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Leadership under construction: A qualitative exploration of leadership processes in construction companies in Sweden

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Abstract

Leadership has increasingly been advocated as a potent organizing practice, linked positively to several performance dimensions as well as successful organizational development and change. Despite these alleged promises, the specific characteristics of leadership processes as they unfold in a construction context have not been fully captured by construction researchers. This paper is predicated on an identified lack of methodological richness underlying leadership studies in construction. While a growing number of contributions have quantitatively tested the ideas and models of leadership scholars, few have qualitatively explored the experiences and interpretations of the actual people that practice leadership in their daily work in construction companies. Drawing on a rich qualitative interview study, this paper analyzes open-ended stories about leadership in the largest construction companies in Sweden. The findings show how leadership styles have been shaped to align with traditional work and organizing principles, but also how they, by the same token, pose a seemingly unresolved tension with change initiatives that seek to reorganize to improve organizational performance. Altogether these findings indicate that there are grounds to question the transformative potential of leadership in construction companies, as practiced today. The paper concludes by outlining the practical implications of these findings, together with some analytical generalizations that can serve as pointers for a strengthened leadership agenda in construction research, one that is characterized by an increased methodological richness and accentuated focus on the context-specific aspects of leadership.

Keywords: construction companies, leadership; managerial work; qualitative method; social process

INTRODUCTION

There is no mistaking that leadership is a hot topic today, frequently portrayed as a core principle for every modern organization and industry aspiring for eminence and success. This popularized discourse is grounded on a myriad of positive correlations established in leadership research. Successful leadership has been linked to, for instance, increased work morale and well-being (Alvesson et al., 2017); strengthened self-esteem (Mhatre and Riggio, 2014); enhanced creativity (Sundgren och Styhre, 2006); decisiveness and power of initiative

(Parker and Wu, 2014); and an accentuated sense of meaning related to a collective organizational vision (Alvesson and Spicer, 2014). Translated to the organizational levels, it has furthermore been shown that leadership can explain a substantial degree of performance variances (Day and Lord, 1988, see also Wang et al., 2011), as well as being a potent nostrum for organizational development and change (Bass and Avilio, 1993; Nadler and Tushman, 1994; Appelbaum et al., 1998; Yukl, 2002; Kisfalvi, 2002; Gilley et al., 2009).

Considering this, there is a curious absence of a matured leadership agenda in construction research. The construction industry is continuously criticized for its lack of performance regarding a broad pallet of areas. Governmental reports in numerous countries have concluded that the construction industry suffers from excessive production costs, low efficiency, slow delivery, and failure to innovate, among other things (see Chan and Cooper, 2010, for an overview). Grounded in this criticism, construction research is rich in contributions of how the industry should transform according to improved structures, processes, technologies, materials, and management concepts, not seldom adopted and translated from other industries and contexts. Yet have leadership perspectives seldom been adopted to frame and explore the *specifics* of these industry conditions and challenges.

Reviewing and reflecting on the accumulated insights drawn from leadership studies in construction research, it is possible to identify an urgent gap, which can be inferred from a lack of methodological variation. As it will be argued in the next section, leadership has been explored with a salient proclivity towards testing quantitatively the ideas and models of leadership scholars, rather than to explore qualitatively the experiences of the actual people that might or might not practice leadership in their daily work in the construction industry. This methodological homogeneity has resulted in a lack of studies that incorporate the

various “extraneous factors” of leadership (Alvesson and Spicer, 2014) that are embedded on the industry-, organizational-, and day-to-day local levels, and condition the nature of leader-follower interactions (Liden and Antonakis, 2009). This has left a blind spot, not only regarding how the specifics of various construction contexts shape leadership processes, but also how leadership might shape construction.

