

Leadership as a balancing act between performance- and development-orientation: a study of managers' and co-workers' understanding of leadership in an industrial organisation

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Article Title Page

Leadership as a balancing act between performance- and development-orientation: A study of managers' and co-workers' understanding of leadership in an industrial organisation

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Structured Abstract:

Purpose

The purpose of this article is to revisit data from a previous study of leadership in an industrial company that was in the process of implementing a process-oriented, team-based form of organisation. Based on these data, the assumption that process-orientation implies “new” leadership behaviours and relationships with co-workers is explored. More specifically, the focus is on analysing how the managers and co-workers understood and practised the ideas about leadership for learning and development that were introduced in connection with the new production organisation. The purpose is also to determine what factors constrained and facilitated these leadership practises.

Design/methodology/approach

The study was conducted with a large industrial company using case study methodology. The empirical material consists of 35 qualitative interviews with production managers (n=4), first-line managers (n=14), and operators (n=17).

Findings

The results indicate that performance-oriented leadership with a focus on facilitating adaptive learning is emphasised more than development-oriented leadership, which facilitates critical reflection and innovative learning. Furthermore, the study suggests that the administrative workload greatly limits the potential for development-oriented leadership. Overall, first-line managers appear to have more in common with system administrators than leaders.

Practical implications

This study highlights the need to find a balance between performance and development in organisations. Specifically, there is a need for leaders to create opportunities and support for increased developmental learning at work. It is also necessary to emphasise critical reflection both in connection with daily operations and in the formal education of co-workers and leaders.

Originality/value

This study demonstrates the gap between the rhetoric of new leadership and the organisational realities that leaders experience in their daily work. At the same time, the study points to the dual nature of leadership for learning and the constraints on its realisations in practise.

Keywords

leadership, learning, industrial organisation, managerial work, organisational change and development

Article Classification:

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Running Heads:

Leadership as a balancing act between performance- and development-orientation

- A study of managers' and co-workers' understanding of leadership in an industrial organisation

Introduction

Within both research and public debate, there is currently an interest in new ways of organising and managing production. Such new ideas have been described using terms such as horizontal organisation, process organisation, team-based organisation, and lean production (Ashkenas *et al.*, 1995; Cooney, 2002; Hines *et al.*, 2004; Mohrman *et al.*, 1995). It is assumed that these new forms of organisations imply new demands on leadership behaviour. Examples of these alleged new demands include an increased emphasis on creative leadership (Mumford *et al.*, 2002), knowledge leadership (Viitala, 2004), learning-oriented leadership (Berson *et al.*, 2006; Wallo, 2008) and/or consultative leadership (Sandberg and Targama, 2007). However, in spite of the widespread interest in these and similar ideas, empirical research has yielded limited knowledge concerning what these notions of leadership mean in practice (Hales, 2005; Wallo, 2008; Yukl, 2009). The literature identifies, among others, the following responsibilities or duties of managers: promoting co-workers' interest and confidence in their capacity to learn, supporting experimentation with new methods and ways of working, helping co-workers to learn from unexpected events and mistakes, and developing a system of rewards that promotes learning and improvement.

With respect to the relationship between managers and co-workers (the members of the work team), work team autonomy and control are emphasised, and many of the responsibilities that were previously assigned to managers are now delegated to the work team. The manager's work shifts from managing the details of the work to, ideally, functioning as coaches, facilitators and/or consultants to their work teams (Beattie, 2006; Ellinger and Bostrom, 2002; Ladyshevsky, 2010). This implies, among other things, that a manager is not expected to give orders directing the work that is occurring; instead, the manager should coordinate the teams and lead by encouraging problem-solving and critical reflection (Manz and Sims, 2001). However, these conceptualisations of leadership betray a normative bias and tell us little about what such changes mean in practise. Therefore, several authors have also indicated the need for more empirically based research on the manager's role in facilitating the learning processes (Babuji and Crossan, 2004; Ellinger and Bostrom, 2002; Hughes, 2004; Viitala, 2004, Wallo, 2008).

The aim of this article is to revisit data from a previous study of leadership in an industrial company that was in the process of implementing a process-oriented, team-based form of organisation (cf. Kock, 2007; Mohrman *et al.*, 1995). Based on these data, we will explore the assumption that process-orientation somehow implies "new" leadership behaviours and co-worker relationships. More specifically, we will analyse how the managers and co-workers understood and practised the ideas about leadership for learning and development that were introduced in connection with the new production organisation. We will also determine what factors constrained and facilitated these leadership practises.

