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The mainstream effect

A critical study on leadership development

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The Mainstream Effect

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Abstract

This paper critically examines the effect that mainstream leadership ideas have on the leadership development initiatives in a highly technical, engineering dominated, Swedish public sector organisation. Through 28 interviews divided between senior managers, managers and co-workers, the story of an organisation that wish to solve their organisational challenges deriving from a fast-paced expansion phase is told. The study reveals a number of existing problems and how these are sought to be solved through leadership development initiatives (LDI's). By understanding how the organisation's actors perceive leadership, the paper sheds light upon how the LDI's are affected by any prevalent mainstream leadership ideas. Inspired by the perspective of Critical Leadership Studies (CLS), the study questions and reflects upon taken for granted assumptions in regard to the organisation's LDI's in order to reveal the interconnection between the perception of leadership and organisational processes and practices. As a result, the paper presents the mainstream effect; that the perception of leadership and actions of individuals have caused chain reactions elsewhere in the organisation.

Key Words

Sweden, Regional Public Organisation, Leadership Development, Critical Leadership Studies, Leadership, Mainstream Effect

Introduction

Even though there is no universally agreed upon definition (Fairhurst, 2010), leadership is often seen as the catch-all solution to nearly every problem. Thus, it should come as no surprise that the majority of the budget for organisational training tends to be allocated to leadership training (Ho,

2016; O'Leonard, 2014). However, only a small minority of organisations actually perceive their leadership training as highly effective (Schwartz, Bersin & Pelster, 2014), calling into question the current effectiveness of contemporary leadership development initiatives (henceforth referred to as LDI's).

Though there has existed a long-standing interest amongst practitioners for leadership development, the emergence as an active field of theory building and research has primarily transpired over the last 25 years (Day et al., 2014). During this time, the practice of leadership development has tended to be based on traditional and mainstream leadership theories and has often lacked a more critical perspective (ibid.). Examining the interconnection between how leadership is understood and how it may affect LDI's has rarely been the centre of attention over the years. Instead, studies have repeatedly focused on providing new designs, methods and directions regarding what should be included in LDI's (Day et al., 2014; Lacerenza et al., 2017). Vast numbers of researchers have provided the research field with various functionalistic studies, i.e. having a narrow focus on how to best develop a leaders' personality, skills and abilities (DeRue & Myers, 2014; Mumford et al., 2000). Studies have also repeatedly been focusing on dichotomisation, striving to e.g. simplify leadership by adding dualisms (Collinson, 2014), or separate the terms leader and leadership development (Day, 2000; DeRue & Myers 2013), however often concluding that the terms are used interchangeably. In recent years, the idea of empowering leadership has grown to manifest itself in the mainstream literature (Dewettinck and van Ameijde, 2011), and is now often emphasised in LDI's. Moreover, there appears to exist a widespread misperception that if the field would be able to identify and agree on the "correct leadership theory then the development piece would inevitably follow" (Day et al., 2014, p. 64). This may not turn out to be so simple as the development of individuals involves the understanding of a complex set of processes. Day et al. (2014) argue that we need to "focus on development as much as leadership in order to shed light on how this process unfolds" (p. 64).

We argue that the lack of a critical perspective within the research field of leadership development is significant and that this shortcoming is substantial. Providing a critical perspective to leadership development, while questioning the effect mainstream ideas have on LDI's, would allow to approach and develop an understanding of why LDI's are seen as ineffective. We believe that any attempt to analyse the exercising of leadership development must acknowledge the way the organisation actively participates in creating the image of leadership they wish to develop. Consequently, this thesis aims to identify any prevalent mainstream leadership ideas and answer the question: How does mainstream leadership ideas influence LDI's?

The paper is based on empirical data from a case study of a public organisation which continuously works with internal leadership development. Specifically, it draws upon field data collected from in-depth interviews, document analysis and observations at one of Sweden's largest public real estate management organisations. Today, there exists LDI's in the company which consist of both voluntary and mandatory courses, held both internally and by external actors. Thus, the organisation provides the opportunity to examine the dynamics involved with leadership

development, how LDI's are structured, how courses are picked and what the purpose and effect of these LDI's are.

The article consists of five sections. First, we introduce the theoretical framework used in the study where we connect leadership development to mainstream leadership ideas and critical leadership studies (henceforth referred to as CLS). Second, we present the case company and setting, and the qualitative methodology used in the study. Third, we introduce the empirical findings and the data drawn from the ethnographically structured method. Fourth, with a critical perspective based on CLS, we discuss these findings. Finally, we present the conclusions and discuss the study's implications.

Theoretical framework: Introducing leadership development

The idea that leadership development practice does not live up to its intent in preparing leaders for a complex business world is not new (Grint, 2005; Bolden, Witzel & Linacre, 2016; Vince & Pedler, 2019). It has been widely acknowledged that development programs which assume that leadership is a straightforward business, presented as unproblematic and assumed to be universally applicable, have limitations (Vince & Pedler 2018). When leadership development is treated as a problem that can be resolved by breaking it down, applying various models, and analysing the organisation's actors' behaviour and competences (Bolden et al., 2016), the limitations of development initiatives are disregarded. Regardless of the complex and ambiguous nature of leadership development, the majority of organisations try to define and develop leaders in a "functionalist and normative" manner which is expected to give positive results to all actors involved (Mabey 2013, p. 4).

Many companies and organisations are pursuing the goal to reach a higher quality of leadership by growing talent internally through a variety of different and costly initiatives. In 2015, a grand total of \$356 billion was spent on employee training worldwide (Beer, Finnström & Schrader, 2016). A large portion of this is spent on developing the leaders and research suggests that it is not about to decrease in the near future (Gibler, Carter, & Goldsmith, 2000). On the contrary, more than half of the organisations asked in a review done by Brandon Hall Group, stated that leadership is the main focus of the talent development processes that will see the largest increase in spending in the coming years (Loew, 2015). Match that to the growing research that finds most leadership development to be ineffective (e.g. Ready & Conger, 2003; Schwartz, Bersin & Pelster, 2014; Couch & Citrin, 2018), and the conclusion is a phenomenal amount of wasted resources. Additionally, although there exists a number of suggestions in the literature on how to measure the effects of LDI's (e.g. Black & Earnest, 2009; Gentry & Martineau, 2010), the lack of research in this area is evident (Black & Earnest, 2009). Couch and Citrin (2018) suggest that the problematic nature of measuring the effects of LDI's is due to issues proving causality. As a result, organisations tend to often rely on qualitative methods such as perceived effects when measuring outcomes.

LDI's have been designed and redesigned countless times based on the contemporary trend. Day (2000) argues that a new trend in leadership development has emerged where researchers

have started to divide leadership development into two separate terms: leader development and leadership development. Leader development puts a large emphasis on the development of an individual's leadership skills and abilities which in turn is assumed to provide a more efficient leadership (Iles & Preece, 2006). Leadership development on the other hand, focuses on "developing the capacity of collectives to engage in the leadership process [...] [and] refers to building the mutual commitments and interpersonal relationships that are necessary for leading-following processes to unfold effectively within a given social context." (DeRue & Myers 2013 p. 6). Regardless of the two terms being distinguished, they are often used interchangeably not only with each other but also with managerial development (Lacerenza et al., 2017), and is also done so in this paper. Additionally, DeRue & Myers (2013) argue that leader and leadership development are interdependent regardless of which of the two terms a particular course is supposed to emphasise. For example, a course that is designed to improve the relationships in a leadership process, may also have effect on individual's abilities, beliefs and perception of leadership. The same goes for leader development courses. They set out to improve competences, provide new tools and change a behaviour, but in-directly it will influence and alter the social context in which leader-follower processes occur (DeRue & Myers, 2013).

Over the years, the research field of leadership development has had less contribution than one would think from leadership literature and research. One of the reasons for this is a long-standing focus linking personality with leadership (Day et al., 2014). If personality is conceptualized in terms of traits that summarize relatively enduring dispositional tendencies (House, Shane, & Herold, 1996), then its relevance for studying development (i.e., change) is questionable (Day et al., 2014). Moreover, in the review that Day et al. (2014) present concerning advances in leadership development over the past 25 years, they argue that "there has been a change in focus associated with studies of leadership development broadly defined, away from leadership research and toward understanding and enhancing developmental processes" (p. 64). Meaning that the focus is no longer on leadership per se, but rather it has shifted on to enhancing the process and practice of development. We too acknowledge the importance of insights regarding the development process but argue for the importance of understanding the connection between how the perception of a phenomenon, in this case leadership, will affect the development of said phenomenon.

