

The supervisors who became leaders: Leadership emergence via changing organizational practices

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journals.sagepub.com/home/lea**Jouni J Virtaharju and Tuomas P Liiri**

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Abstract

This paper examines leadership and leader emergence as a contextual process. The paper argues that the emergence of leader identities is a contextual process which is premised on relations between organizational actors and practices. We adopt a social constructionist view on leadership emergence, applying a practice theory perspective on an empirical case of supervisory leadership emergence. Our empirical material consists of informant accounts and corporate documentation of a multiyear organization development project. The empirical narrative explores how the expectation set for a group of supervisors in the organization to act as leaders of production was initially impaired by a lack of participation in central organizing activities. The organization development project reformed the supervisory work to include more tasks related to production activities, which facilitated a new interpretation of the supervisors as leaders. We analyse how the inclusion of supervisors in the daily production practices induced an identity change where the supervisors came to be identified as leaders in production. We argue that contextual changes at the level of organizing practices can influence leadership and leader emergence.

Keywords

Leadership, supervisory work, practice theory, leadership emergence, leader identity

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Introduction

Traditionally, leadership has been conceptualized as a unidirectional social influence process subjected by prescribed leaders to followers (Barker, 2001; Drath et al., 2008). Lately, scholars adopting a social constructionist perspective have argued that leadership emerges from contextual collective action in a meaning-making process. In such processes, people may associate leadership with various activities, persons or things in organizational settings. Rather than being prescribed roles in a static setting, leaders and followers emerge as an outcome of enacted leadership processes (DeRue and Ashford, 2010; Drath et al., 2008). In addition, some scholars have emphasized that leadership action does not have a special or an extraordinary character, but is constituted from mundane organizational actions and practices (Crevani et al., 2010; Larsson and Lundholm, 2010). However, the majority of constructionist leadership research has emphasized human agency by investigating leadership processes as having prescribed or emergent leaders (see Fairhurst and Grant, 2010) as their source. But can social contexts also initiate and facilitate leader emergence, independent of leader actors? In other words, is it possible that leaders become situated (see Endrissat and von Arx, 2013; Grint, 2005) primarily by their social contexts rather than their own actions? If so, how could we theoretically make sense of such relations between contexts and leadership?

In order to explore these questions empirically, we present a case of an industrial organization engaged in a reorganization of supervisory work. We approach the questions on leadership and leader emergence through practice-based theorizing (see Reckwitz, 2002; Schatzki, 2005). This case illustrates how the development project, targeting the daily work practices of these supervisors, influenced a process through which this group of actors came to be perceived as active leaders. The empirical data consist of participant accounts and company documentation detailing the change process and the meanings associated with leadership within this context. Through the empirical study, we argue that the inclusion of supervisors in key organizational practices resulted in organizational members acknowledging the supervisors as leaders of production. Thus, this study points to the centrality of context, analyzed as a bundle of organizational practices, in the construction of leadership.

Our understanding of leadership is based on our informants' interpretations of leadership in their organization. Our case narrative reveals how the identity of the supervisory actors changed from an administrative office worker to a leader of daily production. We argue that this leader identity emergence resulted from the contextual changes in the organization; the changes in organizing influenced the leadership perceptions in the case organization.

Our study contributes to leadership research by exploring the entanglement of leadership and organizing. We illustrate how organizing may provide socially shared contexts, which guide or demand certain actors to obtain the identity of a leader. Rather than associating leadership directly with specific hierarchical roles, we witness leaders being constructed through the supervisors' integration into daily operational practices. Our study shows how immersion within certain contexts can guide actors to claim a leader identity, while also guiding other actors to grant a leader identity to these actors (see DeRue and Ashford, 2010).

The article is structured as follows: We begin by locating our theoretical approach in current leadership research. We present this approach, based in practice-based theorizing, and further elaborate how organizing contributes to the identities of organizational actors.

We then outline our research methods and explain the analytical trail moving from the empirical material to our case narrative. Following the discussion on methods, we present the empirical case narrative. The interpretation of supervisory work development through theories of practice and identity provides the missing linkages between leadership emergence and changing supervisory work activities. Finally, we end the paper with a discussion of our major findings, especially in relation to existing leadership research.

Theoretical background

New look at leadership emergence: Collectives, constructions, social processes and everyday practices

Leadership literature currently has an established line of research focusing on socially constructed conceptualizations of leadership (Fairhurst and Grant, 2010). According to this view, leadership is “co-constructed, a product of sociohistorical and collective meaning-making, and negotiated on an ongoing basis through a complex interplay among leadership actors, be they designated or emergent leaders, managers and/or followers” (Fairhurst and Grant, 2010: 172). Leadership is what is deemed leadership within a collective, rather than something imposed by external parties (Bryman et al., 1988). Indeed, it has been suggested that leadership can be associated with almost any type of action or actor, depending on the context (Kelly, 2014). However, it has also been argued that certain contexts may favor the endorsement of specific kinds of leaders (Grint, 2005). This would further suggest that in specific contexts, specific actors are more likely to become emergent leaders. This line of reasoning provides the basic puzzle we wish to explore in this paper: can we theoretically make sense of these potential connections between leaders and contexts, where context acts as the primary source for the construction of the leader and not the other way around? This question first leads us to the issue of addressing context in a manner that is both relevant to and consistent with a constructionist leadership perspective.

