Meetings as the Practical Accomplishment of Educational Leadership

Abstract

Boden (1994) highlights meetings as 'where organizations come together' – as 'the very stuff of management'. This paper uses findings from a study of 'leaders' and 'leadership' in the post-compulsory education sector in the United Kingdom. Drawing upon ethnographic data in which college Principals were 'shadowed' as they went about their everyday work, our paper comments on and analyses certain facets of 'leadership work' in action within this unique educational setting. In particular, the paper documents some of the interactional features of meetings and examines how and in what ways 'leadership' is observably accomplished and how and in what ways 'power' might be an appropriate description of various interactional accomplishments. Our focus is on the accomplishment and employment of 'power' as an aspect of interaction in leadership meetings; 'power' as the management of incumbent roles; and the display of and orientation to 'power' in terms of organising and constituting hierarchy in interaction.

Keywords

Calculation, education, leadership, interaction, meetings, organization, power, talk

Introduction

".. meetings remain the essential mechanism through which organizations create and maintain the practical activity of organizing. They are, in other words, the interaction order of management, the occasioned expression of management in action..." (Boden 1994: 81)

In *The Business of Talk: Organisations in Action*, Boden (1994) describes meetings as 'the very stuff of management', a place 'where organizations come together' (1994: 81). Through her own study of several organizational settings Boden carefully documents and analyses both the accomplishment of meetings themselves and the role of meetings in the accomplishment of organization. Even if we are somewhat sceptical of the bold claim that meetings are 'the very stuff of management' it is difficult for anyone who has spent time in any kind of organization to argue that meetings are not an important and increasingly regular part of daily life. Meetings form a central part of organizational work, whether they involve formal gatherings around a table, or more *ad hoc* occasions in which talk, opinions, information, gossip, or jokes are exchanged. As Boden states, meetings of one kind or another, are very much a part of the *doing* of organization.

Boden's own interests are in the organization of the talk and the interaction that takes place within meetings. Paraphrasing Peter Gronn (1983) and his own study of talk in the accomplishment of educational administration, Boden argues that for managers 'talk *is* the work', and perhaps more importantly, that the patterning of this talk 'has enormous consequences for the production and reproduction of the organization' (1994: 79-80). In this way, as Boden and Gronn both argue, talk *as* the work involves a subtle blending of speech and social action, talk and task. In this paper we ask in

what ways are meetings an important part of *doing* educational leadership. Taking the UK further education (FE) sector as our organizational setting we provide a detailed description of a funding meeting that took place within one college involving the Principal, senior management team [SMT], and representatives from the local and national FE funding council (the Learning and Skills Council or LSC). The meeting itself concerns a proposal for funding for a new college building and is the result of prior meetings and negotiations that have taken place between the college and the funding council over the past six months. The meeting is described here to demonstrate how such occasions involve subtle forms of 'leadership work', and how such work involves fairly mundane and ordinary skills and practices such as talking, listening and negotiating. These, we argue, are everyday skills not usually described in relation to the more transformational or 'heroic' models of leadership that tend to dominate leadership literatures. In particular we demonstrate how an ethnomethodological approach to the study of leadership work in meetings can offer fresh insights into the practical accomplishment of educational leadership and particularly how so-called local or micro-studies of practice can also deal with supposedly more complex and 'macro' topics such the mobilisation and use of such concepts as 'power' in the accomplishment of leadership and the sustaining of organizational structures and routines. In sum, this paper documents and describes an instance of leadership work in action as observed ethnographically. It presents a 'real world', 'real time' (Sharrock and Button, 1990) example of how leadership work is done in an FE college and considers how such work compares to the more grandiose qualities that are usually associated with leadership in organizations.