Mainstream leadership

One of the reasons to the abundance of different leadership development practices, their differing purposes and strived for outcomes, may be because the phenomenon LDI's are trying to develop is ambiguous and complex in itself. Traditionally, "leadership" has been used to mean or imply quite different things while seeming to represent a common, monolithic, understanding (Jackson & Parry, 2008). Though there is no universally agreed upon definition of leadership (Fairhurst, 2010), there is a wide spectrum of definitions stemming from an excessive focus on the subject from various scholars. In order to study leadership, distinctions and exaggerations have been a usual tool with the aim to simplify, construct, and comprehend the complexity of leadership

(Collinson, 2014). Through comparing and categorizing, e.g. based on the characteristics, power relationships and effectiveness of leaders, the mainstream idea of what leadership is has been formed (Collinson, 2014). What most mainstream leadership research has in common is that leadership is often seen as the catch-all solution to almost every problem (Fairhurst, 2010). Additionally, one taken for granted understanding in mainstream leadership ideas is that the leaders (implicitly managers) and followers (implicitly co-workers) interests are to be in line with one another (Collinson & Tourish, 2015). Followers are often seen as vessels of resistance with only monetary sources for motivation which the leader needs to conquer and motivate in order to drive change. Furthermore, mainstream leadership often tends to be strongly connected to competencies, personalities and behaviours (Alvesson & Sveningsson, 2003), meaning that, personal traits and behaviour have a large impact on effectiveness of leadership. Further, individuals with a mainstream leadership perspective view leadership as a tool or an object that is possessed by individuals (Bendell, Sutherland & Little, 2017). With this perspective, leadership can be taught, practiced and developed in order to influence others. This however completely ignores the possibility that leadership may be socially constructed and interpreted differently by all actors involved in the situational context (Collinson & Tourish, 2015).

Traditionally, these mainstream ideas of leadership tend to privilege leaders and paint them as heroic individuals (Alvesson & Spicer 2012; Collinson, 2014), while undervaluing the effect that the situational context and actions of followers have on the leadership process. Collinson and Tourish (2015, pp 589) state that mainstream ideas “tend to presume that (a) follower conformity is an inherently positive feature of leadership dynamics, and (b) resistance is incompatible with the notion of “good” followership”. So, with this perspective, good leadership results in followers performing their assigned tasks without showing signs of resistance. On the contrary, if there is resistance and followers are not performing as they are expected to do, that would be bad leadership. There exists an extensive body of research aimed at defining what is seen as effective behaviours for leaders (Dewettinck & van Ameijde, 2011). This field of research emphasises the importance of leaders and how they through empowering leadership can shape followers’ behaviours and attitudes with ease and motivate the employees to strive to work towards the organisation’s goals (Sosik, Chun and Zhu, 2013). Dewettinck and van Ameijde (2011) argue that from the mainstream literature, two types of perspective on empowering leadership can be derived. First, the micro perspective, which is depicted above, where this type of leadership is a way to empower a specific form of intrinsic motivation by leaders for lower level employees. Second, the macro perspective, where leaders possess the ability to influence an organisation with various empowering structures and policies. Again, this even further strengthens the idea of the leader as a hero or villain (Collinson & Tourish, 2015).

When viewing leadership through the mainstream lens it is understandable that one can attribute an organisation's success to the actions of the leaders. Through this lens, the leaders are seen as exceptionally experienced and capable individuals that possess the desirable traits and best possible personality and behaviour for organisational efficiency. However, just as leaders are praised for the successes, they can be blamed for the decline in proficiency and operational

efficiency in an organisation (Fairhurst, 2010). With this perspective, the immediate success, or failure, of an organisation is attributed to one individuals' actions rather than the effect of the endless interactions in a much more complex and volatile business landscape.

Critical leadership studies

As attention to leadership and its development increase in the academic fora and the public arena/popular publishing, a counter-trend of scholars whom strive to unpack what they consider inaccurate or unhelpful trends and assumptions in regard to the mainstream idea of leadership has emerged. The aim of CLS is to investigate “what is neglected, absent or deficient in mainstream leadership research” (Collinson, 2011, p. 181). This approach aims to understand and highlight the negative consequences of leadership, question and investigate commonly accepted assumptions concerning leadership, and examine patterns of power and domination enabled by overly hierarchical social relations (Alvesson and Spicer, 2011; Ford, 2010). One aspect has been to continuously criticize the assumed purpose of leadership that exists in the mainstream literature (Bendell et al., 2017). Many case studies provided by leadership scholars assume that the purpose of organisations is to achieve economic goals, rather than goals associated with equity, democracy and environmental sustainability (Jackson and Parry, 2008). The mainstream view of leadership is often expressed in “econophonic terms” (Bendell et al., 2017, p. 426), meaning that economic outcomes are prioritized over all others (Promislo & Guccione, 2013).

Another taken for granted idea within mainstream leadership that CLS questions is that follower conformity, or lack of resistance, is inherently good (Collinson & Tourish, 2015). CLS highlights that this conformity may not be something that has to be overcome, but rather something that needs to be embraced in the form of fruitful feedback (ibid). Further, CLS emphasise the importance of upward feedback and the creation of a culture and environment where the employees can be empowered to highlight perceived flaws and problems in the organisation (ibid). Unfortunately, “frank, open, and honest feedback from followers to leaders is frequently absent in organizations” (Collinson & Tourish, 2015, pp 15) which could be related to the idea of the all-knowing prowess of the heroic leaders and their capabilities to know what is best. The idea of the managers being heroes has recently been highlighted as an issue by Blom and Alvesson (2015), who argues that unreasonable amounts of pressure and expectations are put on individuals in managerial positions as “other people (‘followers’) [are] to receive a significant number of guidelines, support, meaning and personal growth from their leaders” (p. 486).

Moreover, the mainstream literature and practices of leadership development has most often focused on individuals already defined as leaders (Bendell et al., 2017). Research within the CLS literature suggests that in practice, individual leaders' contributions to a collective enterprise are likely to be much more constrained and closely tied to external factors outside a leader's control (Meindl et al., 1985). As leadership is a complex phenomenon and difficult to understand, having this leader-centric approach to leadership may cause one to oversee the real complexity that leadership beholds. Drawing on the idea of the heroic leader, CLS have over time generated critique concerning how leaders become successful, efficient and hold their position of power

(Collinson & Tourish, 2015). Mainstream literature often suggests this is based on the effect of personalities, behaviours and traits possessed by the leaders and the assumption that these leaders have exceptional capabilities and striking charisma (Bendell et al., 2017). By providing a critical perspective, researchers in the critical leadership literature challenge the mainstream researchers and practitioners to not oversimplify leadership and the complex situations connected to the phenomenon. Thus, CLS challenges the common assumption that an organisation's success, or failure, is largely dependent on the leadership with a high focus on the senior management.

CLS have in several instances also questioned the taken for granted idea that leadership is inherently good (e.g. Collinson, 2014; Alvesson & Spicer, 2012; Padilla, Hogan & Kaiser, 2007). What one may consider as something good may be the complete opposite for someone else, showing the light and dark duality that comes with interpretations (Collinson, 2014). In other words, how the act of leadership is understood will be dependent on the eye of the beholder. Padilla et al. (2007) emphasised this by showing and arguing for how leadership practiced by different dictators was considered "good" by their followers at the time. With this study they highlighted the importance of the situational context and as they show, it will change through time and space and decide what is considered good or bad at that present time.

It is important to note that CLS does not say that the mainstream ideas are outright wrong, rather that they should be questioned and not taken for granted (Bendell et al., 2017). As an example, a CEO's actions are not to be considered obsolete and could very well be a contributing factor to an organisation's success. However, what CLS scholars agree on and what the literature provides critique about, is the overly enthusiastic praise and glorification of these leaders and leadership in general (Alvesson & Spicer 2012; Collinson, 2014).

Methodology: Introducing SweProp and the setting

SweProp is part of a regional organisation in one of Sweden's counties. The regional organisation is a large multi-functional public organisation with more than 55,000 employees. By being a part of a regional public organisation, SweProp is not a profit-driven organisation and is mainly funded by taxpayers' money. Since SweProp is not profit-driven, the objective is rather to maximize the value gained from the funds received. The regional organisation consists mainly of different bodies connected to healthcare, where SweProp can be considered a black swan in the context as the body has a technical focus. SweProp's core business is that of a technical nature with e.g. maintenance personnel that make sure everything is working as intended on the different hospitals in the region and engineers that are responsible for things like energy usage. During the last few years the budget for property investments has increased from around 2 billion to over 4 billion SEK. Though the objective of maintaining and managing the already existing properties within the region still exists, this mission has evolved as SweProp now also has been assigned an increasing number of projects with the aim of constructing new regional properties such as hospitals, clinics and specialised surgery rooms. To be able to meet with the expanded responsibilities the organisation has grown vastly, going from 250 employees to close to 600.



Figure 1. Showing the organisational structure of SweProp.

Today, SweProp’s organisational structure is divided into four legs where each leg has different responsibilities (see Table 1). The four legs consist of Clients and Property, Technology, Safety and Environment, Projects, and Management and Service. Additionally, there exists two overarching units that work with all of these four legs, namely the finance and quality, and HR-departments. All of these business areas have their own business area managers which are seen as “third level” managers, or senior managers. These managers are the highest-ranking managers in the organisation below the CEO and in turn have smaller or larger business areas underneath them, with first line and second line managers. The business area managers, along with the CEO, together create the “management” unit for SweProp, which is tasked with the strategic planning of the organisation. Out of the near 600 employees today, SweProp has approximately 45-50 managers ranging from senior to first-line managers. Moreover, SweProp was in many instances by the interviewees described as a flat organisation with few manager levels while simultaneously being characterized as hierarchical by several other interviewees due to many decisions having to go through top management.

