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CEOs NARRATING LEADERSHIP: CONSTANT GARDENERS, TEAM PLAYERS, ACTIONABLE PRAGMATISTS AND BUSINESS DIRECTORS

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There is an increasing stream of leadership-related rhetoric and training interventions stemming from policy-makers, media and management consultants concerning the 'right' kind of leadership needed in order for industries to meet their current and future challenges. Yet seldom is the concept itself problematised or viewed from the perspective of leadership as it unfolds in situated practice. The purpose of this explorative pilot study is to examine CEOs discursive constructions of their leadership, their ambitions and concerns in their every-day practice. Using a narrative-survey approach, life-stories of 12 CEOs in private construction-related organisations in Sweden were collected and analysed against the backdrop of recent studies of managerial leadership of site managers in construction. Four main metaphorical themes emerged of CEOs leadership: constant gardeners, team players, actionable pragmatists and business directors. These mind-sets showed quite different orientations to those advocated in much of the normative leadership literature. Rather the practices had interesting similarities with the leadership views of construction site managers. The paper contributes with a more nuanced, and maybe humbler, view of leadership at the top, which aligns well with leadership practices on site. We also introduce a novel qualitative research tool and briefly reflect over its viability.

Keywords: CEOs, leadership as process, narrative survey, leadership, Sweden

INTRODUCTION

There is no mistaking that leadership is a hot topic today, more often than not portrayed as the cure to all kinds of ills incurred by modern organisations and societies. The construction industry is no exception. In search of a functioning nostrum for societal and organisational problems, 'leadership' and the 'good leader' have re-gained currency among both researchers and practitioners. A substantial body of this literature tends to be quantitative and normative, postulating generic traits, styles, personalities, qualities and behaviours needed to achieve ''best-practice' leadership (for reviews see e.g. Northouse 2016; Yukl 2008). In much of this literature, leadership is viewed from the perspective of a single, often 'heroic', individual who uses the aforementioned assets to influence employees to execute corporate strategies and goals (e.g. Wood 2005). Moreover, the leader-hero examples evoked are invariably at the top of hierarchically structured entities and are most often

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well-known (famous or infamous) heads of state, religious leaders and sometimes CEOs.

We are also witnessing an increasing stream of leadership theories and discourses that reject the notion of the heroic leader, and which take into account the role and impact of followers and context on the leadership. This stream largely concerns the 'right' kind of leadership aspirations and ethos needed to sustain an ethical and sustainable future in an increasingly complex world, y*et al*so tends toward the normative. Some of the most recent theories within this stream are for example: collective and shared leadership (Lawson 2014); blended leadership (Collinson and Collinson 2009); distributed leadership (Gronn 2002); complexity leadership (Uhl-Bien and Arena 2017); authentic leadership (Wassenaar *et al*., 2015); aesthetic leadership (Hansen *et al*., 2007); relational leadership (Uhl-Bien 2006); sustainable leadership (Anderson *et al*., 2017; Chan and Cooper 2010).

Historically, streams and perspectives have shifted (back and forth) to align and reflect changing (Western) socio-political waves, from charismatic 'hero' leader to authentic 'servant' leader, with multiple in-between labels as cited above. However, among this substantial body of leadership theories and how-to recipes, the concept of leadership (and of leader) is seldom problematised. The theoretical abstractions in the leadership literature, stemming from a deep-rooted ideological pre-conceptualisation of the myth of the 'good' leader who saves the world from the evil it faces, permeates all cultures through mythological, religious and folk tales. (Note here that the evil in these contexts is often embodied in a larger-than-life anti-hero, a toxic leader (e.g. Padilla *et al*., 2007). Thus, there is a deeply entrenched, subconscious, ideological connotation associated with the concept of leadership, which makes it difficult to pin down and discuss 'objectively'. This pre-conceived and loaded subjective meaning is implicitly and unreflectively projected in much of the literature. The problem then is that 'leadership' is discursively inscribed and predetermined à priori, before it is practised or theorised. A characteristic which explains the pre-determined, sedimented subjective meaning of the term is that it is an empty signifier, a word which has no signified, i.e. no exact denotation (Laclau 1996). In other words, it 'cannot come into being' in and of itself; it can only be discursively constructed and performed, and then reproduced. As such, it remains an ideal notion, albeit it may shift or float over time and between cultures to take on different meanings in different contextual configurations. Leadership seen from this perspective is intimately tied up with identity (e.g. Ford *et al*., 2008).

