Chapter 1

Introducing the Language of Leadership

In this chapter we begin to make visible the work that the language of leadership does in perpetuating fictions that are useful for bosses of work organizations. We do this so that we – and anyone who shares similar discomforts – can make a start in unravelling the fiction. We contend that even if our views are contrary to the vast and powerful leadership industry our basic arguments rest on things that are plain and evident for all to see.

This book takes a stand against the rise of what we call the 'language of leadership' in organizational life. We use the phrase 'language of leadership' to signal the way in which some people (bosses or others with authority in organizational life) are now *routinely* referred to as 'leaders'; just as what they do routinely gets called 'leadership'.

At first glance, whether we call bosses 'leaders' – or anything else – might seem a trivial matter. But because they are used so routinely, the terms 'leader' and 'leadership' are becoming foundational in our thinking. Indeed, these terms perhaps feature in our everyday talk about work organizations before we do any thinking. Here it is worth recalling Orwell's caution to be on our guard against readymade phrases. The language of leadership is made up of readymade phrases that have invaded everyday talk and they pre-package the world of work. They frame some fundamental, taken-for-granted beliefs about power and organizational life.

Within contemporary culture, 'leadership' is seen in ways that appeal to celebrated societal values and norms. As a result, it is becoming difficult to use any of this language of leadership without at the same time assuming its essentially positive, intrinsically affirmative

nature. Routinely referring to bosses as 'leaders' has become both a symptom and a cause of a deep, largely unexamined new conceptual architecture. This architecture underpins how we think about authority and power at work. Capitalism, and its turbo-charged offspring neo-liberalism, seem to have effectively captured 'leader' and 'leadership'. Capitalism and neo-liberalism are both associated with competition and individualism and both make inequality at work natural or even a cause for celebration. This account of authority and power boosts the status of the elite bosses, while at the same time it has been important in legitimating pay cuts and the precarious conditions of work for those near the bottom of the pile.

These are all reasons that we are *Against 'Leadership'* – because we see the language of leadership as something that has been hijacked by managerial elites. We are not necessarily against leadership as the term has more traditionally been used however. Along with some major social theorists who have written about leadership (e.g. Max Weber and Sigmund Freud) we have no problem with calling someone a leader if they genuinely have 'followers' and can therefore legitimately claim to be among the ranks of people like eminent politicians, religious or military figures and the like. 'Having followers' is, for us, one of the basic criteria someone needs to meet for 'leader' is to be a meaningful and appropriate term. The trouble is that bosses of work organizations are very rarely leaders in this conventional sense. As far as most workplaces are concerned, as survey after survey has consistently shown, more people hate their bosses than admire them. According to a recent Gallop poll for instance, 'eighty-five percent of workers worldwide admit to hating their jobs when surveyed anonymously … many people in the world hate their job and especially their boss' (*Return to Now*, 2017). Even fewer workers would consider that they 'follow' their bosses. Indeed, it is for this reason that in Chapter 9 we argue that calling workers 'followers' is most likely to be considered an insult.

The language of leadership

Our use of the phrase, 'language of leadership' is different from some other uses. More typically, when people say the 'language of leadership' they mean something like tips on how to persuade (or manipulate) people. It can mean how to sound like a leader; or what to say in front of a mirror that will make you believe that you are a leader; or even how to stand – what 'power pose' to adopt perhaps. When we use the 'language of leadership', we are referring to a sub-vocabulary that is invading corporate life (and life elsewhere). Some examples of terms from the language of leadership in the sense we mean are shown in Table 1.1.

Insert *Table* 1.1: The Language of Leadership HERE

We are not simply using the phrase 'language of leadership' to pick out the specific cluster of terms in Table 1.1. In any case, the table is not an exhaustive list of phrases. Nor are any of these phrases necessarily wrong in any way. Any one of them could be being used appropriately by authors or people describing a setting. Despite our cynicism about the language of leadership we are also not suggesting that when any of these terms are used that our eyes should simply glaze over and that we ought to disregard whatever is said next because it is bound to be nonsense (though it often is close to being nonsense in our experience).