Research design

With the study aiming to investigate a socially constructed phenomenon; the case of how mainstream leadership ideas affect LDI’s - a qualitative research method was chosen. A qualitative case study is preferable as it provides the researchers a deeper understanding of a specific phenomenon or situation (Flyvbjerg, 2006) and it makes it possible to use different data collection methods (Silverman, 2011), providing a wider and more comprehensive basis for the analysis. In this study, we have alternated between the use of in-depth interviews, smaller observations and document analysis in order to gather a full picture of the organisation’s LDI’s and a better understanding of how leadership is perceived in the organisation. Having the combination of these

three methods will not only be in line with the ethnographic framework but is also beneficial for the strength of the study (Watson, 2011).

Our data collection period lasted for six weeks and we divided it into different phases, during which we visited SweProp's many organisation sites. Phase one consisted of getting an initial and informative insight regarding how SweProp engages in leadership development. This was done by meeting with our contact person who today is a business area manager for one of the four legs presented above. Our contact person provided us with an overview of the LDI's and with internal documentations concerning the initiatives. The meetings with our contact person were not only informative, but also provided guidance and direction towards the search for relevant employees to interview in our second phase. We were familiar with this possibly implying degrees of nominator bias, however this snowballing method (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2008) was considered useful since we as outsiders had limited insight and knowledge regarding which employees were affected by the LDI's at SweProp. As interviews were conducted, and we gradually got better knowledge of SweProp, we started suggesting interviewees ourselves.

The second phase consisted of interviews with senior managers, first-line and middle managers (henceforth referred to as senior managers and line managers) and non-managerial employees (henceforth referred to as co-workers) from the four different business areas in SweProp's organisation. The choice of interviewing both managers and co-workers was based on the fact that primary sources for material included in leadership studies are usually drawn from the leaders and managers of the organizations being studied (Starkey & Tiratsoo, 2007). Additionally, Collinson & Tourish (2015) argue that if case studies are to be of any real value and break from what can only be described as "a culture of sycophancy" (p. 590), then they need to reflect a much wider variety of organizational perspectives. Apart from having managers and co-workers from the different organisational business areas, the key condition was for these interviewees to have either been part of the LDI's or had someone in their unit, e.g. their manager being part of it. Beyond this, two interviews were conducted within the regional HR-department with employees specifically working with LDI's (henceforth referred to as HR-specialists). All the respondents and their potential quotes in this study have been anonymized in order to protect the respondent's identity and are described by their role and a letter. The name of the company, SweProp, has also been anonymized. We proceeded with the process of saturation (Glaser & Strauss, 1967), which meant that we continued to collect field material as long as it provided us with new and relevant information, summing up with 28 interviews being conducted.

Data collection

The interviews were conducted in a semi-structured fashion. With open-ended questions we could slightly nudge the respondents while simultaneously encouraging them to talk freely and allowing interviewees to share more detail in their stories (Silverman, 2013). This is to generate responses that are generally easy to compare while still maintaining an open and flexible interview environment (Knox & Burkard, 2009). As an interview guide we had a list of themes and questions that we would use during the interviews, ensuring that the subjects had been covered to a

satisfactory level by the end of each interview. These themes and questions evolved as more interviews were conducted, going from more general to more focused towards what caught our interest during earlier interviews. Some of the subjects touched upon were the LDI's and leadership, and an example of how the questions were set up would be, "what do you think of when you hear the word leadership?" or "how do you go about tackling challenges in the workplace?". The interviews generally lasted between 40-70 minutes, which made it possible to get a detailed narrative of the personal experiences of the respondents. To obtain a broader understanding of the LDI's, we consciously selected employees from all different work groups and business areas (see Table 2), of which some have worked for SweProp for many years and some were more recent to join the organisation. This helped us magnify the depth of the data (Dicicco-Bloom & Crabtree, 2006).

Department	Position	# of interviews
Management	Senior Managers	2
	Managers	3
	Co-workers	1
Regional HR	HR-specialist	2
Business areas	Managers	15
	Co-workers	5
Total		28

Table 1. Showing the department and positions of the interviewees.

In order to make the interviewees feel as comfortable as possible, we aspired to handle the interviews as ethically as possible by being aware of the oftentimes perceived power asymmetry which may occur in interview situations (Kvale, 2006). One way of doing this was to have all the interviews in Swedish which allowed the respondents to answer our questions in a more comfortable way, while also minimising the risk for not receiving as rich answers due to language difficulties. Moreover, with the approval from the respondents the interviews were recorded and then later transcribed which allowed us to focus on the interviewee and the ongoing interview, rather than taking notes (Bryman & Bell, 2011).

To mitigate the general downside with interviews; them being subjective and only including the respondents' own perception of the world (Czarniawska, 2013) - we also chose to study documents and conduct smaller observations. In two instances we participated as observers during meetings. The first one was what SweProp describes as "APT's", loosely translated as workplace meetings, where managers sit down with their co-workers to discuss the past, present and future. The second one was a Friday meeting with a middle manager and his line managers. This addition allowed for a better practical understanding concerning what was discussed in the interviews.

Moreover, to strengthen our data further we analysed documents provided by our contact person and other respondents. Examining organisational documents can provide the researcher

with important background information of the studied organisation (Bryman & Bell, 2011). We were provided with internal reports, working documents, PowerPoints of meetings concerning LDI's, and regional documentation on leadership development. Beyond helping us with the design of our interview guide, the documentation analysis provided us with a broader understanding of the contextual setting.

Data analysis

The analysis of the field material was done in a continuously comparative process where we chose an approach inspired by Gioia, Corley and Hamilton (2012), which is based on the ideas of grounded theory (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). This approach helped us achieve an overall understanding of the findings and helped discover any interesting patterns that stood out. The purpose was to study the phenomenon by obtaining rich and detailed accounts of it, followed by theory built on these accounts. In this sense, we did not aspire to test or verify an existing theory, but rather to build theory from data (Martin & Turner, 1986). This allowed us to stay close to the case-study material and deal with the qualitative data from the interviews, it was well suited for this particular study.

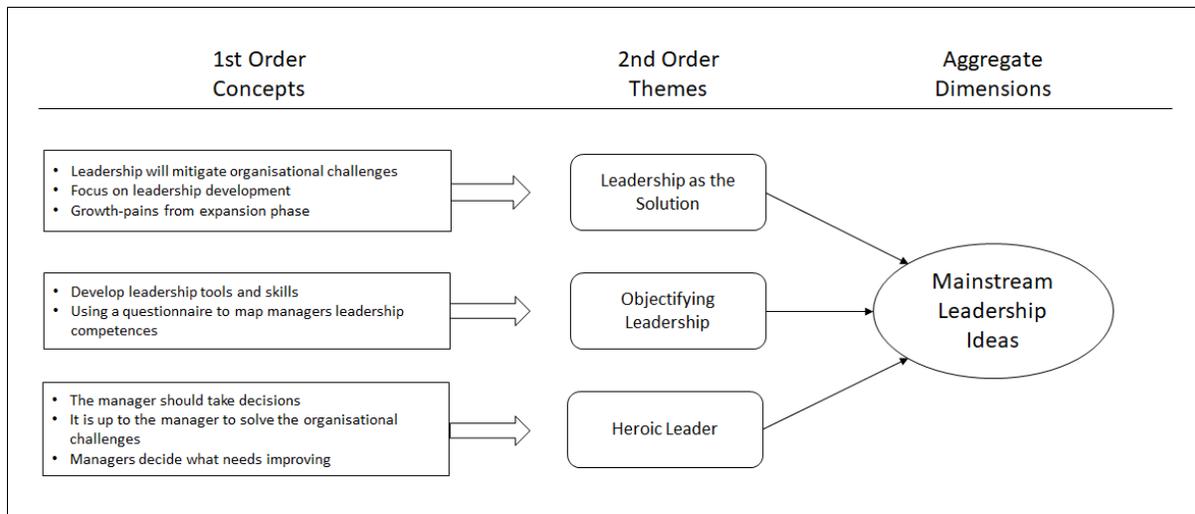


Figure 2. Example of how the data was structured.

The data analysis was conducted in three main steps (see Figure 2). The first step was to transcribe the interviews, code the transcriptions, and conduct a close reading of the material. The transcriptions of interviews happened continuously as more interviews were completed. Already during the interviews, we started to identify and recognise patterns in the respondents' statements. Once all the interviews were transcribed, we read the transcriptions thoroughly where these patterns became further distinct. The transcribed data was then selectively coded. With the phenomenon researched being something as ambiguous as leadership, the selection of what was coded ended up being quite broad. What was being coded was however not without direction as the selection was based on the material being connected to aspects of leadership, the development

initiatives or organisational challenges. In line with what Gioia et al. (2012) suggest, this resulted in a large amount of detailed 1st-order category codes (see Figure 2 for example). At first, the sheer amount of codes was overwhelming, being close to 200 individual codes.

