Leadership Communication in a Virtual Team

Karianne Skovolt
Norwegian School of Management
karianne.skovholt@bi.no

Abstract
This paper examines how leadership is accomplished in a virtual team. The data consists of 400 emails from a distributed work group (Agenda) in a Norwegian tele-company. The study has primarily a discursive approach to leadership and aims at identifying what kinds of discursive devices the leader of Agenda uses to create trust and in-group solidarity, and how she, by the linguistic form of her requests, positions her self towards her subordinates. The results show that the leader displays an egalitarian leader role, building personal and emotional ties and downplays her authority. By giving the group a positive loaded nick-name and creating a success story for the group, the leader invites to group identification. Requests are produced as needs and hopes, and presented as a personal matter rather than an institutional obligation. While her institutional role as leader is downplayed when performing requests to her subordinates, it is explicitly fore grounded when performing requests to external partners.

1. Introduction

Leadership is primarily accomplished through communication. It involves managing many types of oral and written communication genres and thus requires good communication skills. Doing leadership is communication. To be a leader in the Internet Age, additionally involves managing groups of people in virtual teams by use of written communication technologies, for instances email. This requires new forms of communication skills. However, very few studies address how virtual leadership is actually accomplished [6, 2, 14].

This article examines how a leader of a distributed work group (Agenda) in a Norwegian Telecommunication Company (TCM) performs leadership using email as the primary communication tool. The study has primarily a discursive approach to leadership, i.e. examining leadership as it is practically unfolded through written discourse [18, 7, 20, 14]. Within the frame of interactional sociolinguistics, the study analyzes how leadership is linguistically accomplished in the leader’s day-to-day email interaction with her subordinates. The main goal is to find out what kind of discursive devices the leader uses to engage, coordinate and maintain group performance in the virtual team. In terms of politeness theory, the study also examines how the leader by performing requests is positioning her self towards the group.

1.1 Defining leadership

Leadership is a complex concept which has been examined from many perspectives and across different disciplines. Moreover, to be a leader does not represent one single phenomenon, rather there may be many differences among individuals in leadership style [19, 30]. Most of the studies on leadership have been carried out within the field of organizational science. Within this field, leadership has traditionally been defined as “the ability to influence others” in relation to “the achievement of a common goal” [19]. The previous studies on leadership have in general been preoccupied with evaluating good and effective leadership and attempting to identify factors that influence the success and efficiency of leadership [19].

Furthermore, the traditional leadership theories have viewed leadership from idealized characteristics and tend to see leadership as a phenomenon embodied in persons [14]. In the present study, leadership is defined as a discursive phenomenon, involving a person’s communicative skills. Rather than analyzing leadership as a predefined phenomenon, the present study analyzes “leadership as it happens” [14] and views leadership as a phenomenon which is practically and repeatedly achieved in particular discourses by and through language use. This view corresponds with a project within interactional sociolinguistic called “Language in the Workplace”. Scholars within this project define leadership as a “communicative performance”:

[Leadership is] “a consistent communicative performance which, by influencing others, facilitates acceptable outcomes for the organization (transactional/task-oriented goal), and which maintains harmony within the team or community of practice (relational/people-oriented goal)” (Holmes 2005:1780).
According to Holmes’s definition, leadership is seen as a process, or an activity. With her words, the focus is on the “interpersonal interaction processes and the communication which takes place between people, rather than simply on what a leader achieves” [19]. As a practical consequence of the definition above, analyses of leadership include close reading of leaders actual spoken and written exchanges. In the present article, this primarily involves the Agenda-leader’s day-to-day email interaction with her group members, in addition to some of her external partners.

1.2 Defining virtual team

A virtual team is a group of people who collaborate across space, time, and organizational boundaries and use electronic media as primary communication tool. Virtual teams are often composed by domain experts from multiple organizations or departments within an organization [6, 34]. Virtual teams may take many forms [6]. They may be local and include members who frequently meet face-to-face, or they may be global and include members that never or seldom meet [22]. Virtual teams may be permanent, or fluid [27]. Moreover, they may be coordinated by a formally appointed leader, or they may be self-directed, i.e. “groups of interdependent individuals that can self-regulate their behaviours on relatively whole tasks” [10].

Leading a virtual team involves other possibilities and challenges than leading traditional, co-located groups. On the one hand, the creation of distributed groups provides organizations the possibility to draw on professional competence that would otherwise not be available. On the other hand, when group members are dispersed, it is more difficult to create relationships and establish a shared common ground [11, 12]. Therefore, according to literature, building socio-emotional relations and trust among team members are crucial in virtual team work [6, 21, 22, 23, 34].

