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# 'No place to hide'?
# The realities of leadership in UK supermarkets

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**Abstract**

This article explores the realities of managerial work in two major British supermarket chains. While the prescriptive literature welcomes the displacement of bureaucratic management by rote with leadership, empirical accounts of what managers actually do underscore how the purported tenets of leadership tend to disappear upon closer inspection, even at the discursive level. This study observes and discusses the discrepancy between the rhetoric of leadership articulated by executives at the corporate head offices and the actual roles and responsibilities of managers in stores. Work was tightly controlled and managers had little real freedom. We draw on empirical evidence to argue both that while leadership in practice secured only trivial freedoms such freedoms were highly valued and that academic analysis should follow these managers in their ability to distinguish between rhetorical flourishes and real-life job design. Leadership in practice is mundane and local.

Keywords: leadership, leaders, managers, control, deskilling, supermarkets, retail

## Introduction

This article explores the realities of managerial work in two major British supermarkets chains. While the prescriptive literature welcomes the displacement of bureaucratic management by rote with leadership (see for example Zaleznik 1992), empirical accounts of what managers and leaders actually do underscore how the purported tenets of 'leadership' tend to disappear upon closer inspection, even at the discursive level (Meindl et al. 1985, Alvesson and Sveningsson 2003a, 2003b, Tengblad 2004). Kelly (2008) has taken issue with the tendency in the leadership literature of discounting the ordinary everyday work activity of managers in lieu of a continued effort to theoretically pin down how leadership really ought to be conceptualised. He argues that the common terminology used by various writers conceals a wide diversity of practice and that leadership is locally produced. We join Kelly's contention that 'the apparently mundane practices that are made accountable and therefore observable remain unexplicated and actively ignored' (2008:774) and that this is regrettable. We diverge from his emphasis on the reification of leadership through language games, however, and focus instead on the dissonance between the salience of leadership in the popular and practitioner representations of management jobs and the actual limits to the discretion, initiative and control that managers are able to exercise in the concrete, routine and core practices associated with their roles. This dissonance was actively exploited by the supermarkets' business models. Celebratory accounts of leadership were cascaded down the managerial hierarchy, from the corporate head office to the departmental managers, to spur managerial staff to greater efforts in routine work.

The empirical material we use to support these claims comes from a study of managers and managerial work in the stores of two of Britain's largest supermarkets. In the four store sites where research was carried out, the work of managers was heavily prescribed, with ordering, product ranges, stock levels, store layouts, pricing, special offers and staffing policies all set out by respective functional divisions at head office. Their work was also closely monitored, and their personal performance assessed, through the constant and close inspection of the sales, profit and customer service performance scores of the stores and departments they were responsible for. In line with Hales' (2005) observations, these managers were not entrepreneurial visionaries, but links in a chain with little real influence over policies and procedures.

Their work was generally confined to striving to meet a range of very demanding performance targets over which they themselves had little, if any, control.

In both supermarket chains, leadership by managers in stores was considered vital for company performance, with 'the importance of people' to competing with rival chains and 'keeping customers satisfied' repeatedly stressed by the full range of interviewees. Yet this leadership was to be exercised in specific and specified ways. Both managers in charge of stores and those in charge of departments had little power over most aspects of their work but were expected to lead, inspire, motivate and monitor staff on customer service (in the widest sense). Head office executives and store-level managers themselves in both chains repeatedly stressed the charismatic and inspirational elements of leadership. In particular, this depiction of leadership required managers to mediate between the dual pressures of much service sector work, to minimise costs but maximise customer service (Taylor and Bain 1999, Korczynski 2001, 2002). In this context, leadership appeared to be a euphemism for the demand that managers mobilise their personal physical, emotional and social resources to make up for the discrepancies between targets and resources and be ardent pursuers of the employer's end of the wage-effort bargain. This type of contained leadership bears little resemblance to the celebratory accounts but it is probably a far closer reflection of the realities of workplace practice.