As the research progressed and we read through the codes again we started to see patterns, differences and similarities, among the categories. This helped us reduce the number of categories to a more manageable number (from 200 1st-order codes to 25). We then proceeded to give these categories descriptive labels which helped us picture and consider the array before us (ibid.). At this point we started looking at the material in a more abstract way trying to identify 2nd-order themes, “theoretical dimensions, and the larger narrative” (ibid., p. 20). This process was aided by us continuously asking ourselves the question ‘what is this a case of?’. The 2nd-order themes (see Figure 2 for example) that was generated were understood as facts of an ethnographic study as they obtain both descriptive properties of the studied phenomenon and the interviewees understanding of it (Van Maanen, 2011). The 2nd-order themes were a non-chronological description of processes, activities and perceptions: i.e. the organisational issues of SweProp, the interpretation of leadership, and the structure, the purpose and the effect of LDI’s.

In the third and final step we set out to refine the themes even further in regard to theoretical dimensions, something Gioia et al. (2012) refers to as “2nd-order aggregate dimensions” (p.20). This process helped us identify theoretical concepts that had the ability to explain our observed phenomenon (ibid.). We did this by mapping our 2nd-order themes found. Based on our mapping of the themes, new queries arose concerning the ways in which the perception of leadership itself influence the processes and activities of the LDI’s. We thus proceeded to explore how leadership was portrayed and perceived throughout SweProp, and then we identified what effect the perception of leadership had on the LDI’s. Finally, this led to the choice of using the critical perspective provided by CLS. This allowed us to reveal, question and reflect on taken-for-granted assumptions regarding leadership and LDI’s.

Findings

This chapter presents the non-chronological findings collected at SweProp. The first section highlights the various implications that has come with the fast-paced expansion phase and the resulting growth-pains experienced by employees in the organisation. One of the various initiatives to deal with the growth-pains is presented in the second section, namely the initiative of developing the manager. The third section goes on to display representative statements of how leadership is perceived throughout the organisation. The fourth and fifth sections focus on some of the interesting findings regarding the LDI’s, namely the course selection process, the purpose and the effect of the LDI’s.

Dealing with growth-pains

Though many of the interviewees described the expansion SweProp has gone through as positive and something to be proud of, it has not happened without generating tensions in the organisation. Interviewees described the organisation as in a state of immense growth-pains and during the

interviews several areas that was in need of development were presented. The recurring topics interviewees discussed were connected to unclear roles, vague areas of responsibility, insufficient or inefficient communication, and slow decision processes. A line manager stated that they are currently trying to find their roles in the growing organisation where knowing who is responsible to operate tasks or run certain questions is not yet clear.

“We are still trying to define a few roles. Who should be responsible for this and who should do that? Who should run these questions? This is really hard, and we have such darn growth-pains. We are running so many projects and constructions and then in the middle of that we need to find our roles in the organisation, and that is a challenge [...] The frustration that exists is because everyone wants to do a good job, but it gets frustrating when you don’t really understand what’s expected of you.”
(Line Manager A)

Other interviewees recognized the frustration present in the statement above but ascribed it to other reasons. Another line manager claimed that the tension and frustration was generated due to the slow decision processes within the organisation and attributed it to SweProp being a public organisation.

“There is always a large number of people that have to give their opinions before we actually can make a decision, it is a slow process. It is not like anyone is going to say, ‘now we’re going to do it this way’, it is rather ‘I need to check with this or that guy, I need to look it up or we need to have a meeting about that’. That may however be due to SweProp being a regional body” (Line Manager B)

A technician was more practical in their answer and attributed the frustration to conflicts generated from poor communication.

“[...] There are conflicts due to communication issues. It could be as easy as one unit adjusting the heat level of the air that comes in through the ventilation while another unit is adjusting the heat level of the radiators to the opposite effect.” (Co-worker A)

These statements are examples of challenges the organisation is facing connected to the growth-pains that have been generated along with the expansive phase SweProp has experienced. According to the interviewees there is continuous work being done to battle these growth-pains with various initiatives being mounted. One such initiative that has been present in the regional organisation for a long time and is now starting to play a bigger role in SweProp, is that of leadership development. The general consensus between the organisation’s actors is that leadership development is something that is important and worth spending resources on. SweProp wants their employees to be able to follow the latest trends, develop their leadership skills, and be encouraged to pursue development of individual competencies. To do this, the organisation today distributes an amount equal to 2% of the total salary costs to each unit’s manager. This money is at their disposal to spend on various development initiatives annually, for them and their co-workers. SweProp’s employees have access to an abundance of courses that varies in focus and

aim depending on factors such as profession, position and competence. While employees have a range of courses to choose from, courses connected to leadership are mainly accessible by managers.

Developing the manager

SweProp has a well-defined and documented idea of what the practice of managers should be. Drawing from information found in the LDI documents, it is stated that the manager role is more than a profession in its own. A manager is formally appointed within the organisation and they are held accountable in achieving goals concerning financials, operations, and staff. A leader on the other hand is documented to be someone who can handle relationships and manages to continuously conquer the co-workers trust.

“Being a manager is more than a profession, managership is a formal position to which one is appointed. As a manager you possess the mandate and responsibility to reach set goals together with your co-workers. Leadership is a relation where one continuously needs to conquer the co-workers trust. As a manager, you should be able to both be a manager and a leader.” (SweProp’s definition of leadership and manager - LDI document 1)

Further, the LDI documents state that as a manager one should be able to act as both a manager and a leader. On the one hand the organisation separates the definition of a manager and a leader, on the other hand the managers are also expected to be the leader for the unit they are in charge of. With this desire from SweProp, that managers are supposed to be leaders, the organisation has development initiatives specifically designed towards employees in a “leader-role”. The documented overall purpose of these LDI’s is to improve and enrich the capabilities of the employees possessing a “leader-role”. These LDI’s are mainly based on the regional organisation’s collective criteria for managers which are; (1) value based managership, (2) goal and result oriented managership, (3) communicative managership, and (4) development oriented managership. These criteria are further described in the LDI documents.

(1) “A good manager should consciously act in line with the regional organisation’s values, business idea and strategies in a way that contributes to the organisations results and quality. A good manager is motivated and wants to lead others. A good manager has a sound self-perception and is conscious of every person’s equal value. A good manager is a role-model and trend setter, is loyal to the organisation and the decisions that are taken.

(2) A good manager takes initiative and responsibility, has drive, considers the bigger picture and makes decisions. A good manager provides results. A good manager provides measurable key figures for both long and short term, follow up and analyse the organisation’s results and quality. A good manager is a clear employer.

(3) A good manager can understand, adjust, determine and communicate messages. A good manager is clear and adjustable towards the target group. A good manager listens carefully and with interest. A good manager is convincing and provides confidence in both informal and formal situations and exposed situations. A good manager tends to relations and is visible and accessible for others.

(4) A good manager develops and improves the organisation in conjunction with others, towards set goals. A good manager always has the customer, patient and citizen in mind. A good manager influences, inspires, involves and develops the co-workers. Good managers also develop themselves.” (LDI document 1)

The LDI’s have a course catalogue that is assembled based on the organisations perceived needs. What SweProp requires and desires is based on the combined work between HR representatives and managers from different departments within the regional organisation.

“It’s a mix of people ... An initiative I created a few years ago that was called ‘advanced manager program’ [...] During this I went out and met with managers and talked with the existing HR contacts who then spoke to their managers and so on. This let us establish a thesis of what we believed was good and then we went on to do a procurement regarding this.” (HR -Specialist X)

The LDI’s consist of both mandatory and voluntary courses. The mandatory courses are in general shorter courses that aim to educate the new managers how it is to work as a manager in this organisation in particular. How to use certain tools, e.g. IT-support systems, necessities for a manager, and what it means to work as a manager in a public organisation in general. Apart from the fact that every manager should partake in all the mandatory courses, managers are also encouraged to partake in the voluntary courses in order to further develop their leadership skills. Even though SweProp has its own leadership development initiative, the courses are part of the regional organisation’s development initiative and are executed in a cross-department fashion. Meaning that managers within the region with widely different business focus and different practical conditions attend the same courses together. This means that an employee at a technical department within the regional organization can attend a course where the vast majority of participants are working in the healthcare sector. In turn, this occasionally led to the course being perceived as either too general and lacking focus, or ineffective and irrelevant because it is too focused on one type of actor. As a manager partaking in a cross-department course stated:

“I have been to a course that the regional organisation offered. I believe the goal was to improve my leadership skills, but I did not think it was particularly good or helpful [...] First of all, the course is not only given to employees in this organisation but to a large variety of employees within the regional organisation. So, when I was there, it was me and another person from this organisation, and maybe 25 nurses ... so it was very focused on healthcare and that wasn’t very relevant. The other managers in this group have completely different work situations and prerequisites than me and to have one course that should be universal then I don’t think was very good.” (Line Manager C)

To be able to assemble the best possible development program and course catalogue, the organisation’s HR department tries to gain a better understanding of what courses each individual manager has partaken in. One step in trying to determine what courses the organizations managers need is through a questionnaire. Managers are urged to answer the questionnaire in order to map out what courses they have attended.

