

Leadership, Power, and Organisational Misbehaviour

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Learning Outcomes

By the end of this session, you will be able to:

- 1 Critically evaluate mainstream leadership theories through a CMS lens.
- 2 Analyse power in organisations using Lukes' three dimensions.
- 3 Understand organisational misbehaviour as a form of everyday resistance.
- 4 Apply the three CMS pillars to a real case study (Pangdonglai).

Where We Left Off

Last week you learned a way of thinking.

Denaturalisation

What feels natural is constructed.

Anti-performativity

Theory should question, not serve, power.

Reflexivity

Turn the lens on yourself.

Last week we asked: who benefits from calling overwork a personal choice?

This week: who benefits from calling leadership a gift?

Part 1

Leadership

Where Do Today's Theories Come From?

Three older traditions (1960s–2000s)

Political Sociology

Lukes (2005)

Bachrach & Baratz (1962)

Explains how power works

Marxism

Harvey (2010)

Explains how capitalism creates crises

Labour Process Theory

Ackroyd & Thompson

(1999, 2022)

Explains how workers resist

These feed into CMS

CMS: Critical Management Studies

Fournier & Grey (2000) · Alvesson & Spicer (2012) · Fleming & Spicer (2003)

Born in the late 1990s. Borrows tools from older traditions to question what management takes for granted.

CMS uses these tools to question

Mainstream Management

Bass (1985) Transformational · Burns (1978) Transactional · Greenleaf (1977) Servant

These theories treat leadership as individual traits. CMS asks: whose interests does that story serve?

**What you learned
in earlier modules**

In one word: what makes someone a leader?

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- 1 Look at the word cloud. What do most of the answers have in common?
- 2 Are these traits that people are born with, or traits that organisations reward?
- 3 Who is missing from this picture of leadership?

The CMS question

You just described a leader. But did you describe a person, or did you describe what power looks like when we have been taught not to question it?

The Mainstream Story

What your textbooks told you about leadership:

Transformational Leadership

Burns (1978), Bass (1985)

Great leaders inspire followers to transcend self-interest for the good of the organisation.

Servant Leadership

Greenleaf (1977)

The best leaders put followers first. Leadership is service.

Authentic Leadership

Various, 2000s onward

True leaders are genuine, self-aware, and morally grounded.

Common thread: leadership is about exceptional individuals with special qualities.

What Is Missing?

Alvesson and Spicer (2012): Critical Leadership Studies

1

Leadership is not a quality inside a person.

It is a relationship shaped by structures, discourse, and power.

2

The "great leader" narrative serves a purpose.

If the leader is the answer, nobody questions the system that produced them.

3

Most leadership research asks the wrong question.

It asks "how can leaders be more effective?" instead of "effective for whom?"

Denaturalisation: leadership is constructed, not natural.

If leadership is natural, why does it look so different in every culture and every era?

- The "leader" depends on followers, context, and power.
- Transformational leaders are often authoritarian in practice.
- The hero narrative protects hierarchy: if a great person is at the top, the structure is justified.
- The best argument for keeping a system is that an exceptional individual runs it.

CMS asks: whose interests does the "great leader" story serve?

Part 2

Power

First Dimension: Decisions

Lukes (2005)

visible power

A has power over B when A can make B do something B would not otherwise do.

Observable. Direct. Familiar.

Your manager assigns weekend work. You object. The manager overrules you. You can see this power. You can name it. You can argue with it.

This is the kind of power most people mean when they say "power."

Second Dimension: Agendas

Bachrach and Baratz (1962)

agenda-setting

Power to keep issues off the table entirely.

Non-decisions. Hidden. Harder to see.

Pay transparency is never on the team meeting agenda. Nobody decided not to discuss it. It simply never comes up. That silence is not accidental.

The most effective power is the question nobody asks.

Third Dimension: Desires

Lukes (2005)

Shaping Desires

You do not resist because you do not see a problem.

Invisible. Ideological. The deepest form.

"I work late because I am passionate about my job." Nobody forced you. But who taught you that passion means sacrifice? Who benefits when you believe that?

The deepest power makes you want what it needs you to want.

This is exactly what we debated last week.

Three Dimensions of Power

First

Decisions

How it works

A overrules B in a visible conflict.

"Do this."

Challenge

Oppose it.

Second

Agendas

How it works

Issues are kept off the table.

"We don't discuss that here."

Challenge

Put it on the agenda.

Third

Desires

How it works

People want what power needs them to want.

"I want to do this."

Challenge

How do you challenge what you cannot see?

