

Title: Principles for organizing leadership development in public organizations

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Area of interest: Leadership development

Type: Oral presentation

Background and aim

The significance of leadership for organizational success is widely recognized (West et al., 2015; Sfantou et al., 2017; Lundqvist et al., 2023), but there is considerable variation in opinions and approaches regarding the most effective methods of leadership development. Previous research has yielded contradictory findings rather than a definitive stance. Organizations draw inspiration from diverse leadership development approaches, and professionals engaged in leadership development hold different beliefs regarding what constitutes success (Bergmo-Prvulovic et al., 2022; Vongswasdi et al., 2023). This study explores public professionals' shared understanding of success factors for organizing leadership development within public organizations in Sweden.

Method

The study employed a collaborative approach (Van de Ven and Johnson, 2006) together with professionals working with leadership development such as HR, strategists and leadership coaches and trainers. In total, 34 professionals from 17 municipalities and 10 regions in Sweden were participating, spanning the entire country.

To collect data, we hosted two parallel series of workshops (WS). Each series comprised two workshops (WS1 and WS2), each lasting 3 hours, conducted through a digital meeting platform. All workshops consisted of brief instructions to the entire group, followed by collaborative work in randomly assigned trios. Each question was preceded by a 3-5 minute period of individual reflection. The trio dialogues were recorded, and professionals had the option to take notes and share them with the researchers after the workshop. The data collected during WS1 was transcribed and analyzed by using reflexive thematic analysis (Braun and Clarke, 2022). Shared understandings were treated as key concepts (Braun and Clarke, 2022) and interpreted as key principles, each consisting of a range of beliefs on how to achieve the principle. In WS2, participants were invited to review the preliminary analysis, discuss it, and contribute additional insights, which further confirmed and enriched the results. After WS2, the participants had the opportunity to internally review the preliminary findings within their organizations and share their viewpoints via email or by participating in two additional workshops (WS3 and WS4). The key concepts and their respective codes were progressively organized into themes.

Results

The findings revealed 10 key concepts within 4 themes (preliminary), which collectively

portrayed the professionals shared understandings of key principles for organizing leadership development. The findings highlight the professionals' collective comprehension of what holds significance, yet they held divergent beliefs on how to achieve it.

The description of the result is ongoing. A detailed presentation will be possible during the conference.

Discussion and implications

Our findings provide unique insights into how professionals interpret and apply various leadership development theories in practice, as well as their collective understanding of what is important and their diverse beliefs on how to achieve it.

The study makes three main theoretical contributions: 1) Emphasizing the significance of establishing a sustainable leadership development system, rather than solely focusing on individual developmental practices. 2) Highlighting the importance of perceiving the leadership development system as a supportive structure aligned with the organization's overall direction, utilizing a wide range of methods. 3) Underlining the importance of making the underlying assumptions of the organization's leadership development visible and actively questioning and refining them.

For practitioners, our result highlights 10 key principles that are crucial for organizing leadership development in public organizations.

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Title: Quality as a paradoxical practice

Author: Christina Evaldsson

Area of interest: Quality improvement

Type: Oral presentation

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Background and aim

Quality and quality improvement are today common concepts in a variety of areas such as business, manufacturing and the public sector. Nowadays, these concepts are also crucial in systems change, driving transformative and sustainable adaptations to meet stakeholders' evolving needs. Within the public sector, more specifically social services, the interest in quality improvement has grown increasingly, and today, social services dedicate substantial working hours to what they perceive as quality improvement efforts. This focus on quality improvement is also explicitly incorporated into The Social Services Act (SFS 2001:453). However, there are those who are critical of how the concept of quality has come to be understood and how quality improvement has come to be applied (Bornemark, 2020) as the discussion today within social work has increasingly come to be about e.g. review and control, which entails the risk of reducing the professionals' discretion. At the same time, there are those who describe quality improvement as a way to strengthen the professionals' participation in the organization. Improvement knowledge is considered an important complement to professional knowledge and both parts are needed for successful quality improvement (Batalden & Davidoff, 2007).

Systematic quality improvement can thus give rise to paradoxes, with one illustrative instance being the conflict between discretion and autonomy on one hand, and governance and control on the other. This paradox can be particularly challenging within social work, where clients have unique needs that necessitate various service adaptations, which, in turn, entails social workers' discretion. Consequently, leadership is faced with novel demands to effectively navigate this paradox.

