

Passion or delusion: Middle managers constructing new meanings of work

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Recently, organization scholars have called for a need to re-think managerial leadership so as to take into account the “mundane”, the key activity of which is “influencing expectations, meanings, and values about what is desirable and necessary related to everyday work” (Sveningsson et. al., 2012: 84). In other words, mundane leaders can be seen as sense makers (Weick, 1995) and sense givers (Gioia and Chittipeddi 1991). Managerial leadership has also been described as event-driven actions arising mostly from unforeseen happenings (Holmberg and Tyrstrup, 2010). A study of site managers in construction depicted their leadership as a “muddling through”, i.e. they skilfully solve problems as these inevitably crop up, and they try to be everywhere at the same time Styhre, 2012). We argue that muddling through also puts high demands on site managers’ abilities and possibilities of coping with and balancing their work, family and personal life.

The purpose of this paper is to explore what mundane leadership and muddling through actually mean for managerial leaders in construction from a wider perspective than their work. In other words, what does muddling through mean in terms of coping with work and family and life in general.

This paper contributes empirical examples from 37 in-depth interviews with site managers, foremen and supervisor in a large number of construction organisations. We draw on practice theories to explore and analyse the data, and argue that mundane leaders are indeed both organizational sense makers and sense givers, the linkers of the strategic with the operational, the cohesion that generates coherence. All the site managers interviewed were passionate about their work, but deplored organisational and institutional constraints, which mostly obstructed rather than supported or facilitated their work. Sense-making and sense-giving roles demand presence, flexibility, experience, hindsight, judgment and improvisation, which in turn, and over time, often result in exhaustion and stress, and leave little energy over for family and life outside work. We conclude that the “mundane” activities of middle managers are far from trivial; they demand leadership competences that require fostering and nurturing. Today there is little support for middle-managerial leaders and little training of the competences that they need the most.