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The Potential of Intentional Ambiguity:

The Role of Leadership Development Programmes in
Organisational Change

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The Potential of Intentional Ambiguity:

The Role of Leadership Development Programmes in Organisational Change

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Abstract

This paper examines the role of leadership development programmes (LDPs) in organisational change, through a case study of Volvo Group's Exploration programme aimed at emerging leaders. Through 27 interviews divided between executive members, programme facilitators and former programme participants, a more detailed picture is painted about the programme and the organisation's change effort from a rule-based to a value-based approach to leadership. This sheds light on the underlying mechanisms within LDPs that play a role in organisational change. Programmes can facilitate engagement in reflexive thinking through which leaders can develop new understandings, which shape future action and induce emergent change. The incorporation of intentional ambiguity into LDPs can act as a mechanism to facilitate such reflexive thinking and expose leaders to ambiguity in a practice setting making them better equipped to cope with ambiguity in the work environment. Programmes can play a role in answering the call for ambidextrous leadership, producing reflexive leaders who are knowledgeable about themselves and the surrounding leadership structures, therefore capable of engaging in both exploitation and exploration activities. These leaders are sources of emergent change which they bring along from programme environments into organisational settings. They can add to the critical mass of ambidextrous leaders in organisations that contributes to organisational change.

Keywords: Ambidexterity, Emergent Change, Intentional Ambiguity, Knowledgeability, Leadership, Leadership Development, Organisational Change, Reflexivity

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Introduction

In the face of an ambiguous and turbulent future, organisations have to contend with challenges characterised by considerable variety. The World Economic Forum (WEF) has warned of past challenges resurfacing, including rising inflation, social discord, political conflict, and the possibility of nuclear warfare. Meanwhile, the emergence of new challenges such as rapid technological advancements, e.g., the rise of AI technology, mounting global debt, and the need to address climate change, has amplified these concerns (World Economic Forum, 2023). Furthermore, the recent global pandemic has highlighted the disruptive potential of such events ("WHO", 2022). Thus, there is a need for organisations to find solutions, adapt or even change in order to overcome these challenges (Armenakis et al., 1993; Hay et al., 2021).

Leaders have a crucial role in managing uncertainty and finding solutions during uncertain times (Collinson, 2014; McCarthy, 2014). This indicates leaders' important role in dealing with the aforementioned challenges. There is a need for these types of leaders in today's ambiguous work environment. However, research has indicated that a leadership gap exists (Leslie, 2009). Substantial investments have gone into LDPs. For instance, Training Industry (2021) has estimated that the global expenditure on leadership training was $370.3 billion in 2019. Despite this, only 13% of organisations believe that they have properly trained their leaders (Schwartz et al., 2014). This underscores the existence of a leadership deficit (Leslie, 2009), where leaders do not have the necessary skills to be successful (Schwartz et al., 2014). This discrepancy poses a pressing challenge for organisations, considering the turbulent future outlined by the WEF risk report (World Economic Forum, 2023)

Previous research in leadership development has explored the idea of promoting leadership theories through leadership development. The focus has been on developing leaders that fit a particular leadership view. Accordingly, different leadership development approaches have been examined that fit these various views, including classroom-based instruction, action learning, coaching and mentorship (Day, 2000; Dinh et al., 2014; Kraft et al., 2018).

Previous research in organisational change has highlighted the dichotomy of planned-emergent change (Orlikowski, 1996; Bruskin, 2019a). Planned change has been referred to as change that can be planned, is sequential and episodic in nature (Bruskin, 2019a; Pettigrew, 1985). Moreover, leaders have been identified as critical agents in bringing through this type of change (Orlikowski, 1996; Pettigrew, 1985). Emergent change, the opposite end of the spectrum, has been referred to as change that is continuous, gradual in nature, and a part of the natural state of things rather than planned (Bruskin, 2019a; Staw & Sutton, 1993; Staw, 1991; Chia, 2014). As part of this view, actors have been depicted as bringing through change by thinking and subsequently acting differently, in a reiterative fashion (Rorty, 1991; Tsoukas & Chia, 2002).

Whereas leadership development research has explored how to best develop leaders through programmes according to associated leadership theories (Day, 2000; Dinh et al., 2014; Kraft et al., 2018), organisational change research has emphasised the important role of individual leaders in organisational change (Orlikowski, 1996; Pettigrew, 1985). This highlights that there

is a need for research that investigates the direct relationship between LDPs and broader organizational change. Further research is needed into how LDPs can support and influence organisational change processes. By identifying and examining the specific mechanisms that LDPs employ, research can provide valuable insights into how LDPs can facilitate organisational change.

This study therefore seeks to answer the following research question: What is the role of leadership development programmes in organisational change?

The aim is to contribute to the existing literature on organisational change by examining a single LDP in a specific organisation, and its role within the context of a particular change initiative. This can shed light on the mechanisms in LDPs that facilitate organisational change. Furthermore, it can provide valuable insights to organisations seeking to bridge the leadership gap and develop leaders capable of navigating challenges in an ambiguous future.

This paper is organised into five sections. Firstly, it provides a theoretical framework that explains theories of organisational change, reflexivity, structuration, and ambidexterity. Secondly, it describes the case setting, including the organisation, its change initiative, and the research design of the study. The third section presents the empirical findings related to the change initiative, the programme design and delivery, and former participants' journeys before, during and after the programme. These findings are then analysed and discussed in relation to the theoretical framework in the fourth section. Finally, conclusions, implications for future research, and suggestions for further studies are presented.

Previous Research & Theoretical Framework

Leadership

Research in leadership is known for having little to no agreement on its definition (Alvesson & Spicer, 2012). The field has experienced continuous development, and a string of leadership theories have emerged in the last couple of decades. This has led to one of today's definitions, which depicts leadership as a "capacity, a process, or a movement" (Roupnel et al., 2019, p. 127). Alvesson and Spicer (2012) have suggested that Yukl's (1989) description of leadership is a good place to start in terms of clarifying the concept; it outlines how leadership involves acts of influence, including influencing objectives, strategies, and people's compliance and commitment towards objectives.

The traditional focus in leadership research has been on the so-called 'great man theory', where the purpose was to detail leaders' traits, for instance, intelligence, self-confidence, and flexibility (Orazi et al., 2013). Alvesson & Spicer (2012) refers to this as the functionalist approach, which assumes that leadership is an 'objective phenomenon', and leadership is a somewhat "stable object that exists out there in the world and can be tracked down" (p. 370). Functionalist theories, with their focus on the individual, view leadership as certain qualities innate to the person. These have been criticised for overly emphasising leaders and their stable

nature (Alvesson & Spicer, 2012; Padilla & Lunsford, 2013). This has led to a shift in leadership view, considering leadership as socially constructed and actors viewing certain activities as leadership (Alvesson & Spicer, 2012; Fairhurst & Grant, 2010). Moreover, emphasis is put on followers and context in addition to the single leaders. (Padilla & Lunsford, 2013).

The field of leadership research therefore has multiple approaches and has experienced considerable development over the years. This presents some difficulties in terms of establishing a consensus leadership definition. Conversely, new 'leadership' definitions should continue to emerge so that organisations can continue to tackle the challenges they face in their environment (Eich, 2008; Henein & Morissette, 2007).

Leadership Development

One of the many views of leadership today treats leadership as capital rather than an innate quality that leaders have. Since it is possible to increase capital, there is potential for improving leadership, making space for leadership development (Luc, 2004).

According to Megheirkouni and Mejheirkouni (2020), leadership development can be viewed as "developing skills that reflect organisational and leadership needs to overcome a particular problem." (p. 113). The field can also be reflected in a set of questions such as "How to be an effective leader? How do people learn leadership skills? What are the contents of leadership development programs? How does leadership development occur?" (Megheirkouni & Mejheirkouni, 2020, p. 104). Examples of approaches in leadership development include 360-degree feedback, executive coaching, job assignments, action learning, job rotation, networking, and mentoring (Megheirkouni & Mejheirkouni, 2020).

Day's (2000) review on leadership development made a point in distinguishing between 'leader development' and 'leadership development', with the respective terms grounded in different leadership models. The concept of 'leader development' is based on the traditional belief that effective leadership can be achieved by developing individual leaders, through enhancing individual skills and abilities. This approach assumes that leadership is a skill that can be further developed and added to organisations to enhance their social and operational effectiveness (Day, 2000), corresponding well with the functionalist approach.

'Leadership development' has its basis in leadership being a result of social resources within relationships, making it an emergent property of social systems rather than an addition to them (Day, 2000). Therefore, the concept has strong connections to the interpretive approach. This type of leadership can be developed by facilitating understanding, relating with others and coordinating efforts. In addition, it builds commitments and develops social networks (Day, 2000).

Day's (2000) research indicates that the adopted leadership approach should dictate the implemented leadership development approach. For instance, if a functionalist approach to leadership is adopted, the means of leadership development should seek to identify and train

leadership talents. If an interpretive approach is adopted, leadership development should seek to facilitate the social construction of leadership.