As a loosely coupled research stream, the social constructionist research on leadership prominently focuses on the role of interaction and discourse as the main constituents of leadership (Fairhurst, 2009). In doing so, this research has generally strived to displace individual leaders as the focus of leadership studies, both on a conceptual level and in empirical studies. Furthermore, social constructionist conceptualizations of leadership discount the role of preconfigured leader/follower pairs as the source of leadership and rather argue that leadership is what makes these roles emerge in organizational settings (DeRue and Ashford, 2010; Uhl-Bien, 2006). Therefore, it is only logical that the literature has generally tended to disassociate formal positions from leadership and formal managerial/subordinate pairs from emergent leader/follower pairs. Against this intellectual backdrop, it is also sensible that social constructionist research has tended to separate leadership processes from “organizing”. Yet, organizing also represents a fundamental context in leadership processes: leadership emerges in an ongoing process through shared discursive constructions of “boundaries”, “positions”, “roles” and “issues” in which multiple voices arrive at concrete decisions as collaborative work tasks are completed and others begin (Kelly, 2014: 910). A strict division between “organizing” and “leadership” creates a boundary between the processes of social construction that are responsible for organizing and those that in turn result in the construction of leaders.

New emerging streams of research suggest that the social construction of leadership is closely connected to the everyday organizing, which provides organizational actors with socially established, situationally grounded ways of acting and understanding. These new leadership approaches have focused on studying the ways in which organizational members make sense of their everyday organizational life, “the work in and of leadership” (see Kelly et al., 2006; Larsson and Lundholm, 2010). Approaches based on practice theory provide leadership researchers with conceptual tools for delving into these matters, providing a perspective based on the everyday activity in organizations: “What humans actually do when managing, making decisions, strategizing, organizing, and so on” (Miettinen, Samra-Fredericks and Yanow, 2009: 1309). The study of practices is a relatively recent approach for leadership research, coined as leadership-as-practice (L-A-P) (Carroll et al., 2008; Crevani et al., 2010; Denis et al., 2010; Endrissat and von Arx, 2013; Raelin, 2011, 2016). Scholars argue that there is a great need for this kind of “leadership-as-practice body of work that, for virtually identical reasons as strategy, aims at the demystification, deepening and appreciation of the ‘nitty-gritty details’ (Chia, 2004: 29) of routine and practice” (Carroll et al., 2008). The L-A-P approach argues that to study how leadership unfolds, we must look to the practice within which it is occurring (Raelin, 2011, 2016).

Although still relatively few in number, empirical L-A-P studies have examined the relationships of material objects and practices in leadership processes in education (Mulcahy and Perillo, 2011), the way power, context, and identity are inextricably linked within specific practices (Gagnon and Collinson, 2014), the importance of physical space, routines, and artifacts in leadership identity formation (Carroll, 2016), and the way practices and context recursively coproduce each other (Endrissat and von Arx, 2013). L-A-P scholars also highlight the importance of the symbolic dimension and the meanings carried by practices. Collectively understood practices provide social actors with cues on how to interpret what is happening (Endrissat and Von Arx, 2013), and thus the central interest of practice researchers should be in the beliefs and co-constructions that guide collective action (Raelin, 2011, 2016). In this paper, we suggest that the reverse is also true; leadership research can also benefit from studying how collective action guides the beliefs and co-constructions associated with leadership.

Practice theory and organizing

In practice theory, these collective actions are understood as a complex nexus composed of a variety of smaller elements (Nicolini, 2013). Practices are recurring localized configurations of actions which carry specific meanings (Nicolini, 2013). Schatzki (1996, 2001; see also MacIntyre, 2007[1981]) even argues that practices are the source of meaning for social actors and that human action ultimately emerges and attains meaning and intelligibility from social practices. Thus, practice theory is not limited to an observable dimension but also attends to people’s experience of the world and the activities they pursue. Shove et al. (2012) elaborate on the idea that practices are composed of smaller elements and argue that practices are defined by interdependent relations between three elements: materials, competences, and meanings. Materials encompass objects, infrastructures, tools and the body; competence refers to different forms of understanding and practical knowledgeability; and meaning represents the symbolic meanings, ideas, and social and symbolic significance of participation. Furthermore, as practices also interrelate with other practices and other social elements, critical questions in practice theory concern the performances that make up

different practices and the production of the social world jointly through interrelated practices (Nicolini, 2013). For leadership research, this implies the question: how does leadership interrelate with the practices that make up organizational life?

To answer this question, we adopt a strong practice-based programme, where the focus is on explaining phenomena in terms of practices, rather than on listing or recording them (Nicolini, 2013). Practices are defined as the basic units of analysis for organizational phenomena: “practices are fundamental to the production, reproduction, and transformation of social and organizational matters” (Nicolini, 2013: 14). It is thus the practical activity of social actors, not individuals or their features, which frames and defines leadership. From this perspective, the social construction of leadership cannot be accounted for by individual actors nor the interactions between individuals. Rather, the construction of all social phenomena, including leadership, is intertwined with the practices that permeate and constitute organizing (see Schatzki, 2005).

