

ABSTRACT

Is there Leader in Self-Managed Team?

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This paper focuses on exploring leadership in self-managed team or also known as leaderless team. Organisations have been utilizing project teams to encourage members with various expertise to produce ideas that result in creative output in completing their tasks. Therefore, project teams are considered important in most organisations. Various types of project teams exist in organisations and the leadership style differs amongst the teams. In a self-managing team, the team members have different set of knowledge and abilities which are a result of utilizing a combination of experts from different areas. The teams are given the autonomy over completing their tasks and responsibilities are also delegated to the team members rather than any specific leader. Therefore, it is interesting to gain understanding on how leadership functions in this particular type of team with no formal leader. A qualitative research was conducted in exploring this issue of leadership in self-managed team in organizations. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with the team members from two organizations in Malaysia, HGCo and WTCO. The findings of the study suggested that in a self-managed team, even with no formal leader within the team, external leaders play an important role. External leaders become the point of reference to the team members in ensuring that they are able to perform their tasks. Leadership is also needed when the team faced with conflicts or issues which distract the team members. When this occurs, the team members needed to rely on the external leader to assist them in decision making and problem-solving process. This process changes the team members from being independent, towards becoming dependent on the external leader. A model of leadership in self-managed team is proposed and this will assist organizations in forming project teams to ensure that it achieves the objective of increasing organizational productivity and performance.

Keyword: Self-Managed Teams, Project Teams, Leaderless Team, Leadership

(300 words)

Matters of necessity:

Speaking in the name of the situation, shaping next actions

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Matters of necessity

Organizations often self-describe in celebratory terms of choice, possibility and potentiality as most corporate websites, newsletters, job advertisements and yearly reports will swiftly demonstrate. Yet in everyday organizational meetings, conversations, and interactions, not least in times of trouble, another less celebrated but consequential phenomenon appears, that of *necessity*.

Necessity is frequently mobilized to support singular actions, such as when CNN announced sweeping cutbacks across the news organization in 2022 and CEO Chris Licht stated in an internal memo: “The changes we are making today are necessary and will make us stronger and better positioned to place big bets going forward without fear of failure” (Darcy, 2022). The way the CEO connects controversial change to a certain rendering of the situation is, in this statement, presented as ‘necessary.’ Establishing an account of a situation in a way that it mandates an – often less popular – next action is a mainstay of corporate communication to the extent that change perceived as negative is oftentimes expected to arise from (or at least connect to) necessity. Indeed, change management consultants may even advise top management to create a ‘sense of urgency’ (Kotter, 2008) as a fertile ground for establishing the inevitability of change – or more simply put, of its necessity. In many ways, necessity is thus a pervasive phenomenon in organizational life, occurring whenever a present situation is described in a way that singles out and mandates a particular next action with little to no room for negotiation.

However, in stark contrast to this pervasiveness, surprisingly little explicit attention has been paid to necessity in organizational theory. Pragmatists like Dewey (Brandi & Elkjaer, 2016) connects the situation and its ensuing action while Grint points to the situated character of any action (2005), which includes the action of accounting for the situation.

Garfinkel, in turn, elucidates the ‘essential reflexivity’ of situation and action, meaning that whatever next thing done or said or done is always made sense of in relation to the one before (1967, p. 4, see also Lynch, 2000; Meier & Carroll, 2022). Yet, these authors do not explicitly address necessity or how needed next action emerges through the way situations are made sense of. What they do allude to, however, is how necessity neither sits exclusively with the contingencies of the situation nor exclusively with the appropriateness of next action but is inseparably produced in interaction: the situation *with* the next action as organizational closure emerges (Cooren & Fairhurst, 2004; Larsson & Lundholm, 2013; Robichaud et al., 2004). In other words, an organizational polyphony is reduced to a monophony (Poroli & Cooren, 2023) as a consequential, next action is foregrounded over others.

In this work-in-progress paper, we begin exploring necessity as a situated, communicative accomplishment. Specifically, we explore and illustrate how organizational members convert select matters of concern into what we label matters of necessity through the invocation of voices that render certain readings of the situation more prevalent than others and deem certain next actions as essential to proceed. Our explorations, illustrations, and conclusions are based on a detailed analysis of meetings between board members and project managers in a major, North European digital automation project. In these meetings, board members repeatedly find themselves in situations they interpret as mandating particular next actions as much more necessary to perform than others. Adopting a communicational lens and ventriloquial analytical approach (Cooren, 2010, 2012; Nathues et al., 2021; Poroli & Cooren, 2023), we elucidate the precise ways by which necessity is discursively produced at the nexus of the present situation and the imminent next action.

