Managing the Meaning of Leadership

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Managing the Meaning of Leadership: Leadership as ‘Communicating Intent’ in Wildland Firefighting

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Abstract Leadership studies and communication studies increasingly overlap in the emergence of the post-industrial leadership paradigm. This study calls attention to how different underlying models of communication in leadership theorizing and program implementation in organizations may cause otherwise progressive theories to be falsely rejected before realizing their emancipatory potential. We analyze a leadership initiative in wildland firefighting, inspired by the German military philosophy of Auftragstaktik, which recommends communicating ‘leader’s intent’. We show how talk about communication in the organization and talk about the theory may diverge. Adapting the language of metadiscourse theory, we explore alternate communication models to expand the practical metadiscourse of communication to better align it with the theoretical metadiscourse of leadership it purports to actualize.

Keywords Auftragstaktik; leadership program implementation; organizational communication; practical metadiscourse; theoretical metadiscourse; wildland firefighting

Leadership studies and communication studies increasingly overlap in the emerging post-industrial paradigm, which emphasizes relational and process-based leadership (Martin, 2006; Northouse, 2004; Rost, 1993). However, just as there are a myriad of models of leadership, so too are there a myriad of models of communication (e.g. Craig, 1999a; Fairhurst, 2007; Putnam et al., 1996). In this article, we argue that leadership studies needs to be conversant with different communication models for the sake of both theorizing and program implementation in organizations. Specifically, models of communication may be culturally entrenched in organizations, such as the conduit model of communication (Axley, 1984), and thus can stymie the implementation of a new leadership perspective that relies upon a different underlying model of communication. In other words, organizations may attempt to adopt new approaches to leadership to address pressing issues, but then implement theories wrongly by relying on incompatible and potentially outmoded models of communication.
In this article, we introduce ‘communication metadiscourse theory’ (Craig, 1996, 1999a) to help theorize this potential divergence. We explain metadiscourse theory in detail below in order to draw attention to the difference between a theoretical metadiscourse of leadership and the practical metadiscourse of communication that emerges in its name. This refers to the difference between the intended embrace of a particular leadership theory from the actual communication practices that may be advocated for its implementation. We show how the latter may fail to actualize the former because the promulgated communication practices reflect a different underlying conception of how communication works.

We present a case that illustrates how a practical metadiscourse of communication may stray from the theoretical metadiscourse of leadership it purports to actualize. Specifically, we show how the wildland fire community in the USA adopted a German model of leadership called Auftragstaktik (a leadership theory that defines leadership in terms of communication) as a way to address pressing problems that had come to be identified as leadership issues in that community. Auftragstaktik loosely translates to ‘communicating intent and imparting presence’ (Shattuck, 2000), but it was imported into the US military as ‘commander’s intent’ (e.g. Straight, 1996), and was later imported into wildland fire as ‘leader’s intent’ (National Wildfire Coordinating Group [NWCG], 2003).

While the theoretical metadiscourse of Auftragstaktik may be appropriate for the problems faced by the wildland fire community, and compatible with the emerging leadership paradigm, when we examine the practical metadiscourse of leader’s intent, we find that the communication practices recommended in a comprehensive leadership curriculum reflect a different underlying model of communication, a conduit model (Axley, 1984) that is more compatible with a person- and position-based model of leadership. We show that by equating these communication practices with the spirit and rhetoric of Auftragstaktik, members of the wildland fire community potentially limit their ability to realize that theoretical metadiscourse. Furthermore, the practical metadiscourse of leader’s intent potentially fails to realize the promise of the emerging leadership paradigm, further reinforcing a perceived gulf between theorizing and training (e.g. Barker, 2002; Nissen et al., 2005).

The case also demonstrates that when implementing new leadership perspectives, organizations do not simply adopt abstract theories (i.e. theoretical metadiscourses). Rather, they benchmark practices of referent organizations (i.e. practical metadiscourses) and adapt them to their own. As will be shown below, instead of starting from scratch to implement Auftragstaktik, the wildland fire community benchmarked and mimicked the practices of the US military. Thus, as part of our analysis we identify points of vulnerability in implementation where a practical metadiscourse can become detached from a theoretical metadiscourse: at the point of translation and the point of transposition. We show how potentially outmoded but culturally entrenched models of communication can stymie the proper implementation of a leadership theory at these points.

Finally, we explore alternate communication models that may help the wildland fire community expand its practical metadiscourse of leader’s intent to potentially live up to both its claims about Auftragstaktik and the promise of the new leadership paradigm. We conclude the article with implications for leadership theorizing and practice.
The emerging leadership paradigm

Leadership studies has often been described as a field of divergent frameworks in search of a unifying perspective (e.g. Northhouse, 2004; Thayer, 1988). Numerous reviewers lament that there is no unifying definition or theory of leadership (Higgs, 2003; Kotterman, 2006; Rost, 1993). Others lament a split between academic and popular approaches to leadership, including that the ‘leadership industry’ may make claims beyond what empirical research can support (Barker, 2002).

If there is any agreement about leadership studies, it is that a new leadership paradigm is emerging (Dugan, 2006; Martin et al., 2007b), which is shifting the field from an ‘industrial’ model of leadership to a ‘post-industrial’ model of leadership (Barker, 2002; Rost, 1993). The industrial model was person (i.e. leader) centric and based on position power; leadership was historically conceptualized as behaviors done to or for others (Rost, 1993). The post-industrial model, on the other hand, is relational (Dugan, 2006; Rost, 1993) and based on shared power (Pearce, 2004; Pearce & Conger, 2003); now leadership is increasingly conceptualized as a collective or collaborative process (Martin & Ernst, 2005; Martin et al., 2007a, 2007b).

Whereas the industrial paradigm was focused on goal attainment, or getting things done through leadership (Rost, 1993), the post-industrial paradigm focuses on collaboration toward interdependent decision making (Kouzes & Posner, 2007; Martin, 2007; Martin et al., 2007a, 2007b). Thus it is more appropriate to focus on the leadership interaction (Rost, 1993) or leadership as a transactional process (Northouse, 2004). Communication skills required of leaders in the new paradigm include the skill of inquiry rather than advocacy (Higgs, 2003) and the importance of creating a climate for collaboration and shared decision making (Martin, 2006), to name a few.

Because the new paradigm focuses on leadership as a relational process of influence, incorporates collaboration, and emphasizes interdependent decision making, leadership studies and communication studies are increasingly relevant to one another. Traditionally, there have been specifically communication-based definitions of leadership, such as leadership as the management of meaning (Fairhurst & Sarr, 1996; Smircich & Morgan, 1982) and leadership as a process of influence (Northouse, 2004; Rost, 1993). But the post-industrial paradigm has the potential to go beyond these discourse-based approaches to encompass additional models of communication (e.g. Craig, 1999a; Fairhurst, 2007; Putnam et al., 1996).

The challenge for leadership theorists and practitioners in the new paradigm, then, is to become sensitized to a variety of communication models for two reasons. First, leadership theorists can draw upon existing and emerging theory in communication to reap the advantages of interdisciplinary insight and collaboration. But second, and perhaps more importantly, leadership theorists and practitioners need to be concerned about communication models used in the implementation of theory in practical settings. This is because some culturally entrenched communication models, such as the conduit model of communication (Axley, 1984), may stymie the implementation of new leadership perspectives that rely upon different assumptions about how communication works. In other words, an organization may attempt to take a new approach to leadership to address pressing issues, but then implement that theory wrongly, by relying on an incompatible and potentially outmoded model of communication.
In the next section, we draw upon communication metadiscourse theory (Craig, 1996, 1999a, 1999b) to help theorize this potential disconnect between the intended embrace of a particular leadership theory and the actual communication practices that may be advocated for its implementation.