As used here, the concept of learning implies both formal training activities (e.g., courses) and informal learning. By the latter concept we refer to learning that occurs regularly at work as well as in everyday life but is subordinate to other activities (e.g., work practises) that do not have learning as their primary goal (cf. Ellström, 2011; Eraut, 2000; Marsick and Watkins, 1990). Learning at the individual level is considered as a necessary, but not

sufficient condition for organisational learning. By organisational learning we refer to changes in organisational practices (e.g. routines and procedures, structures, technologies) that are mediated through individual learning or problem-solving processes (Ellström, 2001).

Previous research on leadership and learning

Studies within the field of management have exhibited a strong normative focus on attempting to establish the characteristics of effective leadership within new forms of organisation. However, there is also a growing interest both in descriptive research that examines what this leadership looks like in practice and in critical management studies that question the tendency of leadership theories to glorify and deify leaders. Below, we provide a brief review of these three leadership research traditions and further elaborate on the concept of learning in organisations.

One of the most well-known theories that propagate the idea of a universal effective leadership style is Bass's (1998) full-range model. Bass's model stipulates that the transformational leader, using individualised consideration, idealised influence, intellectual stimulation and inspirational motivation, will be successful in building good relationships with co-workers and a strong commitment to organisational goals. Furthermore, transformational leadership can be seen as a preferable way to create a "learning organisation" (Bass, 2000). The full-range model also includes transactional behaviours such as contingent-reward and management by exception. These more traditional leadership behaviours, however, are typically not seen as promoting learning (Amitay *et al.*, 2005; Bass, 2000). In addition to those theories that focus on the importance of the leader, there are alternative conceptualisations of leadership as a distributed phenomenon (Gronn, 2002). These theories are similar to Bass's model in many ways. For instance, elements of both transformational and transactional leadership are visible in Manz and Sims's theory of SuperLeadership (2001). However, in distributed leadership theories, the focus is on the team members, and the question for the leader is how to lead those who lead themselves (Elloy, 2005; Manz and Sims, 1987).

A second research tradition stems from critiques of the idea that there is one universal model of effective leadership and has a more descriptive orientation. The important questions within this tradition concern what managers actually do and why they do it (Hales, 1986; Mintzberg, 1973). The early studies suggest that leadership is rarely a rational and proactive process and that it, rather, can be understood as a chain of improvisational steps in a significantly fragmented work practice (Carlson, 1951). Recent studies have shown that these patterns persist but that the fragmentation of workspaces has increased (Yukl, 2010). Furthermore, interpersonal and information-changing roles have taken precedence over decision-making roles, which may indicate that the ideals of 'new leadership' have reached upper organisational levels (Tengblad, 2002; 2006). However, the claim that managers at middle and lower levels are now oriented towards human resource issues does not appear to be clearly supported (Hales, 2005). In descriptive studies of leadership and learning, the primary focus often tends to be on the behaviour or role of the leader (cf. Amy, 2008; Beattie, 2006; Ellinger and Bostrom, 2002, Viitala, 2004). Due to inconsistent categorisation, it is difficult to determine the commonalities among the studies, but recurring behaviours include providing support before, during and after the learning activity; providing resources for learning; placing learning on the agenda; and creating a learning climate. Additionally, existing studies emphasise the function of managers in challenging workers and encouraging them to reflect on their work (Beattie, 2006; Ellinger and Bostrom, 2002; Whittaker and Marchington, 2003).

A third tradition, critical management studies (CMS), is based on the questioning of accepted notions within mainstream leadership theories (Alvesson and Sveningsson, 2011;

Alvesson and Willmott, 1992). Critical researchers are usually sceptical of the instrumental rationality that characterises most leadership studies (Sandberg and Targama, 2007). Critical studies are focused not on the traits that constitute effective leadership but rather on how leadership discourses are translated into managerial identities and how leadership can be understood as a socially constructed phenomenon (cf. Ford and Lawler, 2007). The tendency within mainstream leadership research to romanticise the heroic leader and to consider leadership as the solution regardless of the problem is criticised as too simplistic a view of complex social processes (Alvesson and Spicer, 2011; Meindl, 1995). Furthermore, CMS maintains a critique of top-down leadership models based on the control of co-workers' beliefs and identities (Alvesson and Willmott, 2002; Kärreman and Alvesson, 2004). The relatively few empirical studies of leadership within this tradition focus on themes such as sense making, identity construction, "doing" leadership and discourses of leadership and learning. Evidence from these studies suggests that managers' views of what leadership is, or should be, are inconsistent with the content of their daily work (Alvesson and Sveningsson, 2003b). Furthermore, in accounts of "doing" leadership, it is difficult to discern whether leadership behaviours such as envisioning and coaching have actually been used (Alvesson and Sveningsson, 2003a).

