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Biosketch

Ofelia Palermo, PhD, PFHEA, is Associate Professor of Relational Leadership at Nottingham Business School, Nottingham Trent University. Her research is informed by a wider interest in organisational behaviour, especially questions of socio-ideological control, emotion, and relational dynamics in institutional life. A sustained strand of her research extends relational and leaderful approaches to organisational dynamics not conventionally regarded as leadership, particularly those emerging in the 'uncontrolled' spaces of leadership experience. From this position, she examines how institutional practices configure experience, identity, participation, and recognition across professional contexts, and how particular interpretations acquire the authority to delimit what others can claim, contest, and question in the workplace.

Title

What a description authorises: Language and interpretative authority in organisations

Abstract

Professional expertise is expected to clarify complex situations and support responsible action. It also carries interpretative authority. Expertise shapes what a problem is taken to be, what counts as relevant evidence, and which responses appear reasonable. Drawing on research in relational leadership and organisational practice, this keynote examines the point at which a provisional interpretation acquires enough authority to organise other people's work and possibilities.

Much of that work is done before a decision is announced, and it is done in language. Familiar terms assign responsibility, narrow participation and make particular courses of action seem self-evident before the assumptions behind them have been examined. A concern named as resistance positions the person who raised it. A contested change described as implementation announces that the substantive decision has already been taken. Descriptions do not simply report a situation; they help establish the terms on which that situation can be questioned.

Organisational research can identify these effects, and it depends on linguistic scholarship to describe the resources that produce them. Whether an account can still alter a judgement, or may only respond to one, turns on how agency is attributed or withheld, how a question is designed, and whether a

contribution is taken up or merely acknowledged. The same holds for recognition. Where English is the shared working language of a profession, fluency, pace and familiarity with a dominant register are readily mistaken for competence, so that interpretative authority follows communicative style rather than the quality of a contribution.

The consequences of this outlast the decision. Once a description has settled, it continues to govern what can be raised, by whom and with what standing, while workloads, opportunities and forms of participation are redistributed by an interpretation whose provisional basis is no longer visible. Responsible professional judgement therefore depends on keeping that basis open to scrutiny before decisions harden into necessity, and on remaining answerable for what the interpretation sets in motion. The language in which all of this takes place is the specialist English that professionals are taught.

Keywords: interpretative authority, relational leadership, organisational discourse, English for academic and professional purposes, professional judgement.