While the article stresses the mundane nature of managerial jobs in supermarket stores, it also highlights the way both individual managers and shopfloor workers use the leadership rhetoric. This rhetoric was valued by the managers largely because of its unreality; while they ostensibly 'bought in' to the rhetoric, in practice, most were adept at negotiating the dissonance between it and real work and none sought to put its wider tenets into practice. On the shopfloor, the dramatic language of leadership and transformation was used to legitimise managerial freedoms; these were trivial but they nevertheless proved an escape from scripting for people management and were deeply valued by the managers themselves. We elaborate on the constitutive parts of our arguments in the rest of this article. First, we provide a critical review of the popular ways of conceptualising leadership in the literature and the way these are problematic in relation to managerial work in practice. Then we introduce the specific context of retail work and of our study to highlight the significance of both to an inquiry into the discrepancy between leadership rhetoric and managerial practice. This is followed by a discussion of the contradictions inherent in

leadership on the supermarket shopfloor and the nature of the spaces that remain for initiative and freedom.

**Managers, Leaders and 'Real Work'**

It is popular to claim that managerial work is changing, that hidebound and bureaucratic managers who impede workplace performance are being (or should be) replaced with charismatic and visionary leaders who know when to subvert rules, inspire enthusiasm in their followers and contribute to corporate dynamism (Zaleznik 1992, Alimo-Metcalfe and Alban-Metcalfe 2005). Such claims, clearly, need to be tempered with caution (Storey 2004a, 2004b). Students of business and management have long suffered from those thrills of novelty, which set critical descriptions of the existing and unfashionable against enthusiastic predictions of what an ideal type of the latest fad might look like. An unfair but recurrent practice which, as Storey (2004a) notes, is being repeated for leadership.

This advocacy is rendered possible, at least in part, by the paucity of empirical accounts of who leaders are and what it is they actually do (see for example Jackson and Parry 2008). When data is available, authors rarely write about transformational activities. Rather, they stress how ordinary leaders are and how mundane their work is (Carlson 1951, Meindl et al. 1985, Alvesson and Sveningsson 2003a, 2003b, Tengblad 2004). Even charismatic leaders are not unfettered (Robinson and Kerr 2009). Empirical enquiry strips leadership of its universal grandeur and helps depict a practice that is both contested (Collinson 2005) and locally defined (Kelly 2008). Bureaucratic forms of control are still going strong (Power 1997, Hales 2002, Protherough and Pick 2002) and old-fashioned supervision rather than inspirational leadership is at the heart of most jobs (Delbridge and Lowe 1997, Hales 2005).

Kelly (2008), in his analysis of the nature of leadership and the various discourses that surround it, has argued that leadership as a practice is locally defined and here we propose one example of such local definition:. In this study, the requirements of customer service did indeed shape the demand for leadership skills, but not quite in the way that the proponents of the spread of transformational leadership suggest. What was at stake was not an entrepreneurial transformation. On the contrary, managers' actions were tightly controlled and those controls were increasing. As well as following orders from head office, store and department managers were simultaneously required to inspire, enthuse and motivate the front-line

staff they were responsible for. The positive connotations of the word leadership helped to motivate individual managers, as they in turn sought to motivate others (Etzioni 1961). Here the dissonance between the leadership rhetoric and workplace realities was not an analytical lacuna but an important part of the process since images of leaders needed to be inspirational rather than accurate.

**Retail Work**

Retail work accounts for a significant proportion of the working population, with 12 per cent of UK workers employed in retail (Burt and Sparks 2003). While this work can be skilled, from the glamour of the 'style labour markets' (Nickson et al. 2001), to the product knowledge of expert assistants in France (McGauran 2000, 2001), the wide-ranging skills of apprentice-trained workers in Germany (Kirsch et al. 2000) or the impressive educational achievements of Chinese retail workers (Gamble 2006), most British jobs are not.

For the majority of British supermarkets, the main skills policy pursued is one that is 'tantamount to a personnel strategy based on zero competence', zero qualifications, zero training and zero career (Gadrey 2000). Margins are tight and the extensive centralisation and standardisation of supply chains and products (Baron et al. 2001) extends to work and work processes (Felstead et al. 2009). Workers are valued for their presence and their temporal flexibility, not their skills, and presence and temporal flexibility are seldom highly paid. The retail sector accounts for 26 per cent of British low paid workers (Mason et al. 2008) with 75 per cent of sales assistants and 80 per cent of checkout operators compensated at rates below the low pay threshold (Mason and Osborne 2008). Part-time and women workers, who dominate the sector (Arrowsmith and Sisson 1999, Burt and Sparks 2003) are particularly badly affected. Some stores deploy sophisticated human resource management techniques such as psychometric tests (Freathy and Sparks 2000) and merit-based pay but these are set against generally low wage rates, rigid control mechanisms and limited discretion (Arrowsmith and Sisson 1999, Broadbridge 2002, Burt and Sparks 2003).