Organisational Change

Previous research has highlighted that studying change can be problematic because 'change' can take on several nuances, e.g., transmutation, evolution, innovation, revolution, transformation, transition, and development (Chia, 2014). This opens up the opportunity to view leadership development through the lens of change, specifically organisational change theories. One of the reasons why organisational change has come about is due to the mishaps of people in the work environment, which necessitates change. Many discussions around organisational change emphasise that change would not be needed if people did their job correctly (Weick & Quinn, 1999). Organisational change is also necessary due to various economic and social factors, such as technological change and international economic integration, that businesses must contend with to stay competitive and relevant. (Kotter, 2012). Like studies on leadership, the field of organisational change is broad and diverse in its ideas, some of which are in tension with one another (Maes & Hootegem, 2019; Weick & Quinn, 1999).

Planned-Emergent Change

Bruskin (2019a) highlights the idea of dichotomies within the organisational change literature, where "Dichotomies symbolise a division into two mutually exclusive or contradictory groups or entities" (p. 7). Extremes exist among the theories and a tendency of contrast. One such dichotomy is planned-emergent change. Planned or deliberate change refers to change executed according to a previously designed plan, whereas emergent change does not have a priori intentions (Orlikowski, 1996; Bruskin, 2019a).

The fundamental principle behind the planned view is that it is possible to plan change and that change can occur through different stages or steps (Bruskin, 2019a). These ideas originate from Lewin's (1947) foundational work; according to this model, change is planned and progresses through three sequential steps: unfreeze, change, and refreeze (Maes & Hootegem, 2019; Lewin, 1947). Although this model was produced in the mid-20th century, it is still influential and utilised today, inspiring many other models (Maes & Hootegem, 2019; Weick & Quinn, 1999).

The models within the planned view can also be associated with features such as simplicity, linearity, and practical capacity (Bruskin, 2019a). Kotter's (1995) eight-step model is another central model belonging to the planned view. The emphasis in this model has also been on following sequential steps to achieve successful organisational change. Kotter (1995) highlighted that many change efforts fail because organisations fail to accomplish all the phases in the sequence, hence the impetus to execute change in a linear sequence. According to Kotter (2012), a particular sequence is needed to instigate or overcome resistance to change. Another perspective highlights managers' centrality in planned change, that they have the crucial role in executing change (Orlikowski, 1996; Pettigrew, 1985).

In addition, planned change is seen as a discrete or episodic event (Pettigrew, 1985; Bruskin, 2019a). 'Episodic' refers to change that can be described as "infrequent, discontinuous, and intentional" (Weick & Quinn, 1999, p. 365) and happens in time frames where organisations are not in a state of complete stability. It is also characterised as more strategic, formal, and disruptive than emergent change (Mintzberg & Westley, 1992). Kotter (1995), albeit a main advocate for planned change, recognised that plenty could occur in a change process, including surprises and obstacles. This indicates that his model adopts elements of simplicity which can work as a frame of reference to succeed in change efforts. However, it might miss out on some of the nuances of organisational change (Kotter, 1995), which emergent change may aid in explaining.

Emergent change can be seen as continuous and ongoing rather than episodic (Bruskin, 2019a) and can also be connected to "improvisation, translation, and learning" (Weick & Quinn, 1999, p. 375). Although continuous change involves changes that are small in nature, their dimensions should not be underestimated (Staw & Sutton, 1993; Staw, 1991). These changes are not trivial – in their interconnectedness they can generate substantial change (Ford & Ford, 1995).

Through the lens of continuous change, Lewin's (1947) three-step change model can be reformulated to Freeze, Rebalance, and Unfreeze (Weick & Quinn, 1999). The idea here is to freeze continuous change to make slight alterations or rebalancing, allowing change to flow better. Unfreezing then allows continuous change to resume (Weick, 2000). This process highlights the prevalence of continuous change and that organisations predominantly experience this rather than stability. It also indicates that continuous change involves minor changes and routine alterations. Change is not seen as a phenomenon that can be "managed, choreographed, scripted, or controlled" (Bruskin, 2019a, p. 8). Instead, change is already occurring naturally, and we can influence it (Chia, 2014).

Organisational Becoming

The idea that change is natural and continuous (Chia, 1999) has evolved into the becoming view (Bruskin, 2019b). Even in a stable entity such as routines, it is possible to see emergent change, according to Feldman (2000). That is, routines are seen as ideas, actions, and outcomes that interact with each other and can change. Tsoukas and Chia (2002) are the originators of the becoming view through their development of 'organisational becoming.' In this view, change is associated with alterations in actors' thinking and actions, leading to new experiences. This happens continually because change is a natural part of human action and is considered normal.

As part of the main principles in organisational becoming, 'the organisation' is both considered a structure and an emerging pattern. Whereas organisation is there to place some structure with regards to the ongoing change that's occurring and organising entails "reducing differences among actors [...] the process of generating recurring behaviours through institutionalised cognitive representations" (Tsoukas & Chia, 2002, p. 573), this very human action

simultaneously contributes to continuously emerging patterns or change that forms an organisation (Tsoukas & Chia, 2002). Thus, organisation is inextricably linked to change.

The structure relates to cognitive categories, which can be likened to a particular routine or set activity. The emerging pattern relates to altering these cognitive categories as actors perform the routines in a contextualised environment and interpret the activities in another way, for instance. Thus, structure and emergent change interact in a symbiotic relationship. Change is generated through human action through the radial structure of cognitive categories. The non-prototypical members within the categories, or the more unique cases in the realm of activity, are prone to inducing change because actors must figure out how to handle these. The reflexivity of human thinking is the other aspect central to inducing emergent change. This involves the capacity of actors to reflect on their behaviour when performing actions, and through this process, they can develop new understandings. New meaning can also be uncovered by reflecting on and rearranging old experiences (Tsoukas & Chia, 2002).

In sum, actors are seen as "webs of beliefs and habits of action that keep reweaving (and thus altering)" (Tsoukas & Chia, 2002, p. 575) as they incorporate new elements to activities in a reiterative fashion over time (Rorty, 1991). Actors' ability to reinterpret meaning when they engage with the radial structure and their ability to self-reflect induce change (Tsoukas & Chia, 2002).

Theoretical Framework

Self-reflection & Reflexivity

Since concepts of self-reflection and reflexivity have been elevated as playing a key role in emergent change, these concepts will be defined and explored further in the following section.

Reflection is a process where people retrieve a previous experience, contemplate it, and evaluate it. It is a frequently recurring process due to triggers such as information, viewpoints, and experiences. The sources of these triggers can be media, people, and new situations. Thus, reflection entails thinking about a particular experience; self-reflection is when individuals apply this process to themselves (Alvesson et al., 2016).

Reflexivity involves reflecting on reflections (Alvesson et al., 2016). It entails critically evaluating assumptions and ideas and challenging these aspects to see if other ideas or assumptions could be relevant (Alvesson & Sköldberg, 2009; Bourdieu, 1992). Reflexivity broadens the individual's perspective from focusing on a particular issue to reflecting on a meta-level. By doing so, a person addresses issues such as "Where do my ideas come from?" and "What may be problematic about my assumptions and convictions?" (Alvesson et al., 2016, Reflexivity section). It can also be viewed as adopting a 'playful frame of mind,' which allows individuals to be more open to possibilities. This playful mindset helps determine the right approach for upcoming challenges (Ibarra, 2015). The benefit of reflexivity is that by seeing an issue from a new angle, a problem can be defined in a different way, allowing alternative solutions. However, reflexivity may also allow people to discover that an issue is, in fact, not

an issue and that implementing possible solutions can generate more problems. This recognition can enable people to opt for a different course. Engaging in reflexivity can take time and effort as it entails uncovering and challenging deep-rooted assumptions (Alvesson et al., 2016).

Structuration

Actors' ability to engage in reflective thinking is a means of reinterpreting ingrained patterns that shape behaviour (Alvesson et al., 2016), which in turn affects action. This bears a resemblance to Giddens' (1984) theory of structuration, where 'knowledgeability' is the ability to understand the underlying 'structures', consisting of 'rules', that constrain and generate action. The theory rests on the pillars of structure (stability) and agency (change). Structure and agency are not treated as part of a dichotomy, but they are seen as closely interlinked (Bruskin, 2019a; Nicolini, 2012).

Giddens' structuration theory is "a theory of recursive production and reproduction of society as praxis in which the question of 'what comes first' simply becomes meaningless and dissolves" (Nicolini, 2012, p. 45). Within this understanding is the idea that structure and agency can constrain each other, but they can also generate each other. In the generative sense, actors can draw from a structure, and through their actions, they generate change, which generates a new structure. In the constraining sense, the structure can limit specific actions, whereas action 'pushes' against the existing structure (Nicolini, 2012). The structure consists of rules, where rules can belong to the categories of 'rules of social life' and 'formulated rules'. The former relates to general procedures, and the latter relates to rules that have been codified, which you might find within a particular sport, for instance (Giddens, 1984).