Practices and identities

In this study, we are interested in exploring the process through which a particular group of actors in our case organization came to be construed as leaders by the organizational stakeholders. Therefore, we turn our interest to a particular kind of meaning: the identity of a group of actors as leaders. It has been suggested that actors are identified as leaders based on their participation in specific kinds of social activities (Kort, 2008). Practice theory similarly claims that practices and practical activity carry meaning and partake in the constitution of social agents (see MacIntyre, 2007[1981]; also Räsänen and Korpiaho, 2011). Nag et al. (2007) introduced the action-oriented approach to identity, arguing that organizational identities are related to the collective practices that characterize how organization members conduct their daily work. The various knowledge-use practices provide the pragmatic substrate on which collective notions of identity form (Nag, Corley and Gioia, 2007). This linkage with organizational action separates the action-based identity views from the more traditional cognitive approaches. The explicit connection between actions and identity has also been theorized within leadership research: DeRue and Ashford (2010) have suggested that leader and follower identities develop over time through processes consisting of identity granting and claiming actions. These processes work on three levels: individuals internalize an identity as a leader or a follower, these identities become relationally recognized through reciprocal role adoption, and finally, the identities are collectively endorsed within an organizational context (DeRue and Ashford, 2010). Despite distancing themselves from the traditional view of leader identity being a cognitive property of an individual’s self-concept and arguing for a socially constructed and reciprocal character of the leader/follower identities, DeRue and Ashford (2010) show a predisposition towards an individualistic, leader-driven interpretation of leader identity formation processes. They generally assume that the process originates from a person actively asserting the leader identity. Yet, DeRue and Ashford (2010: 641) also suggest the possibility of a collective, contextual endorsement prompting individuals to internalize leader and/or follower identities in their discussion concerning the future development of the theory. In this paper, we especially delve into how the contextually driven identity forming process unfolds. Our empirical case shows the process of leader construction occurring not only through the agency of leader/follower actors but also – arguably even more potentially – through the organizational practices involving these actors.

Empirical context

Data collection

The empirical case took place in the context of a Finnish industrial supervisory development program. Research data were collected in four companies participating in the development program on two occasions: during fall–winter 2010–2011 and February 2012. Starting at the end of 2010, we interviewed supervisors and managers from the participating organizations and the consultants in charge of the development program. We focused on a small number of key-informants to carry out a qualitative investigation of the focal issues related to the organizations' change processes. In the semi-structured interviews (overall number of interviews 28), the interviewees reviewed and reflected on the changes that had taken place in the organization, the way in which they had affected the work of the supervisors, and how these changes were perceived by the various stakeholders. The data collection rounds were timed so that we could first discuss the events leading to program participation and the participants' immediate insights after the change program ended (late 2010–early 2011), and then follow-up a year after to investigate whether the changes had stabilized (early 2012).

Based on our initial analysis, we decided to focus on one of the organizations participating in the study. The second round of interviews suggested that this organization had retained the new practices that were introduced during the program, providing a basis for theorizing on the case. A third data collection instance was decided upon and carried out in the spring of 2014, to supplement existing data and to confirm some of our conclusions with the participants. In addition to the interviews (six in this particular case in total), we obtained access to corporate documentation. We reviewed approximately 1300 documents related to organizational and operational changes in the focal organization. These documents consisted of consultant-authored diagnoses, intervention planning, and project progress reports dated between 2008 and 2011, and manager and supervisor-authored notes, project plans, meeting memos, reports, and training material dated between 2006 and 2011. The documents were first screened to determine which of them contained information valuable to our inquiry, reducing the number of documents studied to approximately 200. Material relevant to the themes of supervisory work and leadership was extracted from these documents to supplement our evolving case narrative. The documents were further used to help construct an emic view of leadership (Boje, 2001: 122; Morey and Luthans, 1984): the documents detailed leadership development approaches pre-dating the development project, a set of issues associated with the initial state of supervisory leadership, goals set for improving leadership, and the follow-up on how these goals were being met during the change process. Essentially, these data informed us of what leadership meant to the research participants in this context.

Case organization and focal actors

The supervisory work development case took place in a production unit of a Finnish brewery. The focal organization, the filling unit of the brewery, employs circa 200 machine operators and technical service workers and 15 operative production supervisors. The supervisors report to the production manager of the filling unit, who is a direct subordinate of the chief production manager in charge of the total production of the facility. The filling unit also includes a maintenance unit and a small development unit.

Situation in the case organization prior to changes

The case organization's primary concern was one of its production lines: the can line producing canned beverages. The can line had the greatest production volumes, producing tens of thousands of items per hour, and the demand for the products was frequently greater than the production output. The range of products produced by the company was also growing, resulting in frequent production setup switches – presenting a time-consuming activity that disrupted the already stressed production.

The organization's management had expressed dissatisfaction with the unit's performance prior to the development project. The can line unit was unable to respond to the increasing production volumes and the growing product range. This inability became apparent in the form of unplanned and lengthy production standstills, personnel problems, and conflicts between production and maintenance. The production system seemed to cope badly with the high production tempo, and the operators argued that the expected increases in production volumes were unrealistic. Despite a 10-year history of lean-based production development projects, the can line operators were viewed as incapable of effective, autonomous teamwork.

The company joined a publicly funded development program to receive external help with these operational issues. The development program was implemented within four industrial organizations in total, with the overarching theme of supervisory work development. The consulting company implementing the program specialized in doing diagnostic organization development (Bushe and Marshak, 2009) and had extensive experience of working with industrial organizations. The project was executed between spring 2009 and the end of 2010.