**Communication metadiscourse theory**

If discourse refers to talk, then ‘metadiscourse’ (‘meta’, meaning above, plus ‘discourse’) is literally, ‘talk about talk’. These conversations in which we reflect upon talk fall along a continuum from ‘practical metadiscourses’ to ‘theoretical metadiscourses’, according to Craig (1999a, 1999b). Practical metadiscourse refers to talk about how communication works in a particular context, whereas theoretical metadiscourse refers to talk about how communication works in general, as exemplified by most academic literatures (Craig, 1996). These fall along a continuum because while theoretical metadiscourses attempt to systematize communication practices, practical metadiscourses necessarily contain implicit ‘theories’ about how communication works (Craig, 1996; Craig & Tracy, 1995).

While Craig’s primary goal in metadiscourse theory is to examine the interplay between practical and theoretical metadiscourses of communication (e.g. Craig, 1999b), we adapt the key constructs to make a distinction between talk about leadership theory in the abstract and talk about leadership communication practices in a particular setting. Thus, we label a leadership theory intended to be implemented in an organizational context a ‘theoretical metadiscourse of leadership’, but the actual discussion of communication practices in the setting that are supposed to realize it a ‘practical metadiscourse of communication’. If recommended communication practices carry underlying assumptions about how communication works that are different from assumptions about communication in the leadership theory, they may fail to realize its intended vision. This article explores two sources of such incompatibility: culturally entrenched communication models in organizational settings, and vestiges of practical metadiscourses imported from different organizational contexts.

In writing about communication metadiscourse theory, Craig (1996) advocates that communication theorists should ‘cultivate’ communication practices along the entire theoretic–practical continuum (p. 470). We interpret his argument as saying that discussants should reflect upon whether a particular theory is the correct, best, and most coherent for their purposes, and furthermore that they are actually doing in communication what they say they are up to. We argue that both standards can and should be applied to the implementation of leadership programs in organizations. Namely, the choice of leadership perspective should be evaluated for its appropriateness for addressing the particular organization’s unique challenges, and the recommended communication practices for implementing it should be assessed for their ability to realize the theory in practice. We bring these two evaluation criteria to bear on the following case analysis.

**Leadership as communicating intent in wildland fire**

In this section, we provide background about the organizational context of wildland firefighting and the unique issues that emerged in the 1990s that were identified
as leadership problems. Next, we describe the particular theoretical metadiscourse of leadership, a German military philosophy called Auftragstaktik, that the community called upon to address these perceived leadership problems. Finally, we present the practical metadiscourse that attempts to realize that philosophy in wildland fire practice as an element of a comprehensive leadership development program. We then analyze the fit between the practical metadiscourse of communication and the theoretical metadiscourse of leadership it intends to realize.

**Background on wildland fire**

In the United States, fighting vegetation fires on forests and grasslands is called wildland firefighting, as a way to distinguish it from structure firefighting in cities and towns, where different priorities, tactics, and equipment may be used. Wildland firefighting occurs on lands controlled by entities of local, state and federal government as well as lands owned by individuals and private corporations.

Agencies at all levels of government engage in wildland fire activities and, more recently, are supplemented by a growing number of private contractors. Five federal agencies bear principal responsibility for fighting fires on federal lands. State and local fire agencies maintain primary responsibility for hundreds of millions of acres of non-federal forests and rangelands. Local fire departments play a critical role in the ‘wildland–urban interface.’ This national network of wildland firefighting organizations is supported by the NIFC. NIFC includes the National Interagency Coordination Center (NICC), which coordinates resources to address wildland fires throughout the United States. Under this system, when a citizen reports a wildland fire, local agencies respond. If the local responders cannot control the fire, their agency requests assistance from one of 11 Geographic Area Coordination Centers (GACC). When the GACC has exhausted its resources, they turn to the NICC for help (NIFC, 2007).

National standards for wildland fire are maintained by the National Wildfire Coordinating Group (NWCG), which was created to coordinate and streamline the efforts of participating agencies. Members of the NWCG include the USDA Forest Service, the Bureau of Land Management, the National Park Service, the Bureau of Indian Affairs, the US Fish and Wildlife Service, and state forestry agencies represented through the National Association of State Foresters. NWCG is made up of a series of working teams that provide formal mechanisms for agencies to agree upon standards for training, equipment, qualifications, and other operational functions (NWCG, 2007a).

**Leadership problems in wildland firefighting**

Within the past two decades, accidents and turnover fatalities in wildland fire have been increasingly attributed to problems in leadership. For example, after a particularly tragic fire season in 1994, a comprehensive Wildland Firefighter Safety Awareness Study identified leadership as an issue requiring attention by wildland fire agencies (DeGrosky, 2005; NWCG, 2003a). The NWCG Training Working Team created a Leadership Committee whose charge was to promote cultural change in the workforce, including identifying ways to emphasize the importance of leadership concepts in training, to cultivate sound leadership practices, and to provide on the
job leadership development opportunities in the wildland fire environment (DeGrosky, 2005; NWCG, 2003a).

As part of their approach, the Leadership Committee established a distinct leadership curriculum comprised of courses that are conceptually connected from the follower level to the organizational leader level (DeGrosky, 2005; NWCG, 2003a). As part of that leadership curriculum, the NWCG promotes a version of the German philosophy of Auftragstaktik. In the next section, we describe the history and philosophy of this theoretical metadiscourse of leadership.

The theoretical metadiscourse of Auftragstaktik

Auftragstaktik (OWF-trags-tack-tick) refers to a German style of military leadership developed by Prussian General August von Gneisenau circa 1869 (Oliviero, 2001: 57). Although auftrag means ‘task’, Auftragstaktik actually discourages specification of tactics and instead emphasizes the creation of a certain command climate within which commanders habitually communicate the overall mission to be accomplished and leave specific tactics up to lower level field commanders (Shattuck, 2000). According to some, the basic tenet of Auftragstaktik is that commanders communicate ‘what to do and why it must be done, but without specifying how to do it’ (Straight, 1996: 1).

Auftragstaktik originated in the 19th century when advances in weaponry made it impractical for infantries to march into battle en masse (Widder, 2002). As became evident the US Civil War, for example, armies less frequently marched into battle in ‘lines’, and increasingly maneuvered in units that were more dispersed throughout the field. However, once these smaller units became spread out in space, commanders were not always able to monitor actual conditions on the ground. Thus, specific orders occasionally became outdated, irrelevant, or even counterproductive. A new approach was needed to address the need for field commanders to ‘act independently in the chaos of battle’ (Oliviero, 2001: 58), but which would simultaneously ‘preclude misguided action by lower-level leaders’ (Widder, 2002: 4). In addition to the advantage of issuing orders that can adapt to changing conditions, another cited advantage of Auftragstaktik is that it frees higher-level commanders from becoming immersed in tactical details.

The term Auftragstaktik was actually coined by its opponents, the Normaltaktikers, who would have subscribed to a style of command called ‘Befehlstaktik’, or order-type tactics (Widder, 2002). Normaltaktikers were afraid that giving subordinates the leeway to develop tactics based on the mission would undermine army discipline (Widder, 2002). Despite their protests, the German army officially adopted Auftragstaktik as a command philosophy in 1914 (Widder, 2002: 5). Oliviero (2001) claims that as a result, the Germans experienced the battlefield differently from the Allies in World War II. Today, although the German word auftrags literally means ‘task’, it actually translates into English as ‘order’ due to the entrenchment of the philosophy.