2. Previous research on leadership discourse

Relatively little is known about how leadership is actually carried out in computer-mediated conversation [6]. However, a few studies have made studies on leadership face-to-face conversations. While several studies in Conversation Analysis (CA) have focused on expert-lay communication [3, 13], only a very few studies have explored leader-subordinate interaction [9, 4]. Within Interactional Sociolinguistics, researchers in the project called “Language in the Workplace” have conducted several studies on leadership conversations [19, 20, 32, 36]. These previous studies on leadership conversation establish useful background knowledge for the present study on virtual leadership.

How leadership is carried out in virtual teams have primarily been studied in organizational studies. These either address emergent leadership [34], or explore leadership as a pre-formulated position, presenting assumptions on how virtual leadership ideally should be accomplished [6]. In what follows, the most relevant research from both conversational studies and organizational studies are reviewed.

2.1 Leadership discourse

Scholars from the “Language in the Workplace” – project analyze leadership conversations predominantly with reference to gender differences and, moreover, to how power is enacted in leadership discourse [19, 20, 26, 32]. The studies in their project use examples from interactions recorded in a number of New Zealand workplaces. In general, their analyses seem to agree that there exist a “consensus view” [36] of power in the workplaces. There seems to be a tendency towards minimizing power differences in the interactions between individuals of different status, between leaders and their subordinates. This is done by using different types of positive politeness strategies, in order to mitigate the repressive content of an utterance. One such strategy is the use of humor. Inspired by the Language in the Workplace project, the sociolinguist, Mullany (2004), shows how leaders use humor as a linguistic strategy to hide the use of power when attempting to gain compliance from subordinates in business meetings. By using humor, the meeting chair disguises the oppressive intent of their messages and minimizes the status differences.

Power may also overtly be expressed in leader’s talk, as explored in Vine (2004). She focuses on the overt expression of power in management style. By combining a quantitative and qualitative method, Vine shows how leaders “do power” in the workplace. Drawing on speech act theory, Vine (2004) identifies and counts what she calls the “control acts” in the data (mainly directives, requests and advices). According to the author, previous studies on people’s perception of control acts and which forms (imperatives, declaratives, interrogatives) are appropriate to use, show that “more powerful people are seen as having the right to use direct forms such as imperatives” [36]. The author thus expects to find a preponderance of forceful forms (imperatives) in the data. The imperative is considered to be a very forceful way of giving a directive, while the use of an interrogative is considered to be the least forceful. The results showed that only 7% of the control acts were directed at the two leaders, while
Vine’s results indicate that leaders favor request forms which are less powerful. By using politeness theory, she shows the ways that leaders in this workplace mark or minimize power differences when performing requests. Control acts were in general mitigated and Vine (2004) finds that communicating and maintaining good relations with people play key roles in this workplace [36]. Of great interest for the present study, Vine (2004) concludes that the leaders “use a range of forms to express control acts and always use mitigation. The power relations between the Managers and their staff is evident in the number of control acts uttered to them, but is not necessarily apparent in the way these are realised” [36] [my emphasis].

The studies from the “Language in the Workplace” project show leaders which tend to minimize power differences. While the power is enacted explicitly through frequent requests, these requests have a linguistic form which mitigates the power of the request.

2.2 Leadership in virtual teams

While the New Zealand project examines leadership conversation, the present study investigates leadership performed through email. Within the research on virtual teams and virtual leadership, only a handful of studies examine what leaders actually do through email discourse. However, none of these examine leadership discourse within a linguistic framework.

Many scholars have paid attention to the role that trust plays for the success of virtual teams [21, 22, 34]. For example, in a study on trust in global collaborative student groups, Jarvenpaa and Leidner (1999) combine statistical/quantitative (surveys with questions of trust) and qualitative methods (naturally occurring emails) in order to find out whether or not trust exists. Jarvenpaa and Leidner (1999) found that initiative strengthened and unified the team, but that providing response was even more important. According to Jarvenpaa and Leidner (1999), response is a trusted behaviour because it signals involvement. In addition, communication around tasks and project also appears to be necessary to maintain trust. Social communication that compliments, not substitutes, task communication, may strengthen trust and members have to explicitly verbalize their commitment, excitement and optimism [22]. Similar results as in Jarvenpaa and Leidner (1999) were found in Iacano and Weisband’s (1997) investigation on trust [21]. In a study on emergent leadership in a self directed virtual team, Yoo & Alavi (2004) found that emergent leaders produce more e-mails, take more initiatives, and provide more socio-emotional support and feedback than other members [34]. Hence, the studies on virtual teams seem in general to agree that trust may be created by both task related messages in combination with explicitly verbalizing socio-emotional relations.

