Leadership between decks

A synthesis and development of engagement and resistance theories of leadership based on evidence from practice in Royal Navy warships

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Abstract

Purpose – The purpose of this paper is to understand the role of interaction in the process of leadership. Interaction has been claimed to be a leadership competence in earlier research into leadership in the Royal Navy. The aim of this research is to define how interaction works within naval teams.

Design/methodology/approach – The research uses Grounded Theory. Following a series of leadership discussions in separate focus groups, discussion topics were coded and subjected to recursive qualitative analysis. The grounded approach is used to synthesise and develop existing leadership theory strands as well as to extend the trait-process approach to leadership.

Findings – The research discovers the key interaction behaviours of engagement, disengagement and levelling. Our findings support recent developments in follower-centric perceptions of leadership and in interaction specifically. The authors develop engagement theory by combining it with the less well researched area of leadership resistance. The authors then re-frame resistance as social levelling, a more comprehensive interaction mechanism.

Research limitations/implications – The research is highly contextual because of its qualitative approach. Some of the detailed reactions to leadership behaviours may not found in other naval or military teams and are unlikely to be generalisable to non-military environments. However, the mechanism described, that of engagement, disengagement and levelling is considered highly generalisable if not universal. Rather than develop new theory fragments in an already confusing research environment, the authors fuse engagement and resistance theory to extend trait-process theories of leadership. The result is a coherent and integrative model of leadership dynamics which frames leadership in the mundane interaction of leaders and followers.

Practical implications – Interaction as a competence is strongly supported as is the encouragement of cultures which promote interaction. Selection procedures for future leaders should include interaction skills. The use of subtle methods of resistance are highlighted. Such methods may indicate poor interaction long before more overt forms of resistance are apparent.

Social implications – The continual monitoring of leaders and implied ambivalence towards leadership could be critical to our understanding of leadership. A dynamic feedback circle between leaders and followers may be a more useful paradigm for the characterising of leadership throughout society. A better understanding of the power of followers to frame and re-frame leadership would help to manage the expectations of leaders.

Originality/value – This research uniquely uses Grounded Theory to extend current theories (competence based leadership and trait-process theories of leadership), explaining the complexity of leadership interaction. The research also synthesises and develops engagement and levelling (resistance to leadership) theories for the first time. As such the project suggests a full range model of follower response to leadership including subtle forms of resistance to power. The value of group-level analysis using focus groups is recommended, especially for other collective leader-follower approaches to leadership. The research is of interest to those studying leadership process theories, competencies, leader-follower traditions, engagement and power/resistance research.

Keywords Focus groups, Leadership, Interaction, Engagement, Disengagement, Levelling

Paper type Research paper

Introduction

Leadership as a process of social interaction is in need of further research (Karp, 2013). Despite the development of follower-centric theories the banal interactions between leader and follower (and their importance) are poorly understood (Larsson and Lundholm, 2010). This research aims to contribute to a greater understanding of leadership interaction. We investigate the role of interaction in leadership effectiveness. Leadership interaction is an increasingly popular paradigm and focuses on multi-directional relations rather than the actions of single leaders (Gill, 2011, p. 29; Meindl, 1995).

Interaction is invariably a focus of leadership development programmes. The Royal Navy's (RN's) Command Competence Framework (CCF) includes it as a competency. (Tate, 2009, 2010). Personal experience of the first author serving in a Mine Counter-Measures Vessel (MCMV), operating off the coast of Iraq (during the invasion of 2003), showed how a ship-borne team could achieve superior performance through interrelating. But what is the nature of this interaction? Our study adds to an understanding of leader-follower interaction, drawing on evidence from practice in RN warships.

In the next section we introduce the RN's method of selecting commanding officers, the criterion of interaction and explain the RN's competency approach. The following section discusses how traits and competencies can be used in a process-based view of leadership. Modes of interaction (leadership styles) are discussed next, linking to engagement and resistance theories. These theories were reviewed after analysing the transcripts inductively. The results of this analysis suggested a review of literature pertaining to engagement and resistance. The last two sections of the Introduction describe the naval context and the contribution we make to leadership theory and practice.