Three Dimensions in One Kitchen

1st

Visible

The head chef says: "No one leaves until the kitchen is clean." You want to go home. The chef says no. There is a direct command and a clear consequence.

You can see this power. You can argue with it. You can refuse and face the result.

2nd

Hidden

The restaurant holds monthly staff meetings. They discuss the menu and customer complaints. They never discuss why the kitchen team works 12-hour shifts with no overtime pay.

That question was not banned. It simply never comes up.

3rd

Invisible

A young cook works 14-hour days, unpaid, six days a week. The cook says: "This is how you become a great chef. Everyone I admire went through this. I want it."

Nobody forced that belief. The cook does not resist because the cook does not see a problem.

Force you. Silence you. Make you agree.

A promotional image for the TV show Kitchen Nightmares. It features three hosts: Alton Brown on the left, Tia Barrow in the center, and Gordon Ramsay on the right. They are all looking towards the right with expressions of concern or surprise. The background is a solid blue color.

**KITCHEN
NIGHTMARES**

**BEST OF
COMPILATION**

Three Dimensions in One Culture

過労死
karoshi

1st · Visible

A manager assigns weekend work. The employee objects. The manager says: "Everyone else is staying." The employee stays. There is a direct pressure and a visible conflict.

You can see this power. You know who is exercising it.

2nd · Hidden

The company runs annual satisfaction surveys. They ask about teamwork and career development. They never ask: "Should we reduce working hours?" That option does not exist on the form.

You cannot vote against a question that was never asked.

3rd

Invisible

A salaryman's contract says 9 to 6. Nobody tells him to stay late. But he looks around, reads the air (空気を読む), sees his manager still working, and stays until 11pm. He believes leaving on time would be disloyal.

Nobody gave an order. He "read the air" and obeyed something no one said.

When overwork becomes virtue, power does not need enforcement.

Your Turn: Spot the Power

zhǔlǐrén · curator

1st · Visible

The zhǔlǐrén sets the rules. No sugar. No loud talking. Order "wrong" and the staff correct you. The power is direct and personal.

You can see who is in charge. You can walk out.

2nd · Hidden

The menu has no "regular coffee." No prices on the wall. The space is designed so that asking "why is this expensive?" feels like the wrong question.

The agenda was curated before you arrived.

3rd · Invisible

You wait 90 minutes. You pay 50 yuan for a drink. You photograph it for social media. You believe this is what good taste looks like.

Nobody made you believe that. But who shaped the choice?

When Gen Z called it out, that was denaturalisation. You already know how to do CMS.

Break Time!



Part 3

Organisational Misbehaviour

When Workers Push Back

Ackroyd and Thompson (1999, 2022)

Organisational misbehaviour is anything employees do at work that they are not supposed to do. It is not laziness. It is not deviance. It is people reclaiming autonomy in systems that treat them as resources.

Management theory calls it a problem to solve.

CMS asks: what if it is a rational response to a problem that already exists?

Anti-performativity: whose interests does "good behaviour" serve?

Four Types of Appropriation



Time

Taking control of your own time: long breaks, leaving early, lateness, absenteeism.



Work

Effort bargaining: doing the minimum, working slowly, choosing which tasks to prioritise.



Product

Using company resources for personal purposes: photocopies, office supplies, company email.



Identity

Refusing the corporate self: dress code violations, humour, cynicism, maintaining your own identity.

Recognise This?

1. Have you ever taken a longer lunch than you should?
2. Have you ever done the minimum because your effort was not valued?
3. Have you ever used your work computer for something personal?
4. Have you ever rolled your eyes at a company value statement?

Congratulations. You are an organisational misbehaver.

The question is: is this resistance? Or is it just being human?

When Workers Name It

Ackroyd and Thompson (1999, 2022)

摸鱼

mōyú · touching fish

TIME + WORK

Scrolling your phone behind your monitor. Alt-tabbing when the manager walks past. Taking a 40-minute coffee break and calling it 15. Doing your online shopping on the company laptop.

Appropriation of time and effort. In 1999, British academics described it. Chinese workers just gave it a better name.

躺平

tǎngpíng · lying flat

WORK + IDENTITY

Doing exactly what your contract says and nothing more. Clocking out at 6pm sharp. Refusing to answer work messages after hours. Saying no to the promotion that comes with unpaid overtime.

When inward curling demanded more for less, a generation chose appropriation of effort and identity: I will not let this job define who I am.

摆烂

bǎilàn · let it rot

EVERYTHING

Not just opting out quietly. Publicly saying you have given up. Making your disengagement visible. Posting about it. Treating your own apathy as a form of honesty.