Against this backdrop, recent writing on retail employment from a strategic perspective has increasingly emphasised the role of management and managers in the overall performance of companies (Booth and Hamer 2006, Hart et al. 2006). It argues that the link between managers' work and store (or firm) performance is

through ‘lay’ workers, in one example, asserting that ‘without strong management and leadership skills, store and employee productivity suffers together with lower staff motivation, ultimately leading to lower profits’ (Hart et al. 2006:281-282). However, lists of actions such as ‘providing good pay and benefits, praise and encouragement and support and training, or even at the most basic level, ensuring employees receive their correct rest periods at work’ (Booth and Hamer 2006:299) do not accurately depict the real remit of managers in large-scale retail organisations.

**Methods and Methodology**

This research was part of an EPSRC/AIM funded project on the organisation and experience of employment in retailing. Since our main interest was in the processual aspects of work, a multi-pronged, qualitative approach was adopted, as this was best suited to compare and contrast official organisational statements with real life practices and experiences. Research was conducted in two of Britain’s largest supermarket chains, here referred to as Retail 1 and Retail 2, respectively. Retail 1 had 356 stores and employed over 160,000 people. Retail 2’s portfolio of stores included the convenience store format, which brought its total number of stores to 823, but it had slightly fewer employees at around 150,000. By and large, their target clientele overlapped and they were direct competitors with similar market shares.

In each supermarket, detailed interviews were conducted with head office staff who were responsible for determining strategies, setting policies and designing business processes. We were able to review a large amount and range of company material pertaining to company strategy, business models, performance indicators, human resource policies, recruitment and training programmes and change initiatives. Interviews were carried out with top executives in strategy, human resources, training, marketing, accounting, customer services and profit/productivity/performance improvement departments. In addition to this, in each chain, two locations were selected for store-level research; store A and store B at Retail 1, store C and store D at Retail 2. In the stores interviews were conducted with the (general) store managers, who would be managing anywhere between 200 and 400 employees, the secondary tier of between three and five senior managers, who had store-wide responsibility and supervised and coordinated the work of department managers, and the managers of the 12 to 15 different departments such as produce, customer service, or bakery, as well as a number of shopfloor workers. All of the managers were salaried, while all

of the shopfloor workers were hourly-paid. Store interviews with hourly paid workers were the most challenging. Our informants were welcoming and supportive but, owing to the tight margins and pressure on staff, few had time for interviews. The length of interviews with managers ranged from half an hour to multiple sessions of several hours, typically averaging an hour and a half to two hours. Some of the interviews with workers also lasted over an hour, but a number of them had to be interrupted after less than half an hour. All formal interviews were recorded, professionally transcribed and coded using NVivo Qualitative Data Analysis software. In total, 86 interviews were carried out, 46 in Retail 1, 34 in Retail 2, and the rest with a range of outside key informants including a top level executive of a third supermarket chain, industry experts based at the Institute of Grocery Distributors (IGD) and trade union representatives. In addition to the interviews, participant and non-participant observation was carried out by one of the research team at the Retail 1 head office and, more extensively, at one of the two Retail 1 stores included in the study (store A). In addition to observing recruitment group interviews, new employee induction sessions and a range of daily activities in the store, the researcher also worked shifts of 10 to 15 hours a week for six weeks on the delicatessen, fish, rotisserie, pizza and ready-meal counters. A research diary was kept during this part of the fieldwork and transcribed.

**'No Place to Hide'**

Leadership was a 'quality' that was extensively referenced in the public presentations of managerial career paths in both supermarket chains. Retail 1's literature on career prospects described the training programme for shopfloor workers who wished to become department managers as being 'built upon' their 'current leadership skills' through on-the-job training, while that for department managers with ambitions to be store managers or deputies was said to help them 'perfect their leadership style'. Retail 2's careers information on the company website directed those with some previous retail management experience and 'looking to grow into a leadership role' to the 'fast-track to Store Manager Development Program'. Hitting the link, interested parties were informed that nobody played a more important role in the supermarket's everyday operations (turnaround) than the managers in the stores, whose leadership 'inspires our people to deliver a great everyday customer experience'. Retail 2's recruitment process for senior managers included psychometric tests that were, among

other qualities, designed to pick up leadership skills and potential. Retail 1's programmes for management development included selection hurdles such as role-play sessions where future managers were expected to stand out from among their peers by displaying the desired abilities, with 'leadership' prominent among these.