Interaction as a competence in the RN

The RN regards the command of warships (known as "sea command") as having special significance. In the words of Rear Admiral Montgomery (Chief of Staff for Naval Personnel in 2009):

> Of all the promotion and selection processes for which I am responsible, those that select people for sea command are – rank for rank – the ones which have the most direct bearing on the Royal Navy's operational effectiveness (Tate, 2009).

The CCF was introduced in 2009 to ensure the best candidates were selected for sea command (Tate, 2009). This is based on Young and Dulewicz's framework of competencies, which is now integrated into Command, Leadership and Management development across the RN (Young and Dulewicz, 2005, 2008, 2009). Their research used a sample of personnel on leadership courses. Appraisal reports were compared with competencies based on leadership and personality questionnaires. (Young and Dulewicz, 2005). Their survey of 271 individuals (with a 97 per cent response rate) suggested four clusters of competencies.

This framework was then developed into criteria for sea command (Tate, 2009), using Young and Dulewicz's (2005, 2008, 2009) work. A further review of the literature and interviews with 14 senior officers added a fifth cluster: warfare skills (Tate, 2009).

The competency clusters which constitute the CCF are:

- conceptualise;
- align;

- interact;
- create success; and
- warfare skills.

Of these competency clusters, "interact" was the most highly correlated one with overall performance (Young and Dulewicz, 2009).

Leadership as a dynamic process
Traits and competencies. Leadership traits are characteristics shown by successful leaders. They are generally psychological in nature (Antonakis *et al.*, 2012; Colbert *et al.*, 2012). Boyatzis (2008) views traits as embedded in personality, whereas competencies are behavioural skills, influenced partly by traits. Antonakis *et al.* (2012) state that traits, as individual differences, are regaining popularity in leadership research.

We consider competencies, specifically "interact", rather than traits *per se*. The competency approach focuses on behaviour which predicts superior leadership:

> When traits are requirements for doing something, they are called "competencies". Traits of leadership are competencies. They are needed if someone is to emerge, succeed or be effective as leader (Bass, 2008, p. 106).

And, as Zaccaro (2007) states, traits of leadership should not be confined to personality but include motives, values, social and cognitive ability, and knowledge.

Leadership emergence. The theory above implicates a causal chain of events through which leadership emerges from traits and competencies through interaction (e.g. Antonakis *et al.*, 2012; Colbert *et al.*, 2012; Zaccaro, 2007, 2012; Mehra *et al.*, 2006; Lord *et al.*, 2001).

Having established event-level analysis of interaction as a promising method of inquiry, we turn to the question of what events to study. Dinh and Lord (2012) suggested the use of "jarring" events which evoke vivid, high-context memories. Larsson and Lundholm (2010) suggest, contrariwise, the study of everyday events for leadership research. As the authors state "[…] leadership is better seen as occurring in the midst of management." This dichotomy arises from our perception of leadership as a grandiose or transformational concept and how we perceive management as the correct repository for "everyday" things (Larsson and Lundholm, 2010).

The RN provides both "jarring" and mundane events aplenty. Through intensive training and, operations RN personnel are subjected to intensive, significant and traumatic events. But most of the time sailors are engaged in everyday activities. The RN context is fortuitous as sailors appear to greatly enjoy sharing sea stories of just the kind referred to by Dinh and Lord (2012). This activity is known fondly as "spinning dits", a well-known pastime in the RN. This activity is a part of the "glue" which holds RN life together (St George, 2012, p. 21). It is rich in context, episodic and laden with social information.

Capturing information from "dit-spinning" is one way that events can be recorded and deciphered. Such a notion underlies our research, which aims to analyse events of jarring and mundane features of naval life.

Leadership styles. Modes of interaction are also styles of leadership. Leadership style theories emerged in the 1950s and 1960s following dissatisfaction with the trait-based theories (Gill, 2011, p. 71). Seminal studies established styles which were viewed as task or people oriented (the Michigan studies) or as "structuring" or "consideration" (the Ohio State studies) (Gill, 2011, p. 71).