The purpose of this paper is to provide an initial filling of this gap by exploring the tensions and alignments that underlie the ongoing uptake of leadership in a situated construction context. Adopting a qualitative methodology, this paper draws on rich stories about leadership in large construction companies in Sweden. These stories were collected and analyzed specifically to highlight the recursive dynamics between leadership and the specific conditions and challenges that underlie managerial work in these companies. The results show a growing appreciation and adoption of certain ‘modern’ leadership practices, as portrayed in contemporary leadership research. However, with that said, the actual uptake and enactment of these practices seem to lack much of the alleged potential of leadership as a transformative force. The results show instead how the ongoing adoption of leadership also seems to work to sustain (and even further reinforce) traditional work- and organizing practices in these companies, not the least by providing mandate and socially mediated governance for a high degree of independence and freedom in the management of various construction tasks. In addition to this, the results also illustrate a certain tension between the identified leadership styles and an ongoing strive to increase organizational performance by developing and implementing more standardized processes and routines. The paper concludes by outlining the practical implications of these results and elucidating further the analytical generalizations that can serve as pointers for a strengthened leadership agenda in construction research.

106

107 **THEORETICAL AND METHODOLOGICAL (RE)ORIENTATION**

108 **Towards a situated understanding of leadership in construction**

109 Over 25 years ago, Langford et al. (1995) noted a substantial shortage of leadership studies in
110 construction research and argued that this might be explained by the lack of understanding of
111 the industry on the part of social scientists and a lack of understanding of the social sciences
112 on the part of those engaged with the industry. While leadership studies in construction have
113 been slowly growing since then (Toor and Ofori, 2007), it appears as if the argument still
114 holds insofar as the contributions reflect a dominant research tradition in construction that is
115 grounded in quantitative and positivistic methods, rather than the methodological richness
116 that characterizes the social sciences (Dainty, 2007; Dainty, 2008; Fellows, 2010; Sage and
117 Vitry 2018). A scrutiny of the studies that brought the topical area of leadership into
118 construction research shows a prominent preference for research designs and methods that
119 rely on quantitative testing of established leadership models, such as Fiedler's Contingency
120 Model (Bresnen et al., 1986; Seymour and Abd Elhaleem, 1991), Fiedler's LPC questionnaire
121 (Fellows et al., 2003), BARS (Dulaimi and Langford, 1999), the MLQ model (Chan and
122 Chan, 2005; Butler and Chinowsky, 2006; Ozorovskaja et al., 2007), the MSQ model (Giritli
123 and Oraz, 2004), or the Kouzes-Posner Leadership Practices Inventory (LPI) (Skipper and
124 Bell, 2006).

125

126 The point here is *not* to argue for the strengths and weaknesses of different methodological
127 approaches, but how a certain methodological homogeneity by the part of construction
128 researchers (Dainty, 2008) seems to have resulted in a gap in our understanding of the
129 specific characteristics and meanings of leadership in a construction context. While the
130 preference for large data sets and closed-question questionnaires supports both the reliability

and generalizability of the causalities found in relation to leadership (Taylor et al., 2010), it has consequently also downplayed our understanding of the meaning and experience that the actors themselves assign to leadership in relation to their daily work in construction (McCabe et al., 1998).

Toor and Ofori (2008) argue for the need to strengthen the leadership agenda in construction by moving beyond the “conventional transactional mentality and task-orientation of industry professional” (ibid: 620), towards an accentuated focus on inter-personal skills and relations, such as leadership. However, it appears as if the shifting focus from task-based to person-based perspectives not merely has served as the starting point for leadership studies in construction, but also to some extent the reoccurring conclusions. Whether the focus has been on construction projects (Bresnen et al., 1986; Seymour and Abd Elhaleem, 1991; Fraser, 2000; Fellows et al., 2003) or organizations in the construction industry more broadly (Dulami and Langford, 1991; Odusami et al., 2003; Chan and Chan, 2005; Kasapoğlu, 2014), it is possible to discern a certain converging and general conclusion that an increased attentiveness to inter-personal relations, on top of construction tasks, is correlating positively with increased performance in various construction operations.

However, this correlation seems not only to be generalizable across several different construction contexts but is also reported in meta-analyses of a broad range of other contexts and industries (Wang et al., 2011). Rather than being concerned about the generalizability of the leadership-related causalities found in construction contexts (e.g., Odusami et al., 2003; Chan and Chan, 2005; Kasapoğlu, 2014), it seems timely to also problematize them for being too general; and for merely reiterating the general ideas and promises of leadership, without

offering any detailed understanding of how leadership have been conditioned by the specifics of construction (and vice versa).