On its face Auftragstaktik may simply seem like a different way to issue orders, but Widder (2002) clarifies that the practice is more than simply delegation; he claims that it is ‘a type of leadership that is inextricably linked to a certain image of men [sic] as soldiers’ (p. 6). Specifically, Widder (2002) argues, subordinates must be
trained how to act independently, they must understand the intent of their orders, they must be given proper guidance, and they must be given the proper resources (p. 4).

According to Keithly and Ferris (1999), current German army regulations emphasize two additional components of Auftragstaktik: initiative and mutual trust. Initiative refers to ‘latitude (granted) to subordinate leaders in the execution of their mission’, and mutual trust ‘requires each soldier’s unwavering commitment to perform his [sic] duty’ (German Army Command and Control, 1998: 302). Keithly and Ferris (1999) interpret mutual trust as ‘superior–subordinate professionalism’ (p. 6); on the one hand, the subordinate is assured that he or she can act confidently without fear of recrimination. On the other hand, the commander is assured that the order will be carried out ‘decisively’. In fact, decisive action is such an important concept in Auftragstaktik that it may be acceptable in some cases for the subordinate to disobey orders so long as it is done for the purpose of achieving the overall mission (Keithly & Ferris, 1999).

Because the original Auftragstaktik promotes a relational and interactive process model of leadership, it appears consistent with the emerging paradigm in leadership studies described above (Barker, 2002; Northouse, 2004; Pearce, 2004; Pearce & Conger, 2003; Rost, 1993). Next we examine how the concept was adopted by the US Military as ‘commander’s intent,’ which was later adapted by the wildland fire community as ‘leader’s intent.’

**Importing Auftragstaktik as ‘commander’s intent’**

While Auftragstaktik means ‘communicating intent and imparting presence’ (Shattuck, 2000), it was adopted by the US military as ‘commander’s intent’ (Straight, 1996: 2), emphasizing the first part of the phrase and not the second (Shattuck, 2000). The concept was incorporated into US military operations sporadically throughout the mid 20th century, but was officially embraced in the 1980s. Today, the US military continues to issue statements on the relevance of commander’s intent for contemporary military operations (Widder, 2002). For example, Howard (2001) argues that as units become more technologically advanced, they become more spread out not in space but in specialization, and thus it has become necessary to continually orient soldiers toward a common mission in order to keep their efforts aligned (p. 1).

US military authors who write about commander’s intent generally agree on the basic philosophy that it involves communicating what to do and why but not how to do it; however, they sometimes differ in the interpretation of specific terms. Above, it was noted that the German philosophy specifies that subordinates must be given proper guidance to ‘preclude misguided action’ (Widder, 2002). However, some take ‘being given proper guidance’ to mean that subordinates are granted initiative but only within a framework (Pearce, 2004). For some, this framework is as simple as the space and time within which the mission needs to be accomplished. For others, however, this framework refers to established operating limits based on accepted military practices and doctrine (e.g. Shattuck, 2000).

Similarly, the conceptual definition of intent seems to vary from author to author (cf. Shattuck, 2000), from the rationale for a decision, to the spirit of the mission (rather than letter of the order). Most commonly, however, intent is clarified as the ultimate ‘vision’ or ‘end state’ to be accomplished by subordinates as executors (e.g.}
Howard, 2001; Widder, 2002). Keithly and Ferris (1999), for example, define intent from the point of view of the commander as the desired end state or ‘standard against which [the subordinate] can measure their planned action’ (p. 6).

However, it is not entirely settled whether ‘commander’s intent’ refers to an entirely separate message, or whether it is a way of modifying the communication of the overall plan. For example, Howard (2001) explains that the actual military practice is to ‘express commander’s intent when transmitting orders and conducting briefings’ (p. 4). He gives the example that an ‘objective’ would be to ‘take the bridge,’ but ‘intention’ would be the ‘vision or strategic thinking’ behind the decision (p. 6). Unfortunately, this example does not clarify whether intent refers to a separate message. On the other hand, Straight (1996) explains that in the army, intent refers to a ‘vision’ that is specifically communicated in a message as a ‘concise expression of purpose’ (p. 2), while the marine corps requires that the ‘mission-type order must describe the desired result’ in addition to the purpose of the operation (Straight, 1996: 3). Thus, for the army, to communicate intent means to state a task and to provide a rationale, whereas for the Marines, to communicate intent means to issue a task, to provide a rationale, and to describe the end state to be achieved.

Importing commander’s intent as ‘leader’s intent’
Federal wildland fire agencies first encountered the commander’s intent concept in 2000 when a group of Interagency Hotshot Crew Superintendents were exposed to the concept in training and began to model it with their crews. In its earliest efforts, commander’s intent was taught in wildland fire as it was described in US army doctrine. However, after some early participants objected to the blatant military connotations, the NWCG modified the approach and renamed the concept ‘leader’s intent’. In addition to translating commander’s intent into leader’s intent for the wildland fire community, from 2002 to 2004, the NWCG Leadership Committee took 50 people per year from various fire agencies through programs at the Marine Corps University. As will be shown below, this Marine Corps influence helped to shape the NWCG’s uptake of leader’s intent for the wildland fire community.

The preferred phrase ‘leader’s intent’ reflects the understanding that there are a variety of leadership functions in wildland fire. The wildland fire version of leader’s intent was later incorporated into a larger Wildland Fire Leadership Development Program (WFLDP), which also emphasizes that people may face a variety of different leadership responsibilities throughout their careers. By 2003, training in ‘leader’s intent’ was fully established in the L-380 (Fireline Leadership) course. To date, nearly 7000 people have taken the course (James R. Cook, 2007, personal communication).

Leader’s intent as a solution to problems in wildland fire
The incorporation of leader’s intent into the WFLDP communicates certain messages to members of the wildland fire community. Symbolically, it identifies safety problems in wildland firefighting, in part, as a set of leadership problems. Structurally, it distributes both authority and responsibility down the chain of command. Practically, it articulates an explicit discourse of leadership that has worked well for similar organizations that have dealt with command and control in dangerous contexts. Substantively, the emphasis upon leaders ‘communicating intent’ highlights the importance of communication in the leadership process (Thayer, 1988).
Culturally, the introduction of leader’s intent is viewed by some as potentially helping to overcome an overly rule-driven approach to managing firefighter safety, where accidents have been traditionally evaluated against checklists (Ziegler, 2007), resulting in litanies of enumerated infractions (Thackaberry, 2004, 2006; TriData Corporation, 1998). Leadership is now presented as a process of devising and communicating ends, on the one hand, and developing the appropriate means for a potentially changing set of conditions, one the other, instead of the enforcement of bureaucratic rules that are supposed to apply universally. With its emphasis on initiative by subordinates, leader’s intent potentially grants firefighters the ability to accomplish their responsibilities in ways other than directed by their superiors.

At the agency level some advocates of a doctrinal approach to firefighting view the leader’s intent concept as one way for agencies to move away from evaluations of dynamic behavior with static rules that may not fit particular situations (Hollenshead et al., 2005). Now, in the wake of an entrapment or burnover, rather than focus on means-oriented questions like ‘did the firefighters follow the rules?’, questions might be addressed toward the intended ends and how they were communicated, understood, and realized. It is thought that leader’s intent can also provide firefighters with a new discursive platform to explain their actions in retrospect. In theory, incorporating the *Auftragstaktik* philosophy may not only be a good thing for the wildland fire community for addressing their particular problems, but it may also be consistent with the emerging post-industrial paradigm of leadership. Next we present the actual communication practices that are advocated in the implementation of this theory in wildland fire. Later, we evaluate the practical metadiscourse of leader’s intent for its potential to realize the vision of the theoretical metadiscourse of *Auftragstaktik*.