“In order to map out which leadership competencies the managers possess a questionnaire has been distributed and the managers have been urged to answer it”. (Line Manager D)

The results from the questionnaire are then compiled and presented to the board of directors. As a next step in the process, the HR department suggests to the second line manager a possible development plan for his or her first line managers. These suggestions will lay the foundation for the discussion between second- and first-line manager regarding development plans during individual performance reviews.

Ambiguity of leadership

An aspect connected to the development of leadership is the perception of what leadership is in itself and arguably, to be able to develop something as abstract as leadership it is important to have an understanding of how leadership is seen throughout the organisation. As stated previously, the managers are expected to be leaders and their leadership should be connected to the documented definition of leadership and the regional manager criteria presented in the previous section. Senior management and employees working with the criteria, mainly HR-specialists, had good knowledge regarding the managerial criteria and generally knew that there was a definition regarding leadership. However, the general knowledge regarding the criteria and the leadership definition amongst the remaining interviewees was low. Interviewees were asked if they knew about how leadership was defined by the organisation or which the manager criteria were. The answers, excluding senior management and employees working with the criteria, belonged to one of two general categories; a plain and simple “No”, or “I do not know of them in detail, but I know they exist.”. Though, there was one exception where an interviewee stated; “Yes, it’s those about the open-minded leadership and about the leader should be focusing on listening” (Line Manager F), which only remotely can be connected to the definition or any of the criteria. As the interviewees were not able to comment on the criteria or the leadership definition from the organisation due to lack of knowledge about them, the interviewees were instead faced with a open-ended and general questions such as “what is leadership to you?” or “what comes to mind when you hear leadership?”. These answers highlighted the ambiguity and complex nature of leadership as not only did the interviews’ answers differ from the definition and criteria presented by the organisation, but the emphasis in the statements showed a variety of definitions of what leadership was perceived to be. One interviewee was a line manager within the technology unit that emphasised the importance of leaders making decisions.

“Mainly about the leader [...] It is about making decisions, the leader, the decision maker.” (Line Manager B).

The interviewee’s statement portrays a leader-centric perspective, describing leadership as being able to make choices and that these choices are to be done by the leader. In contrast to this, the next interviewee stated that leadership, when successfully done, is about becoming invisible.

“A leader works by letting the co-workers feel like they performed the work and that they made it themselves [...] If you as a leader allow yourself to be led you have created a culture where you may not have to take decisions as a leader.” (Line Manager E).

According to this manager, leadership is not about making decisions or leading, but rather about giving the co-workers space to make decisions themselves and allow yourself as a manager to be led. By other interviewees, leadership was instead connected to the leader being well-informed. A coordinator within operations described the leader as being a knowledgeable spokesperson.

“Leadership is about the one with the facts. A person alone on a deserted island is not in need of leadership, but if there were more people, leadership would be necessary, one who speaks for the group and has authority.” (Co-worker B).

Our understanding of this statement is that the development of leadership here would only depend on the leader's own ability to obtain information. To be able to practice the leadership however, the leader is still dependent on having people around them to represent. Similar to the statement above, a line manager within operations emphasised the importance of authority and the leader being in the front, clearly setting the course.

“It would be the one in the battlefield, pointing with the whole hand where to go and calling the shots. A person one could look up to, one you could talk to.” (Line Manager B).

Our perception based on this statement is that it is up to the leader to set the direction for the unit to work towards. With military-like authority the leader should “call the shots”. The voice of the co-workers does not matter when deciding a certain direction. What matters is that there is a leader in the front that inspires, is approachable and shows the way. While also talking about organisational direction, another interviewee, a senior manager, emphasised that leadership is about working with visions.

“Leadership is about creating an understanding of where we are heading and about creating the conditions for your co-workers which enables them to be able to achieve the set goals” (Senior Manager A).

Leadership in this statement may again be interpreted to be about setting a direction, however with less of the “pointing with the whole hand” idea. Rather, it is about making sure that the organisation collectively understands the set goals and finding solutions and means to reach them in the most effective way. Though, it is up to the leader to find the solutions and means by focusing on creating structure and thereby enabling the co-workers. In contrast to this, when asking an engineer working with questions concerning sustainability, the answer was similarly focused

on creating structure for the co-workers. However, this time with the emphasis on the social aspects and not the operational.

“For me it is the social part, how the co-workers are spoken to and that the co-workers are seen [...] The leader providing room for personal development.” (Co-worker C).

Here it is not the joint responsibility between the manager and co-workers that is in focus, rather it is again the leader who is responsible for creating the social structure within the unit. It is the leader who decides how the co-workers are spoken to. It is the leader who makes sure the co-workers are seen and it is the leader that has the means to develop the co-workers individually.

These six statements on leadership indicate that there is a discrepancy between the documented definition of leadership and what the interviewees perceive leadership to be. Our understanding of the statements concludes that only a fraction of what is stated can be connected to the documented definition on leadership and the statements differ a lot between each interviewee. What the statements and the documented definition do have in common is that they all have one person in mind when describing leadership which is the leader, or implicitly, the manager. From the statements we can see that leadership is not only about the leader, but also that it is about the leader doing something. However, the idea of what the leader is supposed to do shifts frequently throughout these statements and one statement stands in stark contrast to the next, often even contradicting the first. Leadership is seen to be the leader taking control through being the “decision maker” and “calling the shots” while simultaneously creating a culture where the end goal is that the leader should “not have to take decisions”. The leader should strive to be in the front, setting the direction and acting as a role-model based on knowledge and authority, and at the same time take on a supportive role focusing on providing space for and growing the co-workers while administering the social and operational structure.

A top-down course selection structure

Another aspect of the leadership development initiative that was discussed with the interviewees was the process of selecting the courses to which the leader would attend. The most commonly encountered course selection method in SweProp is one of two; either it is decided by the managers, or the organisation’s structure requires it, meaning that it is decided from a central level. The courses belonging to the second category are the mandatory courses while the courses the managers themselves get to decide are part of the voluntary catalogue. When deciding on these voluntary courses, the decision can be made in the form of a suggestion from a manager’s manager during an individual performance review. Here, the manager and the manager’s manager discuss strengths and weaknesses in order to pinpoint potential possibilities for development. The possibility to choose freely depending on one’s own interest or self-perception of what is needed is another popular way to decide what course to partake in.

“You have your manager-to-manager performance review. When the manager has a discussion with his senior manager about his development plan, then leadership is of course included. It is in that dialogue where you need to identify what needs to be strengthened, complemented or just upgraded.”
(Senior Manager A)

There was an existing understanding in SweProp that this choice of course selection method might be limiting, as shown in the dialogue with a senior manager below. With this method it is basically the perception of the manager and the manager’s manager that alone decides what needs to be “strengthened, complemented or just upgraded”. Further, the same senior manager admittedly stated that it can be a hard task for a senior manager to know how the line manager really acts towards the co-workers based on the performance review, as the manager may act one way towards his unit and another towards his boss.

“It can be hard when you have the manager to manager performance review to know how that manager acts towards his or her co-workers. You act a certain way as a human towards your boss and another way towards the co-workers you have in your unit. So that it is harder and there are problems, for sure. That is why it requires so much more of that conversation between manager to manager, to drill into what kind of values you have, what type of leadership you stand for. You want examples on how leadership is practiced to better get a feel of where this person is in their leadership development.” (Senior Manager A)

The insight that this way of practice may be problematic is apparent, though no alternate solutions have been suggested on how to solve this dilemma. Our understanding is that the way SweProp works around this issue today is instead by putting more pressure on senior management. It is up to the senior managers to “drill into values” and find out “what type of leadership” the manager has.