Such an understanding is essential, not least because there exists no shared and stable definition of leadership (Bass, 2008). Every attempt to provide or reuse a concise leadership definition is deemed to leave something out or oversimplify what, in reality, is a complex, dynamic, and evolving process (Day, 2014). The growing number of construction scholars (e.g., Chan and Chan, 2005; Butler and Chinowsky, 2006; Ozorovskaja et al., 2007; Kasapoğlu, 2014) drawing on the seminal transactional and transformational models of leadership (e.g., Bass and Avolio, 1994; Bass and Riggio, 2006; Diaz-Saenz, 2011) are, therefore, not only adopting a preconceived definition of leadership but also assume that ‘leadership’ is encapsulating almost every activity that various managers in a construction setting are performing in their work. Those that are critical of such reuses of ready-made leadership definitions and frameworks argue that if ‘leadership’ is used uniformly to describe a broad range of different managerial activities, we risk serious inflation in the meaning (and value) of leadership, not least by making it indistinguishable from ‘management’ in general (Alvesson and Spicer, 2012). A more situated understanding of leadership is therefore not only to acknowledge that leadership is largely shaped by its surroundings, but also that leadership is only one out of many other organizing principles that managers have at their disposal when trying to navigate their organizational realities (Alvesson et al., 2017).

The overreliance on quantitative testing of ready-made leadership models and perspectives on the part of construction researchers seems to have produced such lack of nuances in our understanding of leadership in the construction industry. Prioritizing preconceptions about leadership before the actor’s own interpretations of their experiences from practicing

leadership (Alvesson and Spicer, 2014) have, altogether, placed the actual *persons* that engage in these *inter-personal* relations as being detached from the specifics of the context they are acting in (Barker, 2001). To start addressing this gap, it is therefore essential to view and explore leadership in the construction industry as a processual undertaking, involving leaders, followers, and several contexts in an ongoing interaction of co-operation, collaboration, and co-creation, accomplished over time through enacted processes, situated practices, and dialogue (e.g., Bolden and Gosling, 2006; Carroll, 2008; Crevani et al., 2010; Cunliffe and Eriksen, 2011; Bolden et al., 2011; Alvesson and Spicer, 2014; Collinson et al., 2018).

Understanding leadership as a social process that is being imbued with meaning when it is enacted in context also reminds us about the recursiveness between leadership and context. Paying closer attention to how leadership – the verb and not the noun (Crevani et al., 2010) – has been shaped by, but also might shape, various aspects of the construction context, might also support an extension of the gaze beyond the linkages between leadership and *current* construction operations, to encompass also an understanding of leadership processes embedded in a trajectory that permeates the past, the present, and the future of the construction industry (Chan and Cooper, 2010).

Rather than offering any detailed theoretical framing, the arguments put forward here are bridging over to a general methodological reorientation. To prioritize situated interpretations of leadership (Alvesson and Spicer, 2014) in construction, this paper follows the methodological assumptions that underlie qualitative studies of leadership (Bryman, 2004; Fairhurst, 2007). Therefore, the next section elaborates these arguments with details about the design of a qualitative interview study of leadership in construction companies.

RESEARCH DESIGN AND METHOD

This paper draws on data from 24 in-depth and open-ended interviews about leadership conducted with middle- and top-level managers in the largest construction companies in Sweden. The purpose of the study was to explicitly foreground the managers' own interpretations of leadership processes as they unfold in these particular organizations, rather than testing any pre-existing leadership models, definitions, or hypotheses. We, therefore, designed an interview study grounded in an explorative and inductive research methodology. The interviews were carried out during 2020 and included middle- and top-level managers from the six largest (measured in turnover) construction companies in Sweden. This paper identifies these companies using the pseudonyms ConstracORP, ConstructINC, ConcrETE, ContraORG, ConstructION, and ConSTRUCT. The interviewees will be referred to as "managers" instead of "leaders" throughout the paper. This is to reflect a central tenet of the research, under which leadership is considered a distinct social process as opposed to the formal role of being an appointed manager (Alvesson et al., 2017). The 24 managers were selected equally across the six companies (i.e., four from each company) and included the following formal positions: Regional Manager (n = 6), Division Manager (n = 4), Project Manager (n = 3), District Manager (n = 2), Business Area Manager (n = 2), Development Manager (n = 2), Site Manager (n = 2), Production Manager (n = 1), Marketing Manager (n = 1), HR-Manager (n = 1).

