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A Theory of Leadership Meta-Talk and the Talking-Doing Gap

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ABSTRACT   We identify managers' meta-level talk about the positive purpose, meaning, and significance of their actions as an overlooked type of leadership behaviour and call it leadership meta-talk. We outline why leadership meta-talk is not necessarily truthful or deceptive, but selective and loosely coupled with leadership practice. We discuss varieties of leadership meta-talk, namely aspirational, sub-texting, and sensemaking meta-talk, as well as principled, situational, formulaic, and casual meta-talk. We show how all varieties of leadership meta-talk draw people's attention to positive aspects of leadership practice and provide positive interpretations of it. Thus, leadership meta-talk can positively influence attributions of leadership and portray workplaces as overly harmonious and well-ordered, masking power imbalances and tensions and creating a quantitative and qualitative talking-doing gap. We argue that these talking-doing gaps are systemic rather than pathological features of the contemporary workplace because overly positive leadership meta-talk responds to systemic pressures and opportunities for managers and provides egocentric, psycho-relational, and public-image benefits. In contrast, leadership practice that lives up to leadership meta-talk is more costly, difficult, and time-consuming than commonly assumed. Our theory reconciles attributional, behavioural, and romancing views of leadership, and offers new insights into key organizational and societal challenges, including managing healthy workplace expectations.

Keywords: attributions, leadership, leadership behaviors, leadership meta-talk, romance of leadership, talking-doing gap

INTRODUCTION

Scholars and popular writers produce an ever-increasing body of texts about forms of leadership that are claimed to be simultaneously effective and moral (Avolio et al., 2009;

Lemoine et al., 2019; exemplary popular writings: George & Sims, 2007; Sinek, 2014). Such leadership texts enjoy great popularity among academics, managers, consultants and the public. At annual meetings, for instance, CEOs are expected to talk about the values and visions that guide their leadership. Inside companies, people attend leadership seminars and training sessions, which has become a market with an estimated size of 50 billion U.S. dollars (Deloitte, 2020). In addition, leadership is a common topic of conversation in the hallways, during coffee breaks, and other organizational settings. We refer to managers' meta-level talk about the positive purpose, meanings, and significance underlying their actions as leadership meta-talk (LMT). Leadership writings and lectures offer appealing narratives and scripts for such meta-talk, presenting leadership as the solution to all sorts of problems, including, for example, employee engagement. Concurrently, however, 77 per cent of employees worldwide and 87 per cent of employees in Europe report that they are not engaged or even actively disengaged at work (Gallup, 2023). The prevalence of poor leadership is commonly cited as a major problem in society (Pfeffer, 2015). Thus, the question arises whether there is as much and as glamorous leadership practice as there is meta-talk about leadership.

Our answer is simple and based on evidence that we will review later: Leadership practice is less common and less glamorous than meta-talk about leadership. That is, there are not as many managers who are authentic or transform their employees into committed followers as there are managers who present themselves as authentic or transformational leaders. Likewise, there are not as many managers who are good at coaching or engaging employees as leadership meta-talk suggests.

Sometime ago, one of us got this email:

> My name is William, and I worked – after my degree as a civil engineer in Technical Physics – at the big company BC. I entered such a trainee position there, and was very proud. … I felt great joy that I would now finally get to know the 'fantastic leadership' and the 'exciting technology' that was rumoured to be available at this large company.

> I think it took a few weeks before I started to see that something wasn't right. …

> In particular, I have noted the absence of 'leadership' (whatever that is), but instead a presence of the IMAGE of world-class 'leadership' being exercised. In reality, the most successful managers seemed to engage in internal meetings with other managers. The leadership thing is … like something you talk about the most. Preferably in large, swelling formulations. Everyone seems to be an oracle of leadership when they are allowed to judge themselves.

> I could write as much as I want about this, but my point is that I thought I was alone in making this observation. Since my view of reality did not seem to agree at all with that of my colleagues, I suspected for a long time that I was crazy. I got the feeling that my surroundings at the workplace were engaged in acting and building facades rather than anything that was actually value-creating activities. And this on a frighteningly large scale. It felt like I was living in a 'bizarro world', where up is down, and down is up. Nightmarish.

William was probably quite astute about the practices in his company. There seems to have been a lot of glamorous talk about leadership and little corresponding practice, creating a profound talking-doing gap. Although the gap was obvious to William, it might not have been so to many other people, especially those who believe strongly in the presence, significance, and value of leadership and who are faithful to managerial and organizational talk.

In this article, we develop a theory of leadership meta-talk that explains (i) what leadership meta-talk is, (ii) how leadership meta-talk influences attributions of leadership and reality constructions in the workplace and creates both a quantitative and qualitative talking-doing gap, and (iii) why managers, even competent and righteous ones, have an interest in engaging in leadership meta-talk that creates such gaps. We use the term leadership meta-talk (LMT) to refer to managers' meta-level talk about the positive purpose, meaning, or significance underlying their actions whereas leadership practice (LP) refers to leadership actions that unfold in situ, including talk, whether or not these actions succeed in having a positive significance. Based on our theorizing of leadership meta-talk, we explain how a gap between leadership talk and practice arises, and why this gap is an important, inherent, and even inevitable part of organizational life, although it may vary in size and clarity across contexts. We refer to a qualitative talking-doing gap when LMT makes LP appear more impressive than it actually is, and we refer to a quantitative talking-doing gap when LMT makes LP appear more frequent than it actually is.

Our theory of leadership meta-talk contributes to leadership research by identifying leadership meta-talk as an overlooked type of leadership behaviour that has distinct functions, namely influencing attributions of leadership and presenting workplace reality as harmonious and well-ordered. In this way, our theory bridges attributional, romancing, and behavioural views of leadership and makes specific contributions to each. First, we extend attribution theories of leadership by examining how managers can influence employees' causal attributions of their leadership practice by talking about the positive reasons underlying their actions. We build on Malle (2011) who shows how reason explanations – accounts of subjective beliefs and desires on the basis of which a person forms an intention to act – influence attributions of that person's behaviour. For Malle (2011), reason explanations are in the mind of observers who make causal attributions. Going beyond Malle (2011), we argue that managers who engage in leadership meta-talk provide positively charged reason explanations for their actions by emphasizing the underlying meaning, purpose, or significance. This, in turn, has the potential to influence the reason explanations in the minds of their audience and thus their attributions. For example, if a manager explains that she listens to employees because she cares about their well-being, employees may buy into this reasoning and attribute her leadership practice to this caring motive. Previous attribution research in leadership and organizational science has not considered the role of subjective beliefs and desires (see, e.g., Eberly et al., 2011; Martinko et al., 2007), and we extend it by theorizing the effects of leadership meta-talk on others' beliefs, desires, and attributions.

Second, we extend research on the romance of leadership (Meindl et al., 1985). We show how the talk of managers about the positive purpose, meaning, and significance of their leadership practice romanticizes their leadership and creates a talking-doing gap. We shift the focus from how others, especially followers (Meindl, 1995) and the media

(Chen and Meindl, 1991), exaggerate the role of leadership to examine how managers themselves actively romanticize their leadership. Managers construct romanticized accounts of their leadership practice to positively influence people's attributions and emphasize harmony in the leader-follower relationship. Such a selective, self-serving, and sometimes flawed construction of reality is part of doing leadership. In this way, we explain how romanticization and the talking-doing gap arise because of, not in spite of, managers' leadership.

Third, we extend behavioural theories of leadership. To date, attributional and romance of leadership perspectives have typically been portrayed as distinct from, or even opposed to, behavioural perspectives of leadership (e.g., Dinh et al., 2014). Thus, it is not surprising that major taxonomies of leadership behaviours do not include leadership behaviours aimed at influencing others' attributions of leadership and workplace realities. For example, Yukl (2012) synthesized more than half a century of research on effective leadership behaviours and classified behaviours into four meta-categories, namely task-, relations-, and change-oriented as well as external behaviours. None of these categories captures how people influence others and themselves in their attributions of leadership and views of the workplace. Thus, we identify leadership meta-talk as a distinct and overlooked type of behaviour. Table I provides an overview of these contributions.

In addition to these contributions to leadership research, in the discussion section we outline how leadership meta-talk is related to, but goes beyond, previous work on symbolic action (Pfeffer, 1981), sensemaking (Weick, 1995), and sensegiving (Gioia and Chittipeddi, 1991; Maitlis and Lawrence, 2007). We also argue why leadership meta-talk is a social influence tactic that is morally neutral and not inherently good or bad, although it can be misused for bad purposes. Furthermore, we examine the societal implications of our findings and suggest ways to deal constructively with the widespread and partially unavoidable gap between talk and action, particularly with regard to avoiding excessive expectations of self and others and thereby safeguarding one's own mental health and reducing organizational cynicism.

Table I. Theoretical implications

Overall	Leadership meta-talk has distinct functions – namely, influencing attributions of leadership and presenting workplace reality as harmonious and well-ordered – and bridges attributional and romancing with behavioural views of leadership.
For attribution theory	Leadership meta-talk provides subjective reasons underlying managers' behaviours (c.f. Malle, 2011), and in this way influences attributions of leadership beyond the traditional covariation- and causal history-based approaches (Kelley, 1973) and its more recent extensions to making attributions at the workplace (e.g., Eberly et al., 2011).
For the romance of leadership	Managers themselves – and not only followers, media, or the context – can contribute to romanticizing the role of leadership by offering well-sounding reasons for their actions (c.f. Bligh et al., 2011; Meindl et al., 1985).
For behavioural approaches	Leadership meta-talk is an overlooked type of leadership behaviour that goes beyond task-, relations-, change-, and externally oriented behaviours (e.g., Yukl, 2012), coming closest to sensemaking and sensegiving behaviours (e.g., Maitlis and Christianson, 2014), although being different from it.