Styles approaches have lessened in importance in academic research although their practical applications make them important in leadership development. Action Centred Leadership (ACL) remains at the core of leadership training in the RN and is based broadly on task/people approaches to team leadership (Gill, 2011, p. 74). Leadership styles have lost traction within academia because they fail to account for situational aspects of leadership, do not include the role of values and have failed to sufficiently establish a link between different styles and team performance. However it is clear that followers prefer people oriented styles of leadership (Gill, 2011, p. 72). Khan's (1990) engagement theory claims that concern for people (in interactions) is an antecedent for engagement and team performance.

Engagement and resistance. Khan (1990) conducted two qualitative studies of the psychological conditions for effective leadership in the work place. While describing these conditions he outlined a dynamic system of engagement and disengagement. Khan (1990) described engagement as the "harnessing of personal selves". Gill (2011, p. 257) describes engagement as: "the extent to which people in an organization will willingly, even eagerly, give of their discretionary effort, over and above doing what they have to do". Disengagement is described by Khan (1990) as the "uncoupling" of the three personal resources (cognitive, emotional and physical). It is the withdrawal or withholding of personal investment in a task.

Vogelgesang *et al.* (2013) describe engaged employees as an asset because they work harder and perform better. Disengaged employees, on the other hand, are a drag on performance, morale and resources.

Khan, and more recent researchers, point out the lack of research into the processes of engagement and disengagement (Khan, 1990; Rich *et al.*, 2010; Xu and Thomas, 2011). Khan (1990) claimed that task-oriented leadership behaviours lead to disengagement. Excessively task-oriented behaviours also trigger resistance to leadership (Rodrigues and Collinson, 1995). Resistance to leadership still features rarely in leadership research (Collinson, 2006, 2012). Mainstream leadership theory lacks a coherent and comprehensive explanation of resistance to leadership in practice, treating it as abnormal and irrational (Collinson, 2005).

The causes of resistance appear to be the variation between followers' and leaders' situational perceptions (Collinson, 2002, 2005, 2006, 2012; Rodrigues and Collinson, 1995). Lukes' controversial theory of power also suggests a continual desire for autonomy (Bradshaw, 1976; Benton, 1981). And Foucault cited in Collinson (2005) points out that resistance is always found in the presence of power.

Extending the theoretical framework

Antonakis *et al.* (2012) describe a model of the leadership process, from traits to outcomes. Their research suggests a greater understanding of the interaction stage is the logical next step. We aim to extend the theoretical framework described in our review above and to understand the end-process better. We use an inductive method as this may be used not only to derive new theory but also to build on and synthesise established theory (Bazeley, 2007).

This article describes processes from previous research such as engagement theory (Khan, 1990) and resistance to leadership (e.g. Collinson, 2012). We take the novel steps of combining these theories and developing resistance with levelling theories from anthropology (e.g. Boehm, 2001). This synthesis extends the framework of trait-process theories by embodying the dynamics of leader/follower interaction. It was only after coding our data that the emerging patterns suggested this combination of existing theories.

The naval context
We investigated a sub-section of the RN: MCMVs. These small ships, often called mine-hunters, enter minefields to render safe enemy munitions and allow the safe passage of other vessels. The task is dangerous and carried out in demanding conditions. The teams on board are small and close knit. A number of professions are represented, from mine-clearance divers and mine specialists to technicians and chefs. All are interdependent for success and safety. Three rank classes exist: officers, senior rates and junior rates.

To harness the richness of the sailors' stories (dits), we used a qualitative approach. Rather than ask about specific events, we knew from experience that our participants would be eager to share stories which hinged on socially significant (mundane and jarring) events. We did not code specific forms of interaction indicated in the CCF, preferring to ground our theory of interaction in the data. The method chosen to do this was focus groups.

Methodology
Focus groups
Focus groups collect data by convening people in a group, asking questions and listening to what they say (and how they say it), thereby gathering information relevant to a topic (Krueger and Casey, 2009, p. 2). Bryman and Bell (2011, pp. 13-14) point out that focus groups can support an inductive approach. Grounded methods develop theory out of data using recursive techniques (Bryman and Bell, 2011, p. 576). As a qualitative approach, focus groups are an effective channel for grounded techniques (Kitzinger, 1994), although they have not always featured prominently in management research (Partington, 2000). This would appear to be due to the difficulties inherent in adopting the rigours of a truly grounded approach (Partington, 2000; Bryman and Bell, 2011, p. 577).