Since structure and agency are closely interlinked, they are not depicted linearly. Instead, they operate in a circular relationship where neither facet comes first. In this relationship, actors are given autonomy in terms of agency, and agency is described as voluntaristic (Nicolini, 2012; Jones & Karsten, 2008). They can choose from the structure which aspects to apply, operating according to their own desires. Actors can think independently and are knowledgeable about the structure in place (Nicolini, 2012). Therefore, every act reproducing the existing structure contains the seed for change (Giddens, 1993). The knowledge that actors have includes explicit and tacit knowledge (Giddens, 1979; Giddens, 1983). Knowledgeability is essential to structuration because the premise is that if actors are a part of a society, it makes sense that they know about the society and how it operates (Giddens, 1979). Moreover, Jones & Karsen (2008) highlights that "Social actors are not only aware of how society works but may also be aware of sociological accounts of social practices in ways that may influence their understanding of their own actions" (p. 133). Therefore, "Structuration sees social actors as continuously reflecting on their practice" (Jones & Karsen, 2008, p. 133).

Structuration theory sees change going from a micro to a macro perspective. Change starts at the micro level and manifests at the macro level as small changes in actions gradually accumulate. When connected practices are not reproduced according to pre-existing practices, variation occurs as the connected practices no longer abide by coalescing principles. This can

create disruption, impacting the structure or causing the existing structure to crumble in favour of a new structure (Nicolini, 2012).

The theory refers to social processes, and thus one could assume it has the potential to be applied to different contexts in social life. In terms of its application, it is better to apply particular concepts from the theory for particular contexts rather than the full theory. The concepts should be viewed as sensitising devices that help to explain the different logics behind social actions (Jones & Karsten, 2008). Actors' ability to be both 'knowledgeable' and 'reflexive' play pivotal roles in inducing change in the theories of structuration and organisational becoming, respectively. Thus, it is important to develop these capabilities within actors. This opens up the door for these concepts to be considered in relation to leaders and their development.

Ambidexterity

Organisations need leaders who are capable of solving problems and providing solutions in uncertain times (Collinson, 2014; Megheirkouni & Mejheirkouni, 2020). Ambidexterity has been identified as suitable for handling such uncertain times (Bell & Hofmeyr, 2021; March, 1991). This is an additional capability, alongside knowledgeability and reflexivity, that organisations should attempt to develop in their leaders.

In uncertain times, organisations have needed to balance between performing today and innovating for tomorrow. In theory, this has been described as ambidexterity and has taken various forms in organisations. The most common form relates to structural ambidexterity, which involves setting up separate structures for sets of activities that significantly differ from each other (Birkinshaw & Gibson, 2004). An example is having separate exploratory and traditional organisational units (Reilly & Tushman, 2004). Activities within an exploratory unit may include driving innovation, experimentation, and searching for knowledge and technology. However, activities within a traditional unit may entail exploiting existing capabilities such as driving efficiency and control, and focusing on the existing knowledge and product base. (Bell and Hofmeyr, 2021; Reilly and Tushman, 2004). Top-level management's constant task is to create a good balance between exploratory and exploitation activities regarding the attention they receive; this is a significant mental challenge (Reilly & Tushman, 2004). It can be seen as a trade-off between adaptability and alignment from the structural ambidexterity perspective (Birkinshaw & Gibson, 2004).

It is essential to be involved in exploration and exploitation to survive as an organisation, especially when the environment is prone to change (March, 1991). However, these processes should not only be considered at the organisational level but also recognised at the individual level. For instance, individuals require change capabilities to enable ambidexterity and develop the capability to "sense and seize the opportunities" (Bell & Hofmeyr, 2021, p. 3). An additional skill that individuals or ambidextrous leaders need is the ability to identify and engage tensions between, for instance, traditional and exploratory divisions, ensuring that synergies are maximised between the two so that opportunities can be leveraged from the tensions (Bell & Hofmeyr, 2021).

Birkinshaw and Gibson (2004) have developed a form of ambidexterity that considers the individual perspective. This is called 'contextual ambidexterity' and involves individuals deciding when to perform alignment or adaptation-oriented activities within their specific work context. Ambidextrous individuals are more autonomous; they can make decisions based on their context (when to do one thing rather than the other); they have flexible roles, and with their skill set, they are more generalists than specialists. They can do so in ambidextrous business units with alignment and adaptation-oriented activities. In these settings, which are considered more flexible, individuals can decide how much time they spend between these activities (Birkinshaw & Gibson, 2004).

Methodology

Research Design

The investigation into the role of LDPs in organisational change was approached through a qualitative case study, aiming to concentrate on the uniqueness of the given case to develop a deeper understanding of its complexity (Bryman & Bell, 2011). Qualitative research was adopted because it is useful in describing phenomena within a given context. Moreover, it helps interpret knowledge and processes (Silverman, 2020). Thus, the researchers could attempt to unearth connections between an LDP and a change initiative in a given organisation. Qualitative research also entails using theoretical concepts. As such, an inductive process based on grounded theory was adopted, allowing the development of theoretical accounts from empirical data (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). The theoretical framework developed was grounded in empirical evidence in relation to the research question (Silverman, 2020).

The organisational setting was examined through an initial investigatory phase, aiming to gather information on contextual factors, the overarching intentions of the organisation's LDPs, ongoing change efforts, and finding a suitable programme to study. Under the banner 'emerging leader' and aimed at people starting their leadership journey, the 'Exploration programme' emerged as a suitable case. Furthermore, through the investigatory phase, executives recognised it as one, if not the most, "integral programme in their leadership development portfolio" (E2).

A retrospective perspective was gathered by interviewing participants who finished the programme four, five, and six years prior to the publication of this paper, enabling the researchers to examine the programme's role in organisational change over time. The interviews were divided into three tiers: executives, programme facilitators, and former participants. The executive tier provided an opportunity to gauge whether their views had trickled down into the organisation and whether the programme incorporated similar views through its design and delivery. Interviews were supplemented with internal documents, programme material, and annual reports, serving as references and means of validating data gathered in interviews. Thus, a mixed methodology approach was adopted (Silverman, 2020).

Introducing the Setting: Volvo Group Trucks Operations

The setting for the qualitative study is the global transport and infrastructure company Volvo Group. With a legacy of nearly a century, the group has a presence in 190 markets and 102,000 employees. The focus area is the manufacture of trucks, buses, construction equipment, and marine and industrial engines (Volvo Group, 2023). The company operates within ten business areas, i.e., Volvo Trucks, Volvo Buses, and Volvo Penta. These are supported by five functions, i.e., legal & compliance and finance, whose aims are to provide expertise and deliver products and services throughout ("This is Volvo Group", 2023). The Trucks business, which is the largest segment, is supported by three divisions, namely Group Trucks Technology (GTT), Group Trucks Purchasing (GTP), and Group Trucks Operations (GTO). The latter is the larger of the three, responsible for producing trucks from different brands, such as Volvo, Mack, and Renault (Volvo Group, 2023). Conducting a study in an international company with a strong legacy allows one to explore the challenges and complexities of development and change in a multinational context.

Volvo Group's values define its culture and guide employees in how they are expected to act towards each other, customers, and society. Volvo Group's values are customer success, trust, passion, change, and performance. 'Customer success' relates to understanding customers. 'Trust' entails the ability to trust each other in the work teams and for people to feel that they are entrusted to go out and do the work. 'Passion' is about being proud of the work and one's achievements and showing engagement to reach set goals. 'Change' relates to innovation and is viewed as a source of inspiration and energy. Finally, 'performance' is about having good business acumen, high standards, and going above and beyond to produce good work ("Our Values & Policies", 2023). The Group has recently gone through a shift in leadership view, further explained in the empirical findings, from a dominant rule-based approach to a current emphasis on value-based leadership. The former approach has been characterised by pre-defined processes where leaders are expected to perform specific actions depending on their situations. The value-based approach gives leaders the licence to conduct leadership how they see fit within the parameters set forth by Volvo Group's values and leadership principles.

Data Collection

Interviews were the primary source of data collection, widely recognised as a valuable tool in qualitative research, being a means to uncover reasonings behind behaviour (DiCicco-Bloom & Crabtree, 2006), serving to investigate the human experience to understand their 'lived world' better (Kvale, 2006), and through their eyes garner insights related to the research topic (McIntosh & Morse, 2015). Past experience is a phenomenon that in of itself is resistant to observation. However, qualitative interviews can, in this instance, be suitable for reconstructing events, established meanings, and understandings based on past experiences (Bryman & Bell, 2011). Interviews were therefore deemed an appropriate tool as the research was interested in gathering individuals' experiences and perspectives on leadership development (Silverman, 2020). Interviews facilitate breadth of coverage, meaning one can study several locations, which is suitable for a case with a multinational context. Interviews are also less intrusive towards the organisation's operations. (Bryman and Bell, 2011).

Data collection lasted approximately eight weeks. Through Volvo Group University (VGU), all former participants from the studied programme iterations were approached through mass email. This contained an introduction to the research and a link to an external software (Doodle) where a date and time could be selected for an interview slot. The researchers then contacted all who had picked a time slot to set up interviews. As the studied programme is delivered internationally, this included international participants, facilitating a more holistic view of the programme. Data was collected digitally to enable global participation using the organisation's chosen communication platform, Microsoft Teams. Utilising the video conferencing facility in the platform provided flexibility regarding time and access to otherwise occupied individuals. Interviews were semi-structured, with a predetermined set of open-ended questions to elicit discussion and unstructured answers (McIntosh & Morse, 2015). Further questions emerged through interactions between the interviewers and interviewees (DiCicco-Bloom & Crabtree, 2006; Kvale, 2006). Interactions facilitated an iterative process that enabled interviewees to add to how they understood and related to the given topic while allowing the interviewers to probe, follow interesting lines of reasoning, and develop further questions (Silverman, 2020).