A distinctive feature of our theory of leadership meta-talk is that it extends leadership research and explanations of the talking-doing gap, both of which operate at the micro level, by drawing on theories of coupling and interpretive scholarship that are more prevalent in macro-level research. In doing so, we are able to outline the systemic nature of leadership meta-talk and the talking-doing gap, which also sheds new light on micro-level theories of the link between talk and action. First, we draw on the concepts of selective (Pache and Santos, 2013) and loose coupling (Misangyi, 2016) to show that there is ambiguity in how well leadership meta-talk aligns with practice in terms of frequency and positivity. Talk is not either truthful or deceptive, but can operate outside of both options. Thus, we extend research on behavioural integrity that examines the extent to which words are truthful reflections of actions (Simons et al., 2015) by emphasizing that the link between meta-talk and practice can be more ambiguous. Second, we draw on interpretivist scholarship, which emphasizes that the same objective reality can be interpreted and talked about differently (e.g., Salancik and Pfeffer, 1978; Smircich and Morgan, 1982), suggesting that there is inherent ambiguity in interpreting leadership practice. Research on hypocrisy argues that people interpret a discrepancy between words and actions as hypocritical if and only if the evaluated person is seen to claim undeserved moral benefits (Effron et al., 2018). In this logic, any observer will find a behaviour to be either hypocritical or not. We extend hypocrisy research by highlighting the ubiquity of interpretive ambiguity – when the same observer holds multiple conflicting interpretations about the same manager – and by identifying leadership meta-talk as a potential means of reducing hypocrisy accusations. For example, a manager's relative absence as a supervisor may be interpreted by the same employee as both a positive sign of autonomy granting and a negative sign of disengagement. Under such conditions of interpretive ambiguity, impressive-sounding leadership meta-talk may increase the salience of the positive interpretation and decrease the salience of the negative interpretation. Thus, leadership meta-talk may reduce hypocrisy and at the same time, counterintuitively, widen the gap between words and deeds because LMT makes talk more impressive while leaving practice unchanged.

The remainder of the paper unfolds in four steps: first, we establish 'that' the talking-doing gap exists; second, we define 'what' leadership meta-talk and practice and the talking-doing gap are; third, we examine 'how' leadership meta-talk creates the talking-doing gaps; and fourth, we uncover the reasons 'why' the gap exists and persists. More specifically, we first take stock of the evidence supporting the existence of a talking-doing gap in leadership, which motivates our distinction between leadership meta-talk and practice. Then, we define and illustrate key concepts, including leadership meta-talk and practice. Based on this distinction, we explain how leadership meta-talk is weakly linked to practice in two ways: by exaggerating the frequency of leadership practice, resulting in a quantitative gap and selective coupling between talk and practice; and by portraying leadership practice as more effective and moral than it actually is, resulting in a qualitative gap and loose coupling between talk and practice. Afterwards, we examine the varieties, mechanisms, and functions of leadership meta-talk. Leadership meta-talk can refer to different time periods (as future-oriented aspirational, present-oriented sub-texting, and past-oriented sensemaking meta-talk), use more or less situationally specific language (as principles talk versus

situated meta-talk), and use more or less explicit and institutionalized language (as formulaic versus casual meta-talk). In each of these cases, managers who engage in LMT draw attention to the positive aspects of their practice to exploit the selective link between words and deeds, and they provide positive interpretations of their practice to exploit the loose link between words and deeds. In this way, leadership meta-talk can positively influence attributions of leadership and make the workplace appear more harmonious and well-ordered than it actually is. These functions give rise to several motives for engaging in potentially excessive leadership meta-talk. Finally, we outline these motives and show that they are rooted in egocentric, psycho-relational, and public image benefits of LMT. In turn, there are overlooked costs and difficulties associated with leadership practice that would correspond to such talk; good leadership practice takes time, can be stressful, and requires a de-prioritization of self-interest. Both of these costs and benefits are systematically induced by current organizational and societal arrangements, making the talking-doing gap a pervasive feature of the modern workplace.

EVIDENCE FOR THE TALKING-DOING GAP

Direct Evidence for the Talking-Doing Gap

Empirical studies of managers' talk about leadership in relation to their leadership practice are difficult and relatively scarce. Still, there is strong evidence to support the notion of a talking-doing gap. First, several scholars have found that leadership practice is rare. For instance, Bryman and Lilley (2009) found that leadership scholars themselves had no personal experiences of encountering transformational leadership in their departments. Similarly, Lundholm (2011) found no clear examples of leadership practice in an observational study of bank branches. More generally several scholars found that managers lamented a lack of time for doing leadership (e.g., Ahmadi and Vogel, 2023; Barry et al., 1997; Futures/Chef, 2006; Mintzberg, 2009).

Second, there is large-scale evidence that people are frustrated with leadership in organizations, which provides further indirect support for the scarcity of managers practicing desirable forms of leadership. For instance, a recent study by Gallup (2023) shows that only 23 per cent of employees worldwide and 13 per cent in Europe are engaged at work. The lack of good leadership was frequently cited as a reason for this frustration. Moreover, Cunha et al. (2009) found that most people spoke negatively about their managers in terms of leadership, and Graeber (2018) shows how negatively, or even meaningless, many people see their work and their managers. These studies point to an absence of leadership that is engaging or instilling purpose.

Third, there is evidence that managers who do not practice leadership still talk about it in glamorous terms. For instance, Alvesson and Sveningsson (2003) show that managers talk about (their) leadership in interviews, but when asked what they do specifically, they struggle to describe their leadership practice. Another in-depth study showed that a manager emphasizes coaching people, but barely does it (Alvesson and Jonsson, 2018). These findings are consistent with sociological work that emphasizes increased general societal expectations for individuals (Foley, 2010; Illouz, 2008) because using

impressive-sounding leadership terminology is a strategy to seemingly meet otherwise unattainable expectations.

Fourth, there is evidence that people have better leadership intentions and ideals than leadership practice. For instance, Jacobsen and Bøgh Andersen (2015) find only a weak relationship between managers' intended and employees' perceived transactional and transformational leadership. Moreover, Willmott (1984) identifies a strong divergence between theorized ideals of leadership and empirical accounts of managerial work, and Knights and Willmott (1992) observe that managers struggle to communicate their leadership messages. In addition, Ahmadi and Vogel (2023) conducted an interview study in which they found that managers struggle to put their knowledge of leadership into action. Carroll and Levy (2008) find that managers are attracted to the idea of leadership but have difficulty figuring out what it means to do leadership in practice.

Fifth, employees can contribute to the gap between leadership meta-talk and practice by undermining leadership practice. They may resist their managers' attempts to influence and respond, for example, by avoiding contact, minimizing effort, or undermining team cohesion (van der Velde and Gerpott, 2023). By resisting and not taking or accepting a follower position, the prospects of successful leadership practice are compromised. The reasons for such behaviour can be varied. Employees may have doubts about leadership in general and see the manager's efforts as a 'sales pitch' for the leader-follower relationship, which may interfere with their preference to see themselves as autonomous professionals rather than followers (Blom and Alvesson, 2014).

Sixth, employees may unfairly discount the value of their managers' leadership practice and judge them to be worse than they are, making the talking-doing gap appear larger in the eyes of the employee than in the eyes of the manager. One reason may be inflated expectations resulting from the positive portrayal of leadership in the media and education, with popular notions such as transformational leadership leading to disappointment when managers behave differently (c.f. Margoni et al., 2024). Another is the psychological benefit of seeing one's manager in a bad light. Discounting the leadership practice of one's direct manager can serve as an explanation or excuse for one's own passivity, lack of success, or dissatisfaction at work, which may not have been caused by the manager but has personal or systemic origins. Venting about one's manager has even more emotional and self-presentational benefits and can improve employees' self-image (Kowalski, 1996). In addition, discounting the manager's leadership practice may occur unconsciously due to various biases, including actor-observer asymmetry, the fundamental attribution error, or the halo effect (Fiske and Taylor, 2013).

Indirect Support for the Talking-Doing Gap

The reported evidence shows that leadership practice is generally viewed by employees as relatively rare, which at first glance contrasts with the large body of leadership style research that reports evidence of the effectiveness of moral (e.g., Lemoine et al., 2019) and other well-sounding forms of leadership (e.g., Lee et al., 2018). If these positively valenced leadership styles were indeed effective and frequently exhibited, managers should engage in high levels of leadership practice, and a talking-doing gap would be

the exception rather than the norm. However, recent critiques have shown that the evidence base underlying leadership style research is neither scientifically tenable nor grounded in actual behaviours. In an assessment of the last 70 years of leadership style research, Fischer and Sitkin (2023) note that 'the common finding that positive leadership styles lead to positive outcomes and negative styles lead to negative outcomes might be an artifact of conflation rather than a reflection of reality' (p. 331). Furthermore, Fischer et al. (2024) have empirically demonstrated that these leadership style constructs create causal illusions and erroneously predict effects where none can exist due to study design. That is, much of the existing leadership research is based on conceptualizations that obscure actual leadership practices and their effects.

Banks et al. (2023) have even shown that more than 80 per cent of purported behavioural leadership research does not include a single, truly behavioural measure due to conflation. Moreover, Fischer (2023) outlines how conflated leadership constructs mask base rates of behaviours, making it unclear how often certain leadership behaviours were actually displayed. Thus, typical leadership style research provides neither rigorous support for the effectiveness nor for the existence and widespread prevalence of leadership practice. A stream of targeted critiques of single leadership styles further supports this finding (e.g., Alvesson and Einola, 2019; Banks et al., 2021; Van Knippenberg and Sitkin, 2013). It is important to note that these critiques of leadership style research do not suggest that managers should avoid positive leadership styles and practice. Rather, these critiques cast doubt on much of what is known about leadership practice, including its frequency. There is only rigorous evidence for, not against, the talking-doing gap.