Even if the scholars above base their findings on actual email discourse, doing virtual leadership is not an issue in itself. Scholars which do involve virtual leadership are Bell and Kozlowski (2002). They have developed a typology of virtual teams in order to draw implications for virtual leadership. However, their typology is not based on actual instances of email interaction, but on traditional models of leadership functions, i.e. normative models which identify general leadership functions which need to be accomplished in all teams. According to Bell and Kozlowski (2002) the two major functions of leadership are team development (the development and shaping of team-processes) and performance management (the monitoring and management of ongoing team performance and progress toward task accomplishment) [6]. The challenge for virtual leaders is to duplicate these functional roles into the virtual/distributed environment [6].

The leader of a virtual team may have various challenges, dependent on the characteristics of the team. Bell and Kozlowski (2002) outline four general implications virtual teams may have for its leadership. Firstly, they suggest that teams operating in real time make it easier for the leader to perform “critical performance management functions” and “development functions” [6], compared with teams operating across time. Second, when teams cross institutional and cultural boundaries, often having different values and different set of work procedures, it is more difficult for the leader to create coherence, or link the employees together “so that they are ‘insiders’ in the team”. This can be accomplished by building a unique “third” culture [6]. Third, it is more difficult for leader to establish norms in virtual teams with a more discrete lifecycle, than in teams they have been together with longer. Finally, a leader’s management becomes difficult when team members hold multiple roles within and across different virtual teams. To counteract role conflicts, leaders need to clearly specify each member’s role in the team [6].

Whereas Bell and Kozlowski’s leadership functions outlines normative expectations to leadership, the current study aims at examining leadership as it is practically unfolded through email discourse. Bell and Kozlowski’s emphasis on
creating coherence and a “third culture” seems relevant for the present study.

Since none of the previous studies on leadership investigate leadership as it is actually displayed through computer-mediated interaction, there seems to be a need for descriptive and qualitative work on virtual teams with an explicit focus on the discursive processes involved [2, 5, 6, 14]. Hence, the present study seeks to answer:

1. How is leadership carried out linguistically through email interaction?

In order to answer this question, this study focuses on email interaction in one particular group, Agenda, addressing the following research questions:

2. How does the leader of Agenda promote in-group solidarity?
3. How does the leader of Agenda position herself vis-à-vis her subordinates?

3. Data and methods

3.1 Data

The data for this study are emails collected from a distributed project group called “Agenda” in a Norwegian telecompany, “Telecom” (TCM). The leader of this group is called Line Myhre (LM)¹, and she is the person whose discourse is being analyzed. The email exchanges were gathered from August 2004 to December 2004 and amount to approximately 700 emails, of which 300 contain in-copied recipients. The messages were collected with assistance from the Agenda members, who during the period continuously forwarded their exchanges to the researchers.

Agenda’s main task is to edit all confirmation letters that are distributed to customers in the private market. The members formulate, revise, and standardize letters and templates, with the purpose of giving all letters a uniform style that communicates in a clear and polite way to the customers. They are frequently contacted by various divisions in the company with requests to reformulate their letters. In order to give the letters a unified tone, they follow a set of guidelines concerning orthography, sentence structure, and style. The leader frequently invite to meetings and

The project group consists of 12 members, each representing a team from the different divisions of the company: Telephony, BH/BM; ADSL, SV; Dial-up, LØB/EE; Mobile, JOB; Customer Service, GO; Credit, LL; and Invoice, JE.

In addition, Agenda includes text designer MM, system operator GJ, and an observer and system operator from another division, AS. The manager of the project group is LM, and she in turn reports to AL, the Information Director of TCM Private. The members’ initials and affiliation to the group is presented in the overview in table (1) below.

| AL = Information director | SV = Dial-up-letters |
| LM = Assigned leader of AG | BH = AG’s mailbox, |
| MM = Text designer | Telephone-letters |
| GJ = System responsible, (implementing letters) | JO = Mobile-letters |
| AS = System responsible, (AG’s homepage, Internet) | BM = Telephone-letters |
| LM = Assigned leader of AG | EE = ADSL-letters |
| AL = Text designer | GO = CS (Customer Service) |

Table 1. Overview of the members in Agenda (AG)

The Agenda group reorganized twice during the period data was collected. LØB was replaced by EE in the first week and BH was replaced by BM by the end of the data-collection period. Except from these changes, the rest of the members were (more or less) active in the group for the whole period.