The public funder wanted to include an academic research partner in the process and was willing to fund an independent research project following the development effort. Our formal role as researchers was to follow the development effort and provide feedback to consultants and the companies, but not participate in any further development activities in the organization.

Our analytic process

The research data were first categorized using a situational map (Clarke, 2005) during the initial stages of the study in late 2010. With the situational map, we constructed an overall view of the case, listing the various human and non-human actors, the sociocultural, political, temporal, spatial, and other elements, and the major debates and discourses manifesting in the organization. The second analysis step consisted of forming a narrative of the case (Fairhurst and Uhl-Bien, 2012; Langley, 1999), where we first mapped out the development intervention and the changes it produced in a very strict timeline-based form. The situational map informed the narrative, where we focused on the relations between the various elements of the map, as these pieces were placed into a temporal order. The observations emerging from the evolving narrative presented the supervisory work change first and foremost as a change in how and where the supervisors conducted their daily work: we remarked various differences between the relations of the supervisors and the other elements on the situational map when we compared the initial situation to the conclusion of the development project. The initial narrative was followed by a richer description of the change process, supplemented by interview quotes and document data excerpts. At this point, another

emerging theme was the shared impression of the organization members that the change in the organization was a change in supervisory leadership. These initial observations guided us to conduct an emic analysis (Boje, 2001: 122; Morey and Luthans, 1984): we took the informants interpretation' – that what had happened in the organization was a leadership change – as our starting point. We then focused our analysis to understanding what this supervisory leadership change was and how it was related to the changes in daily practices.

The lack of a coherent explanation for these interpretations – the missing link between supervisory action and leadership – triggered a search for a theory that could synthesize these observations. At this point, the aim of our research became to get “behind the story” of idiographic supervisory work change to achieve analytical generalization (Yin, 2003). To this end, we contrasted our observations with different literatures: the analytic trail of this investigation moved from supervisory work in general to supervisory leadership in particular. Noting the development of leadership literature, we recognized the opportunity to contribute to this area of research. Practice theory, leadership identity, and the emerging L-A-P stream presented us with the analytical tools for understanding why the changes in the daily supervisory action had become interpreted as an emergence of supervisory leadership.

Findings

The brewery before the changes: Supervisors as peripheral administrators

Before proceeding to a detailed description of the situation in the brewery before the changes, we need to return to the original problem that the management wanted to correct in the organisation. The management were unsatisfied with the way the can line production was operating and especially with the supervisors' contributions towards the organizing. This reveals the fundamental issue that is often underemphasized in leadership discussion: what is the actual collective end or goal of the organizational action? In the case organization, running the production line is a shared purpose for the production unit actors – including the machine operators, maintenance personnel, and production/development managers, in addition to the supervisors – and it is pursued with a set of focal practices in relation to which the supervisory leadership is made intelligible.

I mean, our main task here is to make those machines run, after all. There shouldn't be any misconceptions concerning that. (Middle manager)

In the initial situation in 2009, the supervisors' ability to supervise and facilitate production was described as seriously compromised. Their contribution to the organizing of the production consisted of ensuring adequate staffing levels, and little else. A great deal of the supervisors' time was spent on managerial activities in the second-floor office, mostly working on production- and staff-related reports. It was apparent that very little could be done to directly influence the production-related challenges – to solve emerging technical issues, intervene in employee misconduct, or drive up production volumes – through these back-office practices. In a telling example, the development consultant relayed an event

where the production line went offline for multiple hours without the shift supervisor's awareness:

So, earlier you had these situations where a production machine had stopped for three hours and the supervisor had no idea. The production stood still. Ninety thousand cans, for instance, cans, per hour... enormous amounts. And the guys don't know that the line there is at a standstill. (Development consultant)

The disbelief expressed by the informant indicates that the expectations of influencing production were not being met. Several historical developments were seen as the cause of the supervisors' absence in production: during earlier organization development efforts the responsibilities of the machine operators working in the unit had been increased. They had been given more authority and responsibility to run and maintain the production machinery. Informants described how these previous organization development projects, enforcing a lean paradigm, had underlined the importance of operator self-management. In turn, supervisors' ability to participate in technical work had become more limited:

When a supervisor first starts here, there's not much learning into the machine technology. But rather... running the show and operating the machines and the... the knowledge and understanding of the machines, it's very much on the operators and maintenance. (Production supervisor)

The knowledge and understanding required in industrial production line practices is largely related to technical competence, and the years of disengagement had diminished the supervisors' technical knowhow. Mirroring this development, the lack of knowledge and involvement with production practices had affected the operators' perceptions of the supervisors:

The [machine operators'] comment was pretty much: 'They sit over there, they don't really have anything to do with our operational activities.' (Development consultant)

Therefore, the supervisors were dissociated from the focal production practices, both physically and symbolically. Instead, the supervisors primarily carried out administrative practices; their main task was to ensure that workers contributed to production by securing adequate staffing levels, in addition to handling shift-related reporting.