But when let it not becomes a trending hashtag, is it still resistance? Or has the market turned your refusal into another product to sell?

They described these behaviours in 1999. Your generation gave them names.



Taking Back Time

Appropriation of time and effort

Ackroyd and Thompson (1999, 2022)

IN THE UK

Pulling a sickie. Calling in sick when you are perfectly well. A British workplace tradition.

"The train was delayed." The universal excuse for an extra hour at home. Nobody checks.

The long lunch. Meant to be 30 minutes. Often closer to 50. Company time, personal errands.

IN CHINA

Moyu ("touching fish"). Scrolling your phone behind the monitor. Alt-tabbing when the manager walks past.

The 40-minute break. Officially 15 minutes. Unofficially, as long as you can get away with.

Online shopping at work. Your Taobao cart does not fill itself. The company laptop is right there.

Ackroyd and Thompson described this in 1999. Workers were doing it long before that.

Only What You Signed For

Appropriation of work and identity

Ackroyd and Thompson (1999, 2022)

IN THE UK

Working to rule. Doing exactly what the contract says. Nothing more. A strategy British unions perfected decades ago.

Quiet quitting. A 2022 TikTok term for something workers have always done. Show up. Do the minimum. Go home.

"Act your wage." You pay me this much. I work this much. A fair exchange, nothing more.

IN CHINA

Tangping ("lying flat"). Refusing to compete in a system designed to extract more for less. A deliberate withdrawal.

Clocking out at 6pm. The contract says 6. The culture says 9. Tangping says 6.

Refusing the promotion. The one that comes with weekend calls and unpaid overtime. A calculated no.

Both sides made the same calculation. I will give you exactly what you pay for.

Refusal as Content

When misbehaviour becomes public

IN THE UK

r/antiwork. Two million members sharing resignation letters and bad-boss texts. Refusal as entertainment.

"Lazy girl jobs." A TikTok trend rebranding low-effort work as self-care and boundaries.

The Great Resignation. Not just quitting. Filming yourself quitting. Refusal as performance.

IN CHINA

Bailan ("let it rot"). Not quiet withdrawal. Public disengagement. Making your apathy visible on purpose.

Posting about giving up. Sharing your refusal on Weibo and Douyin. Turning detachment into content.

Disengagement as identity. When not caring becomes a brand. A statement that sells.

When rebellion becomes a hashtag, is it still resistance? Or just another product?

Working at a Cynical Distance

Fleming and Spicer (2003)

"I know the company values are nonsense. But I play along anyway."

- 1 Workers often see through management ideology. They are not fooled.
- 2 But seeing through it does not mean they resist. They comply anyway.
- 3 Cynicism is a coping mechanism: it lets you survive the system.
- 4 The paradox: cynicism helps you endure, which helps the system endure.

Knowing the game is rigged does not mean you stop playing.

The Pressure Valve

Fleming and Spicer (2003)

"I know the company values are nonsense. But I play along anyway."

What Cynicism Feels Like

You recognise the corporate performance for what it is.

Venting to colleagues becomes a daily ritual. You bond over shared mockery.

You maintain your real self behind the compliance. You have not been fooled.

It feels like freedom. Like you can see what others cannot.

What Cynicism Does

You still show up. You still perform. You still comply.

The eye-rolling releases enough frustration to keep going.

The system never faces a genuine challenge from you.

Your sense of freedom was always inside the enclosure.

A company that forbids all dissent creates a revolution. A company that tolerates eye-rolling, venting, and long coffee breaks creates stability. The small freedoms prevent the big questions. Your cynicism is not a bug in the system. It is a feature.

Seeing through power does not free you from it.

From Power to Misbehaviour

How the three dimensions shape what workers do

1st

Visible

Direct Resistance

When power is visible (a direct order, an explicit rule, a clear hierarchy), resistance is visible too. Workers refuse, argue, walk out. Both sides see the conflict.

Visible power invites visible resistance. And it is the rarest kind.

2nd

Hidden

Hidden Misbehaviour

When power controls the agenda (which questions get asked, which complaints are heard), misbehaviour goes underground. Pulling sickies, moyu, quiet quitting, working to rule.

The misbehaviour hides where the power hides.

3rd

Invisible

Cynical Distance

When power shapes what workers want (making overwork feel like ambition, compliance feel like choice), the response looks nothing like resistance. Workers see through it but comply.

The deepest power produces the response that threatens it least.

As power disappears from view, so does genuine resistance.