A grounded approach is appealing for this research in offering the opportunity to assess leadership interaction from the viewpoint of the sailors themselves. Previous leadership research within the RN has been positivistic and deductive. For example, Young and Dulewicz (2005, 2008, 2009) used subjects' appraisal reports to correlate leadership traits with performance on career-leadership courses. Our contextual view offers an alternative and complementary strategy to such research.

Data collection
Non-commissioned personnel (collectively called ratings) participated in groups called Interact Focus Groups (IFGs) to discuss leadership interaction. These individuals were serving on mine-hunters based in Faslane, the RN's nuclear-submarine base in Scotland. These vessels (and some of the participants) had seen action in Iraq (2003) and in Libya (2010). In total, 47 RN personnel participated, consisting of two cadres: Junior Rates and Senior Rates. Their average age was 32 (Junior Rates: 31; Senior Rates: 37) and they were overwhelmingly male – a fair representation of the situation at sea. Participants were split among focus groups such that five groups (IFG 1-5) constituted the junior level and three groups (IFG S1-S3) the senior level.

Eight focus groups were conducted using a maximum group size of eight, following the advice of Bryman and Bell (2011, p. 508; see also Morgan, 1996). MCMVs were used as these offered convenient access. These individuals were of equivalent status and known to one another. The benefits of using pre-existing groups are ease of recruitment, a relaxed environment and the use of shared stories (Munday, 2006; Bryman and Bell, 2011, p. 511).

A questioning route was devised (Krueger and Casey, 2009, p. 38) with complementary moderation techniques. The aim of the questions was firstly to establish the importance of interaction. If the groups believed interaction to be important it was intended to discover the nature of this interaction. Discussions were audio-recorded, downloaded and imported into NVivo 8 (and later NVivo 10). The combined transcripts of the focus groups comprised 70,000 words.

Analysis

Coding. A system of codes was adopted following the protocol of Grounded Theory dictated by Corbin and Strauss (1990). Text in the transcripts was coded using open, axial and selective coding (Bryman and Bell, 2011, p. 578). Text was split into themes (open codes), which were organised in similar clusters (axial codes).These codes were placed under a central theme called the core category (Bryman and Bell, 2011; Bazeley, 2007).

Our approach to Grounded Theory. As well as the coding technique other grounded techniques were included in our methodology. As themes emerged they suggested future data-collection opportunities in a process called recursive application (Bryman and Bell, 2011, p. 576). As the questioning route was altered to account for new themes it was imperative to maintain consistency with research aims throughout.

We also searched for coding overlaps or intersections and clustering of codes (see Bazeley, 2007, pp. 182-192). Finally, the recursive application of new themes to earlier transcripts was applied; this is known as constant comparison (Bryman and Bell, 2011, p. 576). In practice this means coding and re-coding transcripts to ensure all themes are captured.

Theoretical saturation was deemed to have occurred when no new themes emerged during the discussions (Bryman and Bell, 2011, p. 442), typically lasting 45 minutes. Most focus-group projects consist of four to six discussions, by which point saturation has usually occurred (Morgan, 1996). Table I shows the process used to analyse the transcript

Phase/operation	Stage	Description	Reference (Bazeley, 2007)
Field notes	Completion of focus group	Memo created to capture initial thoughts after focus group, noting dominant themes for detecting saturation. This was transferred to a document memo in NVivo once transcript typed	p. 62
Annotation	Completion of typing transcript	Notes made on specific occurrences	p. 63
Comparison one	Completion of all transcripts	Open coding	pp. 66-80
Comparison two	Completion of comparison one	Open coding, re-examining earlier transcripts in the light of recently added nodes	pp. 66-80
Comparison three	Completion of comparison two	Axial coding	pp. 100-120
Pit stop	Completion of comparison three	Holistic analysis and appraisal of overall analytical structure	p. 155
Comparison four	Completion of pit stop	Selective coding	p. 191

Table I.
Coding process for interaction focus groups transcripts

following the guidelines outlined in Bazeley (2007). This process was adhered to so as to ensure the principles of constant comparison and recursive applications.