DEFINING AND ILLUSTRATING KEY CONCEPTS

In this section, we set the stage for our theory of leadership meta-talk and the talking-doing gap. We first clarify how we use the notoriously ambiguous term leadership. We then define leadership meta-talk and practice and draw on research on selective and loose coupling to explain why they are only weakly related; we also provide illustrative examples. Finally, we distinguish between a qualitative and a quantitative talking-doing gap.

Defining the Concept of Leadership

The term *leadership* can mean very different things and is ambiguous (Pfeffer, 1977). Fiedler (1971) noted that '[t]here are almost as many definitions of leadership as there are leadership theories – and there are almost as many theories of leadership as there are psychologists working in the field' (p. 1). In addition, Bedeian laments that leadership regularly refers to different concepts such as formal positions, innate dispositions, and actions (see Bedeian and Hunt, 2006). Alvesson and Blom (2022) refer to leadership as a 'hembig', which means that it is a hegemonic, ambiguous, and big concept. There is a strong cultural expectation for leadership, which is seen as superior to management or supervision. However, hembigs combine a strongly

normative connotation with a notoriously unclear meaning, as they cover a vast and diverse construct space.

We use the term *leadership* with a particular focus on (i) activities instead of traits or positions; (ii) activities that refer to purpose- and value-driven social-influence processes instead of those which are merely instrumental or task-solving; and (iii) activities which have a positive moral value (c.f. Lemoine et al., 2019). Exemplary constructs that fall under this label include authentic, empowering, ethical, servant, or transformational leadership but also positive ideals, purposes, values, meanings or visions (e.g., Bass and Bass, 2008; Cheong et al., 2019; Eva et al., 2019; Lemoine et al., 2019). Such an understanding of leadership is in line with a big part of academic (Antonakis and Day, 2017; Yukl and Gardner, 2019) and popular writings (e.g., Sinek, 2009). For instance, focusing on purpose- and value-driven activities is rooted in the popular distinction between management and leadership as two complementary yet different sets of activities (Kotter, 1990). Antonakis and Day (2017) summarize this dominant view by describing leadership as 'purpose-driven based on values, ideals, vision, symbols, and emotional exchanges' and management as 'task-driven, resulting in stability grounded in rationality, bureaucratic means, and the fulfillment of contractual obligations (i.e., transactions)' (p. 6).

Moreover, many writers restrict the term *leadership* to what they see as morally acceptable or even laudable. Such writers either view leadership as inherently moral (e.g., Palanski and Yammarino, 2009; Sinek, 2014) or explicitly exclude immoral forms from their focal leadership constructs (e.g., Bass and Steidlmeier, 1999; House and Howell, 1992). Defining leadership as morally laudable entails conceptual and ideological intricacies because some of the most abhorrent leaders – Hitler, Stalin, Mao, or Bin Laden, for instance – were probably seen by their followers as moral figures (Grint, 2010). Still, most authors tend to use the term leadership only for something positive, unless when talking about toxic or destructive leadership. Some scholars even explicitly say that if it is not good, then it is not leadership (Hannah et al., 2014). Although such a use of the term leadership is problematic in empirical studies of leadership practice, it fits well our focus on managers positive talk about their leadership (Sveningsson and Alvesson, 2016). Thus, we use the term *leadership* as *a social-influence activity that focuses on positive purpose, meaning, and significance*. The 'positive' here is in the eyes of those involved and in the claims made by managers – not necessarily from the point of view of a more critical evaluator, since what is actually 'positive' is often multidimensional.

Defining Leadership Meta-Talk and Practice and Outlining the Weak Link between Them

Definitions. We use the expression leadership practice to refer to talk and other acts undertaken in order to influence people in a concrete situation *based on* positive purposes and values, whereas we use the expression leadership meta-talk to refer to *talk about* positive purpose- and value-driven influencing activities. Leadership practice unfolds in situ and seeks to contribute to the accomplishment of work-related or relational goals. Leadership meta-talk, by contrast, unfolds on a meta-level, is somewhat distant from concrete work-related activities, yet charges them with positive significance. Thus, we define *leadership meta-talk (LMT) as meta-level talk about the positive purpose, meanings, and significance underlying one's actions,*

and we define *leadership practice (LP) as leadership actions that unfold* in situ, *including talk, whether these actions succeed in having a positive significance or not*. For example, LP may include coaching behaviours, while the corresponding LMT would be about the leader presenting herself as a coach or trying to clarify that a particular interaction is an instance of coaching.

Weak link between leadership meta-talk and practice. We argue that much leadership meta-talk is weakly, rather than tightly, linked with leadership practice. Thus, there is no clear correspondence between talk and practice, and this weak correspondence is the basis for the talking-doing gap. We distinguish two types of weak links, namely loose and selective coupling. In both, elements of coupling and de-coupling co-occur. For example, when a manager talks about her leadership as coaching-oriented, this talk is loosely coupled with practice because the underlying behaviours may or may not be seen as an instance of coaching; the same behaviour may also mean different things (e.g., subtle control based on mistrust in the employee's competence). In addition, if a manager engages in coaching-related behaviours, but only rarely, frequent talk about her coaching would imply a selective coupling between words and deeds. We now discuss the weak link between talk and practice along two lines.

First, we outline why leadership meta-talk does not have to be either true (i.e., tightly coupled) or false (i.e., decoupled from practice) but often operates outside of this dichotomy (c.f. Alvesson and Kärreman, 2000; Phillips et al., 2004). Research on decoupling rests on a strict separation between externally oriented talk and other forms of symbolism on the one hand, and action focusing on concrete practices directed towards internal functioning on the other hand (e.g., Bromley and Powell, 2012; Meyer and Rowan, 1977). Based on such a view, accurate and honest talk would describe practices neutrally and be constative. In several cases, talk is indeed constative. For instance, CEOs can report accurately and honestly about the carbon footprint or financial performance of their companies (i.e., tightly coupled). Else, the report of CEOs would be wrong and deceptive (i.e., decoupled). By contrast, leadership meta-talk is typically not simply true or false because it blends description with interpretation. Due to the interpretive elements, the same leadership meta-talk can refer to different leadership practices, and the same leadership practices can be talked about in different ways (on description-interpretation conflation, see Fischer, 2023). Even the same person can hold multiple interpretations of the same leadership practice. Thus, the link between leadership meta-talk and practice is loose, even though not arbitrary because of limits to which interpretations leadership meta-talk can plausibly offer.

Second, leadership meta-talk is not – or at least does not have to be – performative. The notion of performativity stems from Austin's (1975) observation that we can 'do things with words', which stands in opposition to language being purely connotative. This perspective challenges the strict separation between talk and action that is inherent in the notion of decoupling because talk can be action itself. Notwithstanding the many insights generated by the performativity perspective (see also Gond et al., 2016; Lockwood et al., 2019), its basic tenets do not apply to leadership meta-talk. According to Austin (1975), words are deeds when used in an appropriate context and with sincere intentions. For instance, when a priest says 'I now declare you married' in a ceremony and with a serious voice, she performs the act of forming the relationship. For leadership meta-talk, however, it is hard
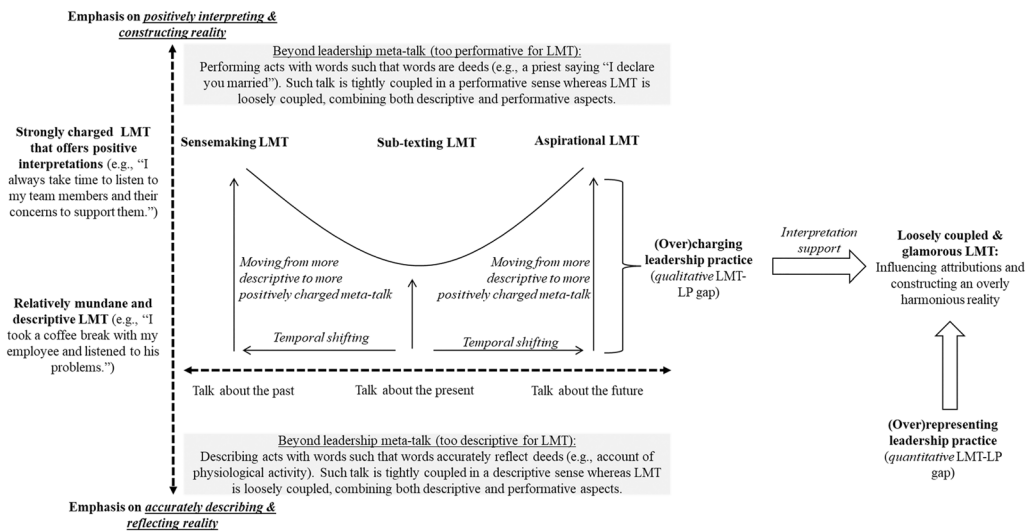
Figure 1. How leadership meta-talk (LMT) creates a talking-doing gap

Notes: (i) LP stands for leadership practice. (ii) Although the vertical variable (y-axis) is depicted as referring to opposite ends of a continuum, in leadership meta-talk both descriptions and interpretations are always present to some extent. The two grey boxes indicate what would be the extreme cases that are either purely descriptive (box at the bottom) or interpretive (box at the top). Leadership meta-talk operates in between and is loosely coupled with practice both in a representational (~ descriptive) and performative (~ interpretive) sense. Still, leadership meta-talk can vary to which extent it is rather factual (~ descriptive) or value-laden (~ interpretive)

to pin down what exactly the talk performs and what would be an appropriate context or sincere intention for such a performance. For instance, when a manager claims her leadership rests on trust, this statement is of such a generality that it is not bound to a specific context or a specific act for which trust-based leadership practice is claimed. In contrast to the examples of Austin (1975), hence, leadership meta-talk operates at a meta-level and is not linked to a concrete symbolic act and context. Put differently, leadership meta-talk does not directly do things and is thus not performative. Rather, we could call leadership meta-talk 'pre-performative' because it prepares the ground for subsequent leadership influence attempts that can then be performative (Figure 1).