The researchers adhered to a mixed-method approach, which involved interviewing 27 individuals and gathering additional information from secondary sources (Silverman, 2020). The interviewees belonged to one of three tiers: executive members, facilitators, and former programme participants. The distribution of interviews according to these tiers is depicted in *Figure 1*. An important note is that a few interviewees provided information beyond their 'intended' tier, e.g., executive members or facilitators who had previously attended the Exploration programme.

Tier	Number of interviews
Executive Members	5
Facilitators	10
Former Participants	12

Figure 1

Executive Members

As prominent decision-makers, they possess invaluable insights into the purpose of leadership development, past and ongoing change initiatives, perspectives on upcoming challenges, and the role of future leaders in addressing them. Including executive members allowed for the capturing of strategic perspectives such as organisational values, the overall view on leadership, and organisational change efforts. This allowed researchers to contrast their views with how past programme participants viewed these aspects.

Facilitators

Facilitators included programme owners, developers, and individuals who took on the role of programme facilitator, facilitating the programme and guiding the participants through it. From the owners and developers, the researchers hoped to gain insights into the programme's design, intentions, and role in relation to the organisation. The purpose of including the programme facilitators was to gather more in-depth insights about the delivery of the programme, how it has been executed, associated success factors, and challenges. In addition, the facilitators could offer different accounts of participant experiences from their perspective.

Former Participants

The tier consisted of individuals who had participated in the programme in different iterations four to six years ago. From them, the researchers could gain retrospective accounts of their experiences before, during, and after the Exploration programme. This would open a window to analyse the programme's potential impact on the participants. Aspects such as personal development, career development and the programme's impact on behaviour, leadership capabilities, and leadership values could be looked into. This horizon could also potentially reveal the programme's role in relation to the organisational level.

This multi-tier approach, rather than just interviewing former programme participants, enabled the researchers to gain a more holistic view of the programme, including its structure and purpose and the role of the programme in the organisation.

Data Analysis

The collected empirical data was analysed through thematic analysis, inspired by methods used by Braun and Clarke (2006), allowing for unearthing themes, or patterns, within a data set. This method was chosen since thematic analysis offers flexibility through adapting and redoing steps in the analysis process, with the user not being bound to a strict, linear sequence. The avenue of exploration enables an in-depth investigation and unearthing of patterns, connections, and nuances not initially apparent (Braun & Clarke, 2006).

The analysis followed six steps: (1) Transcription of verbal data, (2) Generating initial codes, (3) Searching for themes, (4) Reviewing themes, (5) Defining and naming themes, and (6) Producing the report.

The process of transcription, combined with reading and rereading, enables further data familiarisation, and is raised as a critical step in data analysis. This allows for the uncovering of meaning, rather than simply mechanically turning spoken words into writing (Braun & Clarke, 2006). The next step entailed the initial labelling of single excerpts (lines of data) in order to interpret and organise these excerpts. This generated approximately 2000 initial codes. Examples of these initial codes include: 'Learning to self-reflect', 'Developing trust in the set', 'Initially feeling lost', 'Being guided by the adviser', 'Impactful guest', 'Being a leader at Volvo Group'.

These initial codes were further processed by examining the associated excerpts, merging codes where similarities arose, and renaming codes accordingly. This resulted in further refined codes such as 'Facilitating/Learning Self-Reflection', 'Setting the Set', 'Role of the Set Adviser', 'Success Factor - Guest Speakers', 'Realities of Being a Leader', 'Self Reflection is a Leadership Skill', 'Importance of thinking on your own' and 'Self Reflection is a Leadership Skill'.

During the next step of code refinement, these codes were sorted into potential 'groups,' which were further examined in terms of included codes and excerpts to develop groups and sub-groups. This process of connecting, merging and developing these initial groups and their contents, turned 80 'groups' into 12 potential themes. Examples include 'Self-Reflection', 'Leadership Development', 'Lack of Clarity', 'Programme Intention', 'Leadership Transformation', and 'Managing Expectations'.

These 12 potential themes were further sorted by examining overlap, and further refined through the aforementioned process into three overarching empirical themes: 'Self Reflection Leads to Development', 'Intentional Lack of Clarity', and 'Simultaneously Perform and Transform. Through connecting with theoretical concepts, these developed into their final forms: 'Reflexivity leads to Development', 'Intentional Ambiguity', and a 'Call for Ambidextrous Leadership'.

Ethical Considerations & Limitations

The basis of the ethical consideration in this research has been that of honesty, starting with informed consent. Organisations and interviewees have the right to be duly informed about the research's purpose, process, and potential risks and benefits (Silverman, 2020). In terms of voluntary participation, the organisation and participants were extended the opportunity to decline or withdraw participation. The anonymity of participants was paramount towards this end, as to not feel forced by their organisation to participate. As previously mentioned, VGU sent out a mass email offering former participants the opportunity to sign up for interviews. The researchers were then responsible for contacting and setting up interviews with participants who had accepted the opportunity. VGU was not made aware of which former participants decided to sign up for interviews. This facilitated voluntary participation and ensured participant anonymity in relation to the organisation.

All participating parties were informed of the study's privacy, confidentiality, and data security policies, and were offered an opportunity to comment on any information they wished to be subtracted from the study. Participant confidentiality was approached further in terms of Volvo Group, including VGU, not having access to who participated nor the gathered empirical data. To further ensure anonymity, efforts were made to separate personal identifiers from excerpts of data, including names, gender identifiers, and specific organisation-specific terms (Bryman & Bell, 2011). From this point forward, interviewees were allocated a letter denoting their tier: E for executives, F for facilitators, and P for former participants, with a corresponding individual number. Moreover, non-disclosure agreements were set up and followed

accordingly to ensure that non-authorized actors external to the organisation would not have access to the material.

Any information presented in this report was done in such a manner as to maintain participants' privacy, refraining from sharing particular personal stories or identifying experiences, and opting for general examples where possible. Information collected from the organisation's intranet was kept in the confines of Volvo Group's network. Audio recordings and associated transcriptions were subsequently deleted after the finalisation of this report.

Interviews were progressive in relation to the depth of questioning. This was done to ensure that the participants became gradually more comfortable as the interviews proceeded. It also encourages a format where the interviews are characterised by two-way discussion rather than one-sided questioning (DiCicco-Bloom & Crabtree, 2006). Interpersonal contact was approached with an emphasis on personal consideration and respect. The same approach was applied concerning the collection, analysis, and presentation of empirical data, with emphasis on the accurate and honest representation of the participants' statements.

Limitations
The single-case approach may be a limitation regarding the generalizability of the study's findings. However, the very nature of the organisation may add strength to the generalisations that have been made. For instance, the organisation has a longstanding legacy and operates globally on a large scale. The development programme is at entry-level, belonging to the tier of finding leaders - arguably a more significant tier than later tiers in the development trajectory. Thus, the case has certain representative qualities that extend to other development programmes and similar organisations.

An inherent factor of qualitative studies is subjectivity, relying on the interpretations made by the researcher(s), a factor further amplified by use of an inductive approach (Silverman, 2020). This was in part diminished by utilising the strength of having two researchers involved and by having both present in all interviews. Time was spent after each interview writing memos to discuss both content and providing each other feedback on how the interview was conducted.

Another limitation concerns gathering data through interviews as it relies on self-reporting. Participants may be selective in what they share partly due to perceived personal benefit (Silverman, 2020). This was addressed by keeping participants' identities anonymous. In addition, having a mixed methodology, including the use of secondary supplementary material, allowed the researchers to verify certain self-reported statements from participants.

Empirical Findings

Leadership views

Volvo Group's strategy is rooted in creating value through increasing customer profitability. It aims to achieve this through its seven strategic priorities, where priority seven relates to leadership and expresses Volvo Group's leadership view. The current emphasis is on "value-based leadership" (E2), where people are encouraged to take action and given the mandate to lead and be accountable for results. "We are all leaders; we need to drive this company forward even if you do not have direct reports" (E1). Everyone can and should take the initiative to contribute to business success, the "prerequisite being able to take risks" (E1). If this leads to failure, then that constitutes a learning opportunity. Thus, "leadership is a strategic component, not an HR responsibility, but one of our most important enablers to reach business targets" (E2).

The value-based approach emphasises having values as a foundation, to give leaders the licence and make them feel "empowered to make their own decisions and to be accountable" (E2). Thus, the current value-based approach indicates a shift away from a previously dominant rule-based approach with a focus on pre-defined processes, with leaders expected to follow particular actions based on specific situations:

> [...] rule-based approach, meaning trying to foresee the future and create processes and descriptions of how employees should act if this happens or if that happens [...] to talk more about our values, our principles, and then let you decide based on the situation you are in, what kind of leadership actions to take, what kind of leadership behaviours you need to do where you are now with our business challenges based on everything around you (E2).