The organization's maintenance unit was also intimately involved in maintaining the production machinery's functionality. A serious disconnect existed between the maintenance personnel and the production supervisors, who were expected to supervise the group during the evening and night shifts. The maintenance personnel had grown accustomed to the supervisors being oblivious to issues related to the production machinery. This had created a sense that interactions between these groups were redundant and often frustrating:

...the maintenance members' respect for the supervisors was fairly... low. [...] They had nothing to give – they had no role in investigating the technical issues. (Development consultant)

But, I think the cooperation with the maintenance unit has been the biggest problem for us, for as long as I have worked here. (Production supervisor)

Again, the supervisors' relationship with the maintenance was not based on any form of established practice, regardless of the part-time role as the maintenance's formal supervisors. These two groups of actors interacted sporadically in the context of technical issues, but these interactions were unplanned and unstructured. The supervisors had no routine input in these exchanges: they generally had no knowledge of what had taken place on the production line. As a result, the supervisors were viewed as being unable to contribute to the practices of solving technical issues with the maintenance personnel.

...because we are the supervisors for maintenance during the evening and night shifts. So, before the project the situation was that I didn't even know – I didn't have list or anything – who should be working the shift in maintenance. (Production supervisor)

As a further complication, the supervisors' own superior, the production manager, had taken on an operational role in the running of the production. The production manager's active role was a "shared issue" for the supervisors. The manager had taken over the practice that historically had belonged to the supervisors and currently should have been handled by the operators, assuming a hands-on approach to maintaining the functionality of the production technology. As a former operator and supervisor with a strong technical background, the production manager acted as the main contributor to the functioning of the production system:

When I talked to the chief production manager, I said I've never seen [a place like this] where the supervisor is really not the boss in the work shift. Instead, it's the production manager who's sleeping at home. That was really something. (Development consultant)

And the rule was, for supervisors, if you have any problems, call 'Bob', call him, the production manager. [...] Three o'clock at night, if there's a problem, you have to call him. (Development consultant)

When I started here five years ago, nothing got done without our superior's permission. So we were... Frankly, sometimes it felt like I was working as a call dispatcher. (Production supervisor)

Being sidelined from the production maintenance practices, information flows to the supervisors were severely restricted. This was perceived as a further cause for the supervisors' disengagement, as they were unable to act based on concurrent information or anticipate upcoming events:

So things like this used to cause negative feelings: some group of visitors comes up to their [production] line and no-one even knew something like that was coming up, so... (Middle manager)

For the machine operators, another issue created by the supervisors' lack of involvement was inconsistent rule enforcement:

So we have this feedback coming from the operators that the supervision is so inconsistent... Someone might be just sitting down during the whole cleaning [period], eight hours, in the back

room, and still gets to go home an hour earlier, while the others have been working hard.
(Middle manager)

The supervisors' lack of participation in the production practices was a cause of concern for middle managers, supervisors, and operators alike. The resulting interpretation of the situation revealed a serious identity conflict: all of the present actor groups, the management, the operators, the maintenance, and the supervisors themselves, recognized and expressed that the supervisors were expected to be "leaders" in production, but their actual work consisted of administrative and support practices. They were physically excluded by not being present, lacked the competence to act on emerging issues, and in general opinion were not held in high esteem. The overall negative interpretation clearly implies that the various stakeholders' expectations were not being fulfilled. A theoretical reading of the situation suggests that as a group of organizational actors, the supervisors were being granted a leader identity through these verbal acts by the managers, the operators, and the maintenance personnel alike, but the daily work practices did not correspond with this identity. Our resulting interpretation was that the supervisors were fundamentally not leaders at the beginning of the development project, due to their inability to influence production. The supervisors had exclaimed how they "have no job here, we're not respected, and we have no authority" (development consultant), suggesting that they would have preferred to claim a contrasting identity: one supported by clear responsibilities, respect, and authority. The view among supervisors was summarized in the following question, representing a focal action point for the project:

What does [the employer] expect from this role? (Project documentation)

However, these verbal identity granting and claiming acts were not enough to alter the daily organizing practices or the task division in the organization by themselves. The incongruity between the verbal grants and the practices remained: the situation resulted in an identity conflict for the supervisors, where the expectations and actual activities did not meet. The supervisors (and the other actor groups) were clearly not satisfied with how things were unfolding in the organization, yet they were unable to change the daily routines. The production was perceived to be "lacking leadership" and operating on an unsatisfactory level. This prompted the unit to enter the development stage of the project, where steps were taken to change the situation.

The brewery after the changes: Supervisors turning into leaders of production

The development project focused on reinstating the supervisors as the focal group in the daily operations of the production line. The overarching vision for the change was to enable the supervisors and the operators to cooperate to jointly achieve higher production standards and solve most of the technical issues without involving the production manager or the maintenance unit. The supervisors worked together in various thematically organized development groups to explicate the various challenges in their work, facilitated by the development consultant. The consultant also provided personal coaching to the supervisors during work shifts towards the end of the project.