Two Examples Illustrating the Weak Link between Leadership Meta-Talk and Practice

The meaning of joint coffee breaks. We first illustrate loose coupling between leadership meta-talk and practice with the stylized example of a manager who takes a coffee break with an employee from her team. During the coffee break, the manager listens to the employee's problems. After the coffee break, for instance, during a meeting or at a leadership seminar, the manager recounts the interaction with the employee in a way that presents it as an episode of leadership. We offer two alternative statements about such a break.

1. Descriptive talk about the coffee break: 'I took a coffee break with my employee and listened to his problems.'

2. Meta-talk about the positive purpose of the coffee break: 'I always take time to lis-
ten to my team members and their concerns to support them in both their job and
their life.'

Both statements refer to the same encounter – the coffee break – and none of the state-
ments is necessarily an inaccurate account of the conversation. However, the first state-
ment is mostly descriptive, whereas the second statement invokes a positive purpose and
positive values underlying the manager's behaviour. Put differently, in the first statement
the department head says *what* she did and in the second and third statement she also
says *why* she did it, implying a positive effect of the behaviour on employees. Talk about
the purpose and underlying values of one's leadership is typically charged with posi-
tive moral or organizational significance, because managers seek to present themselves
positively. In this way, the manager self-romanticizes her own work – not necessarily by
lying, but by painting an idealized picture that emphasizes impressive-sounding leader-
ship functions or purposes such as concern and support instead of reporting mundane
behaviours such as having a conversation during a coffee break. Furthermore, positive-
sounding leadership meta-talk makes one's own leadership appear more deliberate than
would talk that describes the typically unordered and ambiguous day of managers (c.f.
Mintzberg, 2009; Tengblad, 2006).

The meaning of absent and hands-off practices. Our second example illustrates both loose and
selective coupling and is a real-life break time conversation involving a middle manager
called Neville and his subordinates, including Marsh and Kerr. This conversation took
place at a workshop and further illustrates a loose link between talk and action, because
the words have an indeterminate link with reality. The conversation starts when Neville
leaves the room.

'What is very good for Neville, I think, is that you talk to him on a regular basis,' says
Marsh, being the first to mention Neville's name, 'every second week or so, just five
minutes to chit-chat, tell him what you are doing, what's on your mind, so that he gets
sort of in touch, so that he stays in touch. If he doesn't come to you, you should go to
him, just to tell him what is going on, because sometimes he is very busy and I think
it would be very good for him if you just steal five minutes from him every now and
then.' 'If he can,' Kerr says, 'he should dedicate one day in his calendar, one after-
noon, to support, and talk with everybody….'

When Neville re-entered they all made 'shh' jokes and laughed. He said: 'Leadership
and trust. I think from my point of view, what is very important is being involved
without controlling.' His idea of leadership was more about support and less about
expertise and problem solving' (Alvesson and Sveningsson, 2015, pp. 159–60).

Neville says that his own leadership rests on trust, being involved without con-
trolling, and offering support. By contrast, the subordinates mention Neville's busy-
ness and absence, which indicates that Neville's talk rather poorly reflects his practice.
Neville's words might be but do not have to be hypocritical or decoupled from action,

because Neville may state his sincere aspirations or self-view, and his subordinates acknowledge that he is available and supportive when they proactively take up his time. Neville's leadership meta-talk and practice are therefore neither tightly coupled and truthful nor decoupled and deceptive but loosely coupled and in between or outside the other two options. Due to the loose coupling, there would be many other ways in which Neville could speak of his limited presence. For instance, he could praise himself for a hands-off approach as ultimate proof of trust and provision of autonomy, which would indicate that he has a fine general attitude to people. He could also praise co-workers and say that they are very competent and do not need close supervision, which would emphasize the qualities of the co-workers as well as Neville's capacity to recruit, select, and retain excellent people. Alternatively, Neville could admit limited presence and blame the organizational structure that does not permit him time for close involvement. Any leadership practice – or lack thereof (e.g., limited involvement) – can be talked about in different ways, using quite different meanings and framings. The framings, in turn, can reduce doubt about Neville's limited presence and legitimate him as a leader. Without leadership meta-talk, however, the chance is higher that he might be seen as simply absent, disengaged, and of limited usefulness for his group.

Different Forms of the Talking-Doing Gap

Based on the two types of weakly coupled leadership meta-talk and practice, we can distinguish two types of talking-doing gaps: (i) a qualitative gap by making leadership practice appear more impressive than it actually is, and (ii) a quantitative gap by making leadership practice appear more frequent than it actually is. In the former case, leadership practice is loosely coupled with leadership meta-talk, and in the latter case, leadership practice is selectively coupled with leadership meta-talk. Our focus is on versions of the talking-doing gap that may involve some but not extreme misrepresentations or distortions of leadership practice. That is, we do not focus on instances of extreme and strict decoupling, for instance, when managers lie or totally lack self-awareness. These instances might be common (Gray and Densten, 2007) and further reinforce the talking-doing gap. It is our intention, however, to show that moderate versions of the talking-doing gap are an inherent and systemic feature of organizational life. A talking-doing gap can but does not have to be a sign of hypocrisy or a lack of behavioural integrity (c.f. Effron et al., 2018; Simons et al., 2022). These two types of the talking-doing gap can be produced in different ways. First, managers can create a qualitative talking-doing gap in leadership by speaking about the positive significance of their work rather than providing detailed descriptions of it, thus offering interpretations of their practices that are more favourable than reality. Second, managers can also create a quantitative talking-doing gap in leadership by making leadership practice appear more frequent than it actually is.

THEORIZING THE CONCEPT OF LEADERSHIP META-TALK

In this section, we theorize the concept of leadership meta-talk, which later helps explain how the talking-doing gap emerges. We discuss the varieties of leadership meta-talk,

Table II. Features of leadership meta-talk

	Features of leadership meta-talk

Varieties	• Temporal frame of reference:
	  ◦ Aspirational leadership meta-talk: future-oriented
	  ◦ Sensemaking leadership meta-talk: past-oriented
	  ◦ Sub-texting leadership meta-talk: present-oriented
	• Degree of situational specificity:
	  ◦ Leadership principles meta-talk: low situational specificity (e.g., about general leadership orientations, including values or styles)
	  ◦ Situated leadership meta-talk: relativity high situational specificity (e.g., about how concrete actions should be understood)
	• Degree of using explicit vocabulary:
	  ◦ Formulaic leadership meta-talk: explicit (uses institutionalized terms such as authentic and transformational, or coaching and motivating)
	  ◦ Casual leadership meta-talk: subtle (gives hints how leadership practice should be understood)

Mechanisms	Charging own practices with positive purpose, meaning, and significance. Thus, presenting one's own leadership in an effective and moral way by offering positive interpretations and drawing attention to the more favourable aspects of one's own work • Interpretation support: E.g., referring to a mundane coffee break as an instance of concern and support for employees • Attention management: E.g., talking about a coffee break, which is as an instance of at least some presence, while remaining mute about the many instances of absence
Functions	Managers narratively construct a glamourous and romanticized leadership reality • Positively influencing attributions of leadership: Providing positive reason explanations about why one leads in a certain way • Presenting workplace reality as harmonious and well-ordered: Hiding diverging interests and tensions, emphasizing harmony, and thus preparing the ground for subsequent influence attempts

the mechanisms of influence, and the functions in the workplace, and summarize these insights in Table II. In doing so, we draw on interpretive research that sheds light on people's subjective reality construction.

Varieties of Leadership Meta-Talk

Different time frames. When managers lift their talk to a meta-level and speak about the meaning or significance of their actions or qualities as leaders, they engage in LMT instead of LP. This talk can relate to leadership practice in three different time frames. First, *sensemaking leadership meta-talk* attempts to give positive meaning and significance to past actions. An example is how Neville describes and makes sense of his past actions as based on trust and autonomy. Second, *subtexting leadership meta-talk* provides support for interpreting current actions to give them positive significance. For example, the manager who frames the joint coffee break as supportive leadership attempts to offer a positive

interpretation of a mundane act that could be interpreted differently too (e.g., as politeness or even boredom). Third, *aspirational leadership meta-talk* tries to shape attributions of the intentions underlying future leadership practices. For example, when employees confront Neville about his relative absence, he may say that he wants to be more engaged in the future. These examples of leadership meta-talk have some, but only weak, links to leadership practice. In general, when the temporal frame of reference is shifted from the present to a more distant time period, it is easier to talk about the meaning of one's own leadership practice in glamorous terms with limited descriptive content. In any case, these forms of talk ascribe positive meaning or significance to specific actions or general tendencies.

Different degrees of situational specificity. Leadership meta-talk is generally more abstract and less situated than leadership practice but can still vary in its degree of situational specificity. *Leadership principles meta-talk* has low situational specificity and refers to general aspects of a manager's leadership orientation, such as values, style, personality, or overall agenda. For instance, Neville's statement that his leadership rests on trust and support without invoking concrete examples of his trust-based leadership illustrates this type of LMT. *Situated leadership meta-talk* is situationally more specific and refers to concrete actions, issues, and problems because the manager tries to shape the meaning of these specific interactions. For instance, when an employee confronts Neville with his absence in a concrete work situation, he could justify non-involvement because he has trust and gives autonomy to empower the employee on a specific issue in a specific situation. More generally, when assuming a new managerial role or looking back at the last decade, LMT with low situational specificity might help convey the manager's general leadership orientation. By contrast, LMT might be redundant in repeated standard work situations because employees know already the manager's self-presented leadership orientation. Still, specific LMT may help to convey the intended meaning of one's acts and to get acceptance for them in untypical work situations. If a manager talks about her leadership practice in the present, situated leadership meta-talk is more appropriate, whereas leadership principles meta-talk is more appropriate if she talks about events in the distant past or future. Moreover, there might be occasions when managers blend situationally specific and unspecific talk. For instance, a manager might say 'I am really a hands-off, high trust type of person, disliking micro-management, but this situation calls for a direct intervention'. This LMT first clarifies the general leadership orientation (low situational specificity) and then clarifies how a specific act should be understood (high situational specificity). The manager may see a specific act as an instance of a general orientation, although it is not self-evident to others, which calls for clarifying the degree of trust or control in diverse and ambiguous situations.