The three research traditions described above contribute to our understanding of leadership for learning. However, even when the three traditions are considered together, it is evident that the relationship between leadership and learning has only been sparingly explored in contemporary leadership research. Moreover, in most of the relevant studies, the focus is clearly on leadership, whereas learning is almost considered unproblematic and therefore remains something of a "black box". In contrast, in research that more specifically focuses on learning in organisations, learning is often problematised, whereas leadership is not. Therefore, it is necessary to integrate these two literatures. A recent study of the manager as a facilitator of learning in two industrial firms attempted such a project (Wallo, 2008). Drawing on March's (1991) concepts of exploitation and exploration and on the two logics of organisational learning proposed by Ellström (2006; 2011), Wallo (2008) makes a distinction between two types of learning-oriented leadership: performance-oriented leadership and development-oriented leadership. These two types differ with respect to the leader's implicit understanding of learning, the activities the leader implements to facilitate learning, and the different roles that the leader assumes.

More specifically, Wallo (2008) argues that performance-oriented leadership may be assumed to create opportunities for learning that is mainly adaptive in character; that is, they focus on the mastery of given tasks or situations or on the formation of competencies for handling routine or frequently occurring tasks or problems. In contrast, development-oriented leadership focuses on individual/collective development and/or more radical change. Developmental learning is assumed to occur when individuals or groups within an organisation begin to question and explore existing working conditions or established perspectives on the problems and tasks at hand, thereby developing new ways of handling the duties and the often complex problems associated with their work (Ellström, 2006; 2011).

A performance-oriented leader typically relies on formally planned activities to facilitate learning. In the direct leadership of co-workers, the leaders in Wallo's study assume three main roles: supporter, educator, and confronter. Performance-oriented leaders alternate between these roles depending on the situation; however, the main focus is on maintaining the status quo rather than challenging it. A development-oriented leader, in contrast, has a broader view of learning as something that is naturally embedded in all work activities. This leader facilitates learning through activities that can be categorised as partially planned and spontaneous (in that they make use of the learning opportunities that arise from problems encountered in the team's daily work). A development-oriented leader also assumes the three

previously mentioned roles depending on the situation but aims to challenge and encourage co-workers to be innovative and to critically reflect on their work.

The leaders in Wallo's (2008) study can be seen as facilitating learning with a primary focus on performance. Although these leaders exhibit traces of development-oriented leadership, such patterns are not as apparent. For instance, it is not common for the leaders in the study to facilitate critical reflection. However, it is important that these different types of learning and the two leadership orientations not be viewed as mutually exclusive; rather, they are complementary and can co-exist. Whereas Bass (2000) privileges transformational leadership over transactional leadership as a means of encouraging learning, others have focused on the challenge of finding a balance between exploitation and exploration, adaptation and development, and transformation and transaction in organisational leadership (Jansen *et al.*, 2009; March and Weil, 2005; Yukl, 2009). Nevertheless, this balance may be difficult to attain because one type of logic tends to dominate (Holmqvist, 2009), and there is a need for more empirical research on the specific ways that managers influence both types of learning (Jansen *et al.*, 2009; Nemanich and Vera, 2009). However, in line with a contingency perspective, it is also important to identify the conditions under which the one, or the other, leadership orientation is likely to dominate and thereby what space there is for a more balanced leadership orientation.

Method and research setting

The subject of this study is a company that has been located in a small city in central Sweden since 1913. The company is part of a world-leading group and has several areas of production, most importantly in the area of power generation and the transmission and distribution of energy. The company's products are sold globally, and the Swedish market accounts for approximately 15 per cent of its total market share. The company has approximately 2,000 employees, 30 per cent of whom are employed under a collective agreement. During the period from 1996 to 1999, the company made major changes to its leadership and production organisation. The impetus for this decision was the ever-quickening pace of product development, increased competition (primarily from Japanese and American companies), and increasing customer demand for faster delivery. The development project included (a) upgrading the production technology and machinery used, (b) setting up team-organised production, and (c) transitioning to team leadership. The latter was preferred as a means of "supporting and developing people and the enterprise", and learning and the exchange of experiences within and between teams were considered essential (internal company document). Before this transition, the managers mainly assisted the operators in solving technical problems and fulfilled certain administrative tasks. The new policy required the development of team-based production, including a focus on continuous improvement and leadership support for such changes.