Is Misbehaviour Resistance?

If workers resist but nothing changes, is it really resistance?

Or is misbehaviour a pressure valve that prevents real challenge?

Reflexivity

A company that lets you take long lunches, make jokes about the CEO, and leave early on Fridays might be buying your compliance. The small freedoms prevent the big questions.

Even our resistance might serve the structure.

Part 4

A Different Kind of Company

An example company that made a different choice.

Pangdonglai

Founded 1995 · Xuchang, Henan · Yu Donglai

Yu Donglai started as a street vendor in Henan Province.

He built Pangdonglai into one of the most admired retailers in China.

Not through technology. Not through scale.

By treating employees the way most companies say they do but never actually do.



He rejected everything we just critiqued.



Deep into China

Meet Yu Donglai 'silliest boss' in China
who puts staff happiness ahead of making money

The Numbers

¥23.5B

2025 revenue (yuan)

Up 38.7% year on year

¥14.5B

First half of 2026

Up 24% year on year

19,000+

Employees

More than doubled since 2024

9th

In China's top 100 supermarkets

Up from 19th

A Different Workday

Industry Standard

Pangdonglai

Working hours

8–12 hours

7 hours

Annual leave

5–10 days

40 days

Unhappy leave

—

10 days

Monthly salary

¥3,700–¥6,000

¥9,400+

The Profit Split

50%

to employees

¥4 billion distributed in 2026

50%

to management

Yu Donglai takes only 5%

Yu Donglai

~¥200 million

~5% of total profit

Store managers (12)

¥20 million each

More than the founder takes per person

Average employee

¥9,400/month after tax

vs industry ¥3,700–¥6,000

The founder takes less than his store managers earn per person.

Beyond the Workplace

Philosophy: freedom and love

- **Caps profit margins at 30%.** Refuses to overcharge customers even when competitors do.
- **No-questions-asked returns.** Any product, any reason, full refund.
- **¥500 reward for customer complaints.** Pays customers who report problems.
- **Yu Donglai publicly called 996 "unethical."** One of the few Chinese CEOs to openly condemn overwork culture.
- **2024: paid ¥8.8 million after a food safety incident.** Compensated affected customers and rewarded the whistleblowers.

Referenced at the Ministry of Commerce news conference (2026). IMD case study: "Scaling the Unscalable."

Three Pillars, One Company

Denaturalisation

Pangdonglai proves overwork is a choice, not a necessity. If one company can thrive with 7-hour days, the "need" for long hours is constructed.

Anti-performativity

Success is not measured only in shareholder returns. Employee wellbeing IS the strategy, not a cost.

Reflexivity

But wait. Is Yu Donglai himself a "heroic leader"? Does the model depend on one exceptional person? Can it survive him?

The Uncomfortable Question

If Pangdonglai can do this, why don't other companies?

Harvey:

Because the system depends on cheap labour. Treating workers well reduces the surplus that capital extracts.

Lukes:

Because we have been made to believe this model is impossible. The third dimension of power.

Fournier and Grey:

Because calling it "unrealistic" protects those who benefit from the status quo.

What if the alternative already exists, and the system needs you not to see it?

Does Pangdonglai prove CMS wrong?

1 YES: One good leader fixed everything.

Yu Donglai proves individual leadership matters. No regulation forced him. He chose this. That is the mainstream argument.

2 NO: Depending on one person proves the CMS point.

If the model cannot survive without Yu Donglai, then it is not a structural change. It is heroic leadership with better values.

3 BOTH: And that is the point.

CMS does not give you the answer. It gives you the question. A good critical thinker holds both positions and asks who benefits from each.

15 minutes at your tables. Then we hear from each group.

Bonus question: would you want to work at Pangdonglai? Why or why not?

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Break Time!



Tutorial

Your turn

Next Week Tutorial

Party A Topic: Human Relations Movement

Key Figures: Elton Mayo and the Hawthorne Studies.

Focus: How social factors, group dynamics, worker satisfaction, and management attention impact productivity at work (the "Hawthorne Effect").

Party B Topic: Workplace Motivation Theories

Key Figures: Abraham Maslow (Hierarchy of Needs) and Douglas McGregor (Theory X and Theory Y).

Focus: What drives employees to perform, moving from basic survival needs to self-actualization, and how management attitudes shape worker behavior.

Essential reading:

Alvesson, M. and Spicer, A. (2012) 'Critical leadership studies: The case for critical performativity', *Human Relations*, 65(3), pp. 367-390. doi: 10.1177/0018726711430555.

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Thank you

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