

University of Groningen

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Published in:
Arts Management Quarterly

IMPORTANT NOTE: You are advised to consult the publisher's version (publisher's PDF) if you wish to cite from it. Please check the document version below.

Document Version
Publisher's PDF, also known as Version of record

Publication date:
2019

[Link to publication in University of Groningen/UMCG research database](#)

Citation for published version (APA):

Kolsteeg, J., & Zierold, M. (2019). Mapping the meanings of Cultural Leadership: The use of the term in the field of arts management. *Arts Management Quarterly*, 6-10.

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Mapping the meanings of Cultural Leadership

The use of the term in the field of arts management

By Johan Kolsteeg and Martin Zierold

Given the (necessarily open-ended) discussion about the function of arts and culture in society, it is not surprising that there is a similar tension in deciding on the definition and content of the term ‘cultural leadership’. Most literature on the term can be seen as firmly – and problematically – rooted in Anglo-Saxon and European traditions of thought. But in contrast to academic attempts to put an end to this debate by looking for a unifying definition of the term (quite impossible, for that matter), this issue stresses the context specificity of the notion of “Cultural Leadership”. It embraces the idea that Cultural Leadership always is about relations (between people, departments within institutions, institutions and society etc.) and that the meanings of the term are relational as well, i.e. context-specific. The contributions of this issue reflect this diversity of meanings and show that defining Cultural Leadership is like a dramatic battle for discursive hegemony on one of our central terms.

While we believe it is important to keep the discourse on Cultural Leadership open for a diversity of uses and meanings, at the same time there is a need for mapping the terrain, so that similarities as well as differences between various uses can be identified and reflected upon. We cannot provide a thorough mapping of this kind within the limitations of this short introduction, yet we will try to briefly address three of the central questions which can help to put individual perspectives on Cultural Leadership in relation to each other as well as to some of the dominant academic approaches towards the term.

1. Leadership and/ or/ vs. management

Considering the numerous terms surrounding professional practices in artistic and cultural projects and organizations – including but not limited to arts administration, cultural management, arts management, cultural production – one might pose the question whether another vaguely defined term like “Cultural Leadership” is needed at all. Given the rising number of study programs, funding schemes, conferences and publications (such as this one) using the term “Cultural Leadership”, the pragmatic answer is obvious: there seem to be sufficient contexts which find this additional term helpful. But what then is the relation of Cultural Leadership with its siblings, most prominently, the notion of “management”? Some of the definitions of leadership differ massively in the way they distinguish these terms.

„While there can be management without leadership, there is no leadership without management.“

Most often however, the line of arguments goes like this: Cultural leadership can be understood as being gradually different from cultural management. Managing a cultural institution is the basis, leadership is adding to that a responsibility larger than ‘mere’ management. While there can be management without leadership, there is no leadership without management.

2. Cultural Leadership inside/ out

Yet, what exactly is this added responsibility which the term “leadership” implies going beyond the notion of management? There seem to be mainly two different answers to this question, positioning the idea of Cultural Leadership either firmly as an internal responsibility within a project or an organization, or as a responsibility to reach out beyond the borders of a given project or institution. Seen as a responsibility which is directed towards the inside of the organization, it is usually associated with ‘leading’ people and/ or developing a vision or strategy for the future development of the institution, i.e. proactively ‘leading’ it into the future.

*Examples for such approaches are the European agenda addressing relevant global issues and in contrast the 'provincialization' of Dutch cultural policy (Kolsteeg 2018) and a survey on regional cultural identity (Kolsteeg, Van den Hoogen 2018).

Those perspectives which argue for Cultural Leadership as reaching beyond the confines of an organization often argue that the term describes what happens when management transcends beyond the mere internal running of an organization, such as when a serious attempt is made to involve stakeholders in the organization's governance or when an organization tries to play a strong role in its community as an agent of change. In this view, there is no distinct line between management and leadership, rather management becomes leadership when a wider responsibility reaching outside of the organization is assumed.