Leadership, management and everyday life

The need to conduct more detailed studies of leadership-in-practice has long been recognised within leadership literatures (Gronn, 1982, 2003; Bryman, 1999; Yukl, 2002) and yet few studies venture into the everyday *doing* of leadership. This is in large part due to the dominance of a view within the leadership literature, popular management theory and the media that there is something special about leadership. Leadership as a phenomenon, we are often told, transcends the everyday, the mundane and the ordinary. Leadership is typically associated with more mystical qualities such as the ability to influence, arouse, inspire, enthuse and transform (Bass and Avolio, 1994; Huey, 1994). Within organizational settings leadership is associated with the exercise of power, the setting of goals and objectives, and the mobilisation of others to get work done (Kotter, 1990; Wright, 1996). Within educational literatures leadership is increasingly associated with the transformation and modernisation of the sector (Leithwood, Jantzi and Steinbach, 1999). The message of such literatures is that 'good' or effective leadership breeds 'good' organizations. As such, a better understanding of the nature of (educational) leadership within the sector is essential for improving standards of teaching and learning, and the quality of the UK's post-compulsory learning institutions[1]. As Rost (cited in Barker, 1997: 348) suggests, such views – whether they are in a business, political or educational context - put the leader in a position that can be likened to 'a saviourlike essence in a world that constantly needs saving'. As such leaders must match this imagined notion of leadership by demonstrating that they are strong,

---

[1] *Developing the Leaders of the Future: A Leadership Strategy for the Learning and Skills Sector*. A joint consultation document produced by the Standards Unit and the Centre for Excellence in Leadership. Department of Education and Skills, 8th October 2003.

forceful, charismatic, and positive agents of change and improvement (Bryman, 1992; Gemmill and Oakley, 1992).

As part of this 'mythologization' of leadership, much is made of the distinction between leadership and management. Whereas leadership is associated with strength, vision, power, transformation and the extraordinary; management is cast as bureaucratic, ordinary, conservative and more concerned with stability (Barker, 1997; Zaleznik, 1977). Indeed, as Sawbridge (2000) has commented in his review of leadership in UK further education, 'leaders are generally people who do the right things, whereas managers are people who do things right' (2000: 2). Similarly Fullan (1993) states that, 'Leadership relates to mission, direction, inspiration. Management involves designing and carrying out plans, getting things done, working effectively with people'. Such strong distinctions between leadership and management strengthen the notion that leadership involves something more than merely 'getting things done'. As a result descriptions of what leaders actually *do* are often reduced, or erased from the analysis in favour of the production of models, concepts and theories that claim to explain what is *really going on* behind the mundane talk and action that characterizes much of everyday life in organizations (Gronn, 1982; Gronn and Ribbins, 1996).

Yet, as Alvesson and Sveningsson (2003) have recently observed, much of what passes for leadership in organizations has first to be abbreviated and translated from the ordinary and the mundane. As they argue, 'what managers ('leaders') do may not be that special, but because they are managers doing 'leadership', fairly mundane acts may be given an extraordinary meaning, at least by the managers themselves' (2003: 1436). For us, this 'extrordinarization' of the mundane currently operates at both the

level of theory building and practice. As Alvesson and Sveningsson argue, there is still a need within leadership literatures to understand how everyday work is rendered accountable *as* leadership by organizational members, but equally there is a need to understand just what it is that such leaders/managers actually do on a day-by-day basis.

Background to the study

This material is drawn from a long-term ethnographic study of a further education college based on the outskirts of a major city in a northern region of the UK. This is a comprehensive college that currently operates on two sites and provides A-level, foundation and NVQ level courses for 16-19 year olds in traditional academic subjects and also a wide range of vocational qualifications. Like most post-incorporation FE colleges[2], the college is one of four others that serve this particular community, and competition for students is fierce as each college aims to provide the highest standard of facilities and the widest range of courses. The meeting described here concerns plans for a new annex building to be built next to the existing site. This new building would provide the college with state of the art teaching facilities for its popular hair and beauty courses as well as providing extra teaching rooms for other subjects. The meeting itself was called at short notice to discuss the news that the proposal for the new building had been rejected by the LSC's capital committee. This came as a blow to the management of the college since they had prepared the proposal with the assistance of the local LSC office. Today's meeting (attended by the college management, and representatives of the local and national LSC) was arranged to find

---

[2] Incorporation of FE colleges in the UK took place in 1993, freeing colleges from local government control and passing on responsibility for college budgets and resources to the governors, principal and senior management of the college.

out why the proposal was rejected and what steps need to be taken to amend the proposal for resubmission.

The subject of this 3 hour meeting hinges on one problem: what level of funding the college should say it needs in order to have a new version of the proposal accepted. As we will describe in detail, the problem of which figure to use in the proposal presents several difficulties for this team of educational leaders. The original proposal stated that the college required 35% funding (the college would then make up the remaining costs). This figure was originally chosen since the local LSC had mentioned (informally) that this is the usual level awarded funding for such projects. The college, however, would actually need nearer 50% funding, but by proposing a lower figure it was hoped that the LSC would view the college as a more financially secure investment which would secure at least 35% with a view of increasing this figure over the following the three years.