### The practical metadiscourse of leader’s intent

In this section, we describe the practical metadiscourse of leadership that is presented to members of the wildland fire community at two levels: the overall philosophy of fire leadership, of which leader’s intent is a component, and specific advice for communicating leader’s intent in the field. When we began this project, the most comprehensive statements about the overall leadership philosophy (and thus leader’s intent) could be found on a publicly available website developed and still maintained by the WFLDP (NWCG, 2008). This was appropriate for the target audience, who are widely distributed across the United States and tend to work together in a networked fashion as described above. More recently, the overall leadership philosophy has been refined and published in a book called *Leading in the Wildland Fire Service [Leading]* (NWCG, 2007b), which is also available on the website. Our description below stems from both sources.

In addition to discussions of the overall leadership philosophy, of which leader’s intent is a component, the NWCG has also developed materials specifically for firefighter use in the field that recommend particular communication practices based on the concept of leader’s intent. These include special ‘leadership’ sections of wildland firefighters’ field manuals such as the *Fireline Handbook* and the *Incident Response Pocket Guide*. Thus, below, we also describe the practical metadiscourse of communication available in these directives.
Wildland Fire Leadership Development Program

The discourse of leader’s intent can be found in the first two areas of the WFLDP website labeled ‘Values and Principles’ (Values) and ‘Leadership Toolbox’ (Toolbox) (NWCG, 2008), and in Leading (NWCG, 2007b). The key Values and Principles are identified as ‘Duty’, ‘Respect’, and ‘Integrity’, and these are elaborated by 11 maxims like ‘build the team’, which appears under Respect. Discussions of leader’s intent appear throughout a variety of directives that elaborate upon these 11 maxims. For example, the directive to ‘improvise within the commander’s intent’ is included under the Duty maxim to ‘make sound and timely decisions’, while ‘observe and assess actions in progress without micro-managing’ is included under the Duty maxim to ‘ensure that tasks are understood, supervised and accomplished’ (NWCG, 2008). Similarly, the Respect maxim to ‘keep your subordinates informed’ includes the directive to ‘give the reason (intent) for assignments and tasks’ (NWCG, 2008).

The second component, the Toolbox, takes the visitor to a series of links for further reading about each of the 11 maxims under Duty, Respect, and Integrity. Under the Respect maxim to ‘keep subordinates informed’, for example, one can read articles about commander’s intent and summary statements explaining leader’s intent (NWCG, 2008).

Vision for leadership

Leading next defines leadership itself. Here, leadership is described as the act of ‘influencing others to achieve a result’ (NWCG, 2007b: 13). And, the ideal leader is described as one who wants to develop better leadership skills, to earn trust and respect from subordinates, and ‘to bring order to [the] chaos’ that characterizes the wildland fire environment (pp. 5–6). The definition of leadership contains five elements, two of which include explicit discussion of leader’s intent: ‘Command Philosophy’ and ‘Command Climate’. The Command Philosophy is described as a one of decentralized command, where ‘translating vision into clear leader’s intent’ is at the heart of our command philosophy’ (p. 15). A clear marine corps influence is evident in the implicit definition of leader’s intent as a series of statements that convey ‘task, purpose, and end state’ (p. 15).

Command Climate, the second element, is described in terms of the systems model of communication (Weiner, 1965) with phrases like ‘direct communication with open interaction among teams and their leaders’ (p. 19). This section presents a normative vision for communication that is based on a democratic notion of participation. For example, the ideal climate is described as one with ‘open communication, mutual trust and respect, freedom to raise issues and engage in debate, clear and attainable goals and teamwork’ (p. 19).

Shattuck (2000) lamented that the US army had omitted the concept of ‘impacting presence’ from Auftragstaktik when importing the original philosophy. The WFLDP does address a similarly named concept, but ‘command presence’ is defined in terms of the leader’s image or the personal impression he or she makes upon the team. For example, command presence is described as ‘how we present ourselves to others’ and an ‘image’ one projects (p. 20). The importance of conveying ‘character’ is emphasized, specifically one with a ‘take charge’ attitude (p. 20). In a sidebar, an
example is provided of one historic figure who had had the ‘command presence’ to hold his men at gunpoint as a way to save their lives during a disastrous fire (p. 21).

Given the emphasis on personal command presence, communication is thus discussed with regard to the individual skill of the leader. For example one’s ‘ability to communicate effectively’ is held up as a ‘universally regarded leadership behavior’ (p. 22). Communication is also addressed separately as a ‘primary tool’ a leader can use to establish climate (p. 22). Communicating effectively is defined as engaging in ‘two-way’ communication, listening, conveying objectives and intent, and striving to be a better communicator (p. 22).

The remainder of the document, like the website, elaborates upon the 11 maxims under the three main Values and Principles of Duty, Respect, and Integrity. Discussions of Duty evoke the emphasis on ‘initiative’ evident in the original Auftragstaktik philosophy (e.g. Keithly & Ferris, 1999; Widder, 2002) because it calls for a ‘bias for action’. However, ‘acting within the intent’ (italics added) of their leaders’ necessarily checks the scope of subordinate action. A key maxim for Duty, as noted above, is ‘ensuring tasks are understood, supervised, accomplished’ (p. 33).

And within this discussion, ‘Leader’s Intent’ is described as a specific message: a ‘clear, concise statement’ with the three components favored by the marine corps (cf. Straight, 1996): ‘Task – what is the objective or goal of the assignment. Purpose – why the assignment needs to be done. End state – how the situation should look when the assignment is successfully completed’ (NWCG, 2007: 34).

As described above, the ‘end state’ is elaborated as the framework within which plans are developed (cf. Widder, 2002). However, in a sharp departure from Howard’s (2001) description of intent as an ‘invariate’ or pure message, the WFLDP instructs: ‘each leader goes through the process of understanding and refining intent from above and expressing their intent to their people’ (p. 35). This means that even at the crew levels, tactical objectives are used to ‘develop intent’ (p. 36) (cf. Howard, 2001; Keithly & Ferris, 1999; Straight, 1996).

The section concludes by explaining that communicating intent is an act of ‘giving away power’ to subordinates because it enables them flexibility; however, in doing so, leaders can increase their own influence. Meanwhile, leaders still gather feedback on the unfolding conditions in order to ‘maintain control’ (p. 39). It should be noted that although this section is entitled ‘ensure tasks are understood, supervised, and accomplished’ (p. 44), there is little to no discussion about how the leader actually confirms the subordinates’ interpretation of his or her statement of intent (cf. Shattuck, 2000).

**Advice for communicating**

Specific advice for communicating in the field is provided on the WFLDP website Toolbox, as well as in special ‘leadership’ sections of field manuals such as the Incident Response Pocket Guide (IRPG, 2006) and the Fireline Handbook. Much of the advice follows from the information described above, but some of it also prescribes specific methods for face to face communication. The website Toolbox contains a section called ‘Briefing and Intent’ which addresses leader’s intent; the IRPG contains comparable information, although it is typically more abbreviated. The Toolbox and IRPG reiterate the notion of command presence as something that is ‘transmitted by’ the leader. The Toolbox, for example, states that command
presence is ‘transmitted by your ability to communicate effectively’ (NWCG, 2003b). Effective communication is then defined in terms of the systems metaphor for communication as ‘two-way’ communication and soliciting feedback.