Through this approach, three current leadership principles have emerged. **LEAD** with passion, **PERFORM** with purpose, and **TRANSFORM** with vision. 'Lead with passion' means caring for and empowering people and helping people grow while fostering individual growth. 'Perform with purpose' concerns ensuring that customers gain success through quality and efficiency, achieved through team collaboration. The last principle concerns leaders being ambitious, continuously improving, and driving relevant change for customers, partners, and more prominent stakeholders, i.e., society. These leadership principles are "our values in action" (E1, E2, F1). Volvo Group's strategy involves two main components: 'perform' and 'transform'. For a considerable time, the focus has been on 'perform', with 'transform' added later in 2019. The aim is to remain profitable while transforming the business to align with society's needs, providing more sustainable products and operations. Thus, Volvo Group has embarked on a change journey towards electrification (Volvo Group, 2020). Similarly, Volvo Group's leadership view is experiencing a transformation, communicated as a shift from rules to values.

> We have been very rule-based as an organisation which has served us well […] we have created a lot of good standards and synergies […] where we are now, we see that we need to have this value-based leadership and let go of control (E2).

From performing and transforming being separated into different silos, the silos are now approached in interconnected ways and treated as a managerial responsibility. "We all need to take the lead to do this transformation" (E1).

> That is the leadership challenge; many leaders realise that they need to perform. But there is a risk that people see someone else as transforming […] supporting people to grow is one of your main jobs. We have many leaders who say that is not my job, that it needs to be HR's job, and we need everyone to be responsible (E2).

Previously, the focus was on what was referred to as "the leadership pipeline" (E2) or "the Volvo pipeline" (E1), a predetermined leadership development journey with specific competencies that leaders at each level would need to attain to proceed further. Development was leader-centric in contrast to the new message of accessibility across all levels. Alongside the historic pipeline, there was a trend of domain experts being offered opportunities: "[...] before we talked only about education and programmes for leaders [...] experts in a specific area, and then you moved them into leadership programmes to keep them and to keep them motivated" (F5). In turn, specialists rose further through the said pipeline, presenting a challenge for Volvo Group:

> How do we ensure that leaders that practise this value-based leadership, which we have defined as one of the success factors, are being promoted and that the ones that are role models end up seen as role models (E2)?

Rule-based meant following distinct processes, being told what to do, rather than feeling empowered to figure out things independently. In turn, leadership development followed the same trajectory.

> In the rule-based organisation, leaders knew what was expected of them. It was written in the rules. I have development discussions twice a year with my people [...] when you have ticked all the boxes, you are safe, which of course, leads to a culture of ticking boxes and not really talking and thinking about the quality of the discussion (E2).

Looking forward, the goal is to have leadership that leads through people and untap people's potential: "[...] performance level we are at today is based on the potential that we have untapped today [...] I firmly believe that through leadership, we can untap much more" (E2). Volvo Group is striving for a more decentralised structure where everyone can lead somehow. Trust is raised as a critical value; leaders extend trust to their people and let them figure out things independently.

> We need to realise that we do not know the end destination. Still, the leader needs to create inspiration for people to be part of a journey in a direction. To create energy and inspiration around direction setting rather than describing an end state (E2).

'Transform' will need to be done while maintaining an emphasis on 'perform,' which raises the question of how this ongoing shift can be facilitated. Volvo Group describes this as a challenge as there are managers that have risen successfully in the rule-based organisation with clear expectations and results-oriented targets. They could self-evaluate if they did a good job as leaders through the provided rules-based structure. The shift in leadership view disrupts this element, which Volvo Group acknowledges: "We have a job to redefine these expectations because that will change the leader's role, and that would make people understand what they need to sort of work on to be more efficient leaders" (E2).

Interviewees pointed towards the transformation process being in different stages, proceeding at different speeds depending on the location in the organisation. One participant, now a nominating manager in charge of work across regions, shared their view: "You can sense that these kinds of changes happen close to headquarters, and the further you go from HQ out to different countries, the more difficult it is" (P11). One of the tools in Volvo Group's arsenal is their LDPs: "We need to deliver these different leadership programmes to make sure that leaders in the Volvo Group really understand what that message means and also what it means for them" (F2).

Volvo Group University works cross-organisationally, offering training courses and programmes for people development, upskilling, and reskilling. These activities are organised into academies. For instance, the Fundamentals Academy introduces employees to foundational and compulsory courses such as code of conduct. Leadership development programmes belong to the Leadership and Management Academy. These consist of three streams that build upon each other in terms of leadership development. They are designed to coincide with the overarching leadership views at Volvo Group.

The entry point into leadership training is 'Leading self', aimed at emerging leaders. Within this stream, participants embark on the Exploration programme. The next stage is 'Leading others', developed for managers who have been leading people. The final stream is entitled 'Leading leaders'. Exploration has been highlighted as one of the more integral programmes in demonstrating what leadership at Volvo Group is about.

Exploration Programme

Exploration is a 9-10 month programme with its first iteration in 2012. The overall purpose and structure of the programme have virtually remained the same, apart from minor structural alterations. Eighteen participants across Volvo Group typically join each iteration. The participants may be at different career stages but have all been identified as potential future leaders. The participants split into three groups, called 'sets,' with six participants. Each group is supported by a set adviser (facilitator) who supports the group and facilitates the coaching sessions. As such, each programme iteration has three facilitators, one of whom must have had the experience of being a facilitator beforehand. The groups are taken through three modules: a start, a middle, and an end module. Across these, the groups join set meetings every 4-6 weeks, amounting to approximately eleven meetings during the programme. The start module,

for instance, includes describing the programme's setup and explaining the ideas behind Self-Managed Learning (SML) and coaching. In addition, Volvo Group's leadership view is described, including an elaboration of Volvo Group's leadership principles.

The programme's intentions are ingrained in the purpose and learning objectives that the programme facilitators unveil to the participants at the start. The first aspect can be seen as two-fold. It is about looking into yourself and who you are as a person. That entails analysing your strengths and values. Beyond that, you look into your development needs. Specifically, areas you need to develop in order to take on a leadership role. The 'leadership role' is defined as someone with direct reporting: people report directly to this leader or manager.

The second aspect concerns SML. Participants are expected to take charge of their own learning. They are responsible for figuring out what they need to work on regarding development needs. Through SML, there is also an emphasis on constant learning, and the aim is to push this idea with the participants so that they adopt this way of learning on their own after the programme. The SML process starts with participants developing personal goals they want to achieve in the programme. These goals form the basis of the learning contract, which each participant creates.

The third aspect concerns coaching, a central theme in the activities. Coaching involves asking questions rather than telling people what to do, recognising that people already have the answers to problems within them. As a leader, the aim is to support people in unlocking answers. Participants are expected to improve their coaching, their active listening skills, and their ability to give feedback. In summary, the intentions are for participants to learn about themselves and to develop through a process of SML, and the mechanism through which this learning occurs is coaching.

Participants' journey
The statements concerning the participants' journeys through the Exploration programme can be divided into three parts. Before the programme: associated activities, expectations, and experiences participants have leading up to and subsequently carry into participation. During the programme: how previous elements manifest, develop and shift during participation, including recalled key experiences. After the programme: experiences after participation, where they are now, career development, and personal impact.

Before the programme
Participants' expectations and experiences leading up to and subsequently carried into participation depended on how the three following factors unfolded:

1. *Handling of the nomination process*
The nomination process starts with Volvo Group's yearly talent review, through which managers identify high-potential employees suitable for a potential leadership role trajectory. Once identified, this person is subject to an interview with an HR business partner to assess potential and interest in leadership, utilising a predefined template. Every nominee is eligible

for the programme, but there may be a waiting period due to limited spots in each iteration. This, at times, results in a change of circumstance, with some already having "taken the next step" (P9) and attained formal leadership positions, while others have transitioned within the organisation.

The party who initiates the conversation can have an impact on expectations. When approached by the manager, participants typically carried notions of elevation and, at times, pressure with them into the programme: "seen as a potential future leader by my manager" (F7). When the conversation was initiated by participants expressing the desire to: "take the next step" (P1) and *"develop my leadership"* (P12), participants carried with them notions of affirmation and increased drive: "There are steps for me to take if I take responsibility for my own learning" (P9) and "I am on the right track" (P5).

2. *Previous experience*

Previous experiences can shape participants' expectations, such as having gone through programmes with similar intentions, having held leadership positions before, or having a leadership position lined up. These previous experiences are significant factors in influencing participant expectations: "It was more around why you do it rather than what it is, more to send a signal in the organisation that you are ready for a leadership position" (P6). Several participants shared similar notions of Exploration being a prerequisite for advancement, while others stated: "This would be just another training" (P5), referring to "expecting hard learnings" (E3), "led by a teacher, being told what to learn" (P4), and "learning tips and tricks" (P3).

3. *How expectations were managed*

The information that participants received from their nominating managers before entering the programme often revolved around career development or talent review rather than programme content. Thus, participants had to fill in eventual gaps, often shaped by previously experienced training: "I did other leadership courses before, and for me, it was like, OK, here we go again" (P3), "I had quite high expectations of learning new things, tips, tricks, and tools on how leadership was done within Volvo" (P5) or "hard learnings" (E3).

Some participants stated they had no expectations: a "blank piece of paper" (P5) with hopes to explore whether leadership was for them. Others simply went along with what was presented. Participants often viewed the programme as a necessary step towards advancing their careers: "a step I need to take" (P4). This was partially diminished by facilitators clarifying that there were: "no promises of a position in the future, one needs to apply" (F3). Furthermore, expectations were alleviated when the nominating manager had prior experience with the programme or if the interviewee had former participants in their networks.

