this process from a different perspective, namely as the person responsible for administering it (lines 5-7). The use of *eh* (lines 1, 6,7) here functions to reduce formality and construct rapport between the two participants who are both Māori. The overwhelming impression throughout this interaction is of Quentin as a sympathetic and patient mentor helping Renee to understand her new task.

*The hero as a good bloke or mate*

A third way in which male leaders may lead is by constructing an identity as a good (Kiwi/New Zealand) bloke, emphasising mateship and the egalitarian ethos which is so pervasive in New Zealand society. The ‘tall poppy syndrome’, the label for a rather aggressive commitment to equality and the tendency to try to ‘cut down to size’ those who excel in any way – whether intellectually, in status or wealth – appears to be significant here. Jackson and Parry (2001, p. 27) comment that “it would be difficult to find a nation that has institutionalised and ritualised…wealth and envy status” or “lack of reverence for big business” to the extent that Australasians have. Consequently, those in leadership positions are vulnerable to criticism for acting in ways which indicate that they consider themselves a cut above others, an unforgivable offence. In response, leaders often seek ways of reducing status differences and emphasising equality with their colleagues. For men one option is to adopt behaviours which indicate they are ‘just one of the boys’, to do masculinity in the form of mateship.

Daniel, the CEO of a commercial organisation, plays down his authority, managing meetings with a light hand, and generally avoiding being ‘heavy’ in the way he operates as a leader. Interestingly, he uses a high number of explicitly linguistic devices to emphasise informality and mateship. In particular he makes extensive use of the New Zealand pragmatic tag, *eh*, a feature associated with informality, masculinity and Māori ethnicity (Bell, 2000; Meyerhoff, 1994), and he uses swear words much more frequently than others in professional white collar workplaces.
Daniel is Māori and he works in a Māori organisation so his use of the pragmatic particle *eh* could be regarded as very appropriate. However, he is the CEO of the organisation, and one would therefore not expect him to use this particle so extensively in formal contexts such as staff meetings. His usage is marked, even in a Māori workplace, an interpretation supported by his own comments on his informal style, as well as extensive evidence from our recordings.

Extract 5: Meeting of Senior Management Team, three men and two women senior staff present as well as CEO.

1. Dan: okay just have it for Wednesday //um\ eh
2. Fra: /yeah/
3. Fra: … knowing how I feel about them
4. making time to go and have the games and various
5. other things but not doing the stuff that we’d
6. promised to do by Thursday
7. Dan: oh well shout at them a bit eh +
8. cos it’s all fun it’s great to have fun and get dressed up
9. but it’s gotta fit in with everything else eh

Daniel’s frequent use of *eh* (lines 1, 7, 9) in this excerpt clearly contributes to the informal, egalitarian style that he cultivates, even in formal meetings of senior staff. His use of *eh* is even more frequent in one-to-one meetings with his managers, both Pakeha and Māori. This is illustrated in extract 6 where Daniel indicates his preference for a casual style of dress, consistent with a casual workplace culture.

Extract 6: Daniel is talking to his Human Resources Manager, Caleb, in a regular weekly meeting.

1. Dan: but it also an indication
2. that you don't have to wear ties here any more eh
3. you don't have to but don't wear rags [laughs]
4. [laughs] you know
5. here are what you can wear eh ….
6. I don't wear ties any more
7. I'm hōhā ['fed up’] with it eh um
8. and so nobody else feels they have to wear them either eh
In this excerpt, Daniel expresses his preference for a more casual style of dress, and emphasises this attitude by his frequent use of the casual tag *eh* (lines 2, 5, 7, 8) as well as the informal Māori word *hōhā*. Similarly, the following comment on a politician, recorded in another meeting, not only illustrates his use of *eh* but also indicates his distaste for people who play up their status and ‘put on side’: *heʼs just an imperialist eh heʼs gotta a very er high opinion of his worth eh*. The use of this pragmatic particle, with its associations with informality and masculinity, is one strategy Daniel uses for emphasising solidarity and mateship, a strongly articulated feature of his leadership philosophy.

Swearing has a similar effect and is even more marked in workplace meetings since it is so rarely used by others in professional contexts. Danielʼs utterances are peppered with strong swear words, as illustrated in extract 7 from a one-to-one meeting with his Finance Manager and extract 8 from a large formal meeting of the senior management team.

*Extract 7: Daniel is meeting with his Finance Manager; this is a regular weekly meeting.*

1. Dan: he was + making Mary shit herself eh
2. and I just went down there and said
3. well what is it and then nothing to say eh…
4. you know [politicianʼs name] just a-
5. he pissed me off when we were at that conference eh

*Extract 8: Meeting of the Senior Management Team. Three men and two women senior staff present as well as CEO.*

1. Fra: Company V got a new chairman they just got sick of him
2. Dan: oh yeah + fuck thatʼs the sort of article
3. we got to send out to keep on [company] eh
4. so that they donʼt think that fiddling around with the board
5. wonʼt do that you know
Thus even in formal contexts, Daniel uses swear words to emphasise his points and thereby constructs himself as a good Kiwi joker, or in American terms ‘a regular guy’.

**Conclusion**

Clearly a range of different strategies is available to construct male leadership identity or convey a particular stance. The hero leader is instantiated through powerful and controlling behaviour. The hero-leader often has a narrative to support his position and enactment of a hero-leader stance involves such strategies as a controlling approach to the management of meetings, including a tightly structured agenda, overt allocation of speaking turns, close control of topics by asking questions, for example, and avoidance of digressions.

Another male style involves the enactment of a fatherly role. As illustrated, this may take the form of actively attending to the emotional needs of members of staff, or defending members of one’s team, or demonstrating patient mentoring behaviour, or perhaps paternalistic tolerance of a colleague’s misbehaviour.

The good bloke persona may also be constructed using a range of discourse strategies. Pragmatic particles, such as *eh* and *you know*, provide a way of emphasising solidarity and mateship, as well as contributing to the construction of a very informal interactional context. Swear words have a similar effect. Comments on casual attire further indicate how non-verbal strategies contribute to the construction of ‘the good Kiwi bloke’ as one type of masculine persona.

By emphasising the importance of everyday talk in the most mundane settings as important means of creating transformational leadership we acknowledge that the symbolic (masculine) hero is only one of several effective leadership styles. Discourse analysis allows us to explore the discursive processes by which leadership is constructed and enacted and as Fairhurst notes, “Discursive approaches allow leadership to surface in myriad forms” (2007, p.5). By identifying features which characterise a range of leadership styles we provide empirical support for the claim that there are many different ways of enacting effective leadership.
References


**Transcription Conventions**

All names used in extracts are pseudonyms. Standard orthography/capitalisation is used in the extracts. Line divisions are intended to support understanding and typically represent sense unit boundaries.

- **yes**
  - Underlining indicates emphatic stress
- **[laughs]**
  - Paralinguistic features and other information in square brackets,
  - colons indicate start/finish
- **+**
  - Pause of up to one second
- **...//......\...**
  - Simultaneous speech
- **.../......\...**
  - Unclear utterance
(hello) Transcriber's best guess at an unclear utterance

? Rising or question intonation

- Utterance cut off

… Section of transcript omitted

XM/XF Unidentified Male/Female

[voc] Untranscribable noise

hōhā [‘fed up’] Māori words appear in italics with translation in square brackets

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