The study aims at an in-depth understanding of what meanings the professionals fill the concept of quality with and how the work to improve quality expresses itself and what challenges it faces. By studying how quality improvement takes place today, opportunities are created to advance strategies for quality improvement.

Method

A Swedish social service organization constitutes the study's case. Employing a qualitative methodological approach, the study adopts an interactive design to facilitate co-creation with professionals in the field of child welfare. This collaboration was deemed crucial for advancing our understanding of the concept of quality and its practical implementation through quality improvement initiatives. An interactive design broadly means that the research aims at both solutions to problems in practice and the creation of scientific knowledge (Aagaard Nielsen & Svensson, 2006).

The study's analysis was based on a collection of documents pertaining to the organization's quality improvement efforts, along with 26 individual qualitative interviews conducted with professionals. Additionally, observations were made during the implementation of systematic

quality improvement initiatives. To ensure a comprehensive understanding, input was sought from both strategic professionals within the management, as well as clinical professionals holding roles such as social workers and family therapists. Through these interviews, the professionals offered insights into their perspectives on quality, drawing from their experiences in leading, supporting, and/or engaging in child welfare activities. Qualitative content analysis inspired by Graneheim and Lundman (2004) was carried out. After an initial analysis and as part of the interactive approach, preliminary results were returned to the study participants for a collective dialogue (resembling the dialogue arena described by Rosenlund & Rosell, 2017). The participants offered their thoughts on the presented findings, which provided valuable support for interpreting the results.

The study employs paradox theory as a lens to comprehend the challenges and strategies of professionals concerning systematic quality improvement.

Results and implications

The study's results indicate that professionals give several meanings to quality and quality improvement, meanings that may seem paradoxical, which means challenges in their endeavour to improve quality.

The results highlight the significance of adopting a co-creative approach involving all stakeholders when an organization formulates strategies pertaining to quality improvement. A more collective leadership approach seems to be required to solve the challenges in social care.

The research project remains in progress, and the forthcoming conference presentation aims to unveil a more nuanced and elaborate set of results.

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ISLC proposal 2023

Title

Building Emotional and Relational Resilience in Leaders

Jonathan Reams, Juliane Reams

Detailed Abstract (743 words)

Leadership can be understood as co-creative, (Uhl-Bein, 2021), involving leaders, followers and context (Kellerman, 2018). To enable this co-creative activity, concepts such as emotional resilience (Davis, 2009; Grant & Kinman, 2014) and relational resilience (Jordan, 1992, 2005) can serve to go beyond simple admonitions for leaders to be co-creative by enabling the development of specific skills. In this presentation we focus on conceptualizing and researching how to develop emotional and relational resilience skills through micro-learning activities that can be deployed at scale.

Emotional resilience is described as “the ability to ‘recover’ from adversity, react appropriately, or ‘bounce back’ when life presents challenges” (Grant & Kinman, 2014, p. 24). We wish to look beyond recovering to a prior state and see emotional resilience as a developmental opportunity. For this, we draw on Mascolo (2020), who takes a relational approach to emotional development, describing how “emotional forms arise within a dynamically organized person – environment system” (p. 212).

The concept of relational resilience has been used primarily in youth, family or marriage contexts. Jordan (1992, 2005) proposed a reframe of the conception of resilience from an individual to a relational focus. From this basis, we are zooming in to focus on the micro-processes that occur in relational dynamics. We draw on a combination of Arbingers’ (2000, 2006) concept of collusion and Argyris’ (1990) ladder of inference. Our aim is to support people in applying the foundation of emotional trigger awareness and learn to make use of it in relational dynamics that can enable co-creative leadership.

We use dynamic skill theory (Fischer, 1980; Mascolo and Fischer, 2010) as a foundation. Skills are “the capacity to act in an organized way in a specific context. Skills are thus action-based and context specific” (Mascolo & Fischer, 2010, p. 321). Emotion is very active in the development of skills, habits of thought and choice that become the basis for action. Every action involves an integration of cognitive, conative (Harney, 2020), and emotional processes that influence behavior. Emotional states affect our action tendencies, referring to biases or constraints that emotions exert on the resulting behavior (Fischer & Yan, 2002). Action-tendencies shape skills in immediate situations by the subject’s reaction to their own expectations (Barrett, 2017) and present feelings which cause variations in performance. Through repeated evocation over long periods, these action-tendencies shape developmental pathways – describing how reiterated micro-developmental sequences create macro-development (Granott & Gardner, 1994; Kegan & Lahey, 2001).

