



**Professor Mats Alvesson gives Leadership Seminar**  
**Leadership: Alignment and misfit of images in leadership relations**



Leading management scholar Professor Mats Alvesson spoke at an academic seminar hosted by the Cass Centre for Professional Service Firms on 25 October 2011.

At the seminar, Mats talked about leadership, specifically the alignment and misfit of images in leadership relations. He started by highlighting the problems surrounding leadership in practice and leadership scholarship. He explained that typically, the focus has been on 'leaders' as a discrete group, rather than on the interactions between leaders and followers. Leadership is often portrayed as largely proactive with, for example, 'democratic' leadership leading to strong performance, and 'directive' leadership leading to poor performance. In reality, the causal direction between leadership style and performance is less certain and indeed, leadership is often a reactive process.

As a result, observing the relations between leaders and followers is highly important, as the nature of the interaction between the two can play an important role in the success or otherwise of leadership processes. In order to understand this better, Mats suggests greater attention should be paid to a consideration of followers' views, and that researchers should look at variations both in terms of the characteristics of the (possible) leadership taking place and how these are interpreted and assessed. Drawing on data from the professional service firm sector, he identified four forms of shared/diverse meanings regarding leadership: high alignment leadership (shared meanings), value-misfit (diverse assessment of meaning), construction misfit (different views of what goes on) and multiple breakdowns (high confusion of what goes on and how to assess it). A high degree of alignment between the meanings assigned to leadership by followers and how leaders are assessed – in other words, what we expect of a leader and what we see - is not an inevitable result or 'business as usual.' In fact, this should be seen as a significant accomplishment.

Questions to Mats focused particularly on methodology and approach. For example, how can the researcher know that his or her research participants are telling the 'truth'? What is the precise 'problem' he is addressing in relation to leadership, methodological, definitional or theoretical? In response, Mats made a strong case in support of using a (methodologically and theoretically) wide lens when approaching problems relating to leadership specifically, and management more generally. Having opened his presentation by emphasising the value of a synthetic approach to organisation studies, he closed by arguing in favour of an interpretation of the whole context in which a problem is found. This ensures that relational and situated factors are not overlooked in favour of a more segmented approach. This he says is particularly critical in relation to leadership, an area which is characterised by ambiguity and where there is often a significant disparity between what is espoused and what is in fact enacted.

**Professor Mats Alvesson**

Mats Alvesson is Professor of Business Administration at the University of Lund, Sweden and at University of Queensland Business School, Australia. He is Honorary Professor at St Andrews and Visiting Professor at Exeter University. His research interests include critical theory, gender, power, management of professional service (knowledge intensive) organisations, leadership, identity, organisational image, organisational culture and symbolism, qualitative methods and philosophy of science. His books include *Interpreting Interviews*; *Metaphors we lead by: Understanding leadership in the real world* (with Andre Spicer); *Oxford handbook of critical management studies* (edited with Todd Bridgman and Hugh Willmott); *Reflexive methodology* (with Kaj Skoldberg); *Changing organizational culture* (with Stefan Sveningsson); *Knowledge work and knowledge intensive firms*.  
Louise Ashley