Different degrees of explicit leadership vocabulary. Leadership meta-talk can vary in its degree of *explicitness*. *Formulaic leadership meta-talk* directly uses institutionalized leadership formulars or scripts such as transformational, authentic, ethical, or servant leadership as well as trust, autonomy, or support. Neville's self-description as practicing trust-based leadership is a case in point. Here, LMT comes with a declaration. However,

managers also engage in *casual leadership meta-talk* that is more subtle and uses less explicit language, which rather provides hints. For instance, managers might connect their general absence at work with a statement such as 'our people are highly qualified' or 'hand-holding is not needed', rather than invoking explicit terms such as having trust or providing autonomy. These phrases provide hints that the leadership orientation rests on autonomy and trust or laissez faire without drawing on institutionalized leadership vocabulary. Similarly, leaders may often talk about perspective taking, invitations to generate ideas, or the importance of emotions to clarify their overall leadership orientations or to give meaning to concrete actions, such as appearing creative or empathetic. When used in excess, highly explicit and institutionalized leadership vocabulary might lose credibility because leadership meta-talk appears too standardized and business lingo-like. In such cases, more implicit meta-talk may be helpful, giving LMT a personal touch and authenticity. Still, caution is needed because the message of subtle LMT is less clear to the audience, which leads to the risk of being overheard, and thus requires more communication skills from the manager doing the LMT.

Mechanisms of Leadership Meta-Talk

Leadership meta-talk as interpretation support. Leadership meta-talk *supports positive interpretations* and manages the meaning of leadership practice by offering a positive purpose, meaning, and significance for the underlying behaviours (c.f. Smircich and Morgan, 1982). In this way, leadership meta-talk exploits the loose link between leadership practice and the ambiguity of its potential meanings to offer romanticized interpretations and to portray leadership practice as effective and moral, although leadership practice is often rather fragmented and improvised (Mintzberg, 2009). By positively supporting people's interpretation, leadership meta-talk creates a qualitative talking-doing gap because the underlying practice is less favourable, or at least more ambiguous, than the talk. In the case of Neville, for instance, he frames his limited presence and close-range interactions with employees as a sign of trust and encouraging autonomy. He could have offered other interpretations too, including less favourable ones. The lack of close-range interactions could have been seen as a sign that Neville has less expertise than the employees on technical issues, and he could have said that he does not interfere with their work because they know better. Alternatively, without interpretation support, his limited involvement might be seen as more likely to be absent or disengaged. Likewise, Neville could be seen as busy with other work demands, and he could engage in leadership meta-talk emphasizing that he would love to do more leadership and interact more with employees if he had more time (see Figure 2).

Leadership meta-talk as attention management. Leadership meta-talk *directs attention* towards favourable parts of the manager's leadership practice rather than less favourable ones. Akin to Salancik and Peffer's (1978) social information processing perspective, leadership meta-talk provides cues (e.g., being involved) that emphasize one feature of reality over another one (e.g., being absent or interfering). These cues contribute to constructing reality in a certain way, rather than merely reflecting it. Put differently, leadership meta-
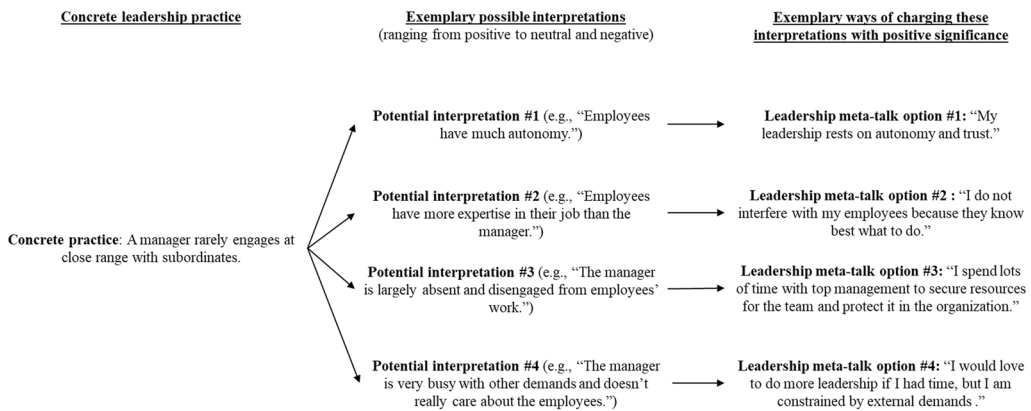
Concrete leadership practice	**Exemplary possible interpretations** (ranging from positive to neutral and negative)	**Exemplary ways of charging these interpretations with positive significance**
	Potential interpretation #1 (e.g., "Employees have much autonomy.")	**Leadership meta-talk option #1:** "My leadership rests on autonomy and trust."
Concrete practice: A manager rarely engages at close range with subordinates.	**Potential interpretation #2** (e.g., "Employees have more expertise in their job than the manager.")	**Leadership meta-talk option #2 :** "I do not interfere with my employees because they know best what to do."
	Potential interpretation #3 (e.g., "The manager is largely absent and disengaged from employees' work.")	**Leadership meta-talk option #3:** "I spend lots of time with top management to secure resources for the team and protect it in the organization."
	Potential interpretation #4 (e.g., "The manager is very busy with other demands and doesn't really care about the employees.")	**Leadership meta-talk option #4:** "I would love to do more leadership if I had time, but I am constrained by external demands ."

Figure 2. How leadership meta-talk charges leadership practices with positive significance

Note: The four examples of possible interpretations and meta-talk are illustrative and not exhaustive. Other interpretations and meta-talk are possible too

talk is selectively coupled with practice and invokes some but not other practices (c.f. Pache and Santos, 2013). By directing people's attention, leadership meta-talk creates a quantitative talking-doing gap because leadership practice appears more frequent than it actually is. For instance, in speaking about the joint coffee break, the manager from the stylized example refers to an instance of being potentially involved and present. Thus, she highlights this instance of involvement as if it were representative of her leadership practice in general, although she might be relatively absent otherwise. Thus, leadership meta-talk can overrepresent leadership practice and lead to a quantitative talking-doing gap.

Functions of Leadership Meta-Talk

Positively influencing attributions of leadership. Leadership meta-talk that directs attention to positive aspects and supports positive interpretations of leadership meta-talk serves an important yet overlooked function, namely influencing how others see their managers and make attributions about their leadership. For instance, whereas the meaning of the leadership practice of Neville is up for contestation and could be classified as absent, he presents his LP in upbeat terms, claiming to lead based on trust. In doing so, he makes a dual claim: being effective and moral. As said, current taxonomies of leadership behaviours overlook the attribution-shaping function of leadership (e.g., Morgeson et al., 2010; Yukl, 2012), and popular leadership style concepts do not cover this leadership function either (for reviews, see, e.g., Fischer and Sitkin, 2023; Lemoine et al., 2019). A potential reason for this oversight might be a common presumption that actions would speak for themselves (c.f. Simons, 2002).

The attribution-shaping function of leadership meta-talk has also been overlooked in attribution research, despite the critical role of attributions in mediating important workplace outcomes such as self-efficacy and the quality of leader-member relationships (Martinko et al., 2007). Presumably, this oversight is due to the common anchoring of leadership attribution research in Kelley's (1973) covariation model, which explains

attributions in terms of the consensus, consistency, and distinctiveness with which a potential cause and effect co-occur, but ignores people's interpretations. Initially, these co-variations were used to explain whether people attribute the cause of an outcome to the person or the situation (Kelley and Michela, 1980), and an important extension goes beyond the internal-external attribution dichotomy to add relational attributions (Eberly et al., 2011). However, these different versions of attribution theory still share a focus on objective co-occurrences between potential causes and outcomes only. Malle (2011) calls such attributions causal history explanations. In addition, he shows that attributions in human affairs are even more strongly driven by another type of explanation, namely reason explanations, which are based on the not directly observable beliefs and desires of the agent.

We argue that leadership meta-talk influences others' attributions by offering reason explanations. For instance, when Neville frames his relatively absent leadership practice as based on autonomy and trust, he does not change the causal history of how his past leadership practice is related to workplace outcomes. However, he expresses his desire to act in a trusting manner and implicitly states his belief that combining autonomy and trust is conducive to employee performance, and that his absence is partly an instance of autonomy and trust. If employees do not reject such talk as untrustworthy, listening to this talk should lower their inclination to attribute negative workplace outcomes to Neville's (lack of) leadership practice; and if they believe in his talk, they should be even more inclined to attribute positive workplace outcomes to him. Therefore, managers can provide reason explanations of their leadership by talking about the purpose, meaning, and significance of their practices, which indirectly states their beliefs and desires, and thus helps to reinforce positive attributions and discourage negative attributions.

Presenting workplace reality as harmonious and well-ordered. Leadership meta-talk presents a reality that downplays or even hides the uncontrollability of events and tensions in workplace relationships. Leadership practice is typically messy and fragmented because many parts of daily work are beyond a manager's control (Mintzberg, 2009; Tengblad, 2006). Furthermore, workplace tensions commonly arise from hierarchical stratification and related differences in status, rewards, and privileges (Adler, 2012). Against this backdrop, the self-portraits of managers like Neville romanticize their role, painting a picture of them as effective and moral leaders whose work is for the benefit of others. Their leadership meta-talk negates partially divergent interests across different levels of hierarchy (see also Learmonth and Morrell, 2021) and presents workplaces as more harmonious than they actually are. Such a portrayal can have important consequences for how employees react to their managers. For instance, managers' privileges in terms of power and rewards might appear more justified if managers were indeed as supportive, trusting and righteous as their leadership meta-talk suggests.