During the programme
This section pertains to the activities and experiences that participants remembered as formative, and how previous expectations were manifested, developed or changed during participation.

Assigned pre-programme tasks
With help from their manager, participants were tasked with reflecting on development needs, how they best learn, and their reactions to aspects such as feedback. These were to be used to form their learning contracts. Participants often had to redo these tasks and reflections, stating that they had "misunderstood the scope of the training" (P10). Their goals and findings from these tasks were often not usable in the programme's scope, having set forth goals pertaining to "hard skills" (P5). Hence, they had to redo these tasks during the programme. Programme changes have later been made where participants are tasked with involving three additional actors, such as co-workers, in order to combat this issue.

Learning contract
The contract was the guiding star on what the participants themselves strived to improve. For most, it was a living contract that evolved in terms of content and meaning to the participant. This was exemplified by a participant wanting to improve in "tough conversations and conflict" (P7). From initially being reluctant to engage in conflict, the participant came to the realisation further along in the programme that they were more comfortable with work-related conflicts and less so with interpersonal conflicts. They subsequently viewed themselves differently, homing in on what they could improve. This included showing the willingness to engage in situations characterised by conflict after the programme in order to develop their perceived weakness.

Participants that embraced the responsibility to adapt and drive their own goals and learnings got the most out of their learning contracts: "It is what you put in yourself; you will get out. If you just go to this programme and say: OK, do it for me now, it will not work" (P9).

Setting the Set
Participants noted that they were responsible for creating the working sets themselves and highlighted this process as critical. The set advisers would leave the room and let the participants handle this division as a group. One participant stated that this was an eye-opener as they recognised that they looked for comfort, people closer to where they worked. However, the group ruled that it was better to strive for as heterogeneous groups as possible. In retrospect, the interviewed participants stated this was a success factor in their journeys. They could engage in conversations in a new light, understanding the need to keep challenging themselves, adding that leaders need to be able to operate with all "different types of people, personalities, and backgrounds" (P7). 'Setting the Set' also refers to establishing the frame of mind of the set, e.g., "building trust" (P2), and "a psychologically safe environment" (E1).

Lifeline
The lifeline was referred to as an impactful exercise that took place early on in the programme, where the participants shared their life story, encouraged to go into as much depth as possible. Every single interviewed participant expressed recollections concerning this particular activity. It was described as impactful to their experience, "building trust" (P2), "the start of really getting to know each other" (P4), and "even now, [...] years after, I still remember almost vividly our first meeting" (P9).

Participants expressed the importance of the set adviser's role in this exercise. The adviser set the tone with their honesty in sharing their lifeline, actively showing how participants could go about it. This initiated engagement on the side of the participants.

> I remember that our coach was really good and opened up deeply in our first meeting in a really emotional way. So, we immediately felt some trust in the group. I feel at ease here in this group. I can tell everything (P9).

The lifeline helped participants understand that people in their professional and personal life might have personal stories, troubles, and experiences that can differ from what one might consider at first glance. This facilitated deeper personal understanding.

> It was a very efficient way of getting to know the other team members [...] and to understand why you are as you are. When someone in the team brought up a challenge, for example, that they had at the moment, then sometimes you could think of that lifeline that was described before, and you could relate; you see patterns why you are the way you are. Same for me (P8).

The lifeline was explained to have been a powerful and emotional experience, often seen as the point where engagement developed from the participants' side. They felt responsible for putting effort into this exercise and the programme, even when it could sometimes feel difficult: "You need perseverance. It is not always fun. It is developing yourself, so it is crossing barriers. It is doing stuff you are not normally used to" (P9).

Aha moment
The Exploration programme was often described as having a steep learning curve, and it could take time for participants to find their stride. Facilitators noted a significant difference in their sets after the mid module. "There is a big difference in the group by the mid module. They have grown [...] and understand themselves better, and [...] usually say something like now I understand why we have to be so lost in the beginning" (F9).

Participants described this 'aha moment' as when they understood the point of the programme, when they started to get to the bottom of how they work as individuals, co-workers, and potential leaders, as well as how they learn and react to learning. "Suddenly, in the mid module, oh, wait a minute, it is not about who I think I should be. It is about who I really am" (F8).

Peer-to-Peer Coaching
In terms of learning, participants singled out coaching as their primary programme takeaway and a key activity in the programme. They described feedback sessions where they practised asking open questions, and they expressed how they learned to give and receive feedback. "I think that is the whole idea and the whole value of it because otherwise, we would have trained leaders in different leadership skills" (F7). "So, I think the entire programme is built on, for example, coaching and dialogue" (P2).

Many realised the importance of taking these learnings outside the confines of their sets, practising on peers in their networks: "Understanding the meaning of asking open-ended questions early and using active listening is good. Do not let it be just in the set group; try it outside the programme" (P4).

Self-Managed Learning
One practitioner stated that one success factor, or as they put it: "the magic" (P2), was building the training together and creating their group. The programme provided structure and guidance: "[...] putting bumpers up to make sure people can find their way. On their own, but not too restrictive" (P10). Thus, the programme provided the experience of creating and driving your own development, described by one facilitator as" [...] nobody else that can bring you something here, you need to go for it yourself" (F7).

This emphasis on self-drive is shared particularly by those who described having experienced a real impact from participating in the programme: [...] a really good gift for me in terms of developing my career, finding myself as a person and also as a leader" (P2).

> "Volvo is giving you a chance and is willing to invest in you. Take it with both hands; it is only nine months, right? You invest in yourself and take out of it what you can; the more, the better. You get what you put in." (P12).

The last part of "you get what you put in" (P12) is repeated by both participants and facilitators. Facilitators often pointed to a lack of commitment, self-drive, or engagement in less successful cases: "They did not really put their heart into it. They were struggling a bit, which is always difficult trying to help, but there is not really a solution" (F9). "I have had a few people that, let us say, their expectations were not met in the beginning. So, what they did was more or less to just float with the programme, but not bring too much effort" (F7).

Self-Reflection
Participants joining the programme often perceived Exploration as Volvo Group looking for future leaders. However, after the programme, participants described it more as looking inwards, finding out if leadership is for you, and exploring what kind of leader you want to be. "Why was I reacting in a certain way than others? It allows you to really step back and take the time to really breathe. To really take a look at you." (P5) "Some of the most successful transformations I have seen in this programme [...] have really looked inside themselves and picked things that they thought they needed to develop. It is not formulated in a book" (F4).

This resulted in participants leaving the programme better understanding who they are, observed by facilitators as having a substantial impact on the organisation: "[...] finding themselves has the greatest impact on their impact on the organisation or in a new role as a leader" (F8).

> The employees that I got back have a better understanding of themselves. Also, insights into what other people are struggling with or other managers are working with, but mainly understanding their own development areas and where they are good in leadership (P6).

The length of the programme provided dedicated days outside of work and time to reflect between sessions. Described as: "[...] a journey with ups and downs, and it is really what they say. It is a programme: you get this free time to develop yourself, what you put in yourself you will get out of it" (P9).

Guest Speakers

Guest speakers were described as both memorable and formative experiences, the most impactful being former participants coming to speak to new sets: "[...] there was also one guest lecturer that came, that spoke a lot about their first management position and their learnings made" (P6).

When asking the participants what they would share if they were a guest speaker, one participant chose to emphasise the associated learning curve of the programme. "You probably have questions in your head. You are probably doubting; it is normal." (P9). Another participant (P3) chose instead to emphasise their acquired learnings. Although initially expecting "hard learnings" in the programme, based on the perception of managers having to be "result-oriented", the participant realised the increased importance of the "soft factors in managing a team" (P3).

> I learned as a manager to be more open to these soft factors on the manager's side. Because the hard factors and the result are easy to understand immediately, the other ones, it is kind of you grow into the role and become better at soft factors. (P3)

The participant shared that "The Norwegian word for manager is 'daily leader'. That is quite a good wording" (P3). This was to highlight that the role of the manager is to support and elevate the members in the team on a daily basis.

After the programme

Pertains to the participants' experiences between exiting the programme and the time of this study: where they are now, career development and personal impact. It also relates to the ongoing transition from a rule-based to a value-based approach.

Where are they now?

Volvo Group University reported that 60 % of all participants that have taken part in Exploration over the years have moved from their original position. 50% of those have since taken up leadership positions. This number is seen as quite successful by VGU, as one of the programme aims is to facilitate continued development after the programme. This is exemplified by several of the interviewed participants expressing a desire and drive to continue developing after the programme: "Maybe it is good for me to move on and do something else to grow, both for me as a person, but also it will be good for Volvo" (P4).

Participants that had not attained a formal leadership position still attempted to apply their learnings from the programme in other capacities. "I tried to implement the learnings in my everyday life with whoever I work with. It does not need to be a team" (P2). This exemplifies

a typical shift among former participants, moving away from believing that leadership is exclusive to formal leadership positions or managers. "I would say that, yes, it changed because, for me, when you were referring to leadership, it was more toward management positions, always management positions" (P5).