Whereas Leading (NWCG, 2007b) and the Values area of the website describe leader’s intent as a specific message containing the three components of task, purpose, and end state, the Toolbox and IRPG tend to muddle these three, previously distinct, terms. For example, as part of their stated ‘Communication Responsibilities’, all leaders are directed to ‘provide complete briefings that include a clearly stated “Leader’s Intent”’ (IRPG, 2006: ix), defined as task (what), purpose (why), and end state (how it should look when done). However, on the Respect page in the Toolbox and in the IRPG under the maxim ‘keep your subordinates informed’ appears the advice to ‘give the reason (intent) for assignments and tasks’ (IRPG, 2006: vii). Here, intent is synonymous with purpose or rationale only. In contrast, on the inside back cover of the IRPG (2006), intent is described as the ‘overall objectives/strategy’.

Similarly, the Toolbox explains how ‘briefings are to be given whenever there is a change in the situation or incident that affects strategy, tactics or assigned resources’ (NWCG, 2003b), and details six items to be included in a briefing. But it actually offers fewer details about leader’s intent, describing it as a discrete message to be ‘delivered’ along with three others like ‘specific assignments and tactics are given’. For further elaboration on intent, one may turn to the page entitled ‘Affect them with intent’ (NWCG, 2003b). However, there leader’s intent is described variously as purpose or objectives (as synonymous terms), overall purpose and expected results, and the three elements of task (now synonymous with ‘objectives’), purpose, and end state (now synonymous with ‘goal’).

In summary, whereas Leading and the Values area of the website had made clear distinctions among the terms task, purpose, and end state, in the IRPG and Toolbox these terms, along with objective and goal, are used interchangeably to describe both the umbrella concept of leader’s intent and its various components. This contrasts with Howard’s (2001) discussion of intent as a specific code word that is unlikely to be confused by trained army soldiers with similar terms like objective, purpose, task, or aim (p. 2). Most notably in this section, leader’s intent is imagined to be a discrete message that is included alongside other messages in a tactical briefing, rather than, say, transforming the communication situation and/or contextualizing those other messages.

Analysis

In this section we analyze the model of communication implicit in the practical metadiscourse described above in the general explanation of leader’s intent and in the specific communication advice for the field. We point out the divergence between the practical metadiscourse of leader’s intent and the theoretical metadiscourse of Auftragstaktik, and we locate two points of vulnerability where this disconnect may have occurred.

The practical metadiscourse of leader’s intent focuses primarily on leaders as persons, including their qualities, activities, and skills. Intent is conceived as a particular cognition belonging to the leader: specifically, an envisioned outcome.
Communicating leader’s intent refers to skillfully encoding that cognition into a unique message and transmitting that message to subordinates. Furthermore, this message is communicated alongside other messages sent in briefings (as opposed to transforming the briefing process altogether). Successful communication of leader’s intent is assessed in terms of the fidelity of the transmission of that individual cognition without distortion. There is also a cascading effect of leader’s intent. At its lowest levels, the intent message may actually be derived from tactics. This potentially means that the intent message can change as conditions change (cf. Howard, 2001).

Within leader’s intent, a leader does have the responsibility to create a particular kind of communication climate. The only specified quality of that climate, however, is freedom of restriction of two-way speech so as to allow for feedback. In turn, that feedback is meant only for checking the accuracy of transmission of the communicated intent message.

This generally reflects a systems model of communication (Weiner, 1965) and communication as a conduit in particular (Axley, 1984). The conduit model regards intention as very individual and subjective (Lannamann, 1991). It is a ‘representative’ view of communication, where ‘thought is a private activity that one packages into a code for another to decipher’ (Anton, 1999: 29). Rather than imagining imparting presence as a way of helping subordinates to learn how the leader thinks (Shattuck, 2000), the emphasis on the leader as a person gives rise to a conception of command presence as a kind of individual impression management by the leader. Command presence is defined as an overt demonstration of individual vigor, dynamism, and forcefulness toward subordinates in order to be granted legitimate authority. This hints at trait-based and charismatic models of leadership.

In summary, the practical metadiscourse of leader’s intent conceives of communication as the desired outcome of one person in a position of power accurately transmitted to the mind of another person in a lesser position of power. The implicit conduit model of communication and the emphasis on the individuality of the leader is more consistent with the industrial paradigm of leadership that emphasizes leadership as rooted in the person and position, and as something leaders do to or for others to achieve predetermined goals. As a result, if the goal is for leader’s intent to realize the true spirit of Auftragstaktik in wildland fire, this practical metadiscourse is unlikely to help achieve that effect.

We believe that this disconnect resulted from issues arising in translation from the German original and transposition from the military context to the wildland fire context. We elaborate upon these points of vulnerability because other organizations may also be hindered at these nodes when implementing new theoretical metadiscourses of leadership.

Translation

The practical metadiscourse of leader’s intent was already limited by its reliance on the practical metadiscourse of commander’s intent, the military’s specific translation of Auftragstaktik. As discussed above, the original Auftragstaktik translates to ‘communicating intent and imparting presence’, and its present day implementation in the German army also emphasizes ‘mutual trust’ and ‘initiative’. Shattuck (2000)
also described the development of ‘shared mind’ as an integral part of the process of leadership.

However, when the military translated Auftragstaktik into commander’s intent for its own doctrine, it shifted the concept from a group process to an individual state. As Shattuck (2000) pointed out ‘there is no discussion of social norms, expectations, trust, or intimate personal knowledge of subordinates’ in the US army’s uptake of the concept (p. 67). Instead, the primary emphasis is on ‘structure and content’, or communicating the ends to be achieved, without recognizing the importance of creating what the Germans called ‘impacting presence’ (p. 71). By privileging commander’s intent, the army lopped off this equally important concept (Shattuck, 2000). Shattuck interpreted this concept as commanders imparting to subordinates ‘a sense of themselves’ (p. 71) by establishing a firm yet just command climate and by explaining the reasoning process they used to arrive at their decisions. On the latter point, he explained that ‘frequent interaction – formal and informal, professional and social3 – will provide subordinates additional opportunities to learn how their commanders think’ (p. 72).

The conduit model for communication is generally entrenched in US meta-discourse about communication (Axley, 1984), perhaps due to the American cultural privileging of individuality. Not surprisingly, one finds conduit models of communication in military author accounts of Auftragstaktik. For example, Howard (2001) defined intent as a ‘mental state’ where ‘one believes the achievement of some act is possible and can bring about that act by engaging in certain activities’ (p. 3). Such intent is conveyed to subordinates in the ‘container’ of a plan; however, it is also coupled with tactics, or ‘variants’ that can change according to changes in the environment. Once subordinates understand the plan in this dual sense, they have ‘intention awareness’ (Howard, 2001). Thus, plans may change as tactics adapt to conditions, but intent never changes; it is a ‘long term invariant’, the end state to be achieved (p. 6).

In contrast, Shattuck (2000) criticized the tendency of the army to primarily emphasize the initial message. He explained that when the battlefield situation changes, the context in which the ‘intent’ statement was originally interpreted also changes, and therefore the intent message itself must also be reinterpreted. But, he complained, soldiers tend to receive too little training and coaching in interpreting and implementing intent. He argued that in addition to parroting back intent messages, subordinates should practice and receive feedback on interpreting and reasoning processes in ‘hands-on’ scenarios that introduce changing conditions (p. 70). As an illustration of the need for specialized training, Gerhard Muhm (1993) described his experience with Auftragstaktik as a German soldier as follows:

With Auftragstaktik, a mission is ordered and the officer is left with the freedom to carry out the mission assigned to him, and so he feels responsible for the actions which are suggested to him by his intelligence, his enterprise and his capabilities . . . If Auftragstaktik is to be adopted for officers, NCOs and soldiers have to be trained in the military schools with continuous exercises. (Muhm, 1993)

Consequently, Shattuck argues, the army has ‘some work to do before we effectively formulate, communicate, interpret, and implement intent’ (Shattuck, 2000: 68).
In summary, the practical metadiscourse of leader’s intent in wildland fire was not imported directly from the original German philosophy, but instead from the practical metadiscourse of commander’s intent from the US military who had already translated the concept. Shifts in meaning and omissions from the original account for some of the variance between the practical metadiscourse of leader’s intent and the theoretical metadiscourse of Auftragstaktik.