The senders and recipients of the messages are primarily Agenda members. Some messages also include group externals who collaborate closely with Agenda. Most of the members in Agenda are physically located in different departments and even in different parts of Norway. They have occasional meetings at the main office, but most of their communication is carried out by email and telephone. The members usually interact in dyads, sometimes with selected co-members copied in, and seldom address the group as a whole. Some members are more active than others, for instance text designer MM, manager LM, and the system operators GJ and TS. Yet all of the members are represented in the data. The members also interact with external collaborators within and outside of TCM, such as employees at the print central 'Strålfors' and members of Agenda Business.

In addition to the email collection, extensive ethnographic and interview data were collected in order to contextualize the communicative practices. The emails were originally written in Norwegian, but are translated into English here. The translations are idiomatic, rather than word-by-word, in order to keep the style as authentic as possible.

3.2 Methods

The research questions springs from a theoretical assumption which views language usage as a basic component of what social relations are made of. Within the frame of politeness theory [8], analyzing language usage coincides with discovering how social relations are constructed. In order to build a
universal model of how social relations are constructed linguistically, Brown & Levinson (1987) builds their theory on Goffman’s (1967) notion of face, our public self image when participating in interaction [15]. According to Brown & Levinson (1987), all rational agents have two particular wants; the want to be unimpeded, a negative face [8], and the want to be approved of, a positive face [8]. In social interaction, the participants share a mutual interest of maintaining each other’s face. However, acts which threaten face, as for instance performing a request, are called ‘face-threatening-acts’ (FTA). When a speaker needs to perform an FTA, she may use one of five different strategies. She may perform the FTA directly, without redressive action (Strategy 1 - going baldly on record. Ex.: “Reformulate the letter”); she may perform the FTA with compensation, by using either positive (Strategy 2. Ex.: “You are doing an excellent work, but would you please reformulate the letter”) or negative (Strategy 3. Ex. “I know you are busy, but could you please reformulate the letter”) politeness strategies. The speaker may choose to perform the FTA indirectly (Strategy 4 - off record. Ex.: “The letter needs some justifications”), or simply avoid doing the FTA (Strategy 5).

By "redressive action” Brown and Levinson (1987) mean “action that "gives face" to the addressee. This is action that attempts to counteract the potential face damage of the FTA by doing it in such way (...) “that indicates clearly that no such face threat is intended or desired, and that S [speaker] in general recognizes H’s [hearer] face wants and himself wants them to be achieved” [8].

A request is a speech act expecting a response in the form of a verbal- or a physical act (Searle 1969). It is an expression of the speaker’s need to get the hearer/reader to act. According to Brown & Levinson (1987) speakers assess the seriousness (“weightiness”) of an FTA. This involves assessing the social distance between the participants, the relative power and the ranking of the imposition in the particular culture [8]. The greater the imposition of a request is, the more the individual need to compensate for the FTA, using politeness strategies to minimize the threat.

In work place interaction, where the participant’s institutional roles and the organization’s need are in the foreground, complying with requests is more or less part of employees’ job description. According to the business communication researcher, Kankaanranta (2005):

“The ranking of impositions within a company is affected by the job descriptions of the participants; for an outsider an imposition may seem heavy but if it is part of a staff members’ job description to do it

or if the staff member has a legitimate right to presuppose it done, then requests involving the imposition will be handled as routine” (Kankaanranta 2005, p. 111).

Depending on the employees’ position, they have a legitimate right to make requests or comply with requests. Hence, giving requests is a part of the routine, and will be treated as the routine [24]. However, the linguistic realization of the request provides interesting information about the social distance between the participants. Correspondingly, the linguistic realizations of the Agenda leader’s requests in the present study may signal how she positions her self vis-à-vis her subordinates.

Brown & Levinson’s politeness theory has been criticized in numerous articles, for instance for being unable to account for the multifunctionality of linguistic strategies [31], and for ignoring inter-cultural differences on politeness [25] The present study takes an interactional approach to politeness [1].

In order to examine how the leader of Agenda linguistically accomplishes her leadership role, I copied her emails (n=99) and placed them in a word document. In order to answer the first sub question, how she promotes in-group solidarity, I close-read all her messages and looked for linguistic markers (contextualization cues) of informal and personal style. These cues included addressing devices, metaphors and personal expressions of engagement. In order to examine the second sub question, how the leader positions her self in relation to the group, I identified the leader’s politeness strategies when making requests.