Certain aspects of the programme were initially unclear to the participants, but their perceived value increased with after-programme experiences. "You do not immediately understand when you are going through the programme; you need the after-the-programme situations to understand a bit whether this was useful or not [...] maybe 1-2 years ahead, you will benefit from the experience in training" (P3).

Former participants of Exploration were described as acting differently to established leaders, as exemplified by the following statement: "You can see leaders who have taken the Exploration programme acting differently as leaders than people who are older and maybe have not gone through it" (P11). This was notable in how they handled the development of others, in particular in the handling of the nominating process for the programme:

> I try to put in that person's mind that: They need to put their efforts in; it is not something that someone will do for you. So, it is you that can reflect on yourself. That is willing to open up and be vulnerable (P9).

In addition, they would strive to actively participate as managers in their employees' development. This is exemplified by how a former participant coached an employee in their team.

> What was more clear afterwards was that they had some different topics to work on before becoming a manager [...] How can *we* do that? [...] They got to know themselves a little bit better and got a reality check of where they must improve to take on a leadership position (P6).

Former participants implemented methodologies presented in the programme, such as SML and coaching, to facilitate development among their team members: "I have learned to ask open-ended questions, not come too quick with the final solution" (P4).

> It is a methodology I have continued to use for my development. I also used it in my line manager work to support people in delivering things and moving forward with their development and actual tasks. I think it is a very good methodology to use for self-learning and self-drive (P11).

One such example is a participant describing their role as a leader in setting direction and facilitating means to get there, where the participant is referring to 'I' in terms of the coached team member:

> If they [the coached team member] have a task: to help set the goal and what kind of milestones or what do 'I' need to do to take 'me' there?... For instance, what do 'I' want to accomplish during the next six months? And then what do 'I' need to do? Connected

also with learning, do 'I' need to learn something to be able to do this? This programme or project or whatever it can be (P11).

The same participant went on to explain that there is a change happening at Volvo Group, in part through former participants of the Exploration programme, but that there are, however, lengths to go: "[...] it is not there yet because we do not have, according to me, the critical mass of leaders today who have gone through the Exploration programme" (P11).

> I think the ambition has been that what we do here is to transform leadership in Volvo, and I think we are on a good way. We must be at 500 leaders that have gone through this programme and by that have a similar view of what leadership could be (F7).

Facilitators said they noticed a considerable difference in participants that come to the programme in later years: "When people come, and we ask, have you talked to your manager about this programme or what have you prepared? We can see a considerable difference" (F7).

What is next?

Executives commented that they have taken strides over the years to become more in line with their vision of what the future leadership at Volvo Group should be. However, there is still room for growth:

> From a business perspective, we are, like every organisation, fully dependent on our people. I think if we have a leadership in 2030 that, at least to a higher degree than today, unleashes potential and aims even higher and constantly asks themselves, how can we untap more potential? (E2)

One avenue for development is uncovered through the following statement: "[...] there has been a lot of focus on leadership in general, but maybe not leadership adjusted to the environment to where the leaders are" (E1). This presents a challenge: "[...] it is difficult with this change. We need to adapt it to different countries" (P11). An issue also noticed by facilitators, such as those with experience with global iterations of the programme:

> I believe that coaching is largely used in Sweden and maybe also in the United States. While maybe it takes a little longer in countries like France, they have another leadership culture. So, even if they use coaching as well, maybe it is not ramping up as quickly or taking the same shape (F7).

That is not to say the change has not been noticed away from HQ, exemplified by one such participant stating that leadership has shifted since they started in the organisation.

> I see now that the leadership style has developed, and a lot of things are now based on the people. It is not only numbers anymore; there is a lot of attention to people's well-being. All those kinds of things come more than when I started at Volvo. I think this is a very good move (P12).

This is an indication of how the change effort is gradually progressing across the organisation, as Volvo Group is implementing their vision of a value-based approach.

Discussion

The thematic analysis uncovered three themes: 'Reflexivity Leads to Development', 'Intentional Ambiguity', and 'Call for Ambidextrous Leadership'. The following section will explore these further in connection to the role of LDPs in organisational change.

Reflexivity Leads to Development

Participants going into the Exploration programme expected the training to involve hard learnings, such as receiving explicit instructions on how to conduct leadership in a classroom setting. However, when participating, they came to the surprising realisation that this was not the case. The idea was instead to have the participants as the central focus. They were encouraged to look inwardly, identify areas they wanted to improve personally and work on these. This aligns with what VGU has highlighted as the intentions of the programme – personal self-evaluation and identifying development needs. Therefore, it is interesting to consider why Volvo Group has invested in a programme dedicated to self-reflection rather than aspects that most participants expected, i.e., hard learnings.

Self-reflection can lead to development and is an integral part of becoming a leader at Volvo Group. This process can be exemplified by the self-reflection journey experienced by P7. The participant arrived at a new understanding through self-reflection, realising that work-related conflicts were a strength area and interpersonal conflicts were an area for improvement. This journey illustrates the participant's engagement in reflexive thinking rather than keeping it at the level of self-reflection, as defined by Alvesson et al (2016). The participant's perspective on the conflict issue changed, allowing them to redefine the problem from being initially hesitant to engage in conflict; they became more inclined to tackle work conflicts and shift focus to developing their interpersonal conflict management skills, shaping future action. They were therefore able to arrive at an alternative solution - a better understanding of how to approach the conflict dilemma (Alvesson et al., 2016). This indicates a process of development through reflexive thinking.

The participants in the programme engage in and benefit from reflexivity in various ways, particularly through the lifeline exercise. The group activity allows participants to develop a deeper understanding of themselves, including uncovering deeper patterns that influence their behaviours. By reflecting on and sharing their past experiences with others, they gain insights about their present reality, which can guide their futures. This exercise encourages them to broaden their horizons and reflect on a meta-level (Alvesson et al., 2016). In the lifeline exercise, it is not only the individual sharing a story that engages in retrospective thinking but also the listening set members who relate and gain deeper understandings. Thus, people are involved in understanding themselves and understanding others, suggesting that reflexivity occurs at an individual and collective level. Therefore, this exercise plays a key role in facilitating and promoting reflexivity among the participants.

When the set members coach each other to tackle challenges later in the programme, they can draw from the lifeline story context to assist them in the coaching process. This is reflected by

one of the participants describing "When someone in the team brought up a challenge [...] then sometimes you could think of that lifeline that was described before, and you could relate, you see patterns why you are the way you are" (P8). This demonstrates how the set members are engaging in reflexive thinking. Coaching facilitates the process of looking deeper, turning self-reflection into reflexive thinking (Alvesson, 2016). By asking open-ended questions the 'coach' encourages the 'coachee' to reflect more deeply. The coaching set members are simply not just thinking back on a previous experience. However, they are building a deeper understanding of the coachee through reflecting on an experience and utilising the understanding to aid the coachee in a better way when tackling problems. By sharing their life stories, alternative solutions emerge which may not have been possible without this context of gaining deeper understanding. This demonstrates a link between reflexive thinking and development.

It can be said that the Exploration programme facilitates reflexivity, which leads to development in the potential leaders that go through the programme. As participants reflect on behaviour in terms of looking back on past experiences, they can reach new understandings, i.e., how to deal with particular dilemmas in better ways, thus shaping future action. Engaging in reflexivity takes time and effort (Alvesson et al., 2016). Therefore, LDPs that provide the time and space for participants to engage with tools that facilitate reflexivity, such as coaching and the 'lifeline', can encourage development. This development can be compared to the emergent change that occurs when actors take part in reflexive thinking (Tsoukas & Chia, 2002). This indicates that one role that LDPs can play in organisational change is to facilitate reflexive thinking, which in turn induces emergent change through shaping future action.

Intentional Ambiguity

The Exploration programme has played a role in facilitating reflexivity through various activities, including coaching and the lifeline exercise. The design of the programme suggests this happens through the mechanism of intentional ambiguity. The programme does not impose strict rules which the participants are expected to follow. The participants are encouraged to figure things out for themselves throughout the programme, leading their own personal development journey and setting individual learning objectives. The Exploration programme, therefore, has this aspect of intentional ambiguity, which is present in the programme by design. The participants are provided with a direction that allows them to find their own way.

Self-managed learning is a good illustration of the intentional ambiguity in the programme. The participants are responsible for setting up their own learning contract by deciding which learning objectives they want to focus on. Learning objectives or 'hard learnings' in terms of leadership lessons are not imposed on them. This results in the participants embarking on their own journey to self-reflect, evaluate themselves and work on aspects they want to improve. Furthermore, how the learning contract process is set up contributes to the described 'aha moments', where the participants not only understand themselves better but also realise the importance of having intentional ambiguity at the beginning of the programme. It is about figuring things out about oneself such that this newfound knowledge can be used to guide future action (Alvesson et al., 2016).

Coaching is another example in terms of intentional ambiguity that is imbued in the programme. Since the practice involves asking open-ended questions rather than providing answers and telling people exactly what to do, the essence of coaching contains ambiguity. The set members are involved in coaching and guiding each other in finding answers for themselves, exploring perspectives, and encouraging the process of reflexive thinking (Alvesson et al., 2016). The coach offers support in this process, hinting at thoughts and ideas that help the coachee unravel meanings and develop solutions. The aforementioned examples show how intentional ambiguity is a component that can foster reflexivity in LDPs. Tools such as SML and coaching can encourage programme participants to find answers from within rather than relying on answers from external sources.