Building on the foundation of dynamic skill theory, Dawson (Dawson and Stein, 2011) has described an approach to learning, virtuous cycles of learning (VCoLs), that operationalizes a natural approach to learning. More recently, Dawson has outlined the practice of micro-VCoLs as a method for building skills in the moment. This learning model becomes central to how we are building learning activities to develop emotional and relational resilience.

In this presentation, we will describe the production of two specific sequences of learning activities focused on building emotional and relational resilience. The first involves creating awareness of triggers that generate reactive behaviors. This allows learners to make micro subject object shifts that enable the reframing of underlying fears into curiosity for learning. The second, (developed but not yet deployed or researched), involves building on this foundational first-person awareness to include the second person, relational dynamic more explicitly. For this, we enable learners to be more present to their emotions as they experience them. We aim to help them to break down the rapid, automatic judgments that occur when triggered, see how they generate unhelpful behaviors, take the perspective of others and finally see how they can break the negative cycles such collusion generates. This can better enable co-creative leadership in practice.

Participants in this study are mature students in a university continuing education course on leadership development. They did a 360 assessment and accessed a series of learning activities in an online platform based on the micro-VCoL model. This was done in the spring term of 2022 with a pilot group of 12 and in the spring of 2023 with 29 leaders in a revised version. These responses were exported to a google sheet and analyzed to identify steps and sequences in the learning process.

The analysis of their textual responses indicate the presence of micro-developmental shifts that enabled them to choose more creative behavior in their work environment in real time. Participants describe a variety of ways they recognized triggers, identified underlying emotions and practiced reframing their experience to enable more creative responses.

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Co-creative leadership:

Why and how certain approaches to leadership allow adaptive responses in complex systems

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Organizations, communities and societies are faced with ever more complex challenges such as public health problems. Attempts to address such challenges require involvement of various actors ranging from state and regional authorities to non-governmental organizations and individuals. Additionally, many of those that are delivering social care services are with different professional backgrounds and belong to different departments. Such partnerships create ground for complex relationships between the actors involved in each project. As a result, such actors find themselves in complex and volatile contexts where the questions of who, when and where to take the lead are, often, ambiguous. Leadership is an integral part of any organization's practices (Schedlitzki et al., 2023). However, theories of leadership have primarily focused on boosting individual leaders' successes within systems, thus curtaining the relational aspects of leadership. Like Uhl-Bien (2021a), we understand leadership as a co-creation. Yet, the knowledge on the necessary competence to manage such projects and what enables cooperation and adaptability is limited. Thus, our overall aim is to further the understanding of how co-creative leadership can enable interconnectivity and adaptability in complex systems.

The context for this presentation is a new project on competency supply in social care services. A general shortage of different kinds of professionals has urged the municipality in a medium sized town in Sweden to create cross departmental projects which seek to explore new ways of managing staff shortage issues. Through follow-up research in the form of process evaluations, our focus is on how the project affects the larger system in which it is part of. Our research will be exploratory, and informed by complex system perspectives, such as complexity leadership theory (Uhl-Bien et al., 2007; Uhl-Bien, 2021b), generative emergence (Lichtenstein, 2014; 2021) and complex systems perspective (McGill, 2021), on the one hand, and co-creative leadership perspectives (Denis et al., 2012; Kjellström et al., 2020), on the other.

Our ambition is to address the following research questions:

- 1) How a cross department project evolves over time and how what happens can be illustrated and explained based on theories of complexity?
- 2) If and how a co-creative leadership is used, and why and how certain approaches to leadership allow adaptive responses, while others hinder them?
- 3) How continuous improvement is integrated in the management of the project?
- 4) How is leadership developed in daily practice throughout the project?

We will utilize a mixed methods approach, and, as a first step, use shadowing of project meetings (Czarniawska, 2007). Through shadowing, we aim to “be there” when the practices occur, and to see first-hand what, and how it, happens. This would allow us to notice things that our study objects do not necessarily think of sharing during a regular interview. The shadowing process will start in September 2023, and we plan to have a learning seminar with all parties involved in November 2023, where our initial observations are shared with researchers and municipality professionals. Our goal for the conference is to present our early findings and discuss future avenues of this project which is under way.

Keywords: leadership, co-creative leadership, complex systems

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