When selecting these interviews, several different sampling criteria were considered. The first consideration was to select interviewees from several different construction companies to explore any possible variations in leadership. However, as the study progressed, we found

striking similarities across the companies, suggesting that the study might best be characterized as a single case study (Flyvberg, 2006) of leadership in large construction companies in Sweden. The minor variations found are outlined in the result section. Still, they also strengthen the idea that leadership processes in construction companies may overlap with a certain community of practice (Dubois and Gadde, 2002).

A second consideration regarded which managers to select for interviews. We decided to include a mixture of managers from both the line organization and the central functions. Under this general idea, the managers were selected according to a snowballing principle, which provided us with an interesting sample. Not the least since the managers tended to direct us further, either to the manager immediately above or below them in the hierarchy. Based on this, the interview data provided us with the possibility to triangulate their stories about leadership by comparing different versions of the leader-follower processes as they permeate various organizational levels.

The third consideration was how many interviews to conduct. Here we were guided by an overall sensitivity to an ongoing degree of saturation concerning the content of the leadership narratives collected (Patton, 2002); that is, we conducted additional interviews until no or very few additional insights were deemed to follow from yet another interview. While there is no universal number for when saturation in qualitative interviewing usually occurs, research suggests that 24 interviews would fall well within the critical scope (Guest et al., 2006).

During the interviews, we let the managers act as free storytellers (Cladinin and Connelly, 2000) as much as possible. In this case, collecting open-ended stories about leadership were considered to support a receptiveness for the links between experience and meanings related

to leadership and the particularities of the contexts in which these meanings are constructed (Cladinin and Connelly, 2000; Gill, 2001; Alvesson and Sköldberg, 2017). Instead of following a detailed interview guide, we probed the managers to tell their stories across a number of interrelated themes (see Table 1).

[INSERT TABLE 1 HERE]

Table 1. Overview of the overarching themes used in the interviews.

The managers typically covered most of the themes using their own narrating, although not always in the order presented above and often in a more interrelated and overlapping fashion. The interrelation between the themes, were, in fact, commonly used as a cue for our follow-up questions. As were brief follow-up questions asking “why?..why?..why?”, “can you explain further?”, and “can you give a concrete example?”, all to support the overall research ambition to understand leadership as it was related to the daily work of these managers. Each interview lasted between 60 and 90 min and was recorded and transcribed verbatim, amounting to 18–30 A4 pages of written text.

ANALYSIS

The interview transcripts were analyzed in three phases: (1) open coding, (2) axial coding, and (3) selective coding (cf. Strauss and Corbins, 1990). With the inductive approach as a starting point (Thomas, 2006), the analytical process was inspired by the general intentions and guidelines within Grounded Theory, but without strictly following all the steps outlined by Strauss and Corbin (1990). Instead, the aim was to maintain, as far as possible, an open

mind for different interpretations of leadership and thus joining the more interpretative approach of Strauss and Corbins (1990), Czarniawska (2004), and Charmaz (2006) to the analysis of interview data; seeking to create a coherent story that captures the meaning of the situated events.

Following this, the three analytical phases overlapped in multiple step-based readings of the material and iterations between the data set and emerging findings (Alvesson and Kärreman, 2011), as well as ongoing joint discussions between all the authors of this paper, to strengthen the validity of the interferences made (Taylor et al., 2010). The first rounds of readings were open, searching for any interesting patterns of consensus and/or variances concerning leadership. After this initial reading, we focused on phase 1, collecting a wealth of *open codes* (Strauss and Corbins, 1990) that captured the most central aspects of the interviewees' leadership narratives. Considering the explorative nature of this study, there were no preconceptions and/or hypotheses about leadership that were deemed suitable to pre-code using any software (such as NVivo). Instead, we conducted this step as a very timely manual endeavor, guided by the overall themes described in Table 1. This resulted in four thematic clusters of open codes, including the importance and role of leadership (see Category A, Table 2), leadership styles and perspectives (Category B), alignments between leadership and current organizational principles (Category C), and tensions between leadership and future organizational principles (Category D). In this phase, we also searched for open codes concerning 'leadership training' and 'origins of leadership', but found too few descriptions to proceed with these open codes in phase 2) and 3).