Transposition

A second point of divergence occurred in the transposition of the concept of commander’s intent in the military to the concept of leader’s intent for wildland fire. While the origins of wildland firefighting in the USA are rooted in a military metaphor of a historic declaration of war on wildfire (Pyne, 1994), there has been a shift in recent years toward ‘managing’ fire as a necessary part of the ecosystem (Pyne, 2004).

Aside from the migration away from the root military metaphor for organizing, the structure of the military may not be entirely compatible with the networked structure of wildland firefighting. Even if the practical metadiscourse of leader’s intent were true to the spirit of Auftragstaktik, communication practices like ‘frequent interaction and reason giving’ (Shattuck, 2000) might be easier for standing crews like Hotshots and Smokejumpers than for other resources who come together on a fire in a more ad-hoc fashion. Thus, in addition to the translation issues from the German original, the transposition from military commander’s intent into leader’s intent in the wildland fire context introduced further differences from the original Auftragstaktik.

As described above, the importation of Auftragstaktik from ‘communicating intent and imparting presence’ (Shattuck, 2000) to ‘commander’s intent’ gave rise to a metadiscourse of leadership that tended to focus on the commander’s actions. This positional and personal approach to leadership survived the transposition from the military to NWCG’s leader’s intent. But in the adaptation to wildland fire, leader’s intent further emphasized the effective transmission of the intent at the time of the briefing, and amplified the emphasis upon the person of leader per se.

Above it was shown how the conduit model underlies the military conception of commander’s intent, where intent is a message that can be transferred from commander to subordinate in pure form because it is wrapped within a protective tactical plan that can absorb any noise along the communication channel. Different branches of the military have different conceptions of the form of the intent message, but NWCG’s leader’s intent gravitated toward the marines’ specification of intent as a three pronged message specifying task, purpose, and end state. But NWCG localized leader’s intent to the time of the initial briefing by adding it as a new discrete message to the initial briefing itself. Namely, communicating effectively is defined as engaging in ‘two way’ communication, listening, conveying objectives and intent [italics added], and striving to be a better communicator (Leading, NWCG, 2007b: 22).

This transposition may have been influenced by two existing models for communication in wildland fire, the first being the ubiquity of radio communications in that context. Indeed, any reference to ‘communications’ in wildland fire generally refers to radio communications, whereas even public relations communication...
often called ‘public information’. Second, the narrow emphasis on the transmission of the message at the time of the briefing may also stem from the fact that leader’s intent was incorporated into existing briefing practices, which may already have carried a conduit model of communication. But as Shattuck (2000) points out, where commander’s intent really matters in the Army is when conditions actually change, and the same may be true for leader’s intent in wildland fire.

The transposition from commander’s intent to leader’s intent in wildland fire also magnified the person of the leader as compared to the military context. This is evident in the addition of the phrase ‘striving to be a better communicator’ in the definition of successful communication above. In the military the command and control system is strictly hierarchical, and subordinates are held accountable for following direct orders from their superiors. In contrast, the NWCG’s conception of leader’s intent seems to discount the notion that leaders will be granted legitimate power in wildland fire based on position power alone. Specifically, the many discussions of skill and self-improvement emphasize what individual leaders can do to enhance their credibility in the eyes of their subordinates. This emphasis on the leader as person is echoed elsewhere in WFLDP, such as in written profiles of particular leaders that showcase their individual qualities.

In contrast to this charismatic approach to command presence, Shattuck (2000) described imparting presence in the German original as creating the necessary organizational climate to form the basis for communicating intent. According to his account, such a climate seemed to exist partly in the ethos of the leader and partly in the creation of a shared mindset based on continued interaction and reason-giving. In a move that sounds strikingly similar to identification-induced unobtrusive control (e.g. Tompkins & Cheney, 1985), Shattuck (2000) explained that imparting presence is ‘the process of developing subordinates’ decision making framework so that they respond the same way the senior commander would if they were able to view the situation through their eyes’ (p. 72; cf. Kaufman, 1967; Tompkins & Cheney, 1985). With the emphasis on the leader as person in leader’s intent, however, the target of a wildland firefighter’s identification is more likely to be an individual person rather than the group or organization.

Reclaiming Auftragstaktik in the practical metadiscourse of leader’s intent

Here we show how exploring alternate models of communication can expand the practical metadiscourse of communication to potentially bring it back in line with the intended theoretical metadiscourse. Although there are numerous reviews of general communication and organizational communication models (e.g. Craig, 1999a; Fairhurst, 2007; Putnam & Fairhurst, 2001; Putnam et al., 1996), our purpose here is merely illustrative. Thus, we narrow our approach to models of conversational interaction that specifically addressed the notion of intent. We find it helpful to organize the discussion according to Taylor’s (2006) typology of ‘epistemic’, ‘deontic’, and ‘taxemic’ approaches to organizational discourse.
Epistemic discourse

The conduit model of communication described above is compatible with what Taylor (2006) labels the epistemic approach to discourse. This rudimentary approach to describing communication emphasizes the transfer of information from one person to another. Its simplicity makes it popular; indeed it is typically the model used in introductory public speaking textbooks. However, many communication scholars have critiqued the model’s basic assumptions, particularly with respect to the role of intent in communication.

For example, privileging only the speaker’s meanings does not acknowledge the important role of the listener in shaping the meaning of an interaction. One communication theory claims that the meaning that the listener constructs is the only meaning that matters (Watzlawick et al., 1967). Other critics question the extent to which we are conscious of, and therefore can willfully control our faculties for speech in the way that the conduit model assumes (e.g. Langer, 1989). Many point out that much of communication occurs somewhat automatically and even mindlessly (although not necessarily in a pejorative sense) (Andersen, 1986; Langer, 1989; Stamp & Knapp, 1990). Furthermore, we are not always aware of our intentions, which we sometimes discover only through communication (Scott, 1977).

These critiques of the conduit model suggest that rather than focusing the majority of attention on the leader’s role in the interaction, it may be important for the practical metadiscourse of leader’s intent to acknowledge the subordinate’s role in the formulation of intent, including his or her intentional attributions of what the leader’s intentions might be. Second, there may be an important difference between a leader’s intended vision for a completed mission, and the leader’s intentions to influence others in communication to carry out that plan. A leader may have a clear intention for an outcome, but neither may be able to attend to, nor may be in control of, all the necessary details in making that precise image appear in the mind of the other. In short, what the conduit model cannot account for is the potentially collaborative nature of communication that is emphasized in both Auftragstaktik and the new leadership paradigm. Next we turn to the deontic model of discourse to explore its potential contributions to the practical metadiscourse.