Apparent from the statement from the senior manager above, is that the co-workers are not involved in the process of deciding how the leadership is to be developed or what courses the managers are to attend. With the leadership being defined as a relationship between the manager and the co-workers it is fair to assume that the co-workers may possess some information on aspects that might be in need of improving, both structure-wise in the unit but also in regard to their manager. However, when asking interviewees in different departments of the organisation if co-workers are involved in the leadership development process, the common response was no. When further asked about why this was the case, the explanation was usually something along the way that it was not the called for practice in the organisation by top management. One manager stated:

“That’s a very good question ... right now we have some sort of a ladder that you climb whenever you take a new course. But I don’t think that has been the case but instead managers could basically choose freely. Involving co-workers in the process is nothing that the organisation has told us to work with” (Line Manager F)

While another interviewee that was asked, a senior manager, concluded:

“We haven’t got around with that just yet. Right now, we are focusing on establishing the course inventory for our managers. But no, I don’t believe so ... of course it is the people who are affected by the manager and the leader that have insight on the leadership. That relationship between leader and follower is not highlighted in the way we work with course selection as of right now.” (Senior Manager A)

Our understanding is that there is no clear structure that decides the way courses are picked and how the development plan of each manager is constructed. The development plan is often based on feel and personal preference rather than a well-grounded perception, with information from many sources, of what is needed. Even though the co-workers are the ones experiencing their managers leadership on a daily basis, they are not involved in the leadership development process. Instead, SweProp accepts that it is the managers that are expected to know best what needs to be improved. There is however one forum in place today where the managers have the possibility to get insights from their co-workers; the co-worker performance reviews. Here the manager and the co-worker have a one on one, face-to-face sit-down, where there is a dialogue regarding the past, the present and the future. One of the standard questions on the review form is directed towards leadership and the co-workers are asked to comment on the managers leadership. While it may be possible for this to have the desired effect, we find it complicated due to a number of reasons: first, the co-workers need to be brave enough to give criticism to their managers. Second, the co-workers need to have reflected over what it is the manager needs to improve. Third, the manager must be susceptible to criticism. Fourth, the organisation must have a culture where constructive criticism is handled in a good way. What happens then if the managers are not susceptible to criticism, or does not have the required self-perception needed to decide single-handedly, or together with their manager, which courses they should attend?

Below, the problematic nature of perception is highlighted, pointing out how hard it actually is to see where oneself needs to improve. A manager working within operations was asked to describe his personality as a manager. He emphasized himself being a person with communicative capabilities, being distinct and fair, but pointed out that something he needs to improve is his IT competencies and involving other employees by delegating.

“Distinct, try to be fair, work with freedom under responsibility, communicative. I have the idea of trying to be Mr. 100% and it is not always possible, so what I have to improve is delegating [...] Most likely some sort of IT or data course, can’t really claim to be a “hacker”. PowerPoint I can manage but more advanced stuff I surely could improve” (Line Manager G)

After this, a co-worker belonging to the managers unit was asked to state what the manager needed to improve and what type of course he should take. In contrast to the managers perception of the situation, the co-worker said that the manager should try to improve his communication and that he should attend some sort of course that can help improve this competence.

“Well, some sort of communication course. He has a tendency to talk about three things at the same time. Though, I told him this during our last performance review, so he is aware of what I think.”
(Co-worker A)

This example highlights how the interviewed manager’s own perception of the situation is inconsistent with others understanding of the same situation, even if it is people who meet more or less on a daily basis. In this case, the need to improve “delegating” is something that had been discussed in another forum, manager to manager, where this particular co-worker was not present. According to the co-worker, the manager should however supposedly be aware of his shortcomings as “I told him this during our last performance review”, but based on the above statements, the manager is either not aware of what the co-workers think of him, or simply does not agree and thus has neglected the co-worker’s input. Why this is the case could be due to many reasons, the result is however clear. There is a discrepancy between the manager’s self-perception of what needs to be improved and what his unit perceives as areas in need of development.

Unclear purpose & unanticipated effects of LDI’s

As we saw in the previous two segments, perceptions tend to differ a lot. The same goes for the purpose of LDI’s. As stated earlier, the documented purposes with the LDI’s are to improve and enrich the capabilities of the employee in the “leader-role”. This purpose was generally confirmed and understood by the interviewees. A second line manager stated that the purpose is indeed to develop managers but focused mainly on communication.

“You want to strengthen the managers. You want all managers to have a common ground to stand on. I think it’s easier for the board knowing that your managers have done this, it allows communication to be done in another way, regarding leadership that is. You are a manager because you are supposed to be a leader, not because you are an expert.” (Line Manager H).

Again, managers are assumed to be leaders. Further, our interpretation is that according to this statement the desired effect of the LDI is to create a common language amongst the managers to make the communication regarding “leadership” more efficient. The desired effect of the LDI’s and who or what the initiatives are supposed to influence, is however something that is not documented by SweProp. When a HR-specialist, who is working with the LDI’s within the regional organisation, was informed of this perceived gap during an interview, the specialist stated that it should affect both the manager partaking in the course and said managers’ co-workers.

“We have those who are managers today and those who are to become managers, and of course do we want their behaviour and the way they practice their role to be affected, but beyond that it should end up with the co-workers. It is there where the interaction happens somehow, the leadership or managership or whatever you want to call it. It is that interaction, where it happens, that’s what we want to influence... The co-workers affect our goals and processes so in the end it should affect the business very much.” (HR Specialist X)

Our understanding is that by developing the managers skills and way of acting, SweProp wishes for them to grow as individuals and become more efficient in their professional role. The manager should then in turn be able to improve the interaction between the manager and co-worker, impacting the social structure in the unit and empowering the co-worker. By doing so the co-workers are to improve in their roles and in the processes they partake, generating positive outcomes for the business. According to this statement the end-goal is not connected to the individual manager per se, but rather to the development of the interactions between all employees which in turn should lead to increased operational efficiency.

Today, work is being done in the organisation in order to measure the effects of the LDI's. Initially, the regional HR-department had the ambition to measure the effects by looking at e.g. staff turnover or employee sick leave, but this has proven to be problematic. Establishing the causality seems to be trickier than what the organisation first expected. Instead, they now have proceeded along a more qualitative path, interviewing managers and co-workers who have been connected to the initiatives either directly or second-hand.

“We had hoped that we'd be able to measure [the initiatives] by for example lowered absence due to illness and lowered employee turnover. [...] We can measure this, but we realised that we can't prove the causality. We can't do this because we initiate so many different measures concerning work environment to lower employee turnover and make things better. Therefore, we can't say that it is only due to the development initiatives, it also makes it hard to measure. That is why we measure perceived effects, what one feel, what one thinks.” (HR Specialist X)

A senior manager gave his perspective on the possibilities of the effects generated from the LDI's. The problematic cause-effect situation is seen as a non-issue as the courses might not actually be there for obtaining new knowledge, but rather as motivation and confirmation that the managers are doing the right things in their daily work.

“You can't possibly know that. Leadership is something you apply in the 'real world'. It is not that you sit in your own room and work with it on your own, rather it is when you're out there in the 'real world'[...] If you decided that being a manager is a professional role then, well, when I have had conversations with people who have that attitude they most often say that 'I need to be topped up from time to time with both knowledge but most of all confirmation that I'm working towards the right direction, or if i need to adjust my way of thinking' [...] It might not be so that you actually learn anything new when attending a course, it might rather be that you get insights, 'this is something I shouldn't do, this I should look out for, and this confirms I'm on the right track'. This is what I consider to be the most important part. Even if you've never been a manager or a leader and you attend one of these courses you will probably get the impression that this is common sense ... because there is no 'hocus pocus'.” (Senior Manager B)

We see this perspective generating a new problem. If the leadership development initiative is based on “common sense” and is there as some sort of confirmation for the managers, whose common sense is this based on? Who is in the position to claim that what the managers are doing is correct and not? This person has the capability to provide or withhold the confirmation that the

manager attending the course is there to obtain. In this case it would be the course educator, who might have a completely different perception than the organisation and its employees of what to be considered the “right direction”. As trends within leadership and management tend to shift quite frequently the “most important part” of the development initiatives, is going to be something that is subjective, changes frequently, and are left to be decided by someone outside the organisation.

Another problem the organisation is faced with is that of when the courses are not aligned with the organization's way of working. In some cases, the organizational structure and values were seen to have obstructed the usage of newly obtained knowledge.

“You can take a course and then when you return, everything is business as usual. I have attended a course I wanted to take and then when I return from it, I realise that this is not something the organisation wants or can handle. Why did I then take this course? For my own sake it may have been fun but if I want to be able to use my new knowledge I will have to search for another organisation, look for a new job. Because if this organisation doesn't want this knowledge then it will only end up as “beads for the pigs”. (Line Manager I)

We understand that it is likely that some courses may have no perceived effect at all as when the manager returns to work everything will be “business as usual”. This is not in line with the purpose of the development initiatives. However, even courses that provide a positive result, where the attendant feels like they have obtained new knowledge, the effect might be negative. If the organisation is not ready for change or structured in a way where the person attending a course is not able to “use [the] new knowledge”, the interviewees describe two scenarios. Best case scenario, the organisation will have spent money on nothing as it is not used. Worst case scenario, the organisation might lose an employee that is considered worth developing.

Discussion: Mainstream leadership ideas in SweProp

The empirical findings suggest that there are a number of prevalent mainstream leadership ideas in SweProp. The ideas that stand out and briefly will be discussed below are the following: leadership is seen as the solution to most problems, leadership is understood as something that a person can possess, and that the person who possess and practice leadership is the heroic leader. Thereafter, we will discuss what implications these mainstream leadership ideas have had on the processes and practice of SweProp's LDI's.