Even though we have set the table out in this way, the 'language of leadership' does not just mean a bundle of terms that can be used to refer to a quality or a role, or practice, or person or process, or to describe a set of characteristics or behaviours in any given situation. Instead, we are against the language of leadership for a broader reason. The cynicism we have about these readymade terms is motivated by a simple, but powerful idea: that these words 'do' things. In saying that terms do things we mean they are not purely descriptive. Instead, the very act of calling something 'leadership', or calling someone a 'leader', or using any of the

terms in Table 1.1 or similar terms – actually changes the nature of that situation. As we explain in more detail in Chapters 6 and 7, the words that we use to describe the social world also create our world. Each of the terms and phrases from the language of leadership in Table 1.1 'does' things when it is used to describe the world of work.

This distinction between describing the social world and creating the social world is what motivates Orwell's caution that we be on our guard against readymade phrases. It is crucial when it comes to dissecting terms like 'leader' and 'leadership' because it is through ordinary, day-to-day language that we create the world at work. These terms come bundled with assumptions about how we should understand relations of power in work organizations. Throughout the book, we identify and challenge these assumptions. We unravel the language of leadership by identifying the connotations and associations 'leader' and 'leadership' have in contemporary organizational life. We explore these and explain how they affect those who become called 'leaders' and those who they might believe they lead.

There are contradictions and tensions that come bundled with terms like 'leader' and 'leadership'. On the one hand, these terms are used in ways that suggest people called 'leaders' are in positions of unquestioned power and authority. On the other hand, the overwhelmingly positive associations to the terms 'leader' and 'leadership' suggest organizational leaders are 'good' or 'nice' in some way. Unlike 'managers' – whom we might even expect to have occasional conflict with their subordinates – 'leaders' must have followers for the term 'leader' to make sense. 'Leaders' at work are, by definition, on the same side as those they lead – or else why would they deserve the title? As Jeffrey Pfeffer (2015a) has pointed out:

> Over the last several decades, the [leadership] industry has produced a recipe for how to be a successful corporate leader: Be trustworthy and authentic, serve others (particularly those who work for and with you), be modest, and exhibit empathetic understanding and emotional intelligence.

The routine, readymade uses of 'leader' and 'leadership' are redrawing our picture of relations at work. What these terms 'do' goes beyond describing people who are in positions of power and authority. Instead, the use of these terms creates and justifies a particular kind of relationship. This has two aspects: flattering bosses and flattening workers – the core themes of this book.

Flattering bosses

The first aspect to the readymade uses of these terms is that talking about bosses as leaders overly flatters them and excessively glamourizes their roles. As mentioned, this is because the title 'leader' has connotations of an authority and power that goes unquestioned. To call someone 'leader' implies more than that they have been appointed to a formal position of authority. It suggests there is something 'special' about them and their authority. This implication airbrushes away the kind of conflict at work that we might associate with the term manager. For this reason, one of the important consequences of the rise in the language of leadership is that the people who used to think of themselves as mere 'managers' can now imagine themselves using a term that makes them sound much grander and considerably more important. They can imagine themselves as 'leaders'.

John Hendry (2013: 96/7) captures well the ways in which many people think of what it must be like to be a 'manager':

> For most managers, management is basically a job … Few people become managers … out of a sense of vocation. It is not something they do out of a burning desire to express themselves, to contribute to society or humanity, or to take a stand on issues that matter to them. A successful manager … might well be proud of her achievements, but being a manager … is rarely in itself a source of great pride. … It is a job, and a good and respectable job, and for many people an interesting and/or remunerative one, but at the end of the day it's just a job.

In contrast, Gianpiero Petriglieri and Jennifer Petriglieri show us how today's dominant cultural image of the organizational leader is rather different:

> The image of leadership that predominates is of an individual ascending to, or occupying, a position of hierarchical power, competently adapting to his or her environment, and wielding his or her influence to achieve financial (or otherwise measurable) results and, in so doing, rising further up the ladder. … [thus, this image] portray[s] leaders as 'crafters of their own fortunes' … in a world where success – usually defined as promotions and profits – hinges on making the right decisions in high-stake situations … a worldview in which individualism and heroism prevail (Petriglieri and Petriglieri, 2015: 631).

When we call one person a leader and another person a manager, we are not just naming them differently. While managers are generally imagined as bureaucrats, leaders are imagined to be admired by their followers, shareholders and market analysts alike; imagined too, as being able to transform organizations and those who work for them as they pursue their visionary strategies (Wilson, 2016). In other words, a key reason the language of leadership has become popular is because it has suited the interests of those who represent corporate power – the bosses. This language has become a pro-elite resource; a kind of filter through which elites can imagine and project their identities in much more positive (and functionally useful) ways than was the case with the language of management.