Deontic discourse

‘Deontic’ discourse (Taylor, 2006) encompasses models of communication that focus less on the transfer of information in speech and more on the effect of speech upon the social world. Two examples are speech act theory and social cognition. In this view, intention is neither in one person’s head nor in the literal message communicated, but is better understood as the intention in conveying that particular message to that particular hearer (Levelt, 1989). Once conversation starts, intention becomes a resource both parties use to construct meaning and continue the interaction (Grice, 1975; Levelt, 1989; Yoos, 1986). Thus, it is not possible to directly communicate intent. And, once interaction begins, one’s original ‘intended’ message becomes irrelevant.

Furthermore, when people in conversation mutually construct intent together, they must draw upon shared background knowledge or experience with one another to do so (Adams, 2002; Levelt, 1989). A social approach to cognition suggests that intention lies somewhere ‘between’ people engaged in conversation. For example, ‘perspective taking’ suggests that we look for clues in conversation about the other
person’s intentions, including how their intentions might affect our own goals in the interaction (Jackson, 1992). But because we do not have direct access to the other person’s intentions, we must necessarily guess what those are by ‘taking the other’s perspective’; that is, by imagining ourselves in the other person’s shoes and guessing what our options might be if we were in their situation (Jackson, 1992). Our (likely imperfect) guess, in turn, influences how we communicate in that interaction (Jackson, 1992). In that sense, even though the guesswork occurs ‘in’ one’s brain, because something like intention can only be guessed at through perspective taking, it is necessarily a ‘socially’ cognitive phenomenon.

This suggests that once one is engaged in interaction, one cannot be evaluated as a lone communicator. The joint construction of intent and the joint creation of meaning in conversation suggest that in spite of what individuals intend to mean in conversation, the meaning conversationalists ultimately come up with is jointly constructed and relies heavily on the shared social context in both its original doing and its later reconstruction.

This perspective on communication can help to expand the practical metadiscourse of the concept of intent itself. Instead of just emphasizing intent as a literal message transmitted in a briefing, leaders can be encouraged to engage in communication activities that cultivate a shared background with followers. This approach can also help to move the concept of command presence closer to the original concept of imparting presence. As Shattuck (2000) pointed out, imparting presence was a precursor to communicating intent, not a side activity, and it was not rooted in the person of the leader. Instead, establishing a shared mindset through constant interaction was precisely what allowed the intent message to be effective when conditions changed.

As noted above, however, this may be challenging in the wildland fire environment where many people do not work together often. But at the very least, leaders might consider how the social context (the hierarchical relationship, working experience with one another, etc.) may affect not only the subordinate’s interpretation of intent messages but also their attributions of the leader’s intent in sending these messages. Furthermore, even if the leader has an intended outcome in mind and can develop highly intelligible and rhetorically sensitive messages, those ‘skills’ per se will not wholly accomplish the communication of intention. Rather, the leader and the subordinate mutually construct intent together. The upshot is that in trying to communicate intent, leaders may have less control over the conversation and the meanings that emerge out of it than they thought they might at the start. Unfortunately, continuing to emphasize communicating intent as a matter of individual skill may continue to perpetuate the belief that they do, and that ‘breakdowns’ mean that their skills simply need to be improved further.

The deontic model tends to emphasize communication breakdown, or where vulnerabilities exist in meaning creation. What this approach tends to overlook is that by virtue of sharing language we are already embedded in ‘larger systems of intentionality’ within which we think and communicate (Stamp & Knapp, 1990: 282; Langer, 1989; Motley, 1986). Some argue that by virtue of sharing language, individuals may intend with others, in addition to toward them (e.g. Anton, 1999). This brings us to the third model of discourse to explore its potential contribution to the practical metadiscourse.
The ‘taxemic’ view of communication (Katambwe & Taylor, 2006; Taylor, 2006) emphasizes relational possibilities through language. This perspective rejects the representative view of communication evident in the example of the conduit model and embraces a ‘constitutive’ view of communication. Instead of viewing communication as that which labels an already existing exterior world, the constitutive view of communication claims that how we name our experiences actually constructs the world that we inhabit. Thus instead of communication ‘representing’ an exterior world, communication brings entire worlds into being (Mumby, 1997).

In this view, intention does not belong to one person alone. Rather, talk and interaction is an ongoing negotiation of rights and responsibilities created and perpetuated in communication (Katambwe & Taylor, 2006). Furthermore, intention does not belong to one person alone; rather, it is a shared activity where each is relying on the other to do his or her part (Searle, 1995):

Once we place the act of speech in its context of an ongoing conversation, we have to recognize that the capacity to act, using language, is not so much a privilege of the single actor as it is a feature, and outcome, of the back and forth interaction within which knowledge and a mutual understanding about the responsibility to act (duty) of each participant are being either explicitly or implicitly negotiated’. (Taylor, 2006: 134)

What matters about intention in this view is only its uptake; thus, intent is not a precursor to communication (something that comes before), it is an outcome of it (something that comes after) (Cooren & Taylor, 1997). Communication becomes a public resource because it expresses and creates relationships and identities (Tracy, 2002), and even creates organizations (Cooren & Taylor, 1997; Taylor, 1993, 2006). In this view, leadership is not the responsibility of any single individual; nor can one person shoulder it alone. The responsibility remains joint in the sense that both leaders and subordinates rely on the other to do their part as they mutually orient toward a communicative concept like ‘leader’s intent’.

This perspective opens the door to move away from individual conceptions of skilled and charismatic leaders to focus on group and organizational resources that leaders and followers can use to construct shared worlds together in communication, even if they do not work together frequently. Organizations, including the wildland fire community, can necessarily define certain utterances as meaning something specific even if they are not intended as such. For example, many sexual harassment policies regard any comments about someone else’s appearance or dress in the workplace to be inappropriate even if the intention is to flatter. Another example is the rule against joking about bombs while going through airport security. Once a statement is made about a bomb, it cannot be retracted or qualified, even if it was originally intended to be a joke. Similarly, raising one’s hand at an auction registers a bid whether it was intended or not (Singh, 2000).

What this means is that the wildland fire community could develop a standardized vocabulary of texts, a kind of ‘communicating intent’ shorthand where phrases have a fixed interpretation regardless of how they are ‘intended’. A good example is ‘trigger point’. A firefighter learns that the phrase refers to an objective condition that, once it appears, compels him or her to take to new course of action. Indeed,
Taylor (2006) argues that because communication constitutes organization in both conversations and texts, ‘the text has to be made explicit if there is to be sufficient level of unity of purpose’ (p. 138).

For example, Howard (2001) explained that ‘intent’ means something very specific to the US army soldier. In that context, ‘intent’ is a trigger word not to be cluttered with other meanings. Unfortunately, by coupling leaders intent with tactics as described above, and by using terms like purpose, goal, task, and objective interchangeably, NWCG may be muddling the potential ‘purity’ of the term intent. Developing shorthand for ‘communicating intent’ will take time. In the meantime, both leaders and subordinates could continually ‘make public’ as best they can their (evolving) understanding of the leader’s intent, as well as how they understand others to understand intent.

The purpose for exploring the alternate deontic and taxemic models of communication was to illustrate that there are more ways to think about intent beyond individuals unilaterally encoding cognitions into one-way messages transmitted at briefing encounters. Specifically, communicating intent must take into account the role of the listener in constructing intention. This has less to do with a leader’s communicative skill in devising a message with how both understand the shared social context. Other perspectives argue that the subordinate is a more active participant in helping to construct intent in conversation. People may actually create intention together in conversation, such that intent belongs to neither one of them but is somewhere ‘between’ them. Furthermore, the meanings they come up with may depend more upon shared background and culture than their individual skills in managing impressions and devising rhetorically sensitive messages.