Mainstream leadership ideas - Leadership as the solution

The high pace expansion phase SweProp has gone through has resulted in various issues throughout the organisation. What was continuously discussed during the interviews were issues connected with unclear roles, poor communication, areas of responsibility and slow decision-making processes. SweProp's answer to mitigating or even solving some of these “growth-pains” was to focus on leadership development. Leadership is seen as the key component that will solve the organisational challenges SweProp face. Thus, it is with the best intentions these LDI's are generated. However, the problem with focusing on leadership is that it is extremely ambiguous

and complex (Alvesson & Sveningsson, 2003; Alvesson & Spicer, 2012; Collinson, 2014). From what is shown in the empirics and what has been shown in previous research (Alvesson & Sveningsson, 2003), what leadership is and the purpose of it differs between each person and can often be contradictory. We can conclude that just like there is no universally accepted definition of what leadership is on a scholarly level (Fairhurst, 2010), it also differs from person to person in the organisation. It ranges from being something people possess to solve problems and is developed over time, to something that is only able to be performed in a group to something that someone can do on their own. As Alvesson and Spicer (2012) discuss, leadership may very well be nothing, or it may include everything since it is created when we state; “this is leadership”. Our findings confirm this idea, that leadership is based on the perception of the beholder, which makes it impossible to define. This itself becomes a problem as there is no way to define leadership, how to develop it, and how it will help solve the issues SweProp is facing.

Mainstream leadership ideas - Leadership as an object

The initiative to develop leadership in SweProp stems from the expectations that managers should be leaders and when being leaders, they should be able to maintain, practice, and develop their leadership tools and skills through the LDI's. Leadership is thus viewed as an object or tool one can possess, exercise and develop, and specifically something that belong to the managers. These leadership tools and skills the managers possess are supposed to help empower co-workers and be used as a means to solve the issues understood as “growing-pains”. The leadership tools and skills have been broken down into the manager criteria by SweProp and it is defined in the manager's job description to pursue the development of one's capabilities within these criteria. With the idea, that as long as the managers are able to develop and practice their leadership the challenges they face in their everyday work will be solvable, it makes sense to focus on leadership development. From previous research however, it can be argued that by underestimating the complexity of the challenges that leaders are likely to confront, LDI's are rarely adequate in preparing participants for their future roles (Gagnon and Collinson, 2014). Further, Meindl et al (1985) argue that in practice, individual leaders' contributions to a collective enterprise are likely to be much more constrained and closely tied to external factors outside a leader's control.

Mainstream leadership ideas - The heroic leader

As previous studies have shown as well as our empirics, the managers are seen as heroic leaders (Alvesson & Spicer, 2012; Western, 2013; DeRue & Myers, 2014). The leader-centric perspective can be seen throughout the organisation, from top to bottom, in different shapes. Already in SweProp's definition, the leader is highlighted as the one who needs to “conquer the trust” of the co-workers continuously. Some interviewees also believe that the leader's responsibility is to propel the organisation forward by setting the direction and making tough decisions. Even in statements that are emphasising a less important role of the leader, where the leader should become invisible when successful, there is a focus on the leader. In this example, the leader is successful by, not only “letting the co-workers *feel* like they performed the work and made it themselves” but

also by “creat[ing] a culture” where a leader doesn’t have to make a decision. Moreover, a leader should create “conditions for your co-workers which *enables* them to be able to achieve the set goals”. Here, the leader may not be portrayed as heroic because he or she makes decisions. Instead the leader is portrayed as heroic because he or she has successfully created a culture where the leader doesn’t need to take decisions. Even if the leader is not taking actions, but rather is passive, it is the leader who *creates* a culture and *enables* the co-workers to make decisions and take initiative. It is also the leader’s input that is needed in order to know what to improve in the organisation. As shown in the empirics, the HR representatives talked with managers in order to establish a hypothesis of what was believed to be beneficial to pursue in terms of improvements for the organisation.

The mainstream effect

From what is discussed above we suggest that the perception of leadership in SweProp is closely related to how mainstream leadership is described (Alvesson & Spicer, 2012; Collinson, 2014; Collinson & Tourish, 2015). Based on the empirical findings, our interpretation is that possessing this mainstream leadership perspective has a number of implications on both the managers and the LDI’s. Much like the butterfly effect - the phenomenon whereby even a small contextual change in a complex system can have large effects elsewhere - we found that the perception and actions of individuals in SweProp have caused chain reactions elsewhere in the organisation. These implications, regarding the managers and LDI’s, are what we want to refer to as *the mainstream effect*. In the empirics it is highlighted how both the expectations on managers and how the structure, practice, purpose and effect of the LDI’s are being influenced by mainstream leadership ideas. Due to the fact that leadership is seen as something that is possessed by managers and that their actions, or inactions, are supposed to propel the organisation forward, result in unreasonable expectations and pressure being put on the shoulders of the managers (Blom & Alvesson, 2015). They are expected to be great leaders and be able to make the right decisions in complex situations that generates a positive result for all actors involved. Along with this, the managers should also know how their co-workers view leadership and act accordingly, depending on who they deal with in a certain context. With the glorified perspective of leadership that the mainstream leadership ideas carry, these ambiguous and complex situations are effectively simplified (Meindl et al. 1985). It is the simplification of leadership that Vince and Pedler (2018) argue that may further increase the self-recognition of one’s responsibilities and capabilities as a manager. In turn this may lead to a focus on propelling their individual skills and careers instead of pursuing a better understanding of the complexity the collaboration between a manager and co-workers entail. This not only further strengthens the idea of the heroic leader, but it also de-emphasises the importance of the co-workers in this process. This perspective leads to it being acceptable that the understanding of what is in need of development is dependent on a few people and manager’s self-perception. Excluding a large number of actors that not only may have relevant information where issues within the organisation may exist, but also who may have solutions.

By having a mainstream leadership perspective, the processes of the LDI's have been affected accordingly. Drawing from the findings, we suggest that the structure, practice, purpose and strived for effects of the LDI's have been influenced. A number of instances in this case can be highlighted, namely; the biased process of selecting courses for managers, the ambiguous purpose of LDI's, and the unintended outcomes of LDI's. These will be discussed in the following three sections.

The mainstream effect - a biased course selection process

Our understanding of the practice of selecting leadership development courses is that it has been heavily influenced by mainstream leadership ideas. First of all, the perspective of the heroic leader influences the perception of what is in need of improving and how this should be done. Today, this is based on a few people, where the insights are mainly generated from senior managers. They are seen as exceptionally experienced and capable individuals (Collinson and Tourish, 2015) who are expected to know best. Further, when it comes to choosing the courses each manager attends, they are primarily decided through manager-to-manager discussions. Thus, the choice is dependent on the reflections and self-perceptions of a mere two individuals, disregarding a large amount of possibly valuable information for the course selection process. With only having two sources of information as basis for this selection process, there is a high risk that this information is biased. This could in turn lead to a less effective course selection process where the courses that are selected could be suboptimal or contextually outright wrong. The empirics show that there exists an understanding of the possible limitations the current course selection process brings, and managers acknowledged that it can be hard to do a thorough assessment of what is in need of improvement. The glorification of the leader, that is a recurring topic of critique within CLS (Alvesson & Spicer 2012; Collinson, 2014), is here highlighted again as even though there was an understanding that the manager may have troubles with undertaking the task of assessing need for improvement, it falls on the manager to solve it. The managers showed signs of mainstream ideas and expressed that it was the managers' tasks to solve this problem by "drill[ing] into values" and finding out "what type of leadership" is needed. Noticeably, when a problem emerges that is hard to define and understand, the first line of thought in how to solve this is directly connected to the heroic leader's capabilities (Alvesson & Sveningsson, 2003). This solution does however seem to function quite poorly. As empirics showed, if managers where to pick courses based on their own self-perception it often does not align with reality, highlighting how hard it is to assess what is in need of improvement and structuring a development plan based on biased and self-reflected grounds.

Additionally, much like how leadership is often seen to possess inherent positive properties (Collinson, 2014; Alvesson & Spicer, 2012), there exists a predetermined idea of how the LDI's work. The LDI's are understood to provide competencies and be the source of information needed for managers to solve problems. Let us say that members of SweProp have criticized the communication in a certain unit. It is then taken for granted that if a manager attending a course aimed at improving his or her communication skills, he or she will now possess this competence.

Thus, it is taken for granted that a manager that develops certain competences will have a better chance at being a “good” leader (Collinson and Tourish, 2015) and be able to improve the performance of his or her unit. This is highlighted in the findings when SweProp set out to see what competences their managers possessed, sending out a questionnaire where they answered what courses they attended. The answers to this questionnaire are then used as a base for the manager-to-manager discussions about course selection and development plans. Our understanding is that this does not show what a manager may be good or bad at, what they know or not, or what they need to develop. A manager who has attended a course about communication may still be perceived as a person who needs to improve their communication. The questionnaire simply shows, much like a CV, what courses the managers have taken.