In the previous study, we had the opportunity to closely monitor this process and the effects of introducing team-organised production. This study was conducted in the year 2000, shortly after the formal ending of the development project. The study was based on interviews with 14 first-line managers (supervisors), four production managers, and 17 operators on two teams. Thus, in total, the empirical material consisted of 35 interviews. Of the first-line managers interviewed, 13 were men, and one was a woman. Their average age was approximately 44 years. The majority of these managers had extensive management experience and had worked in supervisory positions for six to eight years, and several had more than 10 years of management experience. The most common degree among the first-line managers was in mechanical engineering, and all had completed the company's educational program for managers.

The interviews were based on a semi-structured interview guide that addressed the following areas and themes (among others):

- personal background in leadership (e.g., education, previous employment, leadership experience and why the person became a leader);
- models/good leadership (what a good leader is, whether it is possible to live up to demands and expectations);
- experiences and perceptions about leadership in the previous production organisation;
- experiences and perceptions about leadership in team-organised production;
- the responsibilities of leaders (what tasks a leader is responsible for, why these tasks are important, how much of the leader's job is devoted to these tasks, who assists the leader in performing these tasks);
- leadership support (what type of support a leader needs, from whom leaders receive support, and what leadership behaviours are noticed and rewarded).

The majority of the interviews were conducted on-site in meeting rooms located near the workshop. Although the interviews were face-to-face, it was important to allow time for interviewee questions to establish and maintain a positive rapport. Each interview was fully recorded and transcribed, approximately 12-15 pages per interview. All participants were assured that their identities and that of their organisation would remain anonymous. In the results section, we refer to the participants as PMs (production managers), FLMs (first-line managers), and Ops (operators).

The data analysis was conducted in several steps. The first step of analysis began during the interviews in order to make the process sensitive to arising needs to collect new data or use different methods. In a second step, the researchers read every transcript using descriptive codes to obtain an overall sense of the content of each interview. In the third step, we used a provisional list of factors and conditions that we believed would help us to understand the collected data. This list reflected various parts of our conceptual framework concerning learning and leadership (e.g., previous research that might be relevant to organising the data). Miles and Huberman (1994) call this "creating codes". In the final step, we discussed the findings obtained in the first three steps and attempted to develop a mutual understanding of the data in relation to the research questions and previous research. Concerning the presentation of the data, quotes have been used to illustrate the lines of reasoning and to give a more pregnant image of the phenomena being presented.

Results

As noted above, the case company performed an extensive reorganisation process to implement a team-based philosophy and transition to a team leadership style. The next section describes how the actors viewed the prevailing leadership, which would be changed with the introduction of team-based organisation within the entire company. All managers as well as operators included in the study were targets of the reorganisation process.

The prevailing leadership

The prevailing leadership within the case company dominated until the end of the 1990s, when the new organisational model was introduced. In this section, we present how the management, first-line managers, and operators described this leadership.

Production management. The prevailing leadership was described as more authoritarian than the new leadership. First-line managers were expected to act in accordance with the management's decisions, and the work environment was characterised by giving orders and

managing operations by being “on the floor”. Everyone on the management team described extensive changes having occurred in the first-line managers’ form of leadership. Most importantly, the earlier leadership style was technical/task-focused; the leader gave the instructions and orders, and individual needs were assigned a low priority. Changes in the number of subordinate workers and an increase in shift work encouraged the management to adopt a leadership style that involved less direct control.

First-line managers. The first-line managers interviewed were mainly in agreement regarding how leadership was practised 10 to 15 years ago and regarding the major changes that had taken place since that time. Previously, the first-line managers were generally technicians who solved technical production problems, whereas the supervisors mainly ensured that there was work to be performed, solved problems and served as liaisons to the construction department. Economic responsibility was limited, and supervisors managed fewer operators. Several first-line managers described this work arrangement as better than the new one.

Operators. The two groups of operators interviewed depicted the prevailing leadership in a manner that was consistent with the supervisors’ descriptions. According to the operators, the first-line managers made more decisions and directed employees in much more detail in the prevailing leadership system.