Unfortunately this plan backfired and the capital committee felt that, judging from the proposal, the college was financially too healthy to need even a 35% grant. Following this decision an amended proposal was quickly produced between the college Finance Director and a representative from the local LSC to make the college appear less financially stable. This also involved changing the level of funding required from 35% to 55%. The meeting described below begins following yet another rejection from the capital committee who is now suspicious of the college's actual financial situation following the two proposals and now requires a more detailed proposal for exactly why the college needs this new higher level of funding.

The meeting is chaired by the college principal (John), and involves his vice-principal and Financial Director (Brian), two other Vice-principals (Clive and Peter), the representative for the local LSC (Derek) and the National LSC (Guy)[3]:

> Principal (John): "Right so welcome to the college again…"
> National LSC Rep (Guy): "…Yeah, good to see you…"

> Principal (John): "So, are you going to give feedback to us first of what went on at the er …"

> National LSC Rep (Guy): "Yeah, I think it's important to understand what happened, erm, we understand that you as a college are very disappointed on the result, but what I want to do is to try and allay those fears and let you know really, this it's not quite a miscarriage of justice, but it's very usual by what happened and that we are really confident that, with a small amount of extra work from staff we will get this through on the basis that it was presented, y'know, at the last committee meeting. But I think it's useful for us to put our cards on the table and just explain what happened so at least, y'know, you would be hopefully not angry about the decision, but that you'd be quite supportive in what we did in order to get this project through."

Guy begins the meeting rather nervously with the bad news that the college's proposal for funding for the new building has been rejected. He then outlines the reasons for the proposal's rejection. The Finance Director (Brian) appears increasingly frustrated by this news and adds:

> Brian: "…I've heard, obviously, what you've said Guy but I have to say I have got some concerns about your comments. Firstly, when we met some months ago we went through parameters and you gave us some 'clear steers' about the situation. I

---

[3] All names of people involved in this meeting are fictional.

then had a period of time where I spent hours and hours on these models, forwards and backwards with the local LSC, and it reached a point where I submitted these figures and I was told '*Yes*', y'know, there's nothing coming back saying that you need to keep revising it, and this was well within the deadlines you're indicating. I think it's a little bit, sort of, pushing things a wee bit to suggest that somehow these figures were not reviewed … Now, I don't understand, given the experience and expertise that officers have in presenting these cases nationally, why it was unforeseen that this was likely to happen, because the parameters were known the categorisations, the borrowing levels, all the rest of it, were known well in advance of that capital committee meeting. No one came back to *me* and said 'you need to amend these figures'…"

Guy: "…I think there's two things to bear in mind here Brian: that we met well in advance of the capital committee, the capital committee met on the 20th of April, we'd met already … on the 2nd of April so there was like a three week time delay which normally took about a week…"

Brian: "…but to be fair we met some weeks ago, I was told the date to submit that I was given two weeks originally to submit, then it was brought back…"

Guy: "…because the numbers were ok at the time…"

Brian: "Well, it was brought back to one week, so I complied with that deadline then there was a whole period of time where I was in discussion with the local office and they informed me that they were in discussion with you and were presenting various scenarios, and I'd revised the figures on numerous occasions, and it reached a point where I was told those figures were acceptable, so I don't understand the context of what you're saying that it went to the national committee and somehow it became unacceptable…"

If meetings are the stuff of management, part of this 'stuff' involves debate, contestation and negotiation. As with other formal encounters, meetings like the one above are structured occasions in which truths are debated and facts produced, reconfigured and argued over to produce an agreed upon and standardised version of reality, a 'way of seeing' (Goodwin, 1994). From the outset the meeting is dominated by Brian and Guy and their increasingly heated discussion over whose version of events is correct. Brian states that he is certain that over a period of months, involving several drafts of the proposal and discussions with the local office – and what he describes as *clear steers* - that the proposal should have been acceptable to the capital committee (the committee responsible for the distribution of funds). The fact that it was rejected is the cause of some concern among the senior management of the college, particularly as there are only a limit number of committees meetings left that the proposal can be resubmitted to. Brian is especially concerned as it is his responsibility to prepare such documents and it is his professional reputation that is being threatened by Guy:

> Brian: "…what Guy is saying is that somehow you weren't one-hundred percent certain of the figures and you put it to the capital committee simply to get it on the *agenda*, well, that's not my understanding of…!"