It is also important to recognize that people are embedded in larger system of intentions by virtue of sharing a language. Engaging in communication creates and sustains relationships and thus intention may even be an outcome of communication, not a precursor to it. And, organizations have the ability to ‘fix’ certain meanings regardless of what may be ‘intended’ in conversation. Thus, it may be possible to develop organizational resources external to leaders and followers for them to use in constructing intent together in the organizational context.

### Discussion

As communication theory and leadership theory increasingly overlap in the emergence of the post-industrial leadership paradigm, this study suggests that leadership theorists should increasingly pay careful attention to communication models in theorizing and implementation. There can be an important difference between communication as imagined in a model of leadership as compared to the actual communication practices that are promoted to implement that theory.

### Theoretical contributions

We introduced communication metadiscourse theory to distinguish between a theoretical metadiscourse of leadership and a practical metadiscourse of communication. Due to culturally entrenched but outmoded models of communication, there can be a divergence between a theoretical metadiscourse of leadership and a practical...
metadiscourse of communication that is implemented to realize it. This should be of concern to leadership theorists because it means that a particular leadership theory may be falsely rejected when communication practices promoted in its name are grounded in a different underlying model of communication. Furthermore, without realizing it, organizational members may miss out on the emancipatory promise of the theory.

We examined a case where a particular leadership theory, the German Auftrags-taktik philosophy, which seemed compatible with the emerging leadership paradigm, was adopted by the wildland fire community to solve pressing organizational issues that were identified as leadership problems. However, when we examined the practical metadiscourse of leaders’ intent as promoted in a new leadership curriculum and in materials for the field, we found that it relies upon an underlying conduit model of communication and an image of leadership as rooted in the person, and thus would be unlikely to realize the true spirit of the original philosophy if that is the goal.

We explored two places where this ‘disconnect’ may have occurred: in the translation of the original German philosophy by the US military and in the transposition of that practical metadiscourse from the military context to wildland fire context. That part of the analysis demonstrated that when organizations implement leadership perspectives to solve pressing problems, they do not simply ‘talk the talk’ of a theoretical metadiscourse. Rather, they ‘walk the walk’ by importing practical metadiscourses from other, at times very different, organizational contexts. In doing so, they rely on prior translations of theory that may already have been stymied by outmoded and incompatible underlying models of communication. Then, in transposing those practices to their own organizations they may face additional limitations. We highlighted these moments because they may represent two points of vulnerability for other organizations that attempt to implement new leadership perspectives.

However, rather than simply critique the practical metadiscourse of leader’s intent, we also explored alternate communication models as a way to expand the practical metadiscourse of leader’s intent so that it might move closer to the original philosophy. In addition to critiques of the underlying conduit model used in leader’s intent, we also explored the deontic perspective, which regards communication as acting with speech, and the taxemic perspective, which is a relational and constitutive approach to communication (Taylor, 2006).

**Practical recommendations**

The following practical recommendations stemmed from our exploration of the alternate communication models. NWCG should cultivate discussion about leader’s intent beyond the conduit model of communication and beyond a leader-centric person approach to leadership. First, address the subordinates’ role in interpretation of intent statements, including their intentions in the attributions of leader’s intent. Second, consider shifting the vocabulary away from ‘leader’s intent’ as an individual cognition and back to ‘communicating intent’ as a process. Consider how this might transform the briefing process instead of adding another item to an existing briefing checklist that was potentially rooted in the conduit model of communication. Indeed, expand the notion of leader’s intent beyond the initial briefing, and engage
in exercises that help subordinates to interpret and reinterpret leader’s intent when conditions change.

Third, consider shifting the vocabulary away from command presence in terms of its emphasis on the forcefulness of the individual leader and back to ‘imparting presence’ as a social process. Beyond subordinates simply receiving intent messages, consider coaching them in the process of actually co-constructing leader’s intent. And, explore how opportunities for ‘constant interaction and reason-giving’ might be increased to help cultivate a sense of shared mindset to do so. Fourth, instead of emphasizing identification with the person of the leader in command presence, explore how these interaction opportunities can help subordinates to actually come to think like their leaders.

**Future directions**

This study identified an interesting semantic overlap between the original German concept of imparting presence and the communication concept of organizational identification. It also showed how the emphasis of leader impression management in the concept of ‘command presence’ might promote identification with the leader as a person rather than the group or organization. Future studies may investigate the connection between these two concepts and explore the effect of metadiscourse on targets of identification.

It is important to note that the analysis in this study was limited to managerial messages in the practical metadiscourse of leader’s intent. These leadership curriculum texts and field handbooks are certainly relevant for understanding the practical metadiscourse of leader’s intent because wildland firefighters encounter those texts in their introduction to a leadership development model that will influence their careers across the lifespan. However, we do recognize that these texts are only part of managing the meaning of leader’s intent. Indeed, the alternate communication models we explored suggested that it is imperative to understand the subordinate’s role in constructing the meaning of intent. In particular, it would be worth investigating the parity between the practical metadiscourse of communication for leader’s intent in the leadership training curriculum and the practical metadiscourses of communication regarding leader’s intent on the ground. However, to investigate the practical metadiscourse of leader’s intent in the field requires alternate methods and is best left for another study.

Indeed, there is emerging evidence that people believe ‘leader’s intent’ is happening in practice and that it is having a positive impact on the ground. A recent evaluation of the efficacy of the L-380/Fireline Leadership training indicates that the training is clearly producing the effect associated with ‘communicating intent as a leader when leading others’ that the designers of the training intended (DeGrosky, 2007). The evaluation results indicate that the training is causing a moderate rate of improvement in the communication of leader’s intent and a deep diffusion of the concept into the participating agencies. However, we still note the person and position based conception of leadership that underlies this evaluation criterion.

As indicated by this evaluation, both training participants and their supervisors believe that they are observing behavior in the workplace that constitutes communicating intent as a leader when leading others (DeGrosky, 2007). However, whether
the practical metadiscourse matches the theoretical is an empirical question to be answered by a different study. Specifically we would need to find out whether people are actually realizing the original Auftragstaktik, leader’s intent according to the WFLDP, or something altogether different, all in the name of leader’s intent.

More broadly we call leadership practitioners to be vigilant about the parity between their espoused rhetorics of leadership and the communication practices they actually promote to realize them. Not only should organizations be consistent in word and deed, but organizational members should also be able to benefit from the emancipatory potential of leadership theorizing in the new paradigm.

Notes

1. By focusing on the emphasis on leader’s intent in the leadership curriculum, we necessarily limit our analysis to managerial messages in this practical metadiscourse. We acknowledge that it would be useful and important to studying the uptake of leader’s intent among firefighters and managers in ground operations, for example. However, doing so would require different methods and is best left for a future study.

2. This is worded to express the inverse of a warning initially proposed by Craig (1996). He wrote that every description of practice contains an implicit theory, but that further reflective practice is nevertheless necessary because participants may hold ‘false or incoherent or ideologically distorted assumptions that critical reflection may someday bring to light and show cause to be revised’ (p. 465). In flipping these terms around, we use ‘accurate’ and ‘correct’ instead of ‘false,’ and coherent instead of ‘incoherent.’ However, it is not possible to have a ‘non-ideological’ assumption, and the phrase ‘ideological non-distortion’ would be patently absurd. However, the extend to which it is possible to be fully cognizant of one’s ideology (what Antonio Gramsci might refer to as ‘discursive penetration’ [Mumby, 1997]), is captured by the phrase that the participants are actually doing in communication what they say they are up to.

3. It should be noted that such frequent interaction can prove difficult in the operating environment of wildland fire agencies, where the incident organization is highly mobile and temporal, often developed by disparate elements assembled only for that specific incident.

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References


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