Before, there was more of an attitude that, like, you can stand there [at your machine] you jerk, until you drop. (Op1)

They decided a lot more. They just said, “Do this”. Yup, and that was all there was to it. (Op2)

The operators also reported having had more respect for the first-line managers in the traditional/prevailing management system. Because the first-line managers had a great deal of technical expertise, they previously assisted the operators with technical production problems; however, this is no longer the case under the new leadership style. In sum, the production managers, supervisors, and operators all described the prevailing leadership as more authoritarian, instructive, order-driven, and characterised by distance between the leaders and subordinates. The setup was often described negatively, but individual leaders and operators also emphasised the order and structure that the old system engendered.

The emerging “new” leadership

We now present how the emerging new mode of leadership was characterised by the production management, first-line managers, and operators.

Production management. The management group provided varying descriptions of the “new” leadership. However, the supervisor was routinely portrayed as a coach. Being a coach means being accessible and providing support, as described in the following quote:

Yeah, it is a lot. You have to be able to listen and understand what is being presented... It is hard to give a good description; you have to consider the situation as well. But I think that you have to listen, understand, and make something of it. (PM5)

Social competence was emphasised as one of the capabilities and qualifications a leader should possess; it was considered an important requirement for managing people and promoting a sense of commitment. The demand for this leadership style was connected to changes in societal values and to the different demands made by young people in this generation regarding their work. Analogies were made between managing and coaching in sports:

It's something like a soccer coach. We have a lot of those coach-types taking part in the leadership sessions we have. But a trainer for soccer or ice hockey or whatever, his most important task is to give the team an energy kick and actually the feeling that he [the manager] is a really great guy that we'll do everything for. That's when you've succeeded. (PM2)

However, problems may arise when a manager practises a coaching-based form of leadership. One of the interviewed production managers stated that coaching requires more active participation, which can entail more control. This excessive control can be problematic because it is important to encourage the operators to take responsibility for their work. Another difficulty is that the coaching-based style of leadership can be taken to extremes; thus, the manager must be able to draw the line, and "the operators sometimes need a little more authoritarian control". Another member of the management group stressed that first-line managers need the courage to speak up when the work is not performed acceptably. In addition, the interviewees were aware that it can take time to develop the leadership skills necessary to properly implement this new model:

...what should I say, there is a long tradition of how production work has functioned and a lot remains of that there should be strict rules and the supervisor should be a work supervisor, really. And it takes a long time to change this and get workers to take responsibility. In some places people are ready for it and in others they are not, and then supervisors can help in different ways. It is probably rather dependent on how far a person has come in their own development as well, how secure a person is in themselves, I think. (PM1)

First-line managers. This group primarily emphasised the importance of promoting participation and commitment among the operators they supervise. Unlike the production management, the first-line managers emphasised the importance of favourable relationships with their co-workers. With regard to the abilities or qualifications required for leaders to perform well, one of the first-line managers stated the following:

Yeah. It takes, above all, that a person can develop a good relationship with his co-workers out in the team. That is the most important, to have a climate that allows people to have a dialogue on all levels. As the saying goes, it's good to have lively discussions. (FLM5)

Several first-line managers stated that as leaders, they developed and promoted participation and commitment by being present for the work and on the team. Several also mentioned that they set high standards for themselves and aimed to serve as role models for others.

To a large degree, the work of a first-line manager is influenced by the events that occur in the workshop. Several of the first-line managers believed that their responses to what happens during the production process presuppose access to time. If a problem arises, these managers must have time to deal with the issue because they feel responsible for maintaining production. Several first-line managers referenced the earlier concept of the order-giving foreman and suggested that the manager is now a part of the team, with more teamwork occurring. One first-line manager asserted that the team is now more self-directed and that this goal had been a priority for many years:

What we do today, we work more with things having to do with getting the team to function... production technology has almost disappeared from our role. Instead, it is more staff issues, yeah, everything that has to do with that, the staff, hiring and that part. There is still some planning; that is still around in the broad picture. (FLM5)

In the interviews, several first-line managers mentioned the concept of coaching, whereas others preferred the expression "team leader". Affinity, relationships, commitment, and participation were important elements of the leadership styles that were described. To the interviewees, being a team leader meant encouraging commitment and participation, and thus,

the leader had to be accessible and committed. One of the managers considered coaching to be both simple and difficult: the manager must both provide a “pat on the back” when needed and be willing to “step in when things get out of control somewhere.”