The first step of the development effort was clarifying what the operational role of the supervisors should be. For the supervisors to have some actual impact on the production,

their responsibility for the factory floor had to be reinstated. The supervisors needed ways to start participating in the production practices. This was achieved by defining their roles especially in relation to the other actors in the production context:

And now, we came to the conclusion that for the supervisors to really have responsibility and work content, they need to clearly have the operational responsibility. And that means that they are the bosses during their shift. (Development consultant)

And then the supervision, what you're supposed to do during the day, are they also supervisors for maintenance and material services. So clarifying that, so, yes they are. (Middle manager)

The supervisors' role as the operators' leaders and instructors was clarified, and the role of interaction in this relationship was emphasized. (Project steering group memo)

However, to provide a realistic opportunity for the supervisors to enact these responsibilities, the production manager was required to step back from his over-active role as the do-it-all technician. Following discussions between the development consultant and the production manager, he recognized the need to balance his own workload and share the responsibility with the supervisors, making the effort to relax his position within the production practices:

So, the chief production manager received the message very well, that they'll have to make room. [...] And the [production manager] said himself, no problem, every time you hear or see me doing the wrong things, just come over and tell me. [...] So it was good that the middle managers accepted that this is the way it had to be, to give the supervisors some content into their jobs. (Development consultant)

At least I think that our superior has also got the hint a little bit, so, there's not like... The supervisors get more of the responsibilities. (Production supervisor)

Middle managers' areas of responsibility were defined, and it was made sure that they did not overlap with those of the supervisors. (Project steering group memo)

The development groups deemed that to stabilize and give tangible content to the change, new practices supporting the new vision for supervisory work were necessary. One of the driving ideas behind these various practices, in addition to facilitating information transfer, was to place the supervisors into contact with the various groups and actors within the organization:

And then, the problem being that the production manager had all the information concerning production... and also the capabilities. So, even though, like I said, there were already so many meetings, we still decided to make one new meeting in the [meeting development group]. It was like this production supervisory meeting. [...] where you agree, when every week you have production plan meetings, maintenance work plan meetings, and the laboratory quality meetings, so which of the supervisors will attend which. (Development consultant)

For instance, the weekly meeting. We didn't have a single meeting with our own superior. [...] We go through the upcoming week, other general issues. We make notes, send it to everyone.

We agree on which one of the supervisors attends which meetings that week. (Production supervisor)

For the supervisors to actively promote new cooperative behaviors and higher production goals, they needed a way to participate directly in the production practices. This was facilitated by a morning status meeting practice and new procedures, which required operators to call for supervisors when technical issues stopped the production line:

We got this information board meeting practice from [the concurrent lean development project]. So every morning the supervisors hold these meetings for every production line, gets ahold of everyone, which is good for information transfer – and supervision too. (Middle manager)

Yeah, so like your code of conduct says, if the line has been offline for ten minutes, you have to call the supervisors. (Middle manager)

The meeting practice, creating awareness of currently pressing issues and facilitating the follow-up discussions and actions, allowed supervisors to join the production practices with a legitimate agenda. Similarly, the 10-minute-rule for calling the supervisors enabled the supervisors to pull in the various groups into the new repair practice. The supervisors were expected to facilitate the problem solving between themselves, the operators, the maintenance, and the machinery. The supervisors also started a new record-keeping “diary” practice, by recording all the technical issues encountered and passing this information on to the next work shift.

These new practices were implemented with the intention of enhancing supervisory leadership in the brewery production. As a result, the supervisors joined the production line practices on the factory floor. The leadership enactment can be understood through the new shared activities in the production line practices, jointly performed by the supervisors, the operators, and the maintenance personnel. As these activities became repeated, routinized and gradually taken for granted – stabilized into reformed production practices – the supervisors occupied a new relational position, where they could influence the priorities and the actual ongoing repair activities:

When the machines break down, [the supervisors] are there leading [the repairs] with the operators. Finding out what is the issue. Even though they can't fix it, but they are there to find out and... Not just observing from up there [the office], like, I think there might be a problem down there. Like earlier. (Development consultant)

So, when the line comes to a halt, I heard in the interviews, that people just notified the maintenance and left for a coffee. And, even like, call us when it's up and running, we're going for a coffee. And now no-one is going for a coffee, they're there with the maintenance personnel fixing the machine. (Development consultant)

So I think it was more like, it was more up to the supervisors themselves. Or about us. And we started to go into those repair situations with a slightly different attitude. (Production supervisor)

Particularly in the context of these production practices, technical competence was an integral factor for the supervisors' leadership. An interviewee succinctly pointed out the

materiality of the production practices:

So this [work] is pretty diverse, because we have a lot of machines and people. We have a lot of technical issues and you need to understand the technology. So this is not just about leading people. (Middle manager)

The supervisors were not technically competent immediately after the new tasks and procedures were adopted. For a time, they merely took part in the operational running of the production line. In time, their expertise of the machinery increased and they began to add real value to the running of the production line. This development was recognized in the organization and seen as a key element in gaining the leadership position.

So for the supervisor to enter into that discussion, to lead that, which way should we proceed with the repairs. . . We tried to increase those capabilities a bit and. . . I'm sure we also succeeded in that. (Production supervisor)

The development project facilitated the emerging interpretation of leadership by expanding the supervisors' work tasks from the administrative to the production line practices. Initially, as the supervisors' work was focused on the administrative practices, the leader identity that was being granted to these actors was in conflict with the activities that the supervisors did and did not engage in. For leadership to emerge in production, the supervisors needed to engage in the practices that both allowed and encouraged them to engage in leadership claiming; in these new practices, the supervisors could act as was expected of leaders in this particular context. As would be expected, individual variance was seen in how the supervisors reacted to the new requirements. The interviewed middle manager gave the following assessment concerning the way in which some of the supervisors acted in the new shift meetings: "Some supervisor's performances can be pretty anemic." Being a leader and enacting the new production practices required different skills from those needed in the administrative practices. In fact, during the early phases of the development project, a couple of the supervisors were deemed unable or unwilling to adapt to the new requirements and these individuals left the organization. We acknowledge these individual differences in leadership performance, but emphasize that in this paper our focus is rather on understanding how the contextual change affected the view of the supervisors as a group of leaders in this organization. The middle management was also at times unable to follow the new agreements. There were instances where the production manager had forgotten to call the shift supervisor to take part in a test run of a repaired piece of equipment.