Flattening workers

The second way in which the language of leadership is redrawing social relations is perhaps even more important. 'Leaders' at work, by definition, have the same goals as their so-called 'followers'; although 'leaders' set these goals. Yet the language of leadership is often a mask or disguise because – plainly – those in positions of power often have different and incompatible interests to those lower down the organizational hierarchy. Routinely using 'leader' is almost a form of permission that allows this disguise to persist. It can make us turn our eyes away from wider injustices that many so-called leaders benefit from.

Over the last thirty years or so, one of the huge ironies of the growth in popularity of the term 'leader', as we examine in more detail in Chapter 4, is that it has occurred at the same time as there has been a massive deterioration in pay, job security and working conditions for many ordinary workers. This widening gap undercuts any idea that there are more harmonious relations between 'leaders' and their supposed 'followers'. On the contrary, the deterioration in ordinary workers' pay has directly benefited senior staff in terms of pay rises at the top. Often such pay rises are also conditional on 'efficiency gains' or what we might call work intensification.

When we redraw this picture and redescribe managers as leaders, we are reshaping the ways in which we imagine organizational elites. The overwhelmingly positive cultural images and associations surrounding the term 'leadership' are reshaping the image of bosses. This is done in a way that is not simply glamourizing and flattering to them, but that also actively serves their wider political and financial interests, in the process denying the interests of ordinary workers.

'Leadership' is terminally toxic

Given the pro-elite associations of 'leader' and 'leadership', we see the language of leadership at work as terminally toxic. Rather than try to reinvent or detoxify it – something that has been proposed most recently by Carol, Firth and Wilson (2019) – we argue that we should simply stop using the term 'leader' when referring to bosses. The language of leadership is irredeemably flawed; but it is also unnecessary – plenty of alternatives are available. Anyone interested in progressive ideas about organizational life should simply stop using the term. Otherwise, *whenever* we use the term 'leader' in the workplace, and regardless of our intention in doing so, this is casting a vote of support for bosses. In the process, we are also casting a vote *against* the traditional interests of workers.

Sadly though, the language of leadership is increasingly popular: in the corporate world, in the media, in daily workplace conversations and even in everyday, non-work life. Most worryingly of all to us, if only because it is perhaps the place where it can be challenged most readily, it is on the rise in academia – with researchers who study work organizations. This includes, in a strange paradox, research that claims to be critical of leadership. More widely, people seem ever happier to make sense of the nature of work, and much of our wider lives, using this readymade, toxic language. In the process, we are providing a kind of support to the inequalities which uses of 'leader' and 'leadership' cover up. Though the use of this language is often absurd, it is also dangerous – and this is what this book seeks to challenge.

Structure of the book

Part 1: The rise and rise of 'leadership'

The first part of the book shows how the use of the language of leadership has dramatically increased in recent years. We also examine its troubling effects in more detail.

In Chapter 2, 'Using the language of leadership' we start to chart the rise and rise of the language of leadership. Today, it is not just corporations, but football teams, schools and families who are said to have 'leaders'. Often the term 'leader' is reserved for high-status individuals, but what seems particularly strange to us is that even junior academics on temporary contracts increasingly have to 'show leadership' (whatever that might mean); at least they do according to their job descriptions.

In Chapter 3, 'Measuring the language of leadership', we show how there has been a marked shift in the way we talk about leaders. We do this by analysing the British National Corpus and the English Web 2015 (enTenTen15) – two collections of huge numbers of samples of written and spoken language from a wide range of sources. These are chosen to represent a wide cross-section of British English. Our analysis shows that whereas in the early 1990s the term 'leader' was used mainly for politicians, by 2015, this political use of the term had been overtaken by its use in business.

In Chapter 4, 'Polishing our chains', we take some specific examples of how the term 'leader' is used to show why the rise and rise in the language of leadership matters. One of the things we suggest is that the title leader (while it is clearly not the whole story) may well have contributed to bosses getting away with huge pay rises – while ordinary workers have had their pay cut and their working conditions made more precarious. We argue this is because the language of leadership seems to be changing the wider cultural climate – making it much friendlier towards the interests of elites. At the same time, the language of leadership is also making the climate increasingly hostile for people who find themselves doing part-time and precarious work: this is the dynamic of flattering the bosses and flattening the workers.