Table I shows the stages of analysis. Initial preparation stages such as the taking of notes were followed by comparison stages. These stages are repeated to achieve constant comparison, each one taking stock of new themes and applying them recursively. The "pit stop" is a reflection stage. The methodology is taken from Bazeley (2007).

Group dynamics

Focus groups should capture group dynamics (Bryman and Bell, 2011, p. 505; Munday, 2006; Kitzinger, 1994; Morgan, 1996). In our case we listened to described events where leaders' actions are watched and countered. As it transpired, we were witnessing important behaviours.

Findings

Our analysis developed six axial codes supported by 47 open codes. It is not intended to discuss all the codes, but the more significant codes are discussed in this section. Although a core category was developed (a repository for all leadership feedback), it was the axial and open codes which allowed us to derive a unique synthesis of leadership and anthropological theory. Therefore the core category is not discussed further.

Coding

The first three axial codes were leadership behaviours. The first two were termed engaging leadership and disengaging leadership. The third axial code was that of leadership style. The notion of style did not seem as important as the two preceding axial codes. Indeed the ratings in our groups were of the opinion that style was not a significant leadership factor, so we do not discuss style any further here.

The final three axial codes concern the way in which followers react to leader behaviour. Participants stated that they were more or less likely to "give 100%" depending on leader behaviour. Their language was often profound, suggesting deep commitment or withdrawal. Less often, but with animated language and gestures, the sailors gave examples of how they thwart ("level") poor leaders. We termed these responses engagement, disengagement and levelling. Table II shows the complete system of themes that were developed during the analysis and is presented for completeness. The most significant themes are discussed and developed in this section.

Open codes are shown in the right hand column, showing themes which emerged early in the analysis. For example Management By Walking Around was used to describe examples of leadership by getting around and talking to people. These codes were grouped under headline themes known as axial codes, shown in the left hand column.

The following sections break down interaction into two leader behaviours and three follower responses.

Leader behaviours

Engaging leadership. In all focus groups, there was a determined assertion that good interaction leads to improved performance. A sailor in the first group makes the point:

> I think that was down to him and his leadership because you never felt like you worked *for* him; you felt like you worked *with* him. And that was as a baby stoker [junior marine engineering mechanic] you felt like that (IFG 1).

Axial code	Open codes	
Engaging leadership	Approachability	Honesty
	Bearing	Management by walking
	Confidence	Around (MBWA)
	Consistency	Mutual support
	Discipline	People skills
	Duty of care	Social events
	Examples of good leadership	Social learning
	Experience counts	Sports
	Gaining understanding	Structure is good
	Getting stuck in	Value of routines
Disengaging leadership	Barking orders	Junior officers
	Empty information	Mushroom syndrome
	Flapping	Over familiarity
	Goal variation	Undervaluing
Style	Formality	
	Informality	
	Knowing the boundaries	
Engagement	Getting more out of the team	Group cohesion
	Goal alignment	Independence
Disengagement	Desertion	Morale drops
	Distancing	Not giving 100%
Levelling	Direct criticism	Information reversal
	Dripping	Mocking
	Feigned ignorance	Monitoring
	Gossip	Power reversal

Table II.
Coding themes
for interaction
focus groups

Disengaging leadership. The participants emphatically described some leader behaviour as detrimental to group performance. For example, during IFG 3 the sailors discussed the impact of being "kept in the dark":

Sailor 1: "You wouldn't mind, like, the changes in the Ship's programme […] not a thing that bothers me. It's just that we never get told, ever […]"

Moderator: "OK."

Sailor 2: "Well, it does change last minute."

Moderator: "How does it affect you?"

Sailor 2: "Straight away it affects you. If you've got something planned in […]. if you hear the lads are dripping [complaining] […] Obviously yeah […] the heads do drop" (IFG 3).

Follower responses
Engagement. Generally groups held that greater application or effort was a likely consequence of better leadership. An example is given below:

Senior Rate 1: "The officer we're speaking about […] his predecessor had a totally different leadership style; he wouldn't just send an e-mail, he would come down and he would be very polite, saying 'Would you mind? Do you mind?'"

Senior Rate 2: [Interrupts […] [Laughter]

Senior Rate 1: "[…] and he would achieve so much. I had so much respect for him and he made such a difference."