4. Analysis

4.1 Promoting in-group solidarity

The Agenda-leader uses an informal, personal and emotional style in most of her messages to the team. This may be seen in how she addresses the group as a whole, how she creates narrative schemas for the group to identify with, and in how she performs requests.

When posting messages to the whole Agenda-group, the leader addresses the members by using positive loaded nick names:

(1) Hi all Letter-entusiasts! Arvid, could you let me have our BI-guest’s e-mail address? Hei alle Breventusiaster! Arvid, kan du gi meg mailadressen til vår Blijest?

2 Bald faces are added to focus on words or expressions which are emphasized in the analysis.
Hi “Agendaes” and especially welcome to Elisabeth, our new member from Internet who will attend the first hour.

In (1) and (2), the leader addresses her group by giving them characterizing nick-names (“Hi all letter-enthusiasts”, Hi “Agendaes”). The nick-names function as attributive categorization devices. By selecting these words the sender creates a category which serves to characterize, include and even complimenting the receivers. Alternatively, the leader could have selected more neutral greetings, such as for instance “Hi”, “To all members of Agenda”, “Dear Agenda-members” etc., in order to signal more distance. Assigning her group positive characteristics in the salutations signals liking, solidarity and contributes to creating a picture of a unified and well-functioning group.

The addressing devices function as closeness strategies which invite to group belonging and a positive identification with a community.

The Agenda-leader uses additional rhetorical resources to create an attractive image of the group. In the communication with text-designer, information director and the group as a whole, the leader uses a certain metaphor. From the start of its existence, Agenda has pursued a central role in the different divisions of Telecom, so that more employees may benefit from their letter services and linguistic/stylistic expertise. To promote her work group, the leader introduces Agenda for different divisions in the company, a project which she calls the “blessing-round” and the “blessing-journey” in her messages to the group:

(3) Hi Maria, I just came from the blessing round at CS and told about us /AgendaPrivate.

(4) Hi all of you!
I would like us to go through some bullet points from the agenda before we move on to the work-list.
- Status from the blessing journey by Line

The metaphors “blessing round” and “blessing journey”, which the leader LM humorously uses in example (3) and (4), draw an inter-textual reference to the Norwegian royal couple and their blessing journey in the monarchy of Norway in order to get the people’s blessing. By drawing a parallel between Agendas presentation project and the royal blessing journey, the leader places her group members into a narrative scheme, where the group’s position in the organization appears as much as important as the royals. By playing with a (in Norwegian context) well known narrative schema, she may contribute to building a success story which the participants may mirror themselves in. The Agenda leader even presents this project as to “sell in” Agenda to different divisions:

(5) [...] [...] I leave for a meeting now, but be back at 15. Skal selge inn Brevforum Privat i AgendaPrivate to Marketing Division to day :-) Med vennlig hilsen Line Myhre

With best regards
Line Myhre

By using metaphors from the finance and marked economic world, she presents Agenda as a valuable product which may be sold. By using this rhetoric, she utterly presents Agenda as an attractive group.

The Agenda-leader informs her group of their results and how their work is getting evaluated by the top managers. She also congratulates them explicitly when they have achieved good results:

(6) Hi all participants of Agenda!
Read Bente’s info this month and read it thoroughly because we in Agenda are mentioned!!! Congratulation for the good work and keep it up; we have focus from the top.
rgds Line

(7) Hi all AGP-es whom I scared to death last week…. I have calmed down now; not so hyper without medicines anymore… BUT the
4.2 The leader positioning herself vis-à-vis subordinates

The Agenda leader performs requests by using positive politeness strategies (strategy 2) in most of her requests to her team members. She compensates for the FTA by presenting the request as wishes and hopes, rather than commands. The constructions that are most frequent are “I need help from you to”, “Hope you have/can” and “nice if”:

(6) 
I need help from you concerning the budgets of letters, internet and mobile […] Jeg trenger hjelp fra dere ved dagens budsjetter for brev fastnett, internett og mobil […]

(7) 
Hope it is possible for you to contact […] Häper du har mulighet til å ta kontakt […]

In (6) and (7), the leader tells her group that they draw attention from the top, and simultaneously encourages the group to work hard. TCM is a large, multinational corporation with approximately 1100 employees in Norway. The distance between the top management and employees is great, and in this context there might be a strong competition in drawing attention from the leaders, and to be noticed and appreciated as an employee. When the Agenda-leader repeatedly stresses that the Agenda-group has focus from the top, and even congratulates them, she is creating a picture of Agenda as a unique group, with great importance and value for the company. This might in itself serve as a rhetoric device to motivate the group and create stronger inside-relations.