Introducing ambiguity into the design of Exploration helps to illuminate another role that LDPs can play. That is, providing a practice environment mirroring what is occurring at the organisational level. More specifically, the Exploration programme is a microcosm of what Volvo Group aims to achieve at the organisational level - a transition from a rule-based to a value-based way of operating. Volvo Group has moved away from the specifically defined leadership competencies and the Volvo pipeline and adopted leadership principles. These work more as guidelines that are up for interpretation. This ambiguity allows leaders to enact leadership within their unique contexts but within certain boundaries. Just as leaders can interpret or explore leadership through the value-based approach, the Exploration programme allows participants to explore themselves within the context of leadership, and to practise coping with ambiguity. This coincides with Day's (2000) point that an organisation's leadership approach should govern the leadership development approach.

Through a programme environment, participants can experience ambiguity and prepare for leadership in an ambiguous setting. Intentional ambiguity creates reflexive leaders who can develop through their critical thinking and find their way in today's ambiguous business environment where the future is not set, and an end destination is not provided. Leaders who are resilient when meeting unexpected challenges can adapt to these situations. In other words, incorporating intentional ambiguity into LDPs addresses the need to prepare leaders for an uncertain and rather ambiguous future. Leadership development programmes can play a role in facilitating organisational change, in terms of a change in leadership approach, and help to reinforce the new leadership view that's been adopted.

Call for Ambidextrous Leadership

Volvo Group has credited its success throughout the years to the previous way of working - employing a rule-based structure and focusing on performance. However, the company has introduced a new approach to maintain success in an uncertain future, reflected in the transition from a rule-based to a value-based approach. This is also evident in Volvo Group's strategy, as 'transform' has been added to create the two pillars, 'perform' and 'transform'. Through its strategy, Volvo Group has recognised the need to incorporate a new approach 'transform' whilst keeping factors that have brought success in the past. There is a need to both 'perform' and 'transform'.

The two pillars can be likened to exploitation and exploration, respectively, which are processes that organisations need to conduct to survive (March, 1991). Volvo Group wants to exploit its existing capabilities to continue performing, and explore new arenas such as sustainable products and electrification. This is a balancing act (Reilly & Tushman, 2004). The company no longer wants to operate in silos where leaders are responsible for 'perform', and HR is responsible for development, as suggested by the leaders that have had strong connections to the rule-based organisation - highlighting structural ambidexterity at the organisational level (Birkinshaw & Gibson, 2004; Reilly & Tushman, 2004). Instead, the aim is to introduce contextual ambidexterity at the individual level, where leaders are responsible for engaging in exploitation and exploration activities and balance their time between the two (Birkinshaw & Gibson, 2004). Thus, there is a call for ambidextrous leadership at Volvo Group, where leaders are responsible for both 'perform' and 'transform'. They are capable of understanding what has made the organisation perform in the past as well as understanding how to explore into new activities.

According to structuration theory, the concept of 'knowledgeability' states that actors know about their society and how it operates (Giddens, 1979). Therefore, in an organisational setting, members should be capable of understanding the structures or 'rules' that govern that organisation. Reflexivity is the process through which these members, including leaders, can reach such deeper understanding. Leadership development programmes such as the Exploration programme can play a role in facilitating 'knowledgeability'.

The Exploration programme helps individuals to understand the underlying assumptions and internal structures that govern their individual actions. In similar ways, the programme can help individuals to gain a contextual understanding about the factors that constrain and generate actions in the organisation (Nicolini, 2012), due to the programme being a microcosm of the leadership approach at the organisational level. Reflexive thinking is thus an avenue for becoming 'knowledgeable'. At Volvo Group, this is evident by actors who have become knowledgeable about the rule-based and value-based approaches, and have the agency to choose which elements of these approaches they incorporate into their own leadership (Jones & Karsten, 2008; Nicolini, 2012)

This is exemplified by P3, who shared what they would advise current programme participants after having gone through the programme and worked at Volvo Group afterwards. P3 stated that being a leader at Volvo Group is not only about hard factors or results but also about soft factors. As a leader, it is about supporting and elevating the members of your team on a daily basis. This resonates with the value-based approach. Hence, P3 shows how they gained an understanding of the structures at Volvo Group, that both a results-focus and empowering people are important aspects of being a leader at Volvo Group. After the programme, the participant was knowledgeable about the rule-based and value-based approaches in the organisation and engaged in both aspects.

The Volvo Group organisation has experienced the incorporation of 'transform' at different speeds depending on location. This indicates that parts of the organisation are more resistant to change than others. For instance, the sentiment is that the value-based structure has been adopted more quickly closer to the headquarters in Sweden. One facilitator has described that this could be due to the context of Swedish society and culture, which is, according to them, more aligned with a value-based approach to leadership. According to structuration theory, this exemplifies how agents' role in change efforts can be diminished by the cultures that are in place in the Volvo Group organisation, or rather agents' actions being constrained by structure (Nicolini, 2012).

The value-based approach being incorporated at different speeds across the Volvo Group organisation corresponds with what P11 highlighted: Volvo Group has perhaps not yet reached a critical mass of leaders that have been a part of the Exploration programme. This could help explain why the new approach has not yet become widespread across the organisation. However, as more iterations of the programme are run, the Exploration programme can play a role in contributing towards this mass, placing a sufficient number of leaders out in the organisation that can fully usher in the value-based approach.

According to structuration theory, the programme can be seen as the micro level where change is first noticed (Nicolini, 2012). Participants who have been through the programme have engaged in reflexive thinking, contributing to inducing emergent change (Tsoukas & Chia, 2002), as previously established. This change can extend and manifest itself on the macro level, as participants from the programme have stated that they incorporate elements from the value-based approach, such as coaching and SML, at the organisational level. The emergent change that they bring along can gradually impact the leadership umbrella structure. They can help to propel the transition towards a structure where the value-based approach is properly ingrained across the organisation (Nicolini, 2012).

The Exploration programme has played a part in producing reflexive thinkers and leaders that become knowledgeable about the leadership umbrella structure within the Volvo Group organisation. They understand the pillars 'perform' and 'transform', the need to have both, and engage in both strategies, characterised as exploitation and exploration activities (Bell & Hofmeyr, 2021; Birkinshaw & Gibson, 2004). Extending this to the organisational level, LDPs can thus be pathways for organisations to answer the call for contextual ambidexterity. The call for ambidextrous leaders better prepared for today's business environment distinguished by an ambiguous future.

Conclusion

The role of Leadership Development Programmes (LDPs) in organisational change could be explained in very simple terms: in order to achieve organisational change, there is a need to develop leaders through programmes such that they become drivers of change. By drawing from retrospective accounts gathered at Volvo Group Trucks Operations, this research contributes to expanding this simplification, shedding light on the deeper connections between LDPs and their role in change.

There are various ways in which LDPs can play a role in organisational change. The programmes can facilitate engagement in reflexive thinking which leads to development. Through these mental processes, actors can develop new understandings, which shape future action and in turn, induce emergent change. In addition, longer programmes can provide the necessary time that actors need to reach these deeper understandings.

The incorporation of intentional ambiguity into LDPs can act as a mechanism to facilitate reflexive thinking. By exposing actors to ambiguity, through SML and coaching, they are encouraged to act autonomously and think critically, thus creating reflexive leaders. The incorporation of intentional ambiguity can also serve as a practice environment that develops actors who are better prepared to cope with ambiguity in the work environment.

The programmes can play a role in answering the call for ambidextrous leadership, producing leaders that are prepared to handle ambiguous work environments. They can facilitate the development of reflexive leaders who are knowledgeable about themselves and the leadership structures that they operate within; leaders that have an understanding of exploitation and exploration activities in their organisations and engage in both these aspects.

Lastly, the programmes can play a role in introducing emergent change in organisations and impact associated leadership structures. Actors, who develop through reflexivity, are a source of emergent change which they bring along from the programme environment into the organisational setting. Thus, as more actors go through LDPs, they can contribute to a critical mass that is able to impact leadership structures.

Although the initial simplification holds that LDPs provide leaders that contribute to change, a closer examination of such a programme opens up the potential to identify and harness the underlying mechanisms that play a role in change. Ambiguity can be intentionally incorporated into the design and facilitation of LDPs in order to produce reflexive, knowledgeable and ambidextrous leaders that contribute to emergent change.

Future research could examine the new practices that participants from the programme implement in the work environment and how these spread throughout the organisation. This could adopt an ethnographic approach where leaders and their teams, and the associated practices, are observed for an extended period of time. Analysing these aspects would enable researchers to gain a more comprehensive understanding of how LDPs drive change, and how

agency affects structure. Practice theories can provide an interesting lens to understand how this process unfolds.

The conducted research contributes to existing research by examining the connections between a specific LDP and an organisational change initiative. This has uncovered underlying mechanisms that help to explain the role of LDPs in organisational change. The mechanisms of intentional ambiguity and reflexivity can provide valuable insights for organisations that seek to bridge the 'leadership gap', answer the call for ambidextrous leadership, and induce emergent change.

Acknowledgements

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