Our analysis shows that necessity emerges as interpretations of a situation converge and align themselves into an immediate next action, i.e., the singularity. The process often involves making the very continuation of work dependent on this next action, thus escalating the severity of the situation. In our analysis, the case project becomes characterized as ‘red’ (‘high alert’) at the board meeting in question, giving participants (and analysts) a sense of Dewey’s indeterminate situation. Yet, we maintain, necessity is also a precarious accomplishment, contingent on gathering – and holding together – a plenum of agencies (Cooren, 2006). Identifying and sustaining ‘being in red’ for instance, takes debate in our Excerpt 2 (not included in this version), in which participants scramble for certainty, suggest various colours and seek certitude in the signs in an unread report, eventually concluding that the project is in red not only in the economy but overall. The ventriloquial lens, then, allows us to unweave the intricate, interactional dynamic of this process. While participants appear as vents to make the project figure red, the redness of the situation makes the CEO insist that the board will – indeed is obliged to – help the project get back to yellow or green, as ‘we do that in these situations’. Necessity accrues as participants express what the situation is, only to find themselves subjected to the very same situation, invoking its demands, prerequisites, and routines, *in casu* the immediate next action.

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**The social practices of eliciting agency at work:
Pushing, pulling, and claiming initiative**

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The Leadership Dynamics of Systems Change

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In 1938 Chester Barnard famously stated that authority does not float from formal hierarchy, role, or position - it is rather granted by people in the organization. At that time, it was otherwise commonplace for formal leaders to issue orders to employees and expect them to follow. Much has changed in organizational dynamics, leadership practices and work interactions since then, rendering strict orders largely obsolete in many contemporary work settings. However, people still need to find ways to get others to take action on the benefit of the organization. Adaptivity and innovation in contemporary organizations entails leadership in the sense of empowering people to take initiative in situations of uncertainty and complexity, enabling organizational actors to commit to work on difficult challenges and finding new ways forward (Ashford & Sitkin, 2019; Uhl-Bien & Arena, 2018; Grint, 2008). This paper digs into the details of how the mobilization of initiative and agency is accomplished in situated work interactions.

There is a dilemma in mobilizing initiative and committed action from others, as you risk constraining initiative in the act of pushing for it (Grint, 2005). In other words, leadership actors are faced with the balancing act of trying to influence someone to not just perform an action, which can be accomplished via commandment and coercion, but to willingly take responsibility for engaging with the action. Organizing with flatter hierarchy and more freedom for self-management may help generate agency and initiative, but it may also complicate how formal and informal leaders influence others to act in the interest of the larger whole. This raises questions such as: How do leadership actors handle the issue of mobilizing action and initiative from others without killing it in the process? What are the social practices of negotiating agentic responsibility in an organizational era post command and control?

We know relatively little about how concrete actions are organized and actors mobilized to commit to them in situated social practice, as ethnographic and interactional studies are still rare in leadership research (Clifton, Larsson & Schnurr, 2020; Larsson, 2017; Van De Mieroop, Clifton & Verhelst, 2020). It is just over the last few decades that leadership research has moved beyond person and position focus to study leadership as an inherently discursive and relational phenomenon, resulting from embodied practices of interpersonal influence towards a shared sense of direction and committed future action (Crevani, 2018; Drath, McCauley & McGuire, 2008; Holm & Fairhurst, 2018; Larsson & Lundholm, 2013; Uhl-Bien, 2006; Yukl, 2013;).

This study explores the social practices of eliciting initiative and committed action through an 8-months focused ethnography in two knowledge-intensive Danish organizations. Focusing on

situated, microlevel social practices and using video recordings of naturally occurring work interactions between managers and specialists as primary data, the project draws on the principles of ethnomethodology and conversation analysis (Garfinkel, 1967; Sacks, Schegloff & Jefferson, 1974; Heritage & Clayman, 2010). Ethnomethodology distinguishes itself by illuminating the tacit practices, 'ethnomethod' activities in particular settings. Ethnomethodological conversational analytic studies in recruitment and requesting practices have shown some of the complexities involved in mobilizing action from others (Curl & Drew, 2008; Drew & Couper-Kouhlen, 2014). In this paper, I combine conversational analytic sequential analysis of recorded interactions (Schegloff, 2007) with a sensitivity to the larger context, drawing on my knowledge gained about the two case organizations through the 8-month period of data collection.

The exploration is driven by two questions: First, what different practices do managers and specialists have for getting each other to take initiative and action in some matter? Second, how are these practices accomplished in specific moments of interaction and with what immediate consequences? The study demonstrates empirically how action and initiative is negotiated through situated social practices of *pushing* (ways of rather directly asking someone else to take a specific responsibility), *pulling* (drawing attention to issues at hand or openly inviting offers and initiatives from others), and *claiming* initiative. The findings illustrate how instances of pushing often include visible sensitivity and the use of various resources to soften the push, suggesting that it can be a delicate matter to ask someone to do something, even for an executive in relation to a subordinate in these work interactions. To be presented in the full paper is a typology of formats and variations of responses, including patterns in their design and delivery, and a discussion of the role of these practices for organizational adaptivity and system change.

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