Moderator: "Do you think he got more out of his team that way?"

Senior Rate 1: "Oh, 100%. And he went on draft [posted away] and everyone's, like, 'Oh, […]'" (IFG S2)

The Senior Rate in the discussion above suggests that an Officer he admired was capable of inducing not only a greater level of effort but also an emotional commitment among his team. We termed this phenomenon engagement.

Disengagement. As might be expected, disengagement was another response to some leader behaviours (i.e. disengaging leadership). In the example below, a senior rate discusses the effect of a captain who did not interact well with the crew:

Senior Rate 1: "Ermmmm […] it sort of isolated him from the crew in a negative way, you know. 'Oh, it's the old man [captain]', whereas you get others where their door is always open. You'll see them on 2 Deck and you won't think 'Oh, God! It's the CO [Commanding Officer].' He's down there, just touring the estate (IFG S3)."

Levelling. Participants also discussed a third response which was used less often: that of resistance. Again we found extant theory (in both leadership studies and anthropology) which explained this behaviour. Resistance to leadership is a plausible third option for followers with respect to leader behaviours. The RN provides an ideal context for research into resistance to leadership especially because overt defiance is strictly dealt with. If covert resistance can be used in a military context, it most certainly can be used in other contexts.

Theories of resistance to leadership offer a single motivation for resistance: unrealistic leadership goals. Our findings include resistance to realistic goals where leadership methods are not appropriate. "Barking" orders was one area which generated resistance even though those orders may be rational. Resistance theories do not account for subtle methods of resistance such as gossip. The work of Rodrigues and Collinson (1995) is, exceptionally, an example of subtle resistance through the use of humour.

In anthropology resistance generates much more interest than appears in leadership studies. In traditional societies, egalitarianism has been maintained through the rigorous suppression of assertiveness in individuals, especially in would be leaders. Such studies are not necessarily generalisable and may not interest leadership scholars directly. However most anthropologists agree that hierarchical leadership is a recent development in human history (Eerkens *et al.*, 2009). Cross-cultural experiments on punishment conducted by Henrich *et al.* (2006) showed that egalitarian behaviour remains a part of the human psyche.

Christopher Boehm, a primatologist, has organised his observations of human society into a theory of resistance to leadership called Reverse Dominance Hierarchies (Boehm, 1993, 2001). He asserts that potential leaders are actively suppressed, or dominated, by the majority. Boehm suggests that humans are ambivalent towards leadership and seek to contain leaders through a process of social levelling (Boehm, 1993, 2001).

We are interested in how this antagonism plays out in mundane interactions. In the following example, a sailor describes how poor information flow was dealt with by essentially antagonising the Officer concerned until the Captain intervened.

The Captain inadvertently created an opportunity to openly criticise the offending Officer without risking repercussions:

> I was on a ship where […] erm […] the Daily Orders, the routine was changing throughout the day. […] And people kept going up and asking the XO [Executive Officer] […] erm […] "You know what sort of routine the Ship should be working?" […] and things like that. The XO then went to the Captain; he was complaining because everybody kept going up and asking him. The Captain came by in the end and he says "Well, you know the XO's getting bother and that." Well […] "To be honest, sir, it's the XO's job to run the Ship's routine. So the reason people are going on at him is because no-one knows what's going on. If everyone knew and the Ship's routine was going via Daily Orders there would be no need ask to him every minute of the day!" (Sailor 3 IFG 1).

It is widely believed that assertive individuals are suppressed using a system of social levelling (Eerkens *et al.*, 2009, p. 7). Social levelling tactics include gossip, ridicule, physical punishment and social isolation (Eerkens *et al.*, 2009, p. 7). Most of these tactics (gossip, ridicule and social isolation) were openly discussed by the sailors as methods of dealing with unpopular leaders. By these means power differentials are minimised. Boehm's well-known book *Hierarchy in the Forest* asserts that levelling is a universal human trait (Boehm, 2001). Evolutionary Leadership Theory (Van Vugt and Ahuja, 2010, p. 3; King *et al.*, 2009) also deploys levelling theory to describe leadership dynamics.