While leadership skills and qualities were presented as core to the work of everyone and as particularly central for progression into managerial roles, in stores almost every aspect of work for every kind of employee, from shopfloor workers during their training period all the way to the general store manager, was set out, standardised and occasionally scripted by the experts at head office. Buyers sourced goods and set prices at the head offices, with computer networks monitoring sales in stores and re-ordering supplies. The corporate human resources department set wages and provided clear targets for store managers in terms of staffing, leaving stores with a balancing act between resources and targets. Checkout tills used electronic scanning, shelf-stackers followed planograms that provided detailed layout plans for displays, price guns printed out price tags, including reductions, as decided by head office software depending on the time of day. According to long-serving informants, limits on discretion were increasing. The remaining specialist departments, such as the delicatessen counter (which included meats, cheeses and fish) and the bakery, were coming under increasing levels of central control. A trained butcher (now the manager of a non-food department) revealed that most meats were now cut and packaged before arrival in store. The same was true for cheeses. In the smaller stores bakeries worked entirely from deliveries of frozen goods which they re-heated, and in larger stores there was a mix of supplier-packed, frozen, ambient and chilled products and goods baked in store. But even breads baked in store arrived ready made up with instructions on times for mixing, proving and baking. The only formally accredited staff in stores were pharmacists employed in special stand-alone units on some sites. Such a policy of standardisation was deliberate and referred to with pride. The wage-planning manager in the Business Improvement Group at Retail 1 head office summarised the challenge as 'how lazy we can make it... make the process easy for them so it becomes a natural habit'.

This close prescription and standardisation of work tasks was not a surprising observation to make of hourly-paid workers, or in the context of retail employment, traditionally known for its reliance on low skills and low wages. What was unusual was that the same restrictions applied to managers. In fact, the managers were under

far greater surveillance in terms of observable results. Because performance and productivity measurements were taken at both department and store level, which were then linked back and traceable to individual managers, their performance evaluation was quantified and routinised. There was no comparable performance evaluation of individual shopfloor workers except for those at the tills, although Retail 2 had just introduced a new performance enhancement programme to track the performance of individual workers. Yet these practices, too, only increased the number of indicators by which managers' performance could be monitored, as the ultimate responsibility for meeting unit-based targets, as well as ensuring that individual workers showed the head-office dictated levels of performance, still lay with the managers.

An executive in the productivity improvement division of Retail 2's head office operations, who had risen through the ranks, observed that the role of store managers had changed considerably over the last twenty years:

> I think what we probably lost was a bit of the entrepreneurial or tradesmanship of the store manager to say, 'Oh next week that's going on offer, I want 200 of them next week'. Because they were good traders and experienced. And they knew how they were going to present it. Honestly, when I joined... the store manager where I trained was a bit of a wide boy I suppose, but he would do things like – well he made me do it – Saturday afternoon if we were overstocked, I remember him saying 'We're overstocked on lettuces. [Name] go to the front door and stand there and sell your lettuces!' And you'd do things like say 'Come on, here's your lettuce! Get one for the rabbit! Half price!' And you'd literally drop them in people's baskets as they walked through the door so they almost got no choice but to have your lettuce. (productivity improvement manager, Retail 2, Head Office)

But in the current arrangements, because of the focus on what Pye (1968) terms the 'workmanship of certainty', the emphasis in store for both managers and workers was on obedience to instruction. In fact, much of a manager's work was about ensuring such obedience.

> [The parent company] is very much about... they use a word quite a lot called compliance and there is a lot of compliance and the phrase they used... was 'there is no place to hide' [*Was that like an official thing?*] No, it was kind of like – you know with all the systems, their systems monitor everything, they monitor everything. Every little thing is monitored so there is no place to hide. I am not saying in terms of hiding things that are wrong but they see everything. (senior manager, Retail 1, Store B)

A policy backed up by the motto 'comply then complain', which had clear implications for the way work was conducted.