> John: "…No. No. No. I think that…"

> Guy: "…there's no point making accusations!"

The discussion at this point begins to turn into an argument as the Principal (John) steps in to attempt to calm the situation down. His attempts at this point, however, fail as Guy takes offence at the Finance Director's suggestion that the LSC had submitted

an unsuitable proposal without the college's consent. It takes Derek (the local LSC representative) to attempt reconciliation and break what has become a stand-off between Guy and Brian:

Derek: "…I, I, I think that Guy started with the defence which then sets the, sets the tone for the meeting, we're trying to pick through the bones of what happened …we thought that there was, there was a good chance of it going through the national capital committee, otherwise we wouldn't have put it out there…"

John: "Yep, I think that's fine … I, I think …"

Brian: "But, but what …"

John: "HOLD ON BRIAN, sorry a sec, I think erm, I think really we want to draw a line under, under what's happened, but I think, I think probably Brian's quite right to feel a little bit upset by the, the earlier comment that implied that somehow we'd got it wrong, and that if you were short of time you should have told us we got it wrong so we could have put a better case. Now, as I say, as Brian's explained is that it's not quite like that and yeah, I mean, we accept that there's an element of judgement and yeah, y'know, no, it's not cast iron certainty, but I think if we just draw a line under it, for whatever reason, there was a misunderstanding about what we'd get through, and I don't think that there should be any blame on Brian, as though he's somehow produced a case…."

Guy: "…there should be no blame anyway…"

John: "Ok, so we're in agreement then…"

As Boden (1994) states, 'meetings are also ritual affairs, tribal gatherings in which the faithful reaffirm solidarity and warring factions engage in battles. They are, to borrow from Dalton's classic study, "a stage for exploratory skirmishes". When in doubt, call a meeting. When one meeting isn't enough, schedule another…' (1994: 81) This meeting began as a series of versions of how the current state of affairs was reached. These versions were structured and organized so for instance, Guy was invited by the principal to tell his version of events; Brian then countered this version with his own account of why the proposal was rejected. In both instances the meeting serves as an agreed upon organizational space, a space in which organizational realities could be discussed, debated and solidified. Even though the reasons for the proposals rejection may have been known prior to the meeting, the formal space it afforded was an opportunity to state things 'on the record', to have views, opinions and versions of events stated and recorded in the presence of the leadership of the college and funding council. As such, the kind of talk observed in this meeting, even when it becomes heated, follows an organized structure of turn-taking through which competing versions of the situation are played out. As we go on to describe, it is the job of the chair (in this case the principal) to then attempt to resolve conflicts and disagreements by agreeing upon a version of events that allows work to be accomplished, progress to be made.

Calculation work and managing ambiguity

Anderson, Hughes and Sharrock (1989: 105-6) have commented in their own study of everyday managerial work and decision-making in an entrepreneurial firm, that the practice of calculation frequently involves 'grappling with the sheer practical difficulties of determining which figures are wanted, pulling them out, and then

knowing how to manipulate them and assess their product.' The three hour funding meeting described above was largely concerned with the practices of calculation employed in the presentation of the case for funding. To put it another way, much of this meeting was spent discussing and debating what version of events was acceptable. As the meeting progresses this becomes a question of what 'story' the figures used in the proposal should actually tell. As Anderson et al argue, figures can be and frequently are manipulated to serve a variety of organizational agendas. Figures can tell any number of stories depending upon how they are organized and presented and, '…success depends upon managing the interplay between precision and interpretation in calculation' (1989: 121). Management information, like the calculations made in this funding proposal has to be actively worked upon in order to tell a story. As a college principal this point is understood by John who suggests a possible way forward following the disagreement between his two colleagues:

> John: "…lets move forward and discuss how we go forward from here. But just to sort of finish up my, where I was before that, before we went back I mean, one of the ways of interpreting the committee's responses, that really, that were if the re-worked figures, which we're saying now are prudent and possibly even over-prudent, I mean, we're submitted again we're at a subjective interpretation aren't we? I mean, another way of interpreting the same outcome, there are two ways of going forward I see, one is to say thirty-five percent is right, go back and make the figures come up with thirty-five percent, which is what we've played before … or to say no, the figures are right *and* thirty-five percent is not enough."