Social levelling provides an explanation for the assertion that power generates resistance. It also creates a fine-grained explanation of resistance in action through the use of humour (e.g. Rodrigues and Collinson, 1995; Van Vugt and Ahuja, 2010), gossip and ostracism (e.g. Boehm, 2001). The notion of levelling allows a flexible system of interaction between leaders and followers which minimises the risk of actual opposition and conflict.

The full interaction model is presented in Figure 1. This figure includes all codes which were used in the transcripts. Interaction takes the form of engaging or disengaging leadership, regardless of leadership style. Responses take the form of engagement, disengagement or levelling.

The model demonstrates the range of possible behaviours and responses discussed in the focus groups. The core category is shown at the top, with direct links to leader behaviour and from this to follower response. The nature of these interactions is shown through the open codes inside the boxes. Feedback from follower responses is shown with a dotted line. The importance of style is relatively diminished as an associated factor.

Discussion

Leadership interaction leads to a spectrum of responses ranging from engagement to resistance. These responses are due to the continual monitoring of leader behaviour by followers. Once a consensus is reached, followers may endorse or sanction leaders.

Theoretical implications

Leadership studies remain highly fragmented despite a number of attempts to fuse theory fragments into a coherent whole (Gill, 2011, p. 100). And leadership research has been criticised for focussing solely on leader differences (Meindl, 1995). Leadership research also appears to have considered each theory one at a time. Rather than generate new theory fragments, we have fused engagement and resistance theory
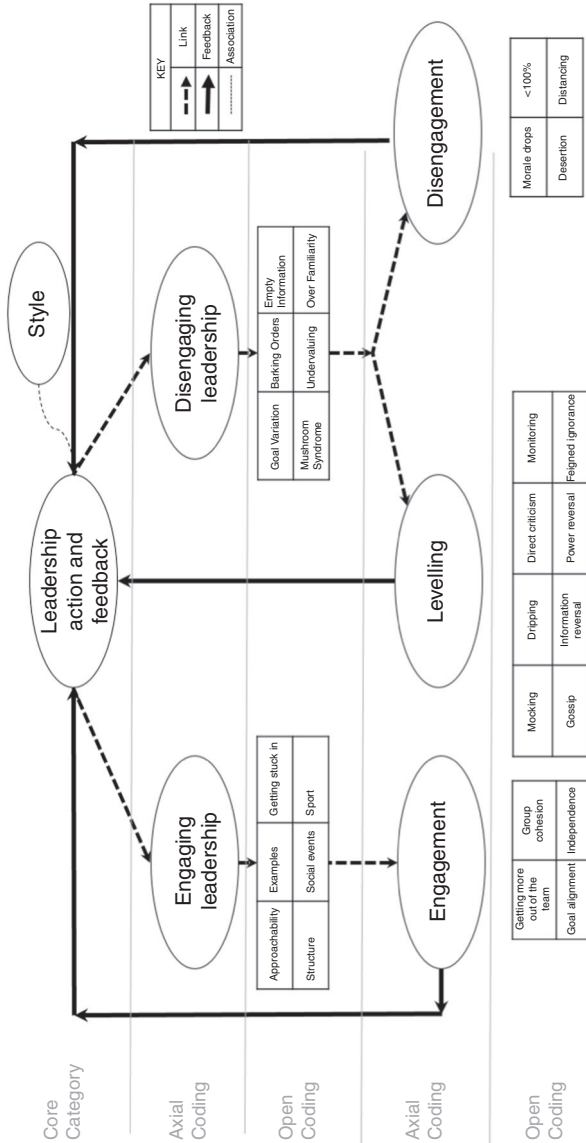
Figure 1.
The interaction
model: selective,
axial and
open coding

along with trait-process theories. This is not the first time a theoretical synthesis has been assembled. For example Gill (2011) discusses an integrative model of six core themes and practices, including engagement (pp. 100-106). Our focus, however, has been on a fine-grained explanation of interaction, so we have moved from themes to processes.

To our knowledge this is the first time trait-process theories of leadership have been combined with a competency framework. We have extended one competency cluster in the RN's Command Competency Framework to explain the interaction dynamics which result. Casimir *et al.* (2014) describe the area between the leader-follower relationship and follower performance as a "black box". The engagement-disengagement-levelling responses we found provide at least some description of the contents of the "box".