In Chapter 5, 'Building Santa's workshop', we examine the basic nature of the employment relationship and argue that there is conflict at the heart of this relationship. This conflict arises because bosses (as representative of owners) and workers often have fundamentally opposing aims. Maximising profits almost inevitably means extracting extra value from workers – and at least for some increased insecurity and worsened conditions. The traditional terms 'manager' and 'worker' tacitly acknowledge such conflict and a divergence of interests. In contrast, the language of leadership seeks to make the workplace into a kind of 'Santa's workshop', where everyone below the leader is imagined (against common-sense) to be a happy elf. We also develop some of the ideas in the opening chapters to speculate on why 'leadership' has become the routine way in which we talk about the exercise of power, authority and influence in organizations. We show how this state of affairs is not just absurd or ridiculous, but also dangerous. It is dangerous because, most basically, the language of leadership glosses over sources of contest and resistance.

Part 2: Leadership as rhetoric

The second part of the book anchors our claims in some of the most exciting ideas that inform our understanding of language.

In Chapter 6, 'Labels matter', we flesh out one of the central ideas in the book – that the language of leadership is not just describing the world of work but is actually building and creating this world. We introduce concepts from the social sciences (disciplines such as sociology and social psychology) and the humanities (disciplines like literary studies and history) – for instance the roles of rhetoric, self-fulfilling prophecies and narrative. These concepts all help to explain the processes through which the language of leadership has such toxic effects. Bringing in concepts from the humanities is especially helpful because for so many academics who study leadership, their overwhelming preoccupation is with 'science'.

This bias has resulted in blind spots when it comes to understanding leadership that this book, in part, is intended to remedy.

In Chapter 7, 'Performing leadership', we continue with these explorations into the nature and effects of language use. Having considered a number of disciplinary perspectives in Chapter 6, we look in more detail at how insights from philosophy can be applied to understand the effects of the language of leadership. To do this we draw on the work of John Austin and Michel Foucault among others. In different ways, both these thinkers have informed our understanding of how language is never purely descriptive but has direct effects on the social world.

Part 3: The seductions of leadership

In this section, we bring together ideas from the first two parts of the book to show why the language of leadership has taken hold of so much of organizational life.

In Chapter 8, 'The attractions of being (called) a 'leader'', we look in more detail at some of the images that the readymade language of leadership calls to mind. We argue that simply talking about 'leadership' at work means we almost inevitably talk in positive terms. To explain this we look at three of the major sources from which images of organizational leaders are drawn: (i) the military officer, (ii) political and world leaders, and perhaps a little more surprisingly (iii) 'hippie' leaders.

Chapter 9, 'A boost to the executive ego', sets out how the positive associations surrounding leadership benefit elites. Although some ideas associated with leadership (such as creating a common vision) could theoretically help workers at all levels of the organization, this language has been largely co-opted and put to work in promoting the interests of those in

power. One curious symptom of this is found in the aspirational, self-serving language people use on social media when positioning themselves as leaders. We call this 'me-dership' (a term adapted from the LinkedIn satirist Mike Winnet). We also unpick the idea of 'followership', suggesting that this is an ugly, patronising term and far more destructive than the traditional, solidarity-conferring term 'worker'.

Part 4: Resistance

In the final part of the book, we look at what prospects there may be for struggling against the language of leadership.

In Chapter 10, 'What is to be done?', we speculate about how we might resist the language of leadership. We begin with discussing some attempts to guard against the negative effects of leadership language. We see these as well intended but ultimately likely to fail because they still rely on the language of leadership. These include versions of so-called critical leadership studies, as well as forms of women's leadership and collective leadership. Our preference is to try to avoid the language of leadership altogether. We end the chapter with stories of some of our own attempts at avoiding the language of leadership in our own (leadership-saturated) industry.

In Chapter 11, 'Concluding thoughts: Leadership as a fig leaf?', we sum up our arguments, and look forward to the future. The struggle we advocate is certainly an uphill one because of how institutionalised the language of leadership has become. Also, given that this pro-elite language serves the interest of the powerful it is likely to remain institutionalised. While we are realistic about prospects for success, we are not entirely pessimistic. We think it is possible to be optimistic, at least about the long run prospects for the decline in the use of the

language of leadership. Perhaps alongside its growing use, a growing number of people are coming to see that 'leadership' is really little more than a fig leaf for corporate elites – hiding the more oppressive aspects of life at work.

Finally, in Chapter 12 'Further reading' we provide a resource for any readers who would like to explore the themes we have examined in this book further. It includes a relatively brief listing of some additional sources that is perhaps more in the style of an appendix than a conventional chapter. We end with some questions for further research that are also against 'leadership'.