Only one first-line manager mentioned another aspect of the role of coach, namely, that leaders are also responsible for supporting the development of the operators. In this role, it is essential to ask questions as part of the ongoing learning process. One important way to support operator learning is to maintain a low profile and to encourage co-workers to find solutions rather than providing them (the co-workers) with the answers:

No, but some people ask why you're doing this and that.... then you say, “Do you have another suggestion?” Then there can be a discussion to try to reach another solution. The best is if someone comes with a problem and asks, “What should we do in this case? What do you think?” Then there is a dialogue right away, and a solution is found.... new ideas, new, fresh ideas, you just have to keep at it. It feels good. (FLM1)

How, then, does a leader learn to meet the expectations of a particular leadership style within the organisation? Working in the company for an extended period of time seems to be one way of learning this code:

...but there is an old culture and there is of course a lot that can't be learned from reading but that you have to have experience to understand... (FLM1)

It also seems that manager experience with sports is important. A large number of supervisors are or have been sports coaches. In addition, personnel department and higher-level managers have on several occasions hired sports coaches as lecturers and consultants. Experience as a sports coach appears to be one of the qualifications of a good leader:

Well, I don't know if it is the right attitude, but I have the approach that you become a leader if you have been thoroughly involved in volunteer organisations, which is an advantage because you have to show consideration for other people and be used to working in teams and groups. And I've been involved a lot with soccer, and still am. I'm involved with a women's team, and have the benefit of that. There are somewhat similar conflicts at work as there are in sports. You know kind of how to solve it. (FLM1)

Leadership as described by the first-line managers can be summarised as an effort to create commitment and participation by being present and available to those being led. This leadership style presumes social competence, which includes the ability to create good relationships, to bring co-workers together and to maintain the attention of the co-workers. These abilities are cultivated through experience and discussions with others within the organisation but also by participation in other similar contexts – for instance, as sports coaches.

Operators. The operators also described leadership as relationship-oriented, and first-line managers were described as team leaders. They emphasised that managers and supervisors are now more sensitive to operator needs and that there are more opportunities for operators to have control over their own work.

It's sure an unbelievably different way of thinking, so in that way, it's much better now, that's for sure. And this thing with the teams we work in, that we work together and help each other as much as we can. So it's really a big difference. (Op1)

The first-line managers have relinquished control of certain production tasks, and several tasks are currently performed by the groups of operators:

He doesn't poke into anything. Instead, we have X who is a planner and looks after what we're going to work with. We, all of us, are involved. We all know pretty well what to do. (Op1)

Several operators felt that having a friendly relationship with the supervisor was positive but that it could cause problems for the supervisor. Older operators stated that they lacked clear directives and decisions from supervisors. One explanation for this sentiment may be that these older operators worked under more instructive management for many years. Others felt that it was difficult to achieve a balance between friendship and leadership.

Difficulties experienced in realising the "new" leadership

The "coach" and the "team leader" styles of leadership described by the first-line managers were regarded as highly attractive. However, these managers also experienced a number of constraints. The supervisors' new roles included several additional responsibilities and work tasks. These included increased responsibility for personnel, finances, environmental issues, occupational health, and security issues. The supervisors stated that as a result, their new tasks limited their ability to work as team leaders.

On this subject, the production managers suggested that the supervisors faced challenges and a great deal of responsibility. One member of the production management team specifically described the work of the supervisors as "an impossible task". Several supervisors worked on operations while also fulfilling very demanding administrative responsibilities, the latter of which took priority over co-worker needs. One consequence was that some administrative tasks required the supervisors to work overtime. Others decided to prioritise the administrative duties and therefore did not have sufficient contact with the team.

When the first-line managers described the changes in leadership, several discussed the increased responsibility that they were given over financial matters, personnel, work environment issues, and occupational health. It was especially clear that these individuals now have increased responsibility for work environment issues and for addressing occupational health issues. They considered these responsibilities an encumbrance. They described the consequences of failing to complete such tasks successfully in dramatic terms:

Yah, these are the things that land you in jail for a few years if you aren't careful. Do they have valid truck drivers' licences? Have they received hoist training? Are these chemicals in our chemical binder when they get them in their eyes? Are we keeping track of that they have the proper training for the job? If you don't take care of it, then you're stuck. (FLM2)

In addition to having responsibility for work environment issues, several of the first-line managers spend substantial amount of time on individual development reviews during certain periods, and this proves especially demanding for those with large groups of co-workers.