John attempts to take on several roles here: As a leader of the college and chair of the meeting he is keen that the group finds a way forward, a solution to this problem following the argument between Brian and Guy. As an experienced manager and

administrator he also knows that such a solution has to be worked out today and that although the capital committee had rejected their original proposal of 35% funding this not an insurmountable problem. As he states, such things are open to 'subjective interpretation'. It is not that the 'correct' figure exists, it is that this group have to decide how best to present the figures *as* 'correct' to the committee. For John, then, this is about creative accountancy and presentation rather mathematical calculation alone. Either the college re-submits 35% and makes a stronger case for coping with this smaller figure, or they apply for 55% - a more useful figure for the college, but a more difficult figure to justify alongside the other stories contained within the calculations of previous funding proposals.

This is a tricky managerial problem for this group, and yet such situations are not uncommon in the daily work of educational leaders. Making figures tell a story is an important and yet taken-for-granted skill for the leadership of colleges in this sector. As we have reported in other articles (Iszatt White, Kelly and Rouncefield, 2004), managing the ambiguity between the precision of management information and possible interpretations that can be made of the data is an essential task for any skilful administrator. Figures cannot tell a story on their own, and as Richard Harper (1988) has commented in an ethnographic study of accountancy practices, 'it's not just any old numbers' that have to be calculated, just as its not just any old story that such figures tell. It is the job of a 'good' administrator, leader/manager, or accountant to make sure that the right story is told in the right situation and at the right time. The task before John, his colleagues and the representatives of the LSC is to determine the meaning that can be attributed to either 35% or 55%. Either figure can be used, but it is left to their judgement as to which story they choose to tell:

Derek: "…Can I suggest a way forward? I think we all need to be happy with the process, and I think we need to put that in at this point in the conversation. But if we are happy with the process, I think it's less of how we got from there to there, I think it, it would be useful to have a discussion about what *are* the reasonable levels of income, for example, so that we're all reasonably happy with the assumptions that are being made and then we can see what the result is from that, and what percentage that suggests. To my mind that will *at least* stress thirty-five percent…"

John: "…if I sum up just where I think we are and you tell me if we're wrong: One option is to rework the figures again from the position somewhere in-between those of the capital committee so that it's a bit worse than it was, but not as bad as it in fact finished up as. That's one option…"

Guy: "…but would you be comfortable with that as a college if you don't believe the numbers, I mean…?"

John: "Well, there you are, I mean…"

Derek: "…John's going through options ok, so…"

John: "…that *is* the option isn't it? That is the *only* option?"

Brian: "…but, this, I…"

John: "…Sorry, let me finish Brian. I don't know what the committee expects of us. Are they expecting to see the same proposal with thirty-five percent grant level requested, but *re-worked figures*, or are they expecting to see it come back with a request for a, a higher grant? Now clearly from our point of view, we would prefer the higher grant, because … *you know* really that the figures that you put in the plan are

based on degrees of optimism, and all you do, you can change that very easily by changing your optimistic view of the world, and it can go from *hugely* optimistic, which we felt we were to get by on thirty-five percent, to much less optimistic, which were the re-worked figures that Brian came up with. Now we have got a leeway within that, it's just which, which *looks* the more credible case … to actually go back and say 'look, we've have re-thought, we've changed our position of optimism and we now think that we should have a forty percent grant or whatever it would be. Or, to go back and say '*whoops*!' we realised we've gone from being over optimistic to *under*optimistic, to pessimistic, and then we'll come back again'. I mean those two look the two, I think we've only got two options haven't we? Change the figures or change the grant level…"

After nearly three hours of discussion it becomes clear to the group that some kind of decision needs to be made. Eventually it is decided that a figure of 40% would be easily the most justifiable to the capital committee. For John and his colleagues this is also a figure which suits the needs of the college, but which can also be justified, thus avoiding any embarrassment in front of the capital committee:

Derek: "…we *all* agreed in our local capital committee, Guy, everybody agreed that you had a clear case for thirty percent. I think that there's then the assumption that if you apply the different level of, er, 'prudence' the most you would get would be thirty-five percent mark - the range would only be about five percent, and that's usually the case with a college when they look at the figures. So Guy's sort of questioning about the drops in income and things is probably from his surprise that, that we can go from something that looks on more like thirty percent *as far as* forty percent, but the true position could be closer to forty-percent once we're all agreed about what's a reasonable approach…"

Guy: "…yeah because that's the figure, that's what we should be presenting as far as I'm concerned…"

John: "…forty percent. From figures that we were happy with and you were happy with, if it came to forty then that would be judged on its merit not just chucked out because it said forty…"

Guy: "…normally they would accept our recommendations, but they would need satisfying that we've gone through all of the usual red tape and we're under a lot of pressure to do that now, more so than we were before, and, y'know we get a grilling if we don't follow the rules, but as I say, they look at our comments, so we'll do what we can …"

John: "…well we're very keen to work with you. We don't want to be seen that there's any sort of barrier between us and that, y'know, we're hurdles to get over, because I mean we want to work *with* you to get it through committee, so we want to, y'know, take advice and, and present the best case…"

Time is pressing and John attempts to bring the session to a close:

John: "So just to, the way forward then: Derek you'll work with Ann, contact Brian and, that, y'know, we'll not leave Brian doing ten backwards-and-forwards efforts. We'll get there quicker till we know what's happening. And then we'll have an option, if it comes out to more than thirty-five percent, you can tell us when the, the next capital committee is, it might be possible to fit that in before the June meeting."

Guy: "…Yes. Would it be helpful for me to make a quick call and find out…"

John: "…yeah, it would actually yeah, yes…"

Guy: "…alright…" [Guy steps out of the room with his mobile phone]

John: "…I'll just see if I've got people waiting for me, I've got some interviews going on all afternoon and I'm due at 12.30pm."

[John looks through diary briefly and then leaves the meeting in the hands of his deputy].

This meeting demonstrates some of the complexities of what we have called 'leadership work' in an FE college. The meeting described here was a structured occasion for problem solving: the problem being what figure to present in a funding proposal. What appears as a straightforward problem of accountancy is treated by the actors in this meeting as a kind of organizational game that needs to be played out. John is careful to manage the delicate relationship between the college and the LSC, but he is also keen to protect the professional image of his deputy. The representatives are also in a delicate position in that they want to offer help to the college, but at the same time must not *be seen* to be helping by any outside authorities. This process of careful negotiation can be likened to a game since the rules of funding are also open to interpretation by the capital committee and have been known to change from case to case. Deciding what figures to present (and what story they should tell) is not so much about 'leadership' as about skilful administration and the management of performances, interpretations and power relations.

Rationality, power, and organizational acumen

In his classic essay 'the concept of organisation', Egon Bittner (1965) puts forward a persuasive argument for challenging traditional notions of the 'formal' and 'informal'

in organizational analysis. What Bittner proposes is not so much a new theory of organization, so much as an outlining of a programme of inquiry in which the production of common-sense notions of 'informal' and 'formal' organization can be studied and explicated through their use 'in real scenes of action by persons whose competence to use them is socially sanctioned' (1965: 270). Bittner suggests that formal structures and organizational designs are treated as 'schemes of interpretation' by competent and entitled organizational members who can manipulate these rules to suit their own agendas and that '…the varieties of ways in which the scheme can be invoked for information, direction, justification, and so on, without incurring the risk of sanction, constitute the scheme's methodological use' (1965: 272). What Bittner is outlining here is not a guide for rule bending or subversion, but instead recognition of the complex relationship between organizational members, formal rules and structures, and practical action – what he terms the 'gambit of compliance' that characterises 'organizational acumen':

"We propose that we must proceed from the theoretical clarification of the essential limitation of formal rules … to the investigation of the limits of manoeuvrability within them, to the study of the skill and craftsmanship involved in their use, and to a reconsideration of the meaning of strict obedience in the context of varied and ambiguous representations of it. This recommendation is, however, not in the interest of accumulating more materials documenting the discrepancy between the lexical meaning of the rule and events occurring under its jurisdiction, but in order to attain a grasp of the meaning of rules as common-sense constructs from the perspective of those persons who promulgate and live with them." (Bittner, 1965: 273)

Within this 'field of games of representation and interpretation' (1965: 273), it is the task of the skilled administrator to find ways of getting work done amidst the formal rules, procedures, and protocols that represent rational and formal organization. For us then, describing the funding meeting here in such detail is important for an understanding of how such skilled administration is accomplished in practice. As we have shown, decision-making in organizations such as this are all locally organized matters (Pollner, 1987). Locally organized, but performed using rituals, routines and common-sense constructs contained within the structure of the formal meeting and drawn upon by its participants in order to get work done. In short, meetings like the one described in this paper are examples of how the 'institutional order' of educational administration is achieved and sustained through taken-for-granted skills expressed through talk and social interaction.