Inspired both by the practice and the linguistic turns in the social sciences, some leadership scholars have acknowledged the performativity and co-constructive nature of leadership as term and phenomenon. They argue that leadership is not a static state manifest in a person, but a processual undertaking, involving leader, followers and several contexts in on-going interaction of co-operation, collaboration and co-creation, accomplished over time through enacted processes, situated practices and dialogue (e.g. Bolden and Gosling 2006; Crevani *et al*., 2010: Cunliffe and Eriksen 2011). From this perspective, leadership-as-practised, rather than the leader, becomes the focus of analysis, opening up for situated, practice-based research on how leadership is actually accomplished in organisations.

Rationale and Aim of the Study

In the construction-management literature, studies of leadership are usually subsumed under overarching research areas such as culture and/or project management, and

mostly apply trait or style theories and a quantitative approach (e.g. Mäkilouko 2004; Ozorovskaja *et al*., 2007; Wong *et al*., 2007). More recently, construction-management research applying a practice lens have provided interesting insights into the day-to-day managerial practices of site managers (Styhre 2012; Sandberg *et al*., 2015; Sandberg *et al*., 2016). These studies draw on work by organisation theorists such as Alvesson and Sveningsson (2003), see also Tengblad (2012), who have highlighted a need to re-think managerial-leadership theorising so as to take into account the social-interaction dynamism of the "mundane", i.e. small acts that managers carry out every day such as listening and chatting, and which are often trivialised in the mainstream literature. Sveningsson *et al*., (2012: 84) elaborated the notion of mundane leadership, as "influencing expectations, meanings, and values about what is desirable and necessary related to everyday work".

The mundane leaders described in the above-mentioned literature show flexibility, experience, hindsight, judgment and improvisation, all of which are shown to be necessary qualities for organizational and situational sense-making. Styhre (2012), drawing on the mundane notion, described the leadership of construction-site managers as "muddling through", i.e. skilfully solving problems as they inevitably crop up, and trying to be everywhere at the same time. Further, based on life-story interviews with site managers, Sandberg *et al*., (2015) argued that site managers' self-images and self-expectations (as well as others' expectations of them) are rooted in masculine norms and values such as self-sufficiency, autonomy, omnipresence, crisis management and overwork, reflected in competencies of planning, problem-solving, and the ability to see the "wholeness". The site managers enact such masculine orientations and competencies through a role of 'paternal' leader. Löwstedt *et al*., (2014) found a strong identification mechanism among construction middle and upper-middle managers with the work and workers on site, proposing that the construction-site mind-set is reflected in the boardroom. However, research on CEOs' perceptions of their leadership in the construction-management literature are scant (for an exception see Chan and Cooper 2010, concerning leader's futures thinking).

In the pilot study described in this paper, our aim was to move from site-managers to explore CEOs' perceptions of their leadership by allowing them to talk freely and choose the orientation and emphases of the conversation. We were interested to test whether the identification proposition held. Moreover, we wanted to evaluate the viability of the narrative survey (Shkedi 2004; Fine 2009) as a methodological tool. We contribute empirically and methodologically to the emergent practice-based managerial leadership literature in construction management by using a novel narrative approach as a tool to elicit 12 CEOs' narratives of their perceived leadership-as-practised in construction-related private organisations in Sweden. Here we offer some interesting insights into the everyday concerns, struggles and aspirations of contemporary construction leaders.

RESEARCH DESIGN

To try and understand leadership as process and practice warrants a qualitative, intersubjective and interpretative approach based on open dialogue between researcher and researchee. Inspired by Fine (2009), we used a narrative-survey methodology Shkedi (2004), which has its grounding in narrative analysis. A narrative approach is posited on the idea that individuals make sense of, and rationalise, their experiences through iterating their life stories (Chase 1995; Polkinghorne 1995). Identities are (re)constructed through the stories people tell themselves; stories in turn convey to

others the values a person espouses, his/her beliefs, attitudes and concerns (Clandinin and Connelly 1998). Life stories are animated; they shift in time and space; and they are populated by human and non-human entities. They are also imbued with contradictions, which become crucial clues for qualitative, interpretative researchers. Through respondents' stories, they are offered snapshots of situated practices such as leadership practices, as in our case.