> [I]f the company says to you 9am Monday morning stand on one leg in the foyer, I want you to do it, at 9am and if that's all of you, I want you to do it but then you'll all stand there thinking why on God's earth are we doing this, then ask the question, why do we need to do this? What benefit am I getting from it? But do it in the first place before you even complain about it, because until you've tried it you don't know what it's going to do, but it's driving that culture. (general store manager, Retail 1, Store A)

This approach was generally greeted with enthusiasm.

> I love this comply and then complain. You know because you put it right, you do it the way they want you to do it and then if it is not right you feed back what is wrong with it so you complain after you have had a go at it at putting it right. And I think that is absolutely vital. You know we have a duty to feed back and give that feedback but you know we don't have that right until we have had a go at it… the right way first. (training manager, Retail 1, Training Store)

Unsurprisingly, such an approach influenced the skills expected of both workers and managers as well as leaving little space for transformational leadership. Skill levels were low and product knowledge in particular was a welcome, but almost optional part of work. Several of our informants did possess expertise and boasted strong personal interests in electronics or fish or experience in bakeries, but while this might allow front-line workers to develop a personal pride in aspects of their work it was not a job requirement and was rarely shared by the senior management team in stores, whose career progression was based on obligatory movement between different departments. Head office executives spoke of promoting people with an interest in a particular area of work, a 'passion about food' or 'a personal interest', and management training did provide product information as part of the process, but the demand for and emphasis on specialist knowledge was limited. Mason and Osborne's (2008) comparison of supermarkets with electrical retailers reveals that the (often supplier provided) training in product knowledge that characterised electrical goods had few parallels in supermarkets, while Gamble's (2006) research into Chinese retailers showed a well educated workforce and a highly demanding customer base not reflected in our study. In these supermarkets, workers could apply for entry-level managerial posts as soon as their twelve weeks of initial training were complete (although the graduate training schemes in both supermarkets were rather different).

Graduates were more noticeable in the head offices and in certain specialisms (three of the four store-based human resource (HR) managers we spoke to were graduates, compared to three of the 23 managers in Retail 1 Store A). But while one

of the HR managers thought that having a degree was useful for 'the analytical side of what (managers) need to do', in general formal qualifications were not a significant criteria for managerial posts. The vast majority of managers had come up from the ranks of hourly-paid shopfloor workers. Interestingly, the non-graduate managers all spoke of the encouragement they had received from their managers to embark on management training. In the absence of a universal demand for specialist training or knowledge, leadership, both demonstrated and potential, was presented as the key element in selection decisions for such career progression:

> I mean, when I interview managers to join my team, I'm not necessarily looking for 'Do they know what baked beans and yoghurts are?' and 'Have they filled them before?' I'm looking for attitude, I'm looking for personal resilience and I'm looking for a track record. What have they done before? What have they done in the past? But it doesn't necessarily mean that if I've got a grocery manager position I want a grocery manager from another store. Because it's about managing people, it's about managing hearts and minds really. (general store manager, Retail 1, Store A)

But while store language focused on obedience and hearts and minds, the structural features of promotion ensured that, in practice, most managers and leaders were men. Moving between departments was an integral part of career mobility in both supermarkets. Promotion, even for the first foray into managerial duties, involved a switch of departments, while subsequent expansions of responsibility meant managers would be moved to increasingly larger departments in the stores. For general store managers, and for the second tier of senior management, geographical mobility was required and managers were expected to move between different stores in the same 'regional cluster' (generally between 15 to 25 stores, depending on the region).

Interestingly, managerial informants stressed how lenient their superiors were when imposing these travel requirements. Annual performance appraisals distinguished between preferences for a 30-minute or a one-hour commute. Retail 2 store managers were told by their regional bosses to prioritise their families and the general manager of Store B asserted proudly that he would not be despatched to the other end of the country against his will. But, while all managers seemed to accept that mobility was required, for others the geographical differences between managerial and front-line worker posts discouraged progression and helped to account for the fact that, while the lower ranks of supermarket workers were dominated by women, the managers were predominately male. Many of the workers we

interviewed were attracted to retail by the fact that it was part-time: women with caring responsibilities, students, young people and older workers dominated the workforce. People worked in their local stores and their limited hours often suited their other responsibilities or desire for education. Managerial posts, by contrast, were almost universally full-time despite, given the length of opening hours (24 hours for Retail 1 and 8am to 10pm for Retail 2), no one manager would be able to control their store continually (see Dalton 1966, Moss-Kanter 1977). We did meet two women managers in shared posts but these were rare and had been specifically created to accommodate these informants' demands for job-sharing (see also Mason and Osborne 2008).