What we are describing here is not simply the tensions that exist between the formal rational organization and the informal tactics that seek to subvert it. We are suggesting, as Bittner has, that meetings such as the one described here involve a subtle blending of formal structures and practical actions. The doing of leadership in this context, requires a kind of organizational craftsmanship through which a working division of labour can be established between rules and interpretation. As Yukl (2002) has observed, definitions of leadership generally agree that it has something to do with 'influence'. Yet as Alvesson and Sveningsson (2003) point out, people influence each other all the time. As the description of this funding meeting has demonstrated, influence and the exercise of power play a central role in every kind of social interaction. Indeed, power, if it figures at all as a separate category of analysis (like

leadership) is bound up in the *doing* of work, in everyday mundane talk and daily interaction. In a climate where issues of leadership permeate all aspects of social and personal life (George, 2000) the aim of this paper has been to ask questions of leadership as a practice and to challenge traditional dichotomies between leadership and followership, leaders and managers, the macro and the micro. By focusing on meetings as the practical accomplishment of leadership work we have demonstrated that leadership itself, observed as everyday practice, may not be very special. What is special is the largely invisible and distributed work that takes place in meetings and other occasioned organizational interactions – such as obtaining funding for new buildings – that are later accounted for as 'good' leadership.

Conclusion

In this paper we have described, in as much detail as space would allow, a meeting of educational leaders. These are people charged with the running of an FE college and also representatives of a major UK educational funding council. Through the explication and analysis of some of the features of this meeting we have suggested that 'leadership' as a phenomenon, quality, or ability is virtually indistinguishable from other kinds of administrative and managerial work. Indeed, as Alvesson and Sveningsson (2003a) have observed, when one actually looks at what leaders do, 'leadership' as a concept seems to disappear. And yet we would argue that it is not that 'leadership' itself is a distraction, or a red herring, but rather that leadership work is not necessarily that different or special from other kinds of work carried out in organizations. Whilst obtaining funding for a new college building is certainly a part of doing 'good' leadership for John and his team, the way in which this work is done is actually quite ordinary. Meetings are held, proposals are planned, written and re-

written, e-mails, letters and phone calls are made, committees are attended etc. What we are at pains to point out, however, is that although this kind of leadership work is not that different or unusual, the actual way in which such work is carried out is an, as yet, under-explored part of what it means to be an educational leader in the UK learning and skills sector.

Indeed, one of the central findings of our study of educational leadership is that one of many skills involved in being a college principal is the accumulation of what Bittner (1965) has termed 'organizational acumen' – the ability and entitlement to interpret rules and procedures in a way suits a particular purpose. In this case it was the skill of the principal, his senior managers and the members of the LSC to manipulate figures and calculations to put forward the best case for the funding of a new building. But we have observed many other examples where college staff at all levels of the organization have developed organizational acumen to achieve high grades at annual inspections, meeting internal and external performance targets, or making figures and statistics tell a variety of credible stories to stakeholders. Yet such work is rarely covered in traditional studies of organizational leadership and decision-making. Certainly one of the reasons for this oversight in organizational research is due to the sensitivity that surrounds such efforts, but it is also, we feel, because few studies of everyday practice exist that can observe and record these practices in action. This is because for most organizational members the presence of a researcher – particularly if they are conducting surveys or questionnaires – is simply another occasion that has to be performed, or stage managed. It is perhaps only through a long-term ethnographic study of such work that researchers are able to begin to see how these performances are produced and used in everyday life. The implications for the study of educational

leadership are hopefully self-evident. Good leaders, we argue, are competent and skilled in Bittner's gambit of compliance. They know what stories to tell at the right times, they know what figures to produce, how and when. They are skilled in managing performances, images and interpretations. Yet such skills are not the esoteric preserve of 'leadership'. These are skills available to anyone working in an organization. If there is anything special about leadership it is simply that researchers have yet to realise the importance of the largely unexplicated and seemingly invisible 'managerial work' that is essential in the doing of educational leadership.