The narrative survey is a qualitative tool that is appropriate for a relatively small data set, where the purpose of the analysis is to seek characteristics across the data set (e.g. of interviews) in order to link the characteristics found to, in our case, the aforementioned theorising on managerial leadership in general and in construction. In other words, it allows for an analytical generalisation toward the development of theoretical concepts and connections (Shkedi 2004), rather than presenting an in-depth analysis of each respondent's story or to generalise based on the specific data-set population. Similarly to Fine (2009: 186), whose aim it was "to examine (female) interviewees' discursive constructions of leadership […] to see if women leaders' constructions of leadership suggest new theoretical approaches to leadership", we explore CEOs' discursive constructions of their leadership to seek connections with extant site-manager stories as an initial step toward the suggestion of a new theoretical approach to leadership in construction.

The narrative survey encompassed life-story interviews with 12 CEOs in construction-related large and middle-sized private organisations, the majority of which were constructors. Three of the constructors were ranked among the five largest in Sweden. One of the companies is the largest developer and supplier of building materials in the country, and one is a fairly young and rapidly growing construction project-development consultancy specialising in the development of digitalisation methods and tools such as BIM. The remaining companies consisted of middle-sized to small contractors. The sampling was purposive in that we used our respective contacts to help us obtain access to the CEOs. Upon contact, all the CEOs accepted to be interviewed, and we followed up by sending them a brief description of the pilot study. We stated that we hoped they would consent to a 90-minute informal and personal conversation concerning their career trajectory and achievements, their future ambitions and concerns for their organisation and the sector as a whole.

The respondents included 11 men and one woman, which is deemed a sufficient number for a narrative survey (Shkedi 2004). Two of the respondents, a man and the woman, had been interviewed by us several years earlier for another study, and another respondent had participated in a prior observation study. That these three respondents happened to also participate in the current study was serendipitous and advantageous since we were able to go back and triangulate prior life stories and field notes with their current narratives. The interviews took place in the CEOs' places of work.

To obtain as rich data as possible, we allowed the respondents' retrospective narratives to flow as smoothly as possible only interrupting with prompts to elicit examples or specifications. We asked them to reflect over their career path so far: their background, reasons for choosing the construction industry, what their driving forces were, what a typical day looked like. As mentioned earlier, we encouraged them to speak freely and to choose the orientation of the conversation. The interviews were recorded and transcribed. We drew on narrative analysis in our scrutiny of the transcript, sorting the text into thematic plots, which we could then connect to form

narrative themes and connections across the samples and with previous studies. What struck us were the respondents' frequent use of overlapping metaphors to convey their perceptions of self-as-leader, values, beliefs and affective proclivities. These metaphors enabled us to identify the dominant narrative themes of the 12 life stories.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

CEO Commonalities: Leaving a Mark and Whitewashing the Sector

All of the respondents had chosen a construction career path early on in their lives, many already at vocational upper-secondary school, and had worked summer jobs as craftsmen on site. Eleven had higher-education degrees in civil engineering, real-estate or quantity surveying. A typical explanation for their choice was their attraction to the physical, hands-on and practical features of the sector. They talked about the satisfaction of "actually seeing and touching the outcome of one's creation."

> In chemistry you deal with molecules and in physics it is about ones and zeros. I want to be able to see the results … I want to leave a mark. Not that you don't leave a mark should you succeed in discovering a special medicine … but I want to see it more concretely, I want to see the result right there immediately … that is the kind of person I am, it is easier for me to understand and explain if I can point and say: Look! This is how it turned out!

This fascination with the materiality of construction, especially the pride expressed in the achieved product, has been noted in studies of construction site managers (e.g. Raiden, 2016; Sandberg *et al*., 2018), and is one of the cohesive traits of construction workers' strong collective identification with on-site work (Löwstedt and Räisänen, 2014). Here we see that this identification does indeed follow managers all the way to the top, as proposed in Löwstedt and Räisänen. All the CEOs, but one (a man), emphasised the importance of, in their parlance, "the absolute necessity of knowing the trade through having worked in the mud and done the same job as 'the lads'". This quote and the one above are almost identical to many of the quotes by site managers in previous studies. Not only did their identification with 'the lads' give them legitimacy, the affect toward the object and site of construction may also explain the 'circuit of credibility' and 'economy of reputation' observed among managers and workers in the sector (Styhre, 2010), and which underpins the sector's norms of 'good work'. Noteworthy here is that all the CEOs had remained faithful to the sector even though they had rotated between various Swedish construction companies, and all but two had started their careers working on building sites.