Phase 2) and 3) of the analysis sought to investigate and conceptualize the relationship between the concepts identified in the open coding process. Here we drew directly on Strauss

and Corbin (1990) and treated the difference between the Axil codes and the Selective code merely in terms of an increased level of abstraction (with the Selective code being the overall Result category). Again, these phases involved a lot of re-reading of the material to validate the emerging Axial and Selective codes against the contextual use and meaning of the Open codes found in the interview transcripts (Strauss and Corbin, 1990). A detailed overview of the three analytical phases is outlined in Table 2 below, followed by a result section that presents and explains both the meaning and the interrelations between four core categories of leadership processes found in the construction companies studied.

[INSERT TABLE 2 HERE]

Table 2. A detailed overview of the analytical process

RESULTS

Adding leadership on top of construction expertise

When describing the details of the professional profiles that had qualified them for their current positions, the vast majority of the managers emphasized the importance of construction expertise and experience. The results elucidated that this view echoed across all the various managerial positions and echelons because it reflected a certain logic relating to the career progression in these companies.

Every project is unique, and you, therefore, have to adapt to unique circumstances... this requires a very specific set of skills and experience. Therefore, to qualify for the highest positions in a construction company...say, for instance, regional manager... you need to have experience from these all steps... those promoted to regional

329 *managers have vast experience from all the different steps of the hierarchal ladder.*

330 (Manager 14, Business Area Manager, ContraORG)

331

332 Leadership skills were also perceived to be important, but only *on top* of construction-
333 specific expertise and experience.

334

335 *An extensive construction experience is needed indeed...that you have experience*
336 *from various positions. I mean, we have this career progression...it is not 100 percent*
337 *like this, but the majority of the highest positions, like regional managers, have been*
338 *district managers before, and before that project managers. But great leadership*
339 *skills are also required to manage both customers and employees in a good way.*

340 (Manager 4, Regional Manager, ConstracORP)

341

342 However, the general view that leadership skills were perceived as being of secondary
343 importance was often expressed in a self-ironic and critical fashion.

344

345 *In that regard, I think we distinguish ourselves a bit [construction companies*
346 *compared to other companies] ...we have too many engineers that have become*
347 *leaders or managers...that might not necessarily be the best leaders. I believe that our*
348 *sector has a lot of work to do in relation to this. To start promoting the best leaders,*
349 *rather than only the best engineers.* (Manager 6, Development Manager,

350 ConstructINC)

351

352 And:

353

354 *I really hope that the construction industry can start to value leadership more. It is*
355 *not the least by starting to appoint managers, not only because they are skilled at*
356 *managing construction projects, but also because they have strong leadership skills. I*
357 *really hope we can speed up that development. To value leadership skills more as*
358 *opposed to only technical skills (Manager 5, Production Manager, ConstructINC)*

359
360 While many of the managers were critical regarding the overly relaxed pace of increasing the
361 legitimacy of leadership alongside the current dominant managerial ideals, many also
362 perceived this to be an already matured process.

363
364 *I have experienced this change myself. We are much more aware of the importance of*
365 *leadership. We measure leadership these days, and we participate in leadership*
366 *courses. I would say that the managers we had ten years ago focused only on money.*
367 *These kinds of managers have now lost ground to those that are more people-focused.*
368 *Ten years ago, a successful manager was the one that earned the most money for the*
369 *company. Today, a successful manager is one that both earns money and focuses on*
370 *the more human values (Manager 10, Regional Manager, ConcrETE).*

371
372 While there existed varying opinions regarding just how far they have come in their uptake of
373 leadership perspectives and practices, these variations – when taken together – point
374 convergingly to the fact that leadership has gained increased traction, or at least attention, in
375 these construction companies.

376
377 With that said, it was possible to find in the data a more quantitative measurement that
378 indicated that leadership, despite this perceived transition, has yet to become a prioritized

concern for managers in construction companies. By means of distilling all the narrative passages that addressed the managers' professional backgrounds, we found that 20 out of the 24 managers have worked their whole careers in construction companies, and only four have been recruited from outside (see also Table 2). These figures indicate that construction expertise still trumps leadership skills when these companies appoint their managers, including the top echelons. Put differently; in the sample of our interviews, few, if any, managers have been recruited solely based on their leadership skills. This homogeneity that permeates the managerial profiles seems furthermore to translate into certain collective views on leadership, as highlighted in the next section.