The next section (4.2) identifies how the leader is positioning herself vis-à-vis her subordinates. Quantifications made in a forthcoming study of the Agenda-group showed that the Agenda-leader in sum sent the most messages in the group, and that her dominating speech acts were requests [30]. Hence, a great part of the leader’s work consists of telling others to do something. According to politeness theory [8], asking someone to do something is a face-threatening act (FTA). The analysis examines how the Agenda leader linguistically presents the request. To which extent does she mitigate the requests by using positive or negative politeness? What does the linguistic form of her requests signal about the position the leader is taking towards her subordinates?

4.2 The leader positioning herself vis-à-vis subordinates

The Agenda leader performs requests by using positive politeness strategies (strategy 2) in most of her requests to her team members. She compensates for the FTA by presenting the request as wishes and hopes, rather than commands. The constructions that are most frequent are “I need help from you to”, “Hope you have/can” and “nice if”:

(8) 
I need help from you concerning the budgets of letters, internet and mobile […] Jeg trenger hjelp fra dere ved dagens budsjetter for brev fastnett, internett og mobil […]

(9) 
Hope it is possible for you to contact […] Häper du har mulighet til å ta kontakt […]

The Agenda-leader’s requests are formulated as a declaratives, rather than interrogatives or imperatives. Furthermore, the requests are formulated as needs, hopes and wishes. She expresses her self in psychological terms (wish and hopes), rather than in normative ones (obligation). By presenting the requests as a need for help, a wish or a hope, the leader presents the request as a personal wish, rather than an institutional obligation. All in all, this contributes to downgrade her institutional role, in favor of a more personal role. Alternatively the Agenda-leader could have presented her requests in a normative way, for instance by using interrogatives and imperatives. These are more explicit ways of enacting institutional power. However, by using less forceful strategies and presenting the requests as needs and hopes, the leader is presenting the requests as speech acts that need little compensation. She is optimistic, assuming that the recipients will comply with the request, something which simultaneously implies common ground and familiarity with the recipients. Instead of explicitly enacting power, the Agenda-leader downgrades her institutional role, in favor of building socio-emotional ties with her subordinates.

Furthermore, the Agenda leader also goes off record (strategy 4) in performing the requests. She does not perform the request directly, but leaves it to the recipient to interpret the request out of the context or work-place routine:

(10) 
Hope you may respond within Wednesday at 4PM.

(11) […] but it is nice if you send me your comments on email – progression is important […] kommer videre
one, he knows that it is a request. By using the declarative form, the leader LM avoids presenting the request directly, and thereby she manifests less power.

Another indirect strategy LM uses is to perform directives laterally, through so called informatives. Statements directed to a primary recipient in an email message may function as an indirect request to secondary recipient who receives the e-mail as a copy [28].

In example (13), Arvid is a secondary recipient, i.e. the mail is CC-ed to him. In the sentence in (13), LM performs two speech acts, one directly to the primary recipient – a statement, and one indirectly directed to AL, as an indirect request. As in example (12), the leader leaves it up to the information director to identify the request from the context and comply with it.

So far, we have seen that the Agenda-leader uses positive politeness (strategy 2) and indirect strategies (strategy 4) when performing requests to the members of Agenda. However, when the Agenda-leader performs requests to, or negotiates with, partners outside of Agenda, she uses more direct strategies. These are often followed by a warrant, or are anchored in her professional role as a leader:

In examples (14), (15) and (16) the speech acts are directed to partners outside of the Agenda group. The leader’s requests are more direct, or baldly on record [8], than the request to her subordinates. The requests are formulated as interrogatives (Will you […] Can we […]?). According to Brown & Levinson (1989) utterances as: “Can you pass the salt” are indirect, but have become fully conventionalized and the FTA is no longer off record [8]. In addition, in (16) LM refers to her own role as a leader, before she presents the request. This is a way of providing a contextual frame of the request as well as legitimizing her right to perform requests. As we shall see in the next example, the Agenda-leader also

Hi Stein! Thanks for info about a very good service! As leader of AgendaPrivate I have some comments/quest:

- Concerning Per Harald’s title it is decided in Bente Knudsen meeting that the title is […] and it is nice if the title could be changed to this in your letter.

Rgds Line

Hei Stein! takk for info om en meget bra tjeneste! Som leder i AgendaPrivat har jeg noen kommentarer/spm:

- Når det gjelder tittelen til Per Harald er det besluttet i Bente Knudsens ledermøte at tittel er Direktør Internett og det er fint om tittel endres til denne tittelen i ditt breveksampel.