Another common feature among the CEOs, was their agreement as to what the current and future challenges for the industry were. They all emphasised the need to 'wash away' the industries reputation for corrupt behaviour, sexism and racism. They spent efforts on increasing gender equality and diversity, and they all mentioned the need to work more actively with sustainability. The narratives, metaphors and body language of these CEOs revealed that heart formed an intrinsic part of their ethos. The affinity, knowledge and collective identification with the materialities and people constructed a leadership that does not align with the 'grand' theoretical models advocated in the literature (see previous sections) and taught in leadership and management-training courses. Moreover, the CEOs, with one exception, had strikingly similar notions concerning leadership, all of which could sort under 'personal' leadership.

We identified four dominant leadership narrative themes in the data, three of which sort under the umbrella practice of 'personal leadership': constant gardener, team player and actionable pragmatist. A fourth, outlier, theme was business director.

These themes overlapped and intertwined in the CEOs' life-stories, yet we felt that they revealed individual mind-sets. In the following subsections, we discuss these themes and link them to recent theoretical schemas. We start by giving different CEOs voice to verbalise their ethos before we offer a brief analysis. (Note: each quote is by a different CEO.)

Constant Gardeners

> I see myself somewhat as a gardener. I take care of different kinds of plants … and flowers … and some of them need sun and others need a lot of vitamins, and some may even need to be cropped since they grow too fast. As leader, the better you become at understanding this, the better it will go not only for yourself, but also for the company. Because I'm only one person, but if I can get others to bloom and grow, well then, I'm doing a good job.
>
> You have to be a friend. You must be trusting and trustworthy, and you have to take care of that trust. Once you have reached such a state of confidence, then you can start addressing other issues.
>
> The most important resource is our employees. As such it is up to me to check [keep track] how the employees are feeling, where we stand, and what we need. It is incredibly important to me that this workplace be one in which people feel good and that they feel it is fun to go to work.

For constant gardeners, the collective, consisting of individuals, was central. They saw their most important role as that of fostering. In these narratives, words and phrases like: 'grow', 'bloom', 'trust', 'understanding', 'feeling good' and 'fun at work' were iterated. The most common metaphor here was by far the growth metaphor, the notion of seeing and helping individuals grow, which they communicated to us not only through their talk, but also through their body language. Since these particular quotes were voiced by male CEOs, it is easy to associate them with the paternalism observed in studies of site managers' work (e.g. Sandberg *et al*., 2016; Styhre, 2011), which in turn could be associated with patriarchalism. As we see it, the fostering expressed here has more to do with an ethics of care, which has been theorised as a feminist construction (Fine, 2009) of leadership (see also discussion in Sandberg *et al*., 2018). Our CEOs also showcased male role models with similar ethics of care, who had mentored them, and who they tried and did emulate.

Team Players

> As a leader, you should never say 'I did!' It is always 'we' who did and 'we' who decided. As leader you ought never to address others in 'you' terms, especially not in problematic situations. When you do, you situate yourself outside the hockey rink … and that does not work. The match takes place down there not in the stands. This is extremely important.
>
> In terms of [organisational] changes, we try to be extremely involving. It isn't so that a few 'intelligent' people gather somewhere and proclaim that now we will do so and so … rather, change takes more time … and it really involves a large number of the employees.

Team players tended to resort to sports metaphors to express their meaning, as in the hockey metaphor in the first quote above. These CEOs emphasized how they were just "one of the team". They wanted to de-emphasise and de-dramatise traditional hierarchical structures and foreground the importance of the well-functioning team. Common expressions here were negations like: “not seeing oneself as better than others”, “absolutely not sit on a high horse”, “being devoid of prestige”. Lack of prestige was a familiar leitmotif for us; we have heard this phrase so often over our many years of studying managers in construction. Even though these may not always

practice what they preach, we nevertheless interpret 'lack of prestige' as not only an organisational aspiration, but also a Swedish trait.

Actionable Pragmatists

> You have to be determined in this sector, able to move ahead. Demonstrate grit!
>
> I have very little patience with people who think too much and don't arrive at a resolution.
>
> Another thing is simplicity, simplicity, simplicity … simple messages. What are our three top priorities? It must not become too difficult or complex because then people spend too much time thinking … so try and make things as simple as possible!
>
> I usually say KISS: 'Keep It Simple Stupid' … joking apart … I believe in simplicity, simplicity, simplicity. I try to stick to three items, the three most important ones. Only three things.