Responsive leadership

The managers generally perceived leadership as *a distinct set of practices* rather than anything that per default was encapsulated in their formal roles. In fact, they marked a clear distinction between "management" and "leadership", in which the former had to do with formal procedures and processes, tasks, and bureaucracy, and the latter with inter-personal relations. We also learned that they generally associated leadership with a positive connotation and management with a negative one.

By far, the most frequent description of the managers' leadership perspectives and styles was *responsiveness*. Responsiveness is the English translation of the Swedish word "lyhörd", which according to the dictionary is defined as "to readily apprehend and pay regard to something". In the manager's stories, responsiveness was used both directly as a keyword and as a central general perspective to describe a leadership style characterized by carefully listening to their employees to understand their personal needs related to work and then trying to accommodate those needs (see also Table 2, for a detailed overview).

404

405 *I am very personal in my leadership ...personal in the way that I try to listen and be*
406 *responsive to their needs [the followers]. I really like to talk to and meet with people. I*
407 *care a lot about them enjoying their work ... and that we have fun together. (Manager*
408 *13, Business Area Manager, ContraORG)*

409

410 Another:

411

412 *My leadership style is to listen carefully to people ... and to provide them with the right*
413 *circumstances for commitment and development. I try to meet their specific*
414 *requirements and wishes...for instance, by trying to find projects and tasks that fit every*
415 *person. (Manager 1, District Manager, ConstrACORP)*

416

417 A central tenet of leadership-as-responsiveness was to take seriously the idea that each person
418 is different and then adapt to these differences. The results highlight how the managers have
419 developed the skills required to adapt to all the different and unique construction management
420 tasks and all the different and unique employees. Leadership as responsiveness thus
421 encapsulates a type of situation-based work approach applicable for both people and tasks.

422

423 *I practice a very situation-based leadership, and I am good at responding to the*
424 *situation I am in.... both to different situations and different people. The benefits of*
425 *this are that I tend to get both employees and customers on my side. (Manager 9,*
426 *Division Manager, ConcrETE)*

427

When asking them to describe what kind of skills are needed to be a responsive leader, the managers used examples such as “people skills”, “communication skills”, “being like a psychologist”, “being like a friend”. However, it was also common for them to emphasize the advantages of having vast construction experience, thus linking their leadership styles to the managerial ideals highlighted in the previous section.

I believe that the key to leadership is listening and responsiveness....and when I say responsiveness, then I mean to understand the realities of the people you are leading. [...] In my view, a successful middle manager, for instance, should have the ability to do the site manager's job if needed...and a site manager, in turn, should be able to be a team leader and so on. If you have those abilities, then you can truly understand the realities and challenges of those you are leadingand then I think it is much easier to support them in your leadership. (Manager 19, Division Manager, ConSTRUCT)

A question that lingered as the researchers listened to these descriptions of responsive leadership was how it aligns with the kind of organizing that might require more top-down directions.

Researcher: *How do you use leadership to progress organizational change?*

Manager: *First of all, you have to really listen to people. I need to understand what they really feel about the initiatives I am proposing. The key is then to nudge wisely... and entice carefully. To make [naming a subordinate] really want to use whatever I am proposing in their work. No one will buy into changes if they think I am being too rigid about it.* (Manager 3, Development Manager, ConstracORP)

453

454 Leadership as responsiveness seemed to be aligned with a permeating idea of not telling other
455 experienced workers how to do their job. This relation could thus explain how leadership has
456 become embedded in some of the specific conditions in these construction companies.

457

458 **The alignment between leadership and *current* organizing principles**

459 The results indicate that the responsive leadership styles are aligned with ongoing processes
460 of delegating tasks and responsibilities down the organizational levels. In addition to
461 “dictatorship” as a contrasting ideal, the managers also frequently used the idiom of “pointing
462 with the whole hand” as a more detailed account of how they *didn't* want to lead. While the
463 managers stressed that they had no problems making tough decisions when needed, this was
464 considered only as an exception to an overall status quo of passing down a high degree of
465 freedom and responsibility downwards the managerial echelons.