Leadership meta-talk is thus key for managers to define reality as based on mutually beneficial interactions rather than conflict between managers and employees, and to persuade employees to take on the role of followers. For example, when LMT presents conversations about work progress as instances of support rather than control,

it normalizes that a manager checks an employee's work progress, but not vice versa, and thus legitimizes asymmetrical power relations in organizations (c.f. Learmonth and Morrell, 2021). In this way, LMT calls for voluntary compliance beyond the obligations induced by formal hierarchy and employment contracts because the manager and the organization appear benevolent. Put differently, leadership meta-talk prepares the ground for subsequent influence attempts and is thus pre-performative. Leadership meta-talk functions as a resource for reinforcing positions of authority, legitimizing existing work arrangements, and contributing to an organizational order that people comply with. Of course, the success of leadership meta-talk is rarely total, and subordinates may still be unimpressed, or even resist when they find LMT uncredible. Nevertheless, LMT can reduce the perceived antagonism between managers and other employees, thereby mitigating conflict, weakening resistance, and strengthening the fabric of organizational power. Hence, LMT is not about the direct exercise of power, but about grounding or preparing for it by countering widespread scepticism about managers and reducing the openness and ambiguity of leadership behaviours (c.f. Knights and Willmott, 1999).

ASYMMETRIC BENEFITS AND COSTS OF LEADERSHIP META-TALK VERSUS PRACTICE

In this section, we first theorize the benefits of leadership meta-talk, and then the overlooked costs of leadership meta-talk that explain the emergence of the talking-doing gaps. Finally, we argue why the talking-doing gaps in leadership are in the interest of other powerful actors too, creating an incentive for them to provide opportunities for overly glamorous leadership meta-talk. Thus, in the tradition of methodologically individualist sociology (Boudon, 2003; Hedstrom, 2005), we explain both the structural causes and consequences of leadership meta-talk and the talking-doing gap.

The Symbolic Benefits for Managers Doing Leadership Meta-Talk

By talking about the positive purpose, meaning, or significance of their leadership, managers can create an appearance of effectiveness and morality that supports the manager's ego, lubricates relationships with interaction partners, and creates a favourable public image.

Message to the self and egocentric benefits. Managers profit from engaging in LMT by signalling to themselves that they follow scientifically 'proven' or otherwise broadly accepted moral forms of leadership that are part of the institutionalized leadership discourse (c.f. Lemoine et al., 2019). Managerial work is characterized by relatively high levels of insecurity that arise from 'the impossibility of controlling the conditions that support a stable sense of identity' (Knights and Willmott, 1999, p. 19; see also Knights and Willmott, 1999; Sennett, 1998). Leadership is an appealing discourse that can provide identity support and direction but also make oneself appear favourable to others. Thus, LMT can reassure managers that they do not only wield managerial and bureaucratic authority but stand on stable grounds as bona fide leaders.

Being a moral and effective leader is a popular identity template that has ego-comforting and identity-reinforcing effects (Sveningsson and Alvesson, 2016). For such positive effects to unfold, it suffices that the manager believes LMT somewhat reflects reality or will do so in the future. LMT can indicate the actuality or potentiality of acting both effectively and morally. By implication, such egocentric benefits manifest for all managers except those who are cynical about leadership writings and their prescriptions. Because the target of LMT is partly the self, ego-centric benefits unfold irrespective of who listens to the talk. That is, ego-centric benefits can even be reaped by a manager who talks to herself in an inner dialogue. Egocentric motives for LMT might be particularly popular among people who nurture narcissistic fantasies of the unbound self and believe in continuous and unlimited personal growth through self-therapy or self-persuasion. Such fantasies, fed by heavy consumption of popular leadership books, are a large-scale cultural phenomenon (Illouz, 2008).

Message to interaction partners and psycho-relational benefits. In leadership relations, subordinates and others may develop their own views and attributions that can deviate from what the manager regards as desirable. To address this concern, managers can engage in LMT to signal to interaction partners such as subordinates and superiors that they follow the rationalized and moralized narratives of dominant leadership ideas (c.f. Lemoine et al., 2019). The psycho-relational benefits rest on sending the signal that the manager follows institutionalized prescriptions for good leadership; managers want to appear as people who fully and capably handle their leadership remit.

Creating the appearance of practicing good leadership can smoothen relationships between managers and subordinates and foster harmony (Zaleznik, 1997), and the right LMT may increase the likelihood that subordinates grant the manager a leader identity (DeRue and Ashford, 2010) and not just see her as the formal superior or administrator. LMT can also create shared meanings about specific work situations, the leadership relation in general, and the broad set of hierarchical relations that are part of the overall organizational fabric. For such positive effects to unfold, the interaction partner needs to accept leadership meta-talk as credible. Social settings such as formal meetings, group interactions, or one-on-one conversations (e.g., a chat during a coffee break) provide opportunities for this type of talk. Psycho-relational motives might drive LMT particularly strongly when people have a high need for harmonious working relationships and when subordinates expect particularly high respect and support, such as in hospital emergency rooms, social-work settings, and other stressful work environments. However, also in more 'relaxed' settings, relations have to be managed, and LMT can help to reduce frictions and diverging meanings.

Message to the general public and image-management benefits. LMT can also be directed at a broader public to build a favourable image. This need is partly an effect of the pressure to respond to institutionalized expectations of demonstrating signs of leadership as part of ceremonial structures (Meyer and Rowan, 1977). Exemplary responses are leadership policies, developmental programs, media appearances, or efforts to promote the corporate brand and individual image of publicly known executives. At public events, managers can talk about leadership and cultivate their image as a moral and successful leader. For

the positive effects to unfold, it is necessary that the public believes in the LMT because else the LMT comes across as empty slogans or 'business bullshit' (c.f. Spicer, 2020).

Engaging in public LMT is likely to be particularly popular with people who have the opportunity and enjoy communicating with large audiences, and who seek to construct a grandiose public image of themselves. In addition, those who suffer from public-image problems – for example, people who were involved in a scandal – might want to engage in public LMT to repair their image and restore legitimacy (c.f. Schnatterly et al., 2018). But LMT may be useful also in other, less extreme contexts of legitimation and faith-building. For instance, school principals addressing parents may engage in leadership meta-talk to increase trust in the school management. Public LMT tends to follow formulaic rather than casual leadership discourse, drawing on institutionalized vocabulary, because such a discourse is better suited to a general audience with limited local knowledge. However, using well established vocabulary and demonstrating alignment with 'institutionalized myths' is more credible if it does not appear too 'scripted'. Therefore, some variation and personal touch is required, and the infusion of some casual talk is useful.

The Overlooked Costs and Difficulties for Managers Doing Leadership Practice

We turn to the question of why managers do not practice leadership more often or more impressively, although they talk about it and thus seem to find it attractive. We address constraints to practicing leadership that are inherent to managerial work and organizational design, which have been overlooked by research that claims the effectiveness of positive and moral forms of leadership (e.g., Avolio et al., 2009; Lemoine et al., 2019).

Costs and difficulties induced by managerial work. Practicing leadership takes time and requires advanced knowledge and skills (Ahmadi and Vogel, 2023) and requires that employees are willing to take a follower position at least occasionally. Hence, doing leadership is not merely a question of choice. In addition, immediate administrative demands, performance pressures, and the generally hectic nature of managerial work take a toll on managers' well-being (Oc and Chintakananda, 2025) and lead them to regularly settle for half-baked solutions (Tengblad, 2012). Managers may want to support employees but do not find the time to do so (Mintzberg, 2009). Supporting employees requires consideration of their needs, strengths, weaknesses, and the specific work assigned to them, yet attending to all these areas is demanding and time-consuming. These costs are commonly ignored in research that gives advice on leadership practice (e.g., Lemoine et al., 2019; Yukl, 2012). For instance, Yukl (2012) identifies supporting employees and envisioning change as effective leadership behaviours without specifying how to display these behaviours or learn them.

By contrast, learning leadership-lingo and talking about leadership practice in such a way is relatively easy and consumes little time. For instance, some managers might struggle to be ethical or authentic, lead supportively, and set aside time for employees to be present and involved, but they can still frame and talk about many actions as instances of authentic, ethical, or supportive leadership. Such leadership meta-talk, even if it sounds

more impressive than the actual leadership practice that it describes, does not have to come across as hypocritical or insincere. Employees might be aware that work or other organizational demands account for the talking-doing gap, and they might feel reassured if their manager communicates good intentions when engaging in leadership meta-talk. Moreover, there is considerable ambiguity about the relationship between leadership meta-talk and leadership practice such that exhibiting some managerial behaviours that are vaguely in line with LMT may be sufficient to lend enough credibility to the talk and avoid the appearance of engaging in lies or business bullshit (c.f. Spicer, 2020). Thus, LP is more difficult and time-consuming than LMT, and most employees accept that words do not fully live up to the actions. Although some managers might be better at practicing than talking about leadership, previously reported evidence suggests that they are rather the exception than the norm (see, e.g., Ahmadi and Vogel, 2023).

Costs and difficulties induced by organizational design and politics. We have seen that most leadership ideas are based on positive purposes and values, and also assume and prescribe that leadership practice generally requires a manager to de-emphasize self-interest and contribute to a broader common good (Antonakis and Day, 2017; Yukl and Gardner, 2019). However, limiting the pursuit of self-interest is costly when career progression rests on individual achievements (c.f. Daft et al., 2010). Whereas some scholars find that prosocial behaviours have a positive impact on managers' own careers and on organizations (e.g., Organ, 2018; Podsakoff et al., 2009), scholars of organizational power and politics warn about presuming an automaticity between doing good for others and receiving promotions or rewards.

