Exploring leadership stories: 
Constructing identities through self-denigrating humour

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This paper explores some of the ways through which leader identities are constructed in and through the stories that people tell at work. A particular focus will be on so-called ‘small stories’ (Georgakopoulou 2007) that emerge organically during everyday workplace interactions (Clifton 2014). Focusing on those stories where the speakers use self-denigrating humour to supposedly put themselves down, I will illustrate how leaders often portray themselves in rather ‘un-leader-like’ fashion as incapable, awkward, naïve, as well as approachable, humane, and humble. The alternative views of leadership that these stories construct challenge heroic conceptualisations, which tend to depict leaders as ‘the solo, all-powerful hero’ (Holmes 2017). Through these stories we can thus gain insights into ‘another’ side of leadership, and learn more about the complexities and diversities of this multi-facetted phenomenon, which often remain overlooked by mainstream approaches to leadership.

References

