Taking the leadership role

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TAKING THE LEADERSHIP ROLE: UNDERSTANDING LEADERSHIP ACROSS TEAM AND ORGANIZATIONAL BOUNDARIES IN VIEW OF THE CHANGING EMPLOYMENT RELATIONSHIP

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Contemporary knowledge workers cooperate more and more in multiple, temporary, and often virtual teams with peers within and across organizational boundaries. The growing involvement of multiple actors inside and outside organizations has severe implications for how the employment relationship is managed. In the current article it is argued that leadership is becoming not only increasingly distributed but also diffuse. Leadership is no longer “what those in leadership positions do,” but refers to a process by which one or more actors stimulate themselves and each other in order to pursue values, goals, and objectives. Whoever takes on a leadership role, needs to understand the way actors can be motivated and energized to address future needs and requirements in organizations. Building on insights from human resource management, leadership, and organizational behavior literature, how multiple actors are stimulated to take on their leadership roles in order to foster salient outcomes for multiple parties is explored in the current article.
Introduction
The growth of (virtual) multidisciplinary and flexible, self-managing teams signals a fundamental transition toward new ways of organizing work and collaboration (Van der Heijden, Peters, & Kelliher, 2015). The traditional employment relationship, often accompanied by direct control, motivation through reward, and trust based on long-term interpersonal relationships, is no longer appropriate (Peters, Den Dulk, & de Ruijter, 2010). Old employment models are gradually being replaced by more indirect control mechanisms, institutionalized in human resource management (HRM) practices, autonomous motivation, and “swift trust” (Costa, Fulmer, & Anderson, 2018; Peters, Ligthart, Bardoel, & Poutsma, 2016). In this regard, leadership is a challenge. Organizations are forced to consider more complex leadership approaches which are less centered on single formal leaders and relying more on the involvement of multiple actors taking a leadership role (e.g., Pearce & Conger, 2003; Yukl, 2012). In the current article, the new employment relationship is linked to indirect and diffuse forms of leadership displayed by different actors.

Three Dimensions of the Employment Relationship, Leadership, and Multiple Actors
The employment relationship between organization, leader, and employee can be considered as a complex and multidimensional construct concerning a governance, exchange, and cooperation aspect (Peters et al., 2010). The transition of those dimensions toward a new “balance of dominance” represents a shift in organizational stakeholders’ cognitive and value structures, which also has implications for managing the employment relationship (Lewicki, McAllister, & Bies, 1998).

The Governance Relationship: Leadership and Control Mechanisms
The managerial or governance relationship provides formal leaders with power to manage their employees. By acting on distrust, employment relationships used to be managed through institutionalized hierarchical governance structures which allowed for managerial control and coordination (Peters et al., 2010). In the new and changing work context, formal leaders experience a loss of direct control possibilities, which have been replaced by indirect soft and hard control mechanisms institutionalized in new HRM practices (Peters et al., 2016). The management of the employment relationship is delegated to individual employees and teams by using peer and self-control.

The Exchange Relationship: Leadership and Generating Autonomous Motivation
Traditionally, the market or exchange relationship concerns the exchange of employees’ time for pay, but also other psychological contract terms (Rousseau, 2001). Organizations become more dependent on the human capital of employees who are willing to exchange their (nonsticky) commitment, knowledge, and skills for more self-determination in terms of personal development, autonomy, and sense of belonging (Coun, Peters, & Blomme, in press). This new exchange relationship has consequences for leadership as well. Individuals need to display more self-leadership referring to their capacity motivating themselves to individual proactivity and to operate with minimum of interference from their managers (Neck & Houghton, 2006). Also, team leadership has gained importance which is incorporated into their individual level of self-efficacy, shaping conditions for innovation (Pearce & Conger, 2003). Adopting HR management practices such as time-spatial flexibility and information and communication technology (ICT) support, may cultivate and encourage an innovation-driven atmosphere and motivate employees toward pro-innovative attitudes and behaviors (e.g., Lewicka, 2013). Still, formal leaders play a crucial role in inspiring individuals and teams and targeting a shared purpose, by displaying transformational and transactional leadership.

The Cooperation Agreement: Leadership and Shared Responsibility
The third dimension focuses on the employment relationship as a co-operation agreement in which permanent and temporary employees are viewed as partners who share responsibility to act in line with the interest of
the organization, despite potential conflicting issues. Within virtual teams, employees manage themselves and rely on “swift trust” derived from professional role-based settings (Costa et al., 2018). They enjoy higher levels of autonomy, flexibility, and responsibility to organize themselves. Employees may jointly construct a leadership relationship in which some employees temporarily take the leadership role (shared leadership). However, transformational leadership of the formal leader remains important in stimulating informal collaboration with colleague employees, and in creating and communicating purpose and direction in organizational activities. Moreover, HRM practices can facilitate intra- and interorganizational cooperation by offering time-spatial flexibility and access to ICT.

Conclusion

The growing need for agility, flexibilization, and (virtual) team-based work implies that future leadership will be increasingly indirect and diffuse, which is reflected in how the future employment relationship will be managed. More and more, organizations delegate the management of the employment relationship to individuals and teams (self and peer control). Paradoxically, employees are expected to share their knowledge with and mutual support others with whom they do not necessarily have a long-standing relationship. They have to co-shape collaboration via partnerships based on “swift” trust. Regardless of who takes on the leadership role, stakeholders at all levels have a responsibility in managing the employment relationship and need to understand how to motivate and energize others to respond to future needs and requirements in organizations.

References


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