



THE DANGERS OF PROTOTYPICAL LEADERS

Blogpost by Susanne Justesen, INNOVERSITY RESEARCH on August 17, 2006

I am going through quite a lot of articles at the moment, and the difference between how I read articles now compared to how I did it in the beginning of my phd-project is significant. Because now I know what I am looking for, my data presents me with interesting patterns, and I look into theory for theory to aid my understanding and interpretation of those very patterns.

One of the articles I read today was different though, even if it was not exactly was I was looking for, the article had me reading it from beginning to finish, and their research will definitely be referenced in my dissertation, somehow. It was an article from *Academy of Management Review* by Hogg & Terry (2000) entitled: "Social Identity and Self-Categorization Processes in Organizational Contexts". There were several interesting points to pull from that article, but one paragraph was particularly interesting, and this is what I thought that I would share with you: Their discussion of the social construction of leadership in groups:

From a social identity perspective, leadership is, according to Hogg & Terry from University of Queensland, a "structural feature of ingroups (i.e. leaders and followers), which is produced by the processes of self-categorization and prototype-based depersonalization. Therefore (...) being a prototypical group member may be at least as important for leadership as having characteristics that are widely believed to be associated with a particular type of leader" (Hogg & Terry, 2000:128).

What this means is, that leaders often become leaders exactly because they embody "the aspirations, attitudes, and behaviors of the group"(Hogg & Terry, 2000:128), and not necessarily because they possess leadership qualities and competences. This is as such not interesting per se, we see that everywhere, the so-called Peters Principle or Law, where people are promoted until they no longer excel in what they do. The interesting thing in this article is their description of how groups tend to form such leaders themselves, through dynamic processes of social identity construction in groups with a high degree of group cohesiveness.

The danger to innovation then is that cohesive organizations (which we see everywhere in or branded and teambuilt organisations) then, according to Hogg & Terry (2000:129) often end up producing leaders who are selected as leaders exactly because they reproduce the present and therefore are less likely to produce the future (and even less likely to produce innovation). Such organizations:

1. Produce leaders who are prototypical but do not possess task-appropriate leadership skills (and end up producing groupthink instead of good management)
2. Consolidate organizational prototypes that reflect dominant rather than minority cultural attributes, and thus, exclude non-prototypical others from gaining influence, and obtaining managerial roles, and therefore
3. Produce an environment that is conducive to the exercise, and perhaps abuse, of power by leaders.

However, as Hogg & Terry explain (2000:130): "This rigidly hierarchical leadership scenario is most likely to emerge when conditions encourage groups (and organisations) to be cohesive and homogeneous, with extremixed and clearly delimited prototypes that are tightly consensual".....

Hmmmm, something to think about.....