466

467 Manager: *I really don't want to be the kind of leader that is pointing with the whole*
468 *hand.*

469

470 Researcher: *Ok, but how do you organize and direct your employees then?*

471

472 Manager: *As little as possible. I have always had a problem with those managers that*
473 *want to intervene with what I do and how I do it. Therefore, I just explain the task,*
474 *and when the deadline is...and after that, I try to intervene as little as possible in their*
475 *[the followers] work towards that goal. Being too detailed about how to do things*
476 *kills creativity. I mean, if I were to tell my employees how they should do their jobs*
477 *...then it would be no different from merely handing it over to a machine. I don't think*

478 *that is very value-adding for the person either. It is people that do this job after all.*

479 (Manager 7, Project Manager, ConstructINC)

480

481 As this example shows, the idea of mandating high degrees of freedom was a reciprocal
482 process, as this manager expected the same degrees of freedom from his [sic] manager. The
483 common leadership styles were thus embedded in a permeating organizing principle that
484 mandated the rather homogenous group of skilled and experienced construction managers to
485 perform their work within very free realms. This dominant principle was readily confirmed
486 when the managers reflected on the differences between leadership in construction compared
487 to other contexts.

488

489 *Here [in construction companies], you are delegated a lot of responsibility and*
490 *freedom to do what you want. It is actually an enormous amount of freedom that is*
491 *given to you. My wife is working in a very high position in the car industry... and I*
492 *have learned from her that they are far more micro-managed than we are [in*
493 *construction companies]. We are pretty bad at processes...we reinvent the wheel and*
494 *all that...but we are highly skilled at problem-solving...because we are constantly*
495 *given these high degrees of freedom and responsibilities. And I must say that this is a*
496 *really exciting aspect of this line of work.* (Manager 2, Project Manager,
497 ConstraCORP)

498

499 The freedom in work governed by their leadership perspectives and styles seemed also to
500 span beyond the rational domains. Scrutinizing their explanations, we also found many more
501 emotionally laden accounts linked to these permeating logics.

502

503 *I don't know for sure, since I never worked outside construction...but my view is that*
504 *the car industry, for instance, seems to be much more structured and micro-managed,*
505 *compared to construction. [...] and I don't think many of us working in construction*
506 *could handle to work in any other industry, just because the degree of control would*
507 *be so much higher. We are just so used to 'navigate our own ships'. (Manager 7,*
508 *Project Manager, ConstructINC)*

509
510 The preferred leadership styles were thus related both to the organizational tasks per se and a
511 consensus about what makes work-life enjoyable in these construction companies.

512
513 When the managers reflected on the differences between leadership in construction and other
514 industries, almost all of them used the car industry as their comparative example. As it turned
515 out, one of four managers (see Table 2) that had been recruited from outside of construction
516 had actual experience from working in a large international car manufacturer and could
517 therefore readily confirm the collective perceptions.

518
519 *The work is very unstructured here in ConstructINC compared to the car industry*
520 *[...] That is actually a big difference for me... how unstructured the work is here [in*
521 *construction]. I am actually surprised that it is even possible to run operations in*
522 *such an unstructured way as we do here...and I cannot help thinking about how*
523 *extremely well we could do and how much money we could make if only we had more*
524 *structure. These circumstances are actually a major challenge for me as a relatively*
525 *inexperienced leader in construction (Manager 5, Production Manager,*
526 *ConstructINC).*

While confirming the differences, this manager viewed them in a much more critical manner. Rather than positively associating the lack of structures with personal freedom embedded in professional work, this manager conceived of the general leadership styles as posing a threshold for increased organizational performance.

The tension between leadership and *future* organizing principles

The results offer snapshots of how certain leadership styles have gradually aligned with the overarching organizing principles in the construction companies studied. However, the results also point out a salient tension in relation to ongoing organizational transformations.