To summarize our theoretical interpretation of the changes, the engagement in the production practices transformed marginalized, contributive supervisory action into a participative form of joint action (Kort, 2008). Supervisory work was recontextualized from administration to production. The supervisors moved from a marginal, peripheral position to a central position in relation to the production line practices. This shift in supervisory engagement induced the new interpretation of supervisors as leaders in the organization. This was something that the supervisors' formal position in the organizational hierarchy had not established, quite the opposite. The tension between the expectations towards the formal role – expressed through the granting of a leader identity (DeRue and Ashford, 2010) – remained in conflict with the supervisors' perceived contributions to organizing – or lack thereof. In the second phase, the inclusion in the production practices changed the

supervisory work on many accounts: the supervisors were required to enter the production more frequently, to learn the technology-related issues, and to be on top of the daily information flows in production. Through these changes, they became recognized and included in the daily organizing of the production. This shift resulted in the supervisors claiming a leader identity in the context of production. This leader identity adopted by the group of supervisors resulted from their inclusion in the production practices in an active, competent role. The granting of the leader identity, which was also present as verbal acts before the changes, was now supported by the daily practices. Now these granting acts and the context supporting this interpretation were not in conflict but were instead supplementing each other. In this context, it was this particular kind of relational activity, expressed through the focal production practices, which allowed the supervisors to become leaders. This created a leadership configuration (Gronn, 2009; see also DeRue, 2011) that was deemed satisfactory in the organization; organizing more centralized on the supervisors, rather than self-managing teams or the “heroic” production manager leader. To some, this interpretation may be reminiscent of an old-fashioned or a dated view of organizing, but in this organizational context, it was viewed as solving many of the operational problems that the organization had faced earlier. Therefore, in the new setting, the supervisors (and other parties) were content with their new roles, and their actions as part of the production practices were further supported by the organizational rules and procedures.

Discussion

In this study, we have analyzed stakeholder accounts of how supervisory leadership changed in a particular organization. Our research interest was focused on how these stakeholder accounts explain a group of supervisors becoming leaders as a result of the organization development activities. We recognized how our informants associated the emergence of leadership with renewed daily organizing practices. Based on these informant accounts and corporate documentation, we constructed a research narrative in which we synthesized and theorized the accounts with practice-based theory to provide a more generic explanation of the process through which the supervisors were infused with leadership.

First, we wish to present a few observations on social constructionist leadership research. Constructionist leadership research has explained how such reflexive accounts, both the researchers’ (Alvesson, 2003) and the research informants’ (Schütz, 2007[1932]), not only mirror the events and actions as they have happened, they also play a major part in constituting what leadership means and refers to in an organization (see Fairhurst, 2009: 1608). In our empirical material, our informants reflected on their past experiences and took part in the construction of the story of supervisors becoming leaders in the organization. This particular account of leadership emergence differs from the conventional leadership narrative, especially the “heroic” variety (see Crevani et al., 2010), as the supervisors were mostly depicted as passive recipients of leadership, compelled to adopt a leadership identity constructed for them through discursive and practical means. Our case study might be better served by replacing the individualistic concepts of *granting* and *claiming* leadership used by DeRue and Ashford (2010) with a more collective terminology of *demanding* and *accepting* the leadership identity enforced in the organization. This further shows how the leader identity and the leadership relationships draw from the contextual resources, both material and discursive. The research narrative shows how the supervisory leadership development drew from the both the ostensive and performative aspects of the local practices (Feldman

and Pentland, 2003). Leadership emergence required both the construction of the ideational linkages between the meaning of the local organizing practice and leadership and their performance by the supervisors and other stakeholders. The leadership change was enacted through both talk and embodied action (see Küpers, 2013).

Our second remark is related to previous theory on leader identity emergence. DeRue and Ashford (2010) argued that leader and follower identities form when identity claims and grants are individually internalized, relationally recognized, reciprocally supportive, and contextually reinforced. However, based on our research, we would argue that the organizational context can play a more generative role in the leadership identity emergence. Over the years, the case organization had tried to implement a shared leadership model based on the lean management ideology. According to this model, the operators on the shop floor were provided with technical training and were expected to assume a collective responsibility over the daily production, while the supervisors would focus on supplementary tasks. However, this model proved too radical for the unit and the resulting situation in the organization resembled more of a leadership void (DeRue, 2011), where the production manager would sporadically intervene to support the dysfunctional practice as a technical savior. When the increasing production volumes required more efficient daily organizing, the managerial interest turned back to supervisors, who were expected to return to their traditional role as daily production organizers. The new, adopted leadership configuration (DeRue, 2011; Gronn, 2009) can be categorized as centralized leadership, where the supervisors were the focal actor in the daily practices of organizing. Despite being traditional, this model seemed to fill the explicit and implicit expectations set for the daily running of the can filling production line. These variances in the structural patterns of leadership can be seen to be set off by contextual requirements and accomplished through the organizing practices, rather than triggered by individual actors. Furthermore, the association of the leader identity with the supervisors resulted from these structural patterns, not directly from the actions of these individuals.