Pfeffer (2010), for instance, argues that it is naïve to believe that organizations are meritocracies in which people are rewarded for engaging in prosocial behaviours. Kotter (1985 [2010]) emphasizes that people in organizations have conflicting goals. Consequently, people who do not consider their self-interest when they choose their actions will be used instrumentally by others who recklessly pursue their own goals. According to Jackall (1988) and Sims (2003), being politically savvy when interacting with higher hierarchical levels is more important than caring for people lower in the hierarchy in order to retain one's job or get promoted. We do not conclude from such studies that it is generally harmful to be prosocial, but we do urge caution, saying that being prosocial is neither generally beneficial nor generally harmful. In some situations, prosocial behaviour increases personal success, while in others it reduces it.

Leadership scholars, however, rarely focus on the costs of leadership practice induced by organizational constraints and politics. The examples of authentic and ethical leadership allow exploring this point more deeply. Authenticity means being truer to oneself than to one's role (Gardner et al., 2005), and ethical leadership rests on living up to high ethical standards and engaging in 'normatively appropriate conduct' (Brown et al., 2005, p. 120). In situations that do not entail conflicts between oneself and organizational interests, such prioritization does not bear costs. However, conflict between personal values and role demands and between organizational and societal norms is a pervasive feature of organizational life (Daft et al., 2010). Thus, authentic and ethical leadership comes with costs. By contrast, leadership meta-talk is less costly. Talking about their authenticity or ethical leadership does not require

Table III. Benefits and costs of leadership meta-talk (LMT) versus leadership practice (LP)

	Motives for and benefits of leadership meta-talk		
	Egocentric	*Psycho-relational*	*Public image*
Content of the motive	Appearing effective and moral in one's own judgement	Appearing effective and moral in an interaction partner's judgement	Appearing effective and moral in the judgement of others in general
Benefits	Immediately comforting one's ego and getting identity support	Smoothing supervisor-employee relationships	Portraying a favourable external image
Occasions	All occasions, including auto-communication	Talking with interaction partners or talking publicly	Talking publicly (e.g., at leadership events)
Precondition	Believing in LMT oneself	Interaction partner believes in LMT and does not fundamentally distrust the manager	Target audience believes in LMT and does not fundamentally distrust the manager
Reinforcing factors	Believing in rather unrestricted personal growth (~ self-therapy)	Seeking harmony and political support in the work relationship	Narcissism or the desire or need to improve or repair one's image

Asymmetrically high costs of leadership practice (i.e., costs of LP > costs of LMT)

Inherent in managerial work	*Induced by organizational design*
It takes considerably more time and is more stressful to do good LP than to do LMT	LP requires more sacrifice of personal interests for the common good than LMT
It takes considerably more time and is more difficult to develop the skills for good LP than for LMT	LP requires more sacrifice of organizational interests for the common good than LMT

managers to sacrifice their own interests. Furthermore, employees do not necessarily accuse managers of hypocrisy when their LP does not meet their LMT, because many employees may not notice the gap or acknowledge that some talking-doing gap is normal (Alvesson and Sveningsson, 2003; Effron et al., 2018). Relatedly, leadership meta-talk might not even attempt to describe current or past leadership practice but only state aspirations about what managers would like to do in the future (Koning and Waistell, 2012). As long as subordinates do not perceive a salient gap between pretence and practice, managers can engage in leadership meta-talk without facing the costs of living up to such talk or being accused of hypocrisy (Effron et al., 2018; Sveningsson and Alvesson, 2016). We provide an overview of the overlooked benefits and costs of leadership meta-talk and practice in Table III.

Why Many Powerful Actors Benefit from and Support the Talking-Doing Gap

Impressive leadership meta-talk is not only in the interest of individual managers – who are usually at lower or middle levels of the hierarchy – but also of top management and some of their support groups, such as consultants and HR. Leadership meta-talk disguises an asymmetry and power imbalance in relationships between managers and employees by sending harmony-invoking cues (e.g., talk about trust) and doing specific smoothening acts (e.g., linking hierarchy with care). Thus, leadership meta-talk contributes to stabilizing the status quo by presenting managers as effective and moral and camouflaging conflicts of interests in organizations. When successful, leadership meta-talk contributes to employees' willingness to accept followership and subordination rather than resist their managers and challenge the organizational power structure. This implies voluntary rather than enforced compliance.

Organizations create many occasions for leadership meta-talk. Examples are kick-offs, retreats, strategy days, leadership seminars, and teambuilding events. By design, these events are only loosely related to actual work, and managers are supposed to 'zoom out' of daily routines and think about the 'bigger picture,' including visions, values, and ambitions, rather than addressing the operative and administrative nitty-gritty aspects of everyday work. In addition to such formal events, all managers can use coffee breaks, hallway conversations, or team meetings to influence others' opinions, either overtly or through hints. Top-level managers and executives have even more opportunities for leadership meta-talk, for instance, in media interviews, at company receptions, training programs, jubilees, and shareholder meetings.

Moreover, the leadership industry offers writings, videos, and narratives that can be used as conversation material for leadership meta-talk. People in this multibillion-dollar industry make their living on the promise of leadership meta-talk and thus have a clear economic interest in maintaining its popularity. Therefore, we identify a powerful triangle – single managers, general organizational power structures, and the leadership industry – that all benefit from leadership meta-talk, which in turn contributes to talking-doing gaps. It is possible that some of the actors involved are cynical about the messages of such talk and engage in it for purely deceptive and selfish reasons. However, many actors from the powerful triangle probably believe in what they are talking and writing about because sincerity makes the messages more credible and, in turn, effective.

DISCUSSION

We introduced the concept of leadership meta-talk and explained how leadership meta-talk draws attention to positive aspects of leadership practice and offers positive interpretations of it. In this way, leadership meta-talk can positively influence attributions of leadership so that a manager is seen as more effective and moral, and leadership meta-talk can positively influence attributions about the workplace so that the organization is seen as more harmonious and well-ordered than it actually is. In turn, positively influencing attributions of leadership makes the manager appear in a better light, providing ego-centric, psycho-relational, and public image benefits. The
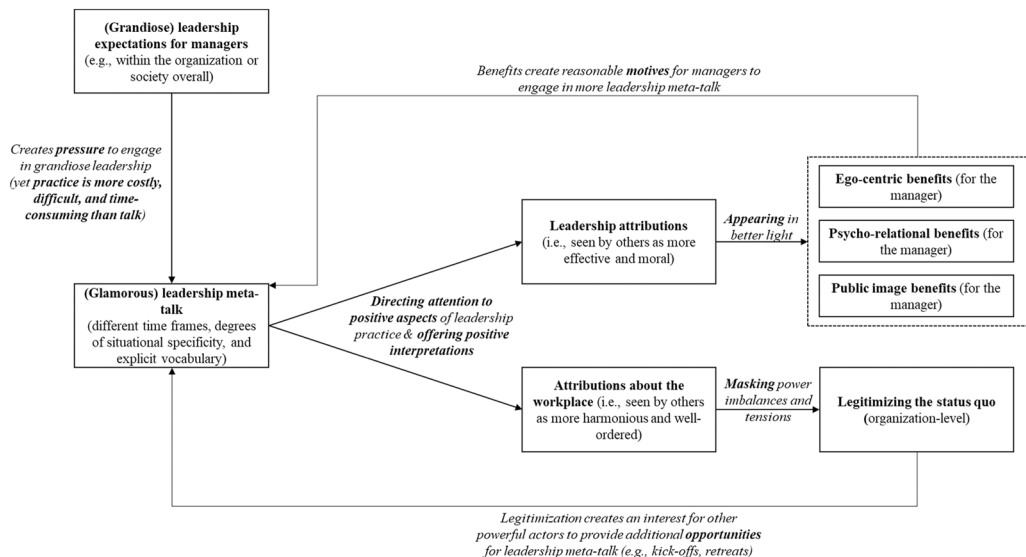
Figure 3. An integrative model of antecedents and consequences of leadership meta-talk

different types of benefits create motives for managers to engage in leadership meta-talk. In addition, positively influencing attributions about the workplace masks power imbalances and tensions in the organization, thereby legitimizing the status quo and social order, which creates an interest for other powerful actors in organizations to create opportunities for leadership meta-talk. These motives and opportunities for managers to engage in leadership meta-talk take place against a backdrop of grandiose leadership expectations within organizations and society at large. Thus, there is great pressure on managers to exercise leadership. However, the practice of leadership is more costly, difficult, and time-consuming than commonly thought and talked about, making it attractive for managers to at least talk glamorously about their leadership, even if the practice is more sobering. Taken together, our theory of leadership meta-talk explains how there are systemic pressures, opportunities, and motives for creating a talking-doing gap, making this gap a systemic rather than a pathological workplace phenomenon. Figure 3 provides an integrative model of the causes and consequences of LMT.

Moral Status of Leadership Meta-Talk and the Talking-Doing Gap

Despite its benefits, it may seem morally deplorable that leadership practice is less common and less glamorous than leadership meta-talk. However, leadership meta-talk is simply a form of social influence, namely influencing people's attributions and reality constructions of leadership. Like other forms of social influence too, leadership meta-talk can be used for both good and bad ends. On the one hand, there is a risk that managers will use leadership meta-talk manipulatively, trying to distort reality in their own favour to cover up their lack of good leadership practice, or that they will deceive themselves and create organizations with limited realism in their views of leadership

(e.g., as William's example illustrates). On the other hand, leadership meta-talk can simply address the inherent ambiguity of leadership and attempt to give clear meaning to otherwise unclear leadership practices. Thus, even competent and righteous managers have good reasons to engage in leadership meta-talk. Put differently, leadership meta-talk is a normal part of a manager's job and, at least to some extent, morally neutral.