Trait-process approaches to leadership have justified the need to understand the processes which bridge individual differences in leaders and team output. They have also prescribed the means by which to do so (Antonakis *et al.*, 2012; Zaccaro, 2007 and Dinh and Lord, 2012). Little research in this area actually specifies a model which explains the dynamics of trait-processes (for an exception see Derue *et al.*, 2011). While this research is exploratory and requires further work, the two drivers (engaging and disengaging leadership) explain the expression of the leadership competence "interaction". These two modes comprise a number of elements shown at Figure 1. The three response modes (engagement, disengagement and levelling) complete a sketch of interaction in the leadership/followership process.

We accept that more research is required as to how these modes are triggered in different contexts. A criticism may be levelled that studies such as Derue *et al.* (2011) have established such a model empirically. Their study outlines a model of trait-process but does not map specific traits with specific outcomes. Although the research reported in this article is qualitative, it achieves greater clarity in terms of which leader behaviours result in which follower behaviours.

Similarly we have connected engagement theory to leader differences. Engagement theory has been somewhat disembodied, although antecedents of engagement have been discussed (Khan, 1990; Xu and Thomas, 2011). These antecedents involve interaction, placing engagement centrally in the interaction leadership model. The context for engagement described by Khan (1990) is thematic, whereas we have identified the processes which drive engagement or disengagement.

Theories of resistance to leadership have been an impoverished area of leadership research (Collinson, 2012). Combining resistance with engagement theory re-frames resistance as one of the likely responses to leadership interaction. Boehm (1993, 2001) suggests there is a universal ambivalence to leadership. We feel this provides a more plausible scenario for resistance than simply goal variation (Collinson, 2012), which explains only some of the levelling responses from the focus-group discussions. Resistance theory tends to discuss overt action (e.g. Collinson, 2002, 2005, 2006, 2012), whereas levelling theory covers a wider range of responses, many of which are subtle and continuous (e.g. Boehm, 1993, 2001; Van Vugt and Ahuja, 2010). Both theories combine to create a comprehensive range of resistance behaviours, but levelling theory describes accurately the responses openly admitted in our focus groups.

Leadership within small professional teams in inhospitable environments is an increasingly attractive area for research. Levelling behaviours may be triggered by proximity, and this may plausibly explain their presence in anthropological sources, especially those studying small egalitarian groups. Some of the modes of engaging leadership, such as participation in sports, may also have a levelling

dimension (playing sports usually relies on relinquishing rank while playing). This model could therefore be studied in similar contexts such as other small tightly knit professional teams.

Managerial implications
Interaction as a competence (Young and Dulewicz, 2005, 2008, 2009) was strongly supported by our focus groups. In practice selection processes would benefit from inclusion of an interaction competence for leaders. A culture where interaction can thrive is likely to result in, and sustain, engagement in a workforce.

Leaders in all workplaces would benefit from an awareness of the subtle levelling activity which occurs universally. Activities as innocuous as gossip may be a reflection of existing poor interaction quality. And they may develop into entrenched resistance long before they become evident and overt.

The RN's use of the interact competence for the selection of commanding officers for warships is supported by our research. The sailors unanimously stated that interaction improves team performance. The reader may feel this is self-evident, but the RN has command and control styles of leadership at its disposal. It is entirely feasible that teams are directed with minimal interaction. Other contexts may be similar, e.g. military, policing, emergency services or other highly disciplined professions. Our research indicates that command and control styles of leadership do not capitalise on the opportunity for engagement.

Limitations of the research
Qualitative research is often criticised for its lack of generalisability (Bryman and Bell, 2011, p. 398). Although this research may equally apply to any close knit professional team, many of the specific behaviours may vary. We have therefore described the over-arching principles of engagement, disengagement and levelling as responses in leader-follower interaction. These broader processes we believe to be widespread, although at present we cannot justify this empirically. This limitation means that researchers must conduct their own exploratory research to understand the context of their own research areas, prior to delving into the dynamics described here. Finally, while we found that the sailors were extremely honest and, especially in groups, content to discuss the negative and positive aspects of their leadership experiences, in other contexts employees may be rather more circumspect or political in their responses to questions.

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