Yup, you can figure 41 individual development reviews times two hours each, so you can figure out how much needs to be done in the fall or the follow-up on the individual development reviews, and a couple salary discussions. Everything is times the number of staff you have. There isn't the time to put the effort you want into the production work. I'd like to work closer to my team and also be able to influence it. (FLM2)

The operators were aware of the responsibilities of the first line managers regarding personnel, budgeting, and work environment issues. Although they primarily emphasised the first-line managers' responsibilities with respect to financial matters, they also recognised their personnel responsibilities.

For the most part, the first-line managers were in agreement when asked how the various demands of the system affected their work. Because the supervisors were faced with increasing demands and had increasingly fewer opportunities to lead by interacting with the

team, personnel issues were given a lower priority than the non-negotiable budgetary, environmental and occupational health issues. Although both the management group and the first-line managers felt that personnel issues are a manager's most important responsibility, they suggested that the system clearly assigns greater importance to other demands.

The difficulty of balancing the demand for economic efficiency and the importance of optimally managing personnel was expressed in an interview with a first-line manager:

If it goes bad economically, then maybe, well, you don't get so much credit for other things that are good. On the other hand, if we're making money, then you can make other mistakes that you certainly don't get told off so much for; they look the other way. (FLM3)

The leadership style used by the management group and the first-line managers can be characterised as team leadership. However, this type of leadership must be further developed. Several supervisors work mainly on operations-related tasks. Simultaneously, an increasing amount of their time is allotted to administrative duties. The picture of leadership that emerged in the examined company can be characterised by supervisors caught between their need to be accessible to operators, the demands of the production management team (and their own ambitions) regarding coaching, and their increased responsibility for various administrative systems.

Discussion

The aim of the present article was to revisit data from a previous study of leadership in an industrial company that was in the process of implementing a process-oriented, team-based organisation. What image of the leadership team at that organisation emerges from the interviews with production managers, first-line managers, and operators at the studied company? What factors constrain and facilitate the practise of leadership according to the interviews?

As previously indicated, many of the interviewed managers and operators perceived a clear difference between the prevailing leadership and the new or emerging leadership. The "new" leadership, which either had already been implemented or was something the company was actively moving towards, contrasts with the prevailing leadership in several ways. In the current case, however, there was no consensus that "it was better before". On the contrary, positive comments were generally made concerning the transition towards the new leadership style, which was perceived to be more consistent with organisational requirements.

What, then, are the characteristics of this "new" leadership? A striking observation is that the differences between the prevailing and the "new" leadership seem to be consistent with several of the basic aspects that are discernible in current management literature. Good leadership is characterised both in this literature and in the manager and operator interviews as supporting the participation and commitment of co-workers. Concepts such as coaching and relationship-building are central to the descriptions of the type of leadership that was developing within the company. These, however, were not characteristics of the prevailing leadership style, which was based on authoritarian control and management of co-workers.

However, it is important to note that the various actors in the leadership group, the first-line managers, and both groups of operators emphasised that the traditional leadership style had not been completely discarded. In fact, completely eliminating the prevailing style was neither considered possible nor desirable. The traditional leadership structure, which was largely based on the supervisor's expert technical knowledge of production, was well established in the local context. In this context, the "new" and traditional leadership styles may not be viewed consistently. The "new" leadership has emerged as a best practise response to future requirements, and individuals must attempt to understand and adapt to it. In contrast, the traditional leadership is considered as less "modern" but is deeply rooted in

practise due to its personification by many leaders within the company. Unlike the traditional leadership style, the “new” leadership style is not supported by good, clear examples and models of how such leadership can and ought to be carried out within the daily work environment. This lack of clear role models may partially explain why the descriptions of coaching-based leadership or team leading were typically only general in nature.

Nonetheless, a closer examination of the “new” leadership reveals two important trends. First, and perhaps most obviously, there was a trend towards establishing good team relationships. As in previous research, the leaders support and guide the team while promoting workplace satisfaction and creating a positive working climate (Ellinger and Bostrom, 2002; Wallo, 2008). The second trend is related to Wallo’s (2008) conceptualisation of the leader as an educator. This leadership style promotes the ability of co-workers to identify and formulate problems in relation to work and to reflect and determine alternative ways of examining problems and solutions. Of these two trends, the second was less evident in the interviews and other discussions with the company managers and supervisors. However, this aspect of leadership was briefly mentioned by only one of the supervisors when he discussed the significance of encouraging operators to find solutions to problems by asking questions.