This view of the moral neutrality of leadership meta-talk is grounded in earlier and related scholarship. For example, in his discussion of sensemaking, Weick (1995) argues that managers should not only 'walk the talk' but also 'talk the walk' (p. 182), because doing so helps managers to better understand the meaning of their own actions. Aspirational talk allows managers to formulate visions that are appealing, even if these visions require future actions that are not yet clearly defined (Brunsson, 2002). Similarly, subtext talk can clarify the meaning of actions and help subordinates to better understand their managers (c.f. Smircich and Morgan, 1982). Nevertheless, being aware of the discrepancy between talk and practice and the logic behind it can help subordinates keep a critical eye on the risk of leadership meta-talk becoming deceptive.

Implications for Theory

Our theory of leadership meta-talk advances leadership research by integrating attributional, romanticizing, and behavioural views. We show how managers themselves can romanticize leadership by providing positively charged aspirations, explanations, or justifications of their work. By contrast, previous research on the romance of leadership focused on the role of followers, the media, and context in creating inflated accounts of leadership (see, e.g., Bligh et al., 2011). In addition, we extend research on the antecedents of how people make attributions of leadership. Whereas previous research is grounded in Kelley's (1973) model that considers attributions as a function of objective or perceived covariations between potential causes and effects (Martinko et al., 2007), we build on Malle's (2011) extension that encompasses also the role of subjective reasons in the process of making causal attributions. Specifically, we outline how leadership meta-talk can influence leadership attributions by providing information about the beliefs and desires underlying managerial behaviour. Furthermore, we show how leadership meta-talk serves two distinct functions that have not been identified by previous research on leadership behaviours (e.g., Fleishman et al., 1991; Morgeson et al., 2010; Yukl, 2012), namely influencing attributions of leadership and portraying the workplace in a harmonious and well-ordered way. Hence, we identify leadership meta-talk as an overlooked type of leadership behaviour that is not reducible to the common categories of task-, relations-, change-, and externally oriented behaviours (Yukl, 2012).

Our work speaks to three further streams of management research. First, Pfeffer (1981) identified symbolic action as an important part of management that creates a shared understanding of the organization (see also Schnackenberg et al., 2019). Leadership meta-talk can be seen as a form of symbolic action that seeks to create a shared understanding about work issues. However, leadership meta-talk is self-centred and has markedly different conversational content and goals than what current research on symbolic action

focuses on. Hence, LMT is an overlooked type of symbolic action. Second, sensemaking seeks to create a shared understanding of the situation (Weick, 1995) and is an essential part in the process of organizing (Weick et al., 2005). Leadership meta-talk can be seen as a form of sensemaking too. However, sensemaking is mostly retrospective and concerned with understanding a disruption (Maitlis and Christianson, 2014; Sandberg and Tsoukas, 2015), whereas LMT is more meta-oriented, does not necessarily relate to a specific disorder or episode, and is potentially future-oriented. Rather than trying to make sense of a situation, leadership meta-talk seeks to create a favourable image of the manager. In this sense, leadership meta-talk overlaps to some extent with impression management (Bolino et al., 2008). However, leadership meta-talk influences not only how a person is perceived but also what the acts mean and how they should be interpreted. And LMT does not have to serve self-promotional purposes, but ego-centric motives can also dominate when leadership meta-talk is directed at the manager herself instead of at others. Third, Effron et al. (2018) argue that a mismatch between words and deeds is interpreted as hypocritical when the person is seen as claiming an undeserved moral benefit. We have outlined the prevalence of interpretive ambiguity, making it unclear whether a manager is hypocritical or not. Under these conditions, leadership meta-talk can influence others' interpretations and make leaders appear less hypocritical. Thus, leadership meta-talk can help managers defend themselves or preempt accusations of hypocrisy.

Implications for Practice and Society

Our identification of the talking-doing gap as a pervasive and systemic feature of workplaces has important implications for both practice and society. Slightly grandiose leadership meta-talk can have positive effects on managers and is often unavoidable and morally neutral. However, excessive leadership meta-talk can fuel inflated self-understandings and unrealistic images of managerial leadership, leading to negative outcomes such as employee cynicism and disengagement. Thus, we suggest that managers, employees, and society should affirm moderate leadership meta-talk as a normal feature of the workplace while maintaining a critical distance from its content. This approach addresses important societal concerns (Wickert et al., 2021) because we provide a more nuanced understanding of the gap between talking and doing about leadership as a pervasive societal phenomenon and offer recommendations for dealing with it. We explain these practical and societal implications in three steps (see Table IV).

First, managers should not feel bad about engaging in slightly grandiose leadership meta-talk. While modesty is valued in many contexts and leadership meta-talk can lead to exaggeration, it is a normal part of the manager's job to put a positive spin on one's leadership. However, managers should avoid internalizing these expectations because they reflect institutional pressures that are difficult to meet and because some managers find the discrepancy between ideal and reality problematic, even painful (Sveningsson and Alvesson, 2016). Without critical distance, leaders' identities may oscillate between grandiosity and shame. Therefore, maintaining such distance may help maintain mental health. Second, employees should recognize that a gap between

Table IV. Practical and societal implications of leadership meta-talk and the talking-doing gap

	Affirmative implications	*Skeptical implications*
For managers	Managers should abstain from creating blatant gaps between words and deeds, but also not feel bad about doing leadership meta-talk, even if they struggle to live up to it	Very big gaps between leadership meta-talk and practice appear deceptive or create excessive expectations that lead to fragile identities and mental health risks
For employees	Employees should accept the talking-doing gap as a normal feature of the workplace and consider leadership meta-talk as potentially sincere	Employees should keep a critical distance from their managers' talk to avoid excessive expectations and undue idealization or demonization of them
For society as a whole	Society should regard the talking-doing gap as a reflection of (too) high expectations towards managers, including by managers themselves. Accepting some discrepancies between leadership meta-talk and practice adds realism, but too big discrepancies can lead to cynicism and accusations of managerial hypocrisy. In addition, persuasive leadership meta-talk masks power imbalances and smooths workplace tensions, reinforcing the status quo	

their managers' words and deeds is normal and often reflects their sincere aspirations and interpretations. There is nothing wrong with managers setting positive goals for the future or emphasizing the positive aspects of their practices, even if reality is more complex (Brunsson, 2002). However, employees should also maintain a critical distance, as unrealistic expectations can lead to the idealization or demonization of managers, overshadowing the contributions of others in the organization. Third, society should take leadership meta-talk with a grain of salt while still avoiding cynicism. Managers may be more important than recent discourses on agility or decentralization suggest (Foss and Klein, 2022), but they are still likely to be less effective or moral than their own talk or the leadership industry portrays. Thus, we call for a nuanced view of managerial work that avoids both hyperbolic praise and disillusionment. Finally, we highlight the role of leadership meta-talk in sustaining organizational and societal arrangements. At the collective level, persuasive leadership meta-talk masks power imbalances and lubricates workplace tensions. By implication, persuasive leadership meta-talk improves the immediate functioning of organizations by reducing conflict, but it also blocks systemic change that would be desirable in the long run. That is, leadership meta-talk legitimizes and reinforces the social order, for better or worse.

Avenues for Future Research

Future research can extend and test our theory of leadership meta-talk and the talking-doing gap in three ways. First, close-up empirical work can more closely examine how managers use and combine leadership meta-talk to make sense of past and ongoing actions and to formulate aspirations for the future. For example, while we juxtaposed formulaic and casual leadership meta-talk, managers may simultaneously engage in both

forms of talk by using positively connoted or suggestive descriptors (e.g., saying one 'does leadership' when spending time with subordinates). Such talk is explicit by drawing on institutionalized leadership vocabulary, but it is also subtle by doing so in unobtrusive and seemingly descriptive ways. Neither managers nor their audiences may be aware of how the use of connoted descriptors such as 'leadership' constructs reality in terms of asymmetrical leadership relationships rather than egalitarian peer relationships or formal subordination. Second, future research can shed additional light on the costs of doing leadership. These costs have generally been overlooked due to the decontextualized (Johns, 2023) and conflated nature of leadership research (Fischer and Sitkin, 2023). It is known from adjacent fields that doing good has costs as well as benefits (e.g., Wickert et al., 2016), suggesting that leadership behaviours as prescribed by leadership writings may also have downsides. Exploring these costs deserves further investigation. For example, demonstrating unconditional authenticity might be detrimental to one's professional image and similar types of costs might exist for other forms of leadership. Third, future research can examine the boundary conditions for the effectiveness of leadership meta-talk; not all talk may succeed in improving leadership attributions and making workplaces appear harmonious. For example, it is still unclear when subordinates view leadership meta-talk as 'nightmarish' (e.g., as William does in the opening example), as a sign of positive intentions (e.g., as some of Neville's team members in the case seem to view it), or as a sign of poor leadership (e.g., as some of Neville's team members seem to view it).

CONCLUSION

Our theory of leadership meta-talk and the talking-doing gap adds nuance to the study of leadership, and by taking leadership meta-talk seriously – but not literally – we can better navigate the realities of leadership in contemporary organizations. We have argued that the talking-doing gap in leadership is a significant and somewhat unavoidable phenomenon in organizations, and that leadership meta-talk is an overlooked type of leadership behaviour that influences people's attributions of leadership and presents workplace relationships in an overly harmonious and orderly manner. Recognizing that leadership meta-talk is both a normal part of a manager's job and a potentially problematic source of misrepresenting organizational realities, the resulting image of managers is mixed. They are typically neither the heroes their own leadership meta-talk might suggest, nor necessarily villains, hypocrites, or failures if their leadership practice is less common and glamorous than their talk. Like many other people in contemporary society, managers simply struggle between the ideals and the realities of their work. Based on these insights, we seek to advance an understanding of managerial leadership that is neither heroic nor diabolical, but simply human: full of ambiguities, aspirations, and sobering realities – and legitimate hope for improvement.

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