**Small Freedoms**

Unlike the transformational visionaries of the leadership literature, the freedoms enjoyed by the supermarket managers in this study were generally minor and illicit. Despite the recurrent official emphasis on 'comply then complain', most created their own small discretionary spaces. The most commonly cited example was in store, counter or shelf layout. Detailed specifications were sent down from head office dictating the number and placement of products. But these were based on national averages of other stores in that category with little sensitivity for local geography, tastes or customer-base. Accordingly, in practice local knowledge, personal interest and the desire to personalise space often triumphed over the formal specifications. It was, of course, possible to protest against layouts officially. The general manager of Retail 1 Store A had done so when he wished to re-site the movie and video booth in his city centre store, taking it out of the foyer where it was vulnerable to repeated thefts and switching it with a sandwich booth which would have benefited from being more readily accessible. His request involved developing a detailed business case and visits from senior management but was eventually turned down (or indefinitely postponed pending a fuller refurbishment to include a pharmacy). Others were less regulation bound.

> I just did it, I got told to do it. They put trust in me to change the layout in the store of Home and Leisure, to move products around if I believed it would gain sales. And for example all the Home section wasn't together, DIY and water was with pots and pans, party ranges weren't with disposable paper tableware, so I put a new shopfloor plan together to move it all around and we did that... [A]t [names other store] I'd gone through a couple of revamps where I'd actually

> changed over 200 bays in [other store] because we went through revamps to get bigger and better ranges in so I'd done a lot of work in the past on how a department should flow and how it should look and how we get the best out of the ranges and stuff like that so putting that experience into here and grouping the departments together... [*Did you have to negotiate with Head Office?*] No, we just did it. (senior manager, Retail 1, Store B)

Occasionally re-siting compensated for inadequacies in the briefing documents. One manager liked to get experienced staff to adapt official shelving briefs to suit the store:

> They know if they've been doing that for a couple of years, they know what will sell and what won't. Now [if] it's a novice then they wouldn't, so I'd need them to do it in space flexing which will tell them the quantity. The plan would tell them how many facings so, say, it was like that it wanted a capacity of 70 on four facings but you can fit that 70 on two facings I would expect you to do it to two facings. And that's where you gain space as well on the plan if you needed to open up on something else because it wasn't lasting on the shop. [*So you've got to play around quite a bit?*] Yes, you've got to play around with it, yes. Everything's not as easy as black and white on paper. (general merchandise manager, Retail 1 Store B)

Occasionally individuals also needed to over-ride the computer systems to over-come limitations. The demand for hot dog rolls on bonfire night, more salads and fresh vegetables for barbecues on unexpectedly hot days and ensuring that local tastes were provided for through particular fish or flavours of roast chicken were matters of relative individual discretion.

But most of these practices were heavily discouraged officially and many were formally denied. One manager of a Retail 2 supermarket during a first interview and guided tour of his store was enthusiastic about the way Retail 2's head office experts designed and laid out the shelf space. An enthusiasm which lasted until one of the researchers took out a camera to photograph the excellent layout. He was immediately asked not to take photographs, since the manager had exercised his own discretion and did not want news of this individuality to get back to head office.

**People and Leadership**

Amidst the widespread use of regulation, standardisation and constraint there was one area where managers were both encouraged and expected to use their own discretion and, in the rhetoric of their head offices, exercise 'leadership'. This was in the area of people management. The structural means for doing this was very limited. Wages,

staffing levels and worker tasks were all pre-set by head office, although some local adjustments were possible. Store managers who recruited staff would be told how many 'hours' they could hire, but it was up to them to decide how to divide this up, so, for example, twenty hours might translate into three new part-timers working distinctive shifts. This often proved difficult to implement, since computer staffing levels did not always translate into viable recruitment.

> The personnel manager, she cares a lot, but [for] the company [it's] all about its process, [it's] not really about the people. And so the process is sort of disguised as this 'caring' – but it's not. So these people, they just expect you to do more and more, and we take more and more sales but we don't necessarily get the hours. Produce was given 20 extra hours for quarter three in line with sales and things, but I can't recruit for these 20 hours because all that'll happen is they'll get taken away after Christmas or the sales won't be there so I'll never see them anyway. You know they're not tangible, I can't take them and use them. (produce manager, Retail 1, Store A)

Much of this was work intensification. Head office staff expected local managers to know who they could allocate to particular tasks to save a few hours on the timesheet and this was considered excellence in leadership.