We have this strong tradition in construction of a very decentralized structure and extremely high levels of autonomy related to project management...and how these 'strong heroes' manage the end results in their own individualized ways. But I think that we here at ConstraCORP, as well as ConstructING and ConstructION, now have started to become much more centralized and structured, compared to other construction companies [...]. But even when having all these structures, business models, and process.... this old logic still remains strong. (Manager 3, Development Manager, ConstraCORP)

The manager in this example refers to an ongoing change that is contrasting the leadership processes that govern delegation of individual freedom and personalized problem-solving. While the results point to a collective set of preferred leadership styles, they also capture several contrasting accounts regarding the future. Among those are accounts that testify to another ongoing change relating to the implementation of more structures, processes, and collective routines, altogether following a more standardized top-down type of organizing

that is grounded in an overarching strive to improve organizational performance (see also Table 2, for an overview of these accounts).

The results show that the managers seemed to be unwillingly aware of this and that it evoked a lot of emotions. Next follows a series of three quotes from three different managers, all working in one of these companies, independently reflecting on these issues.

The first, Manager 9, now working in ConcrETE, but having experience also from ConstrACORP, is voicing this in a critical manner:

At ConcrETE, it is the people that are the most important part of the company. They are the ones that are doing the job... and represent the 'entrepreneurs within all of us'. This differs from my experience working at ConstrACORP, where they tried to 'cast us all in the same mold'. (Manager 9, Division Manager, ConcrETE)

Another, Manager 10:

Here at ConcrETE, we are down to earth, and we are personal. ConcrETE isn't like ConstrACORP, for instance.... we are more soft and more human I would say. We are not nearly as top-managed here. Of course, we still have our own structures and routines, but I believe these are not as strict as in other construction companies... and that is just the way we like it here at ConcrETE. We have actually been paying a lot of attention to preserve that specific aspect of work (Manager 10, Regional Manager, ConcrETE)

578 And another, Manager 12:

579

580 Researcher: *If we consider leadership styles, how have they changed during the past ...let*
581 *us say 10 years?*

582

583 Manager: *Can we say 20 years instead? [laughter] ... I would say that the leadership*
584 *supported even more freedom back then. The project managers were 'Kings' ...restricted*
585 *by much fewer formal rules and processes compared to now. My experience is that those*
586 *employees that choose to leave Constracorp, ConstructINC or us at ConcrETE*
587 *actually, we are not as micro-managed here at ConcrETE compared to Constracorp and*
588 *ConstructINC ...but anyway...those that leave often do so because they want to work at*
589 *companies where these old degrees of freedom still exist, most notable the smaller or*
590 *medium-sized construction companies. (Manager 12, Business Area Manager, ConcrETE)*

591

592 In one of the previous sections, we presented an account from a manager that worked in
593 Constracorp and positively proclaimed how much freedom and maneuvering space was
594 delegated to you in construction, compared to other industries. While in this section,
595 managers that worked for ConcrETE positively proclaimed the same, but when comparing to
596 Constracorp. Manager 12, from the last example here, was, however more ambiguous, and
597 pointed instead to the smaller construction companies as the true realms for the much valued
598 and traditional 'professional freedom'. However, the variations found were only differing in
599 scale and not in terms of the main characteristics they highlight. Altogether, they lend weight
600 to certain leadership styles that gradually – from the past to the present – have aligned with
601 the dominant organizing principles in these construction companies. But now – going from
602 the present to the future – these seem to pose an unresolved tension with ongoing (albeit

seemingly slow) organizational transformation intended to improve construction management and organizing.

DISCUSSION

The results of this paper show that managers in construction companies view ‘leadership’ as a distinct set of principles and practices that they use, to varying degrees, in their day-to-day work. One such clear distinction was how the managers perceived of leadership as belonging to the ‘person-based’ domains of their work, as opposed to the ‘task-based’ domains under which they sorted all activities more directly related to the formal construction management and organizing (cf. Bass and Avolio, 1994; Conger and Kanungo, 1998; Yukl 2006; Northouse, 2016).

With that said, the managers also testified to overlaps between these two domains: emphasizing a salient alignment between their leadership styles and the inherent nature of their managerial tasks. Most notable is how ‘responsiveness’ – sensing and adapting to a constant stream of ad hoc challenges – was applied as a central principle for both their leadership of *people* and management of *tasks*. While this could point to a certain reciprocal alignment between project-based organizing and leadership (Tyssen et al., 2014) in construction companies, the results also remind of the need to critically scrutinize the underlying mechanisms of this dynamic; not least to understand to what extent