The aforementioned elements of the “new” leadership style within the company are, as previously described, in some aspects similar to the ideas of transformative leadership found in the literature (Bass, 1998). At the same time, we note that being a coach is mainly suggested to involve promoting work satisfaction and good relationships, being a role model, taking initiatives, and encouraging new ways to achieve established goals.

Like those of Wallo’s (2008) study, these results suggest that the emerging “new” leadership was primarily dominated by a performance orientation that promotes adaptive learning within and between the work teams in the organisation (cf. Ellström, 2006; 2011; Wallo, 2008). Despite using gentler, more personnel-oriented methods (e.g., building relationships and trust) than traditional leadership, the leaders in the organisation primarily maintain the status quo. Perhaps these gentler methods are examples of the less visible, softer forms of governance that have received attention in recent research on new forms of organisation. This may be illustrated by Barker’s (1993) discussion of the concept of “concertive control”, which is a softer form of control maintained by fostering conformity, mutual understanding and “good relationships”.

How, then, do we explain the predominance of performance-oriented leadership? Some answers may be found in the contextual factors that influence the daily work of the managers. A predominant theme in the interviews regarding the tasks performed by the first-line managers was the suggestion that administration was often prioritised above direct leadership and team contact. First-line managers were responsible for the budget, quality control, work environment issues, and occupational health issues. In addition, they were responsible for personnel issues, including individual development and salary discussions. Several people indicated that the associated tasks were time-consuming. According to many managers, the demands of the system with regard to budget, work plans, follow-up, and reporting required an excessive amount of time, making a decreased amount of time available for direct interaction with co-workers (Hales, 2005). The observed pattern indicates that first-line managers are victims of the increased decentralisation and broad range of responsibilities associated with a “flat” organisation; they must increasingly practise the type of indirect leadership that was previously characteristic of higher-level managers. From this perspective, leading those who lead themselves (Manz and Sims, 1987; Mohrman *et al.*, 1995) in process and team-organised operations means something different than was originally intended. Even if the team leads itself in some way, this primarily occurs with a minimum amount of contact with formal leadership. The obvious risk that arises is that the team will work at a suboptimal

level because, for example, the traditional division of labour will preserve ingrained roles in the group or the team will avoid new or more demanding tasks.

Conclusions and implications

A main result of this study was an observed discrepancy between the company's expectations for a "new" leadership following the introduction of a process-oriented organisation and the actual leadership as perceived by the managers and operators in the study. Thus, we may conclude that the new leadership ideals were not realised automatically or easily, and that the organisational changes did not provide sufficient conditions for changes in leadership behaviour. On the contrary, there appeared to be a strong inertia when it came to changes in leadership behaviour. Then, which were the constraining factors causing this inertia?

Overall, the administrative workload of first-line managers may have greatly limited their opportunities to develop and realise the "new" leadership that were outlined above; they were not able to focus sufficiently on encouraging worker participation, commitment, and learning. However, their focus on administrative tasks may also have been a way to avoid the challenges and more demanding tasks that this "new" leadership style entailed. Such an avoidance strategy could have been further encouraged by the uncertainty and lack of concreteness that characterised the discussions about "new" leadership in the organisation. This may also illustrate the difficulties that are often associated with attempts to implement general, decontextualised leadership models. It is also possible that the "new" leadership ideas clashed with the understanding of leadership that prevailed in the local context. However, at the same time, the results presented in this study indicate that the organisational changes created a potential to foster a development-oriented leadership intended to promote critical, reflective learning and innovative problem-solving in daily work. This is in line with previous research on learning-oriented leadership (e.g. Ellinger & Bostrom, 2002; Wallo, 2008).

One implication of this study is to highlight the importance of balancing the organisation's logic of development and logic of performance to achieve a leadership that truly facilitates both adaptive and developmental learning (cf. Ellström, 2001; March, 1991). As indicated above, such a balancing act does not occur spontaneously. Rather, there is a need for leaders to create opportunities, spaces and support for increased developmental learning at work. An important task for further research would be to explore the individual factors and organisational conditions that could promote a realisation of such a balance. It is also important to further study how managers' learning-oriented leadership can be understood and improved, for example through management education and training, but also through learning in their daily work as managers.

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