

Alternative leadership in democratic organizations

Bringing an interest in alternative organizations (Parker et al., 2014; Rothschild-Whitt, 1979; Yates, 2015) to the field of Collective Leadership (CL) (Fairhurst et al., 2020; Ospina et al., 2020), this paper identifies and analyses the alternative ideas and practices of leadership found in two alternative organizations. One, Flexwerker, is a small cooperative consultancy, fully owned by its workers. The other, Engage, is a medium sized partner-owned consultancy, currently in the process of handing over 49% share of ownership to its workers. Both have been studied using a qualitative ethnographic approach (Neyland, 2008; Van Maanen, 1979, 2011) combining participant observations with ad-hoc and scheduled interviews over a period of six months. With ownership being fully shared in Flexwerker, and broadened in Engage, the cases allow me to empirically analyze the leadership in these organizations as a *type* of CL (Ospina et al., 2020), as the ownership structures effectuate a sharing of responsibility and legal authority. This in turn allows me to investigate the ontologies (Zoller & Fairhurst, 2007) and practices of leadership in worker owned organizations. Further, the situated and participatory research design lets me follow these processes of construction, and highlight the tensions generated as organizational members attempt to balance egalitarian democratic ideals with an organizational need for clear and effective leadership.

Preliminary analysis suggests that the two case organizations have developed two distinct CL ontologies. For Flexwerker, a collective approach to leadership is seen as an end of organizing in its own right. Driven by markedly egalitarian and democratic values, the organization has developed a mutual understanding of leadership as that which promotes collective and individual autonomy and well-being, while preventing arbitrary exercise of power in the organization. This, I argue, is based in an alternative formulation of the normative basis for legitimate authority. A certain measure of authority is needed to effectuate leadership (Alvesson & Spicer, 2012; Sennett, 1993), and in the complete absence of formal hierarchical bases for authority relations, members of Flexwerker rely on practices of *questioning*, *challenging*, and ultimately *conflicting* in order to probe the legitimacy of attempts at claiming authority to exercise leadership. The lack of clear bases of authority thus serves to bolster the collective, while challenging and complicating the practice of leadership in Flexwerker.

In Engage, the existing partner group still enjoys a high status in the informal “experience hierarchy”, and to them, CL is viewed as a means for achieving organizational goals. Engage provides professional leadership training and interventions as part of their services to clients, and as such, they both internally and externally work form a host of various leadership ontologies. The question for

them is thus when collective leadership is an appropriate means for organizational ends. This leads to situations where the partners show no qualms in using their authority as still powerful actors within the organization to either support or circumvent CL practices, depending on what they deem necessary for the organization. In comparison with Flexwerker, we thus see how the remaining hierarchical relations in Engage facilitate the claiming of authority by powerful actors, leading to fewer questions and conflicts around leadership. This in turn means that while the practice of leadership is met with less resistance, this is at the expense of collective autonomy.

Together, the study of these two case organizations offers two central contributions. At the empirical level, by using a situated ethnographic methodology, I am able to provide detailed descriptions of how processes of collective leadership play out in everyday organizational life, something often called for, but seldom provided (Denis et al., 2012; Ospina et al., 2020; Uhl-Bien, 2006). At the conceptual level, I demonstrate the fundamentally contested nature of developing ideas and practices of collective leadership. I show, how constructing CL ontologies and practices is not about discovering “best practice”, but rather a power struggle between claims of authority and autonomy within organizations. Further, preliminary findings highlight the role of legitimate authority as a base from which to practice leadership. The study thus points to some of the inherent contradictions in a term such as “collective leadership”: On one hand, allowing for challenges and conflicts around leadership might be necessary to bolster collective autonomy when organizing for equality. On the other hand, circumventing the collective might be a necessary act to ensure the efficient practice of leadership in contemporary organizations operating in a capitalist market.

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Exploring connection as the substrate of the relational leadership craft

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Abstract

This paper is positioned at the intersection of two key themes in leadership research – relational leadership and leadership as a craft. We explore the phenomenon of *connection* as a key constituent of both. Empirically, we explore connection through the contemporary dance form called *Contact Improvisation*.

Building on process ontology (Langley et al., 2013), recent work in leadership has applied a relational lens to understand how leadership – as socially constructed – is produced and how it influences organizing practices (Crevani, 2018; Uhl-Bien, 2006). This lens focuses on leadership as being in relation to others (Cunliffe & Eriksen, 2011) and, consequently, as something that is taking place between people (Uhl-Bien, 2006) when connections are established, transformed, and dissolved (Cooper, 2005). Such a decentered view conceptualizes leadership as emerging through continuous interactions between people in everyday organizational life. Accordingly, researchers have explored how leaders and managers in organizational settings engage in relational dialogue (Cunliffe & Eriksen, 2011), create conditions for connections to flourish (Taylor & Karanian, 2008), identify and elevate affordances (Margolin, 2013), and bring diverse actors together (Ospina & Foldy, 2010).

However, while most studies have concentrated on more cognitive relational leadership practices, recent work has turned to dance and sports to explore how their embodied aspects (Biehl, 2019; Ryömä & Satama, 2019).

Within the tradition of aesthetic leadership (Hansen et al., 2007), one strand of inquiry considers leadership as an artful practice or a craft (Ladkin & Taylor, 2010). Steven Taylor posits that if leadership is a craft, the material that the crafter works with is *connection*. We wanted to explore this empirically, thereby also elucidate one of the underlying premises of relationships. Following the embodied approach and the view of relational leadership as decentered, this paper aims *to explore the emergence, sustenance, and dissolution of connection* as it unfolds in a co-created achievement without appointed leaders or followers. Contact improvisation (CI) (Novack, 1990; Paxton, 1975) is a contemporary dance form in which dancers improvise around a shared point of contact. Because the next move is never known in advance, the dancer can only mindfully experience the dance as it emerges, listening inwards and acting outwards at the same time. In this way, the dancers participate in a shared co-creation while simultaneously dancing their own dances. It is an embodied experience of relationality as it unfolds.

Nine deep interviews were done with contact dancers from different countries, with a range of experience levels, where seven of them were CI teachers. The interviews, lasting for 30-70 minutes, sought to capture the dancers' subjective experience of connection in the dance. The interviews, as well as the subsequent analysis, were conducted with a phenomenological approach.

Preliminary findings focus on the dancers' subjective experience of how connection is continuously established, maintained, and dissolved through embodied micro-level processes. The dance emerges as the dancers draw upon the rich landscape of affordances made available through connection, which, in turn, alters the circumstances for further interaction.

This paper contributes to illuminating important core preconditions for relational leadership practices identified in previous studies. As a practical implication, we discuss the possibility of using CI as an intervention to invite an embodied experience of relationality.

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