> [S]o we're looking for the managers to not be creative in the ways they do their processes, I want them to follow the processes exactly how the systems define them... I want them to lay the store out how the system devises and I want them to fill the shelves how it says on the tin, if you like, but then absolutely be as creative as possible in the way you service the customers. More the way we would be going. (business improvement director, Retail 1, Head Office)

This 'creativity' was also set down in systems and structures of the stores. The performance of their departments or stores in terms of customer service was assessed through monthly 'mystery shopper' visits, while regular staff meetings provided managers with an opportunity to motivate. The morning shifts in both supermarkets began with caucus-style meetings, held in a central location on the shopfloor in Retail 1 and in a staff area in Retail 2, between the store manager, the upper management team and all the departmental managers who were on shift. Department managers held the same sort of 'getting the day started' meetings with their respective department staff. News about how the store or unit was doing in terms of the performance criteria was often a major theme; good performance was usually emphasised as a reason to feel good and underperformance as grave and in need of immediate attention. In the briefing templates handed down from the head offices, spots were allocated for events to note, improve or celebrate. Managers' motivational

role (whether through generating pride or alarm) was possibly most necessary during these meetings, as announcements, for example about the roll-out of new uniforms could be rendered exciting, or a letter of appreciation from a customer as emotionally touching, through their performative skills.

Performance related pay was extensively used. For general store managers it could amount to as much as 40 per cent of salary and even hourly paid workers might earn over £100. Individual performance was supposed to be assessed separately, as one informant noted: 'sometimes you can have a department which hasn't performed well on paper but what that manager's contributed to that maybe it's a total different story'. But in practice, greatest weight was placed on store and overall company performance in a given trading year. Both supermarkets used some version of recognition schemes where small monetary awards from £10 to £50 could be given out, and this was largely at managers' discretion to 'celebrate success', as there was 'a lot of pressure on everybody to perform all the time' (bakery manager, Retail 2). But managers appreciated that the effectiveness of such schemes was limited:

> [A] lot is spending time with them and motivating them. You know if you motivate them they work far better than – [*How can you motivate them? What do you have at your disposal to motivate them?*] You don't really have any financial really, apart from you've got the yearly bonus, you know colleagues get a yearly bonus. So you've got the bonus to aim for. I don't know really... I think everyone is motivated by doing a good job and job satisfaction and spending time with people and I think a lot of it as well is getting to know colleagues, I know just about everyone by their first name and things like that. (senior manager, Retail 1 Store A)

The financial outcomes of managers' work were assessed through daily checks and monitoring of sales, waste, loss of products and the profits their departments or stores generated. Many were factors over which they had little control. Describing her Key Result Areas, which included absences, sales, labour turnover, waste and the customer service score, the HR manager (Retail 1, Store A) commented, '[s]o all my key result areas are linked with everybody else's, so it's my influencing skills that are really being looked at for that... As a manager, you're paid to manage; you're not paid to fill the shop necessarily'.

This confidence was widespread. But as the store managers pointed out structural conditions, including local labour markets, might be ignored in head office plans but heavily influenced how effective such work intensification could be. One, who was responsible for staffing a city centre store in a University town, spoke with

envy of a friend who managed a rural outlet. If workers in the city centre felt unfairly treated, they had a choice of part-time service sector jobs to move to. Their rural counterparts, in the absence of other local job opportunities, stayed in post (many had been there since the store opened). Yet this was the area over which managers were deemed to have most control and many seemed to accept this. When our informants spoke about leadership, their most common reaction was to emphasise the difference that they, as individuals, could make. A graduate departmental manager in his early 20s noted that he needed to 'work on leadership and people skills'. It was not that these managers did not appreciate the impact that computer breakdowns, local labour markets, employee turnover, stock levels and the weather could have. They did, and dealt with such problems every day. But they also saw them as excuses for a lack of leadership. It was the managers' job to enthuse and inspire others, even when policies and practices had not been explained to them and even if they disagreed with head office decisions (see also Smith 1990, Watson 1994). According to three of our informants:

> The depot might have been short of people and deliveries haven't turned up on time. That could throw things off. Or promotional stuff hasn't turned up. But there's nothing in a store that we can't fix, and it's all about driving the right attitude in the management teams. Because if you drive that attitude well, you can fix anything. (general store manager, Retail 1, Store A)

> At the end of the day we've got to be the leader... I think there's a difference between being a manager and being a leader and we have to become leaders and... we need to keep a real positive approach, because if we turn round to staff and say yes, what we may think in our heart of hearts is one thing, but when we go out there we're out on stage, we've got to perform and say, 'OK, it's tough, but however if we all do this that and the other and get stuck in, we're going to win this'. And you've somehow got to inspire your people out there, you know, so you've got to leave that at the door, because we can't do anything about that. Somehow, what you have got to do is deal with the colleagues you have got, to ensure that they're motivated, trained, they're quick to do the job, and hyped up, and they're going to go out there and deliver it. (senior manager A, Retail 2, Store C)

> OK, if I'm in store today and we get the [mystery shopper] man and I get 90 per cent, then that's on my watch so was I here, was I up in the office looking at the PC or was I downstairs driving the availability, saying, 'Where are those cauliflowers, where's that, where's that, where's that?' Or did I allow there to be nobody on produce because both the departments' managers... are on the same day off, and when they came in there was no cauliflower or lettuce because the person

> down there was actually on the till and I didn't actually know... Yes, so if I'm going to be running a store tomorrow, for instance, I should really know who's in what's going on and any problems. (senior manager B, Retail 2, Store C)

Leadership in these supermarkets was very specific and very detailed. Formal HR practices, meeting templates and detailed systems were in place. Informants gave examples that included monitoring work to ensure people were achieving their targets, retraining those who were not; monitoring stock levels; and being present on the shopfloor. However ultimately encounters with people, whether employees or customers, could not be scripted. The leadership rhetoric, because of its lack of links to the reality of daily work, was used as a motivational tool to persuade managers to work more intensively themselves and encourage others to extra effort.

**Discussion and Conclusions**

This article has presented an empirically based discussion of leadership in British supermarkets. The managers we observed were constrained by extensive regulation. Their experience of deskilling and discretion, consent and control bears little resemblance to the entrepreneurial visionaries described by writers on leadership. Yet despite that, most of our informants described aspects of what they did as leadership, maintaining proudly, and often in defiance of the evidence, the difference that they as individuals could make.

Evidence from elsewhere confirms the impact that line managers have (Rainbird and Munro 2003) but this impact is not without limits. Here, head office systems, computerised schedules, pre-packaged and automatically ordered goods, design planograms and set hours and pay rates provided internal constraints just as location, labour market and the local economy supplied external ones. Our informants needed to accept the leadership rhetoric enough to assert that they could make a difference, but not so much that that difference was extended to questioning the constraints on them; a difference accepted in practice by most.

This leads us to two conclusions. Firstly that leadership was a small freedom rather than a radical transformation (see also Rosenthal et al. 1997, Edwards and Collinson 2002 on empowerment). It affected only the minutiae of the work but even this trivial level of discretion made a great deal of difference to the individual managers. The illicit freedoms of revising store layouts and adjusting stock orders, which managers engaged in to make their mark on work and improve store

performance, were matched by official and acceptable areas of freedom in the unscriptable areas of people management.

These trivial freedoms lead us to our second conclusion on the implications for academic analysis. Leadership is, at least in part, what leaders do, how they do it and who they are. If, as here, mainly male managers worked to pre-set routines with tightly monitored targets then this needs to feature in our understanding of leadership. Yet to date, most accounts have neglected the mundane aspects of work, the very elements highlighted as core in this study. The leadership rhetoric, valued for its emotive qualities and its unreality, was used by managers and their superiors to value, inspire and intensify their input. Managers showed a sophistication missing from many academic writings in their ability to distinguish between rhetorical flourishes and real-world job design. Given this, we suggest that future research may wish to focus more clearly on the unexciting, hackneyed and everyday aspects of work and to consider the form the language of leadership really takes on the shopfloor. The unrealities of leadership are important but they have already absorbed too much academic attention and need to be clearly distinguished from the realities. Future studies, developed through empirical evidence, need to provide a nuanced, local and empirically based understanding of what really happens.

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