Seen in this light, Cultural Leadership is a qualifier for the way cultural actors and organizations relate to their environment. This relationship changes when they add to management an understanding of leadership that takes on a broader (societal) responsibility. This responsibility can entail putting global issues on the agenda and creating an agora where global and local discussion points can meet.¹

3. Leadership as individual / relational / shared&networked

The third question which helps to sketch a first map of the various meanings of the term "Cultural Leadership" concerns what we actually refer to when we talk of 'leadership': Is it something an individual – the leader – does? Is leadership happening as the result of a hierarchical relation between a leader and her followers? Or, even more complex, is leadership something that can be described as distributed within a number of people without necessarily being bound to a hierarchy of leaders and followers? Put very roughly, these three approaches also reflect the history of leadership research which started with the question of what makes a 'great' leader moving on to a more relational perspective and more recently studying distributed modes of leadership (cf. Bolden 2004).

„Cultural Leadership is a qualifier for the way cultural actors and organizations relate to their environment. “

Regarding these questions, more innovative organizations have started to experiment with forms of networked or distributed leadership models quite a while ago (cf. Bolden 2011). One could expect arts organizations and pro-

jects to be particularly apt for such forms – with many arts forms ranging from the performing arts to media-based arts such as film being impossible without the collaborative work of many. But at the same time, most of the big arts institutions particularly in the context of highbrow culture nevertheless stick to very traditional forms of leadership with one ‘heroic’ leader (usually the artistic director) at the top.

However, the more participatory approaches are called for in the arts, the more such traditional ‘heroic’ and hierarchical models of leadership come to be at odds with the idea of arts organizations no longer as spaces of mere distribution of artworks, but of openness for diverse communities and of co-creation for various stakeholders. In this sense, leadership is no longer the task of one lone or some few individuals, but it becomes an emerging phenomenon through the interconnected practices of people within and outside the organization. But at the same time, cultural-leadership-as-way-of-connecting does not imply that deliberate managerial and strategic action is no longer relevant. It is from this strategic action that leadership emerges, e.g. by opening up paths for an organization to undergo the cultural change towards more openness.

„The more participatory approaches are called for in the arts, the more traditional ‘heroic’ and hierarchical models of leadership come to be at odds”

An example: participatory governance in a cultural organization (in this case in Groningen, the Netherlands) is seen as an ideal (or idealized?) form of governance that allows stakeholders to take up a role in the organization’s strategic discussions. It is expected to positively impact the integration and situatedness of a cultural institution in society. At the same time, installing a sustainable participatory governance structure and practice involves a lot of detailed managerial work.

Let’s assume it’s the ambition of a cultural organization in a provincial town to install a practice of participatory governance, and we understand this step as an example of cultural leadership. We can attach this decision from several perspectives. It can be interpreted as a way to create societal value and improve means for justification of the economic and

societal investments. It can also be understood as a way to enrich programming practice by optimizing the organization and mobilization of societal awareness.

Conclusion

The more en vogue the term “Cultural Leadership” has become recently for researchers, teachers and professionals in arts management and cultural policy alike, the more blurred and vaguer it seems to be. If there is one aspect that most uses of the term seem to agree on, it might be the idea that leadership is always in one way or another connected to the idea of transformation – or, as Graham Leicester put it: “The beginning of cultural leadership is always a small act of creative transgression” (Leicester 2010, p. 20). Beyond this shared concern with change and transformation, various meanings coexist without a common ground or shared understanding regarding the relations of leadership to other professional practices (such as administration or management), regarding the direction of leadership either towards the inside or the external context of an organization and regarding the view of leadership as person-centered, relational or distributed. This issue of *Arts Management Quarterly* tries to show how rich and multi-faceted the term Cultural Leadership can be – and at the same time, how important it is to contextualize it and to be explicit about the specific uses and local understanding of it.

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