References

Alvesson, M. and Sveningsson, S. (2003a) 'The great disappearance act: difficulties in doing 'leadership'. *Leadership Quarterly*, 14: 359-381

Alvesson, M. and Sveningsson, S., (2003c) 'Managers doing leadership: the extra-ordinarization of the mundane'. *Human Relations*, 56(12): 1435-1459

Anderson, R. J., Hughes, J.A., and Sharrock, W. W. (1989) *Working for Profit: the social organisation of calculation in an entrepreneurial firm.* Avebury: Aldershot

Barker, R. (1997) 'How can we train leaders if we don't know what leadership is?' *Human Relations*, 50: 343-362

Bass, B.M. and Avolio, B. (1994) *Improving Organizational Effectiveness Through Transformational Leadership*. California: Sage

Bittner, E. (1965) 'The concept of organization' *Social Research*, 32(3): 239-255

Boden, D. (1994) *The Business of Talk: organizations in action*. Cambridge, England: Polity Press

Bryman, A. (1992) *Charismatic Leadership in Organizations*. London: Sage

Bryman, A. (1999) 'Leadership in organizations'. In S. Clegg, C. Hardy, and W. Nord (eds.), *Managing Organizations: Current Issues*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage

Developing the Leaders of the Future: A Leadership Strategy for the Learning and Skills Sector. A joint consultation document produced by the Standards Unit and the Centre for Excellence in Leadership. Department of Education and Skills, 8th October 2003.

Fullan, M. (1993) *Changing Forces: probing the depths of educational reform*. London: Falmer Press

Gemmill, G. & Oakley, J. (1992) 'Leadership: An alienating social myth?' *Human Relations,* 45(2):113-127

George, J. (2003) 'Emotions and leadership: the role of emotional intelligence. *Human Relations*, 53(8): 1027-1055

Goodwin, C. (1994) 'Professional Vision'. *American Anthropologist*, 96(3): 606-633

Gronn, P. (1982) 'Methodological Perspective: neo-taylorism in educational administration?' *Educational Administration Quarterly*, 18(4): 17-35

Gronn, P. (1983) 'Talk as the work: the accomplishment of school administration'. *Administrative Science Quarterly*, 28: 1-21

Gronn, P. (2003) 'Leadership's place in a community of practice'. In M. Brundrett, N. Burton and R. Smith (eds.) *Leadership in Education*. London: Sage

Gronn, P. and Ribbins, P. (1996) 'Leaders in context: postpositivist approaches to understanding educational leadership'. *Educational Administration Quarterly*, 32(3): 452-473

Harper, R. (1988) 'Not any old numbers: an examination of practical reasoning in an accountancy environment'. *Journal of Interdisciplinary Economics*, 2: 297-306

Huey, J. (1994) 'The leadership industry'. *Fortune*, February, 54-56

Iszatt White, M., Kelly, S. and Rouncefield, M. (forthcoming) 'Technologies of leadership and new accountabilities in the learning and skills sector'. *IADAT Journal of Advances in Technology*.

Kerfoot, D. and Whitehead, S. (1998) 'Boys own stuff: masculinity and the management of further education'. *The Sociological Review*, 46(3): 436-457

Kotter, J. (1990) *Force for Change: how leadership differs from management*. New York: Free Press

Leithwood, K.A., Jantzi, D. and Steinbach, R. (1999) *Changing Leadership for*

Changing Times. Buckingham: Open University Press

Pollner, M. (1987) *Mundane Reasoning*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press

Sawbridge, S.J. (2000) Leadership in Further Education: A Review of the Literature. Learning and Skills Development Agency.

Sharrock, W. and Button, G. (1990) 'The social actor: social action in real time'. In G. Button (ed.) *Ethnomethodology and the Human Sciences*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 137-176

Wright, P. (1996) *Managerial Leadership*. London: Routledge

Yukl, G. (2002) *Leadership in Organizations*, 5th Edition. Upper Saddle River, NJ: Prentice Hall

Zaleznik, A. (1977) 'Managers and Leaders: are they different?' *Harvard Business Review*, May-June: 67-68