The focal empirical contribution of this study is the illustration of how contextual elements contribute to leadership emergence. During the first phase, the supervisors in our study were operating mainly in administration and were peripherally positioned in relation to production. Through tangible changes in their and other occupational groups' work tasks, responsibilities, and practices, they were recontextualized to the locus of the joint organizing action on the production line. Holding a central position and controlling the flow of resources, e.g. information and/or materials, is recognized by previous scholars as important to leadership. Terms that have been used to describe such positions are for example "social gatekeeper" (Lewin, 1951), "tertius iungens" (the third who joins) (Obstfeld, 2005), "central attractor" (Hazy and Uhl-Bien, 2015), or "obligatory passage point" (Callon, 1986).

The study also empirically shows the contextuality of leadership action. In our empirical case, the leaders emerged through the actions on the factory floor, as an outcome of the successful joint-performances, which harnessed the contextual resources available (Feldman and Pentland, 2005; Iszatt-White, 2011). The competent action in this context specifically required technical experience of the machines and equipment on the production line. The credibility as a leader was obtained through the skillful use of related technical knowledge and local know-how (Hosking, 1988). It was the action based on *this* knowledge in *this* context that was interpreted as leadership (Iszatt-White, 2011; Kelly, 2014). Contrary to the general understanding of leadership, the supervisory attention was mainly focused on the

production line, not the operators. The human side of the leadership relationship was secondary to leading the production. Contributing to the organizing practices targeted at facilitating production was interpreted as successful leadership.

As our final empirical contribution, we see the portrayal of the multi-faceted nature of leadership. It is worth noting that even after the changes the supervisors' work related to the two identified contexts: administration and production. Operationally these contexts were loosely coupled; the linkages between them were mostly indirect. However, the contexts could be seen competing for the supervisors' attention and time. Earlier, the supervisors had not been able to handle the production requirements satisfactorily. A formal development project was required to facilitate the changes that would help them become leaders in production. Our case narrative does not represent the typical leadership story, where a free-willed, active protagonist changes the organization for the better. Rather, the supervisors were constrained by the expectations originating from the different contexts promoting different ends and requirements. We would assume that high-ranking organizational members or political leaders, for example, need to engage with even more numerous contexts as part of their work. We even argue that prescribed leaders – the individuals who are set to do a job – do not get to choose many of the contexts they need to address. They may have to make compromises on how to participate and act in various contexts. Furthermore, they may have only limited capacity to participate in certain organizational practices, as the initial situation of our empirical case illustrates. We suggest that this managerial "multicontextuality" should be better acknowledged, both in research and in leadership practice.

Our research also has a more direct relevance for leadership development. Our case showed how the situation on the can line had deteriorated over the years resulting in the leadership void apparent during the first study phase. Historically, industrial organizations have held rather traditional, leader-centric views on leadership, for example in comparison with educational organizations, where distributed views of leadership have been adopted more frequently (see Bolden, 2011; Gronn, 2009). The redesign of the supervisory tasks and practices guided the supervisors towards recapturing a leader position in relation to operational action. This repositioning paved the way for a new, "leaderful" reading (Raelin, 2011) of the situation on the can line. The practical implication of our case is that the ordinary, everyday work practices and tasks, and how they are organized, influence how and where leadership emerges in an organization. Leadership development can be understood as the development of shared, ordinary actions in an organization.

This study also has its limitations. First of all, our empirical research context, an industrial production facility, provides a research bias that needs to be acknowledged. It could be argued that such a context is not a very fruitful environment for the study of contemporary leadership, but rather echoes "old-fashioned" readings and practices of leadership. Supervisory work is constrained by organizational rules and regulations. Yet, we believe that questions related to skillful everyday organizing (Drath et al., 2008; Hosking, 1988) are also vital in this context, although the actions and practices through which it comes to be perceived as leadership differ from those that are typically associated with leadership, for example in the work of a CEO of a multinational company. Rather than imposing our own view on what leadership is supposed to be, we have aimed to expose what the local stakeholders took to be leadership (Bryman et al., 1988).

Our empirical material also has notable limitations. In addition to focusing on just one industrial case organization, our primary data consist of a limited amount of interview data and corporate documentation. Although interviews represent an established data collection method, the data, which consists of rationalized past acts (Schütz, 2007[1932]), reveal only certain aspects of how leadership emerges through action over time. Therefore, our empirical research findings should be considered exploratory and tentative.

Overall, this study has sought answers to the questions of where, how, and why leadership emerges, and how it could be analyzed. We have shown how the inclusion in the daily operational practices was perceived as enabling the emergence of leadership in a case organization. We presented how and why peripheral supervisors came to be perceived as central production leaders. Still, we are wary of making strong generalizations based on our study. We assume that the practices promoting or hindering leadership may vary considerably in different organizational contexts. Yet, we feel that the merit of our work is in providing a theoretical contribution for understanding some implications of the contextuality of leadership emergence and an empirical example of how formal management and informal leadership dynamics are entangled in real-world organizations. Our research suggests that planned managerial changes are not orthogonal to leadership, but can support and promote the emergence of leadership in organizational settings.

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