There is no doubt that the key word for actionable pragmatists is simplicity. The pragmatist CEOs were mainly situated in middle to small companies and were those whose discourse and practice aligned most with the discursive construction of leadership by site managers (Styhre 2012; Sandberg 2015; 2016). These CEOs seemed to embody the characteristics of self-sufficiency, autonomy, omnipresence and on-the-hoof problem-solving abilities that Sandberg *et al*., 2015 identified in site managers. Apart from 'simple' and 'simplicity' these CEOs often used the Swedish idiom: 'ordning och reda', which if translated would be 'order and order'. This obsession with order is also voiced in a need to be 'clear', 'straightforward' and 'simple' in one's communication.

Business Directors

Only one of the CEOs expressed a mind-set, concerns and aspirations that sharply contrasted with the other respondents, and may be said to be the exception that proves the rule. In other words, it is through this example that the organisational logic behind the leadership thinking above is offset and understood. The business-director ethos and practice in the narrative of this CEO were foregrounded in almost every utterance he made. While all the other CEOs seemed to genuinely enjoy talking with us, even going over the stipulated 90 minutes, this CEO announced that he could only give us 60 minutes at the most. In other words, right from the start, he asserted his right to decide. As can be seen from the quote below, he seemed to distance himself from the personal leadership mind-set that permeates the Swedish construction sector, making it very clear where he stood and what kinds of changes he considered imperative in order to make construction more effective and productive. Interestingly, this CEO did not have a typical construction background as did the others whose trajectories started on building sites.

> It's all about business. The people in this trade are good at building, but not as good at projects or doing business. In this respect, higher education has neither been able to redirect [courses] nor had it understood changes that are afoot. A change that we must prepare all our employees for is that we shall go toward better planned and governed projects. This in turn means that we cannot have people who see it as their vocation to be their own problem solvers down at those levels … because that in turn means that we have unsolved problems at the higher organisational levels. With better organisational processes there is no need for individual problem solving on the lower organisational levels. Rather than that a site manager be a creator, he [sic] only needs to be an assembler … to be a performer of actual [already in place] effective processes.

CONCLUSIONS

In this paper, we have offered some snapshots from 12 construction CEOs' perceptions of their leadership practices. We used a narrative survey approach on the rather small data-set to explore CEOs' discursive constructions of their leadership and to find connection to conceptions of site-managerial leadership in previous studies. We found that the CEOs leadership ethos and practices sorted under four main themes, three of which aligned with site-managers' discursive constructions in previous studies, and the fourth being an outlier. Although deeper analysis and more respondents are warranted for further theorising, the data seem to support the proposition of a strong identification among CEOs with construction managers and workers on site.

As construction-manager researchers, we have become used to reading about how traditional, conservative and reactionary the construction sector is. These images, however, are not reflected in the personal leadership narratives that we have depicted here. Rather, the leadership practices of the CEOs show many of the modern leadership aspirations reported in recent studies such as sharing and delegating, seeing to the collective, ethical caring and presence, and fostering new generations, to name a few (e.g. Anderson *et al*., 2017; Fine, 2009; Uhl-Bien and Arena, 2017). The personal leadership and relation-oriented practices that they describe seem well adapted to the particularities of a project-based sector in which power and responsibility have hitherto been distributed among regional and district managers as well as project leaders. It also aligns well with the depicted leadership practices of site managers (Styhre 2012; Sandberg *et al*., 2015; 2016; 2018).

However, the business-director CEO saw personal leadership as a threat, hindering the sector from dealing with its current and future challenges. For example, the goal of increasing productivity and decreasing costs, which were his main concerns, are not feasible in a climate where employees are given as much freedom as they are in construction. The sector must standardise its processes through industrialisation, and for this to happen formal structures and hierarchies, better targeted organisational goals and strict follow-ups are necessary. This leadership narrative evoked much of the rhetoric in mainstream CEO literature (e.g. Beer *et al*., 2011; Porter and Nohria 2010) as well as the concerns in calls for modernising and standardising the sector. Since only one of the CEOs expressed such diametrically opposed aspirations and attitudes to the sector, it would be interesting to probe the drivers, both external and internal, of these differences'

The narrative-survey approach enabled us to identify and link empirical elements in the CEOs stories and connect these to conceptual ideas and preliminary propositions in previous research. Much more work and more in-depth narrative analysis are warranted for further theory development of construction leadership. It would be interesting to delve into the implication of leadership genealogy to better understand processes of leadership and leader becoming, leader-follower-context influences and tensions, including gender and diversity issues. Suffice it to say here, genealogy matters!

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