Rgds Line

mvh Line

In examples (14), (15) and (16) the speech acts are directed to partners outside of the Agenda group. The leader’s requests are more direct, or baldly on record [8], than the request to her subordinates. The requests are formulated as interrogatives (Will you […] Can we […]?). According to Brown & Levinson (1989) utterances as: “Can you pass the salt” are indirect, but have become fully conventionalized and the FTA is no longer off record [8]. In addition, in (16) LM refers to her own role as a leader, before she presents the request. This is a way of providing a contextual frame of the request as well as legitimizing her right to perform requests. In (14) and (15) she refers to her superordinate, Bente Knudsen, also to legitimize and ground her request. In both examples, LM explicitly addresses and makes relevant her own authority or a hierarchical position, in order to account for the request. This may be an efficient strategy to necessitate a quick response. As we shall see in the next example, the Agenda-leader also
makes hierarchical positions relevant in order to reject a request or solve a conflict:

(17) Hi Eva! thanks for your response, but in my opinion too comprehensive. Abuse is one letter that needs a better tone of voice. As you saw in the previous mail, this is a letter that is sent from Internet, NOT a confirmation letter. Arvid wishes to prioritize this on behalf of TCM because we have increased bad will in this case. (c.f. VG-article last week.)

[...]

Thanks in advance for your help on behalf of the abuse-group in Internet.

rgds Line

5. Discussion

In a previous mail, Line was criticized by a colleague in another department, Eva Engseth. Eva Engseth complained to Line that she has assigned new tasks to text designer Maria Monsen without consulting her (as MM’s leader) and presenting information about the activity. Moreover, Engseth performs a whole range of requests to Line Myhre. In (17) Line Myhre rejects Eva Engseths requests indirectly, firstly by producing a dispreferred response (thanks for your response, but [...]), secondly by giving an account (Abuse is one letter that needs a better tone of voice) and finally by a change in footing [16], quoting the information director, Arvid Lervik’s point of view (‘Arvid wishes to prioritize this’) and Telecom’s interests (‘on behalf of Telecom’). Rejecting complaints and denying complying with requests are FTA’s. In (17) Line Myhre performs her rejection to Eva Engseth on record, directly, and with very little politeness work. By underscoring words (ett brev/one letter) and even using capital letters (NOT), she emphasizes the propositional content and signals strong emotional involvement and authority. By continuing with grounding her rejection in Arvid Lerviks role as superordinate, and even copying him in, she shows that she has Lervik on her side. This strengthens her authority and makes it difficult for Engseth to reject the decision.

5.1 Summary

The analysis of the Agenda-leaders communicative actions showed that she uses different discursive devices in in-group and out-group communication. When writing messages to the Agenda-group, she mostly uses an informal style and does not make explicit relevant leadership categorizations. Requests are performed with positive politeness strategies (closeness strategies and indirect strategies), signaling a socio-emotional, personal relationship with her subordinates. On the contrary, when writing messages to out-group partners, the leader uses a more formal style and makes hierarchical categories relevant. Requests are performed with direct strategies, grounded in her position as a leader or with reference to her superordinate’s wishes.

The Agenda leader predominantly uses a rhetoric which creates a positive and attractive image of the group. The analysis identified three devices which contribute to build up the group’s image. First, by using addressing devices and positive loaded nick-names she compliments (and categorizes) the members and invites them to identify with the picture/category she presents. Second, the leader makes use of metaphors as narration devices. Metaphors as “blessing journey” and “blessing round” contribute to creating a picture of the team as main characters in a success-story. In addition, by using metaphors from economics (to sell in Agenda) the leader compares Agenda with a valuable product. Finally, the Agenda leader provides feedback to the group by informing that they have attention from the top-leaders. To have the top-leaders attention may signal that the group’s work really is making a difference in the huge company. Providing this information may be a performance management device [6] which might serve to strengthen relations inside the team. In sum, the rhetorical devices which the Agenda-leader uses in her in-group communication contribute to creating a positive image of the group. She presents the group as being enthusiastic about their work and as being valuable for the company, something which may invite to group identification, establish involvement, trust and maybe increased participation.

Despite that all the members of this distributed group belong to different departments, and in addition other distributed work groups in the company as well, it seems that the leader manages to create an image of Agenda as a unique group. It may even be associated with what Bell and Kozlowski refer to as “a third culture” [6]. However, to confirm this, the group’s actual perceptions of being members of the group need to be examined through interviews. This has not been the purpose in the present study. A great part of the leader’s messages to the group are requests. When
she performs requests, she does not explicitly make her role as the leader explicitly relevant. Rather, she compensate for the request by using positive politeness strategies. This corresponds with Mullany (2004) and the findings in the “Language in the Workplace project” [20, 26, 36]. By using closeness strategies, the Agenda-leader presupposes common ground and familiarity, something which makes her appear as an egalitarian leader who trusts her team members and encourages them to act independently.

Despite the fact that the leader of Agenda by linguistic form appears as egalitarian and present in-in-group communication, she constitutes herself more as an authority towards externally co-workers. When writing messages to out-group partners, she tends to use a more formal style. When performing requests, she uses more direct strategies and ground the requesting acts in her position as a leader, or refers to super-ordinates. By referring to hierarchical roles, she is making power categories overtly relevant. This may be an effective device to pursue a quick compliance to a request. Second, the Agenda-leader makes hierarchical categories explicitly relevant when managing conflicts.

This study has primarily shown that the Agenda-leader does not make hierarchical categories relevant when writing messages to the team-members. Her authority is downplayed, or back grounded, in favor of an emotional, personal relationship with her employees. These findings illustrate Fairhurst’s point that hierarchy categorizations often are unspoken [14]. The Agenda-leader Line Myhre does not need to explicitly qualify herself as a leader each time she posts a request. Her appointed role as the leader of Agenda gives her an exclusive right to perform requests and the members are obliged to comply. In addition, the institutional role is enacted implicitly by the rhetorical devices identified in this study. Her leadership role is constituted by and through the actions which she performs. Evaluating, motivating and requesting are leadership actions [36]. When Line Myhre posts messages to out-group co-workers, she does not have the same exclusive right, or can not take for granted that the recipients will comply with her requests, since she is not their leader. Therefore, the requests need to be grounded in her institutional role, or anchored in her super-ordinate’s wish.

5.2 Doing leadership is building trust

The leadership carried out in Agenda seems to a great extent to be grounded on trust. In the present article, this has been exemplified by the addressing devices, the nick names, and the leader’s use of positive politeness when performing requests.

A characteristic of virtual teams and computer-mediated networks is that “boundaries are permeable, interactions are with diverse others, connections switch between multiple networks, and hierarchies can be flatter and recursive (...). The community exists more in the informal networks than predefined work-groups. Rather than fitting into the same group as those around them, each person has his/her own “personal community” [37]. Wellman (2001) refers to this phenomenon as “networked individualism” [37]. A risk with the networked individualism is that the social life at the workplace may be fragmented, and that no one fully knows each other.

Where person-to person community is individualizing, role-to-role community deconstructs a holistic individual identity. A person becomes only the sum of her roles, and there is the danger of alienation. The compartmentalization of personal life – within the household and within the community – may create an insecure milieu where no one fully knows anyone (Wellman 2001:17).

The leadership practices carried out in Agenda, which is grounded on trust, may demonstrate an attempt to reduce these risks.

As mentioned in the review, one of the challenges for leaders of virtual teams is to duplicate the two key functional leader roles to the virtual team (team development and performance management) According to Bell and Kozlowski [6] this includes the leaders need to “closely monitor any changes in environmental conditions”. Additionally it includes to motivating team members to “commit strongly to the overall team effort and need to facilitate team coherence, especially under high intensity conditions”. In virtual teams, as in Agenda where people only rarely meet face-to-face, these functions are challenged. However, the leader seems to attempt to create a positive climate in the group, both by rhetorical devices as giving the group a nick-name and by providing receipts and acknowledgements in third position responses. These characteristics belong to the team-development function [6]. In addition, arranging regular face to face meetings belongs to the performance management function. Conclusively, the leader seems to duplicate both of the important leader functions.

Computer-mediated communication provides great opportunity for leaders to send out important information, request and monitor their members. Even though the team-members are physically distant, the technology facilitates constraint-free communication and “hyperconnectivity”, i.e. “the availability for people to communicate anywhere and anytime” [35]. E-mail may foster social presence in a greater extent than face-to-face, in the sense that e-mail messages are persistent and thus...
having more pervasive force. This makes it possible for leaders to appear powerful, even on a distance. Interestingly, with respect of the amounts of messages, the reminders and extent of feedback [29, 30], the Agenda leader appears as a powerful leader, displaying her hierarchical position in the group. Simultaneously, her methods of creating in group solidarity and performing requests, shows that her institutional role is back grounded as she enacts egalitarian leadership building socio-emotional ties within the team.

6. References