The mainstream effect - an ambiguous purpose of LDI's

It could be seen as common sense that the purpose of *leadership development* should be to develop aspects concerning leadership. As such, based on the organisations' definition of leadership, where leadership is seen as a “relation where one continuously need to conquer the co-workers' trust”, coupled with the mainstream ideas that leadership is an object that can be possessed (Bendell et al., 2017) and that it exists of behaviours, and tools that can be developed (Alvesson & Sveningsson, 2003), it makes sense for SweProp to focus on improving the capabilities reflected in the manager criteria. Therefore, we are not surprised that the documented purpose for SweProp's LDI's is to improve and enrich the capabilities of the employees possessing a “leader-role”. In turn, the development of managers is intended to affect and empower the co-workers which in the end should benefit the organisation as a whole, businesswise. Much like earlier research suggests (Day et al., 2014), the documented purpose thus relies on the idea of generating heroic leaders that can develop the rest of the organisation. However, Lacerenza et al. (2017) found that such trickle-down effects often are poor or suboptimal.

Additionally, according to Bendell et al. (2017), there has been little room for critique and reflection on the purpose of leadership in regard to business and economic progress within the leadership discourse. The mainstream perception when it comes to the purpose of leadership is that it is connected to economic outcomes (Jackson & Parry, 2008). If we make the connection that LDI's are supposedly there to develop leadership, then the purpose of LDI's should also be connected to economic outcomes. Looking at SweProp's documented purpose, it can easily be suggested that even though it is stated that the LDI's exist in order to educate and develop managers, the end goal is to generate a positive economic outcome. However, based on the ambiguity concerning what leadership is understood to be, which is highlighted in both previous research (Alvesson & Spicer, 2012; Collinson, 2014) and can be seen in our empirical findings, this might not be so easy. The six statements on leadership, that can be found under the empirical section “perception of leadership”, suggest that what leadership is and what a leader is supposed to do is dependent on each individual's perception. Much like what Alvesson and Sveningsson (2003) present in their study, the focus shifts frequently throughout these statements and one statement stands in stark contrast to the next, often even contradicting the first. This opens up for

the reflection that there might in fact be purposes connected to LDI's that are not single-handedly related to economic outcomes as Jackson and Perry (2008) suggest. We argue that the purpose of the LDI's may actually be connected to other aspects than economic outcome alone. The findings show examples where the purpose of LDI's is understood to be a way to create a common language amongst managers or a means to nurture, motivate and guide managers. The purpose of having LDI's may thus not be connected to economic outcomes, it may not even be connected to the development of leaders or leadership at all.

The mainstream effect - unintended outcomes of LDI's

Even though the discussion above suggests that having LDI's may not be connected to the development of leaders or leadership at all, SweProp's documented purpose of the LDI's is closely connected to the mainstream perception of the purpose of leadership, namely economic outcomes. With this purpose one would think that SweProp should be able to measure the effects of these initiatives in economic terms, however much like in previous research this have proved difficult (Black & Earnest, 2009; Gentry & Martineau, 2010). Black & Earnest (2009) suggest that this may be to the difficulties of connecting the causality. This is something we agree with as our empirical findings show actors within SweProp claiming to have troubles proving the causality between leadership, leadership development, and economic outcome. One manager even stated that it is something "you can't possibly know". However, the empirical findings also suggest that the reason for this may very well be the fact that what the actors within the organisation perceive to be the purpose of LDI's, is disconnected from the documented purpose. Even though it can't be measured, SweProp is convinced that the LDI's generates positive outcomes. However, the outcome of the LDI's may not always be what was intended and not always positive.

Much like the idea Collinson (2014) presents, that there will always exist a light and dark duality within leadership, a number of situations in the empirical findings suggest the same. What they highlight are unintended effects generated from good intentions. It is with the best intentions SweProp has chosen to focus on LDI's and by doing so developing the managers which in turn should help improve the ability of the co-workers. Mainstream literature would probably suggest that what is happening in SweProp is the development of empowering leadership and the empowerment of co-workers (Dewettinck & van Ameijde, 2011). In SweProp, leadership is singled out as a skill or object belonging mainly to managers. They are chosen to participate in development initiatives to learn how to empower lower level employees.

The result of this is that an "elite club" of managers is being generated, a club where co-workers are not allowed in. One instance where this is the case is when one of the senior managers stated that the LDI's exist to create a common ground for managers to stand on. Our understanding is that this is, without doubt, based on good intentions as the idea is to create a common language amongst managers to ease communication and make it more efficient. What one must consider however are the possible downsides and unintended effects of this. Creating a common discourse on a managerial level may not only be positive as it may cause a sense of exclusion for co-workers,

contributing to the elitism and strengthening the role of the leader which in turn likely will reinforce the mainstream leadership perspective of the heroic leader in SweProp.

Another possible outcome which contradicts the mainstream leadership ideas present in SweProp is the fact that the courses in the LDI's may actually not generate anything of value. Statements from managers show that they feel there are instances where taking courses do not lead to learning anything new. Furthermore, even though the courses may develop new knowledge for the manager that they could use when returning back to their unit, this may cause an unintended outcome. If new knowledge is provided and obtained by the manager sent to a course and the organisation is not ready or willing to use this knowledge in practice, the empirical findings suggest one of two outcomes. Either SweProp will have wasted money as the manager is not able to use the newly obtained knowledge in practice, or the manager striving to use their new knowledge will look for a new position where the knowledge can be used.

Conclusion and Implications

This study tells the story of how a fashionable and highly debated concept - leadership - influences LDI's. Drawing upon data from a Swedish public organisation, the study contributes to previous work on the subject in a number of ways.

First, for those who consider leadership and the development of it to be the solution to organisational challenges, the results of this study may be rather disappointing. Generally, we see that there exists an overexploitation of the leadership vocabulary and a glorification of leadership in society. A reason for this is due to the inherent value of the term leadership, that the term is rather easy for practitioners, business schools, or consultants to sell through LDI's and other practices. With the ambiguity of the term leadership, the focus of these development initiatives can range between anything from human relations to organizational performance, often using mainstream leadership ideas while doing so. We challenge these ideas by taking a critical perspective, questioning and reflecting on assumptions regarding leadership theory and practices. We are not inclined to add to the already complex and ambiguous nature of leadership, but rather we strive to emphasise the existing interconnections of leadership ideas and other organisational processes and practices. This is done by analysing how the perception of leadership has influenced the way LDI's are understood and structured, and the result is that a number of implications have been highlighted. We thus contribute with further insights regarding the complications these implications cause, which also resulted in the coining of the term *mainstream effect*. In our case we saw the *mainstream effect* take place in the way organisational challenges are tackled, and in how LDI's processes are structured and understood. Through the lens of a mainstream leadership perspective it makes sense to attribute solving organisational challenges with the leadership of managers and thus focus on developing managers. However as seen in this paper, even if this is done with good intentions, the outcome may not be all positive.

More specifically, our study contributes by highlighting the paradox that is one of the *mainstream effects*. Mainstream leadership ideas would have managers focusing on practicing empowering leadership, to directly strengthen and motivate lower level co-workers and create

organisational structure that empowers co-workers. By developing the managers, the rest of the organisation should be developed automatically as well. Paradoxically however, our study shows that the result is the opposite. The focus on the manager has instead led to the disempowerment of co-workers and towards strengthening the idea of the heroic leader and the creation of an “elite club” where only managers are allowed in. When deciding what is important to develop and how it should be done, it is mainly the words of the managers that matters. For example, the problematic nature of the manager-to-manager discussions regarding the course selection process could perhaps be solved, or at least mitigated, by developing new structures around course selection processes where co-workers are involved. The valuable upward feedback that oftentimes is absent in mainstream leadership could be more systematically included in the course selection process. We do not however believe that the blame for these effects lies solely on the organisation at hand, but rather that they are the result of a larger societal issue connected to the glorification of leadership.

To mitigate this glorification of leadership, we argue for a less central role of leadership in both practice and literature. Therefore, the practical implications this paper has are mainly connected to the importance of questioning and reflecting on taken-for-granted methods and practices. By doing so, we believe that many processes and practices could be improved. Further, our wish is that this will help alleviate some of the unreasonable pressure that is currently existing on managers. Today, managers are expected to be superhumans that can solve all organisational challenges with the help of leadership. What we have found is that it is not often more leadership that is called for by co-workers, but rather initiatives towards solving organisational issues at hand, such as poor communication, and unclear roles and responsibilities. Lastly, we wish to raise a question to practitioners. With the purpose and effects of leadership development being highly ambiguous and hard to measure, is it really something we ought to spend such vast amounts of money on? Particularly in this case, we are faced with a dilemma. The public organisation strives to use the tax money they receive with highest efficiency. However, can it be considered that tax money is used with highest efficiency if the outcome of the initiatives cannot be measured? We argue that, at the very least, it is a healthy practice for the organisation to critically assess the various implications of such dilemmas.

Future Research

This study has shown a number of effects that comes with having a mainstream leadership perspective. They are however limited to the development of leadership and how organisational challenges are tackled. We therefore suggest further research to be done on the subject of how leadership ideas and the perception of leadership affect other organisational processes and practices, and what implications that may cause. Further, this paper has the nature of a single case. With the focus on a single organisation situated in a specific context, a possible future direction for research could be to study other organisations in other contexts to see if the results are in line with our findings. Such a study would further extend the understanding of how the perception of leadership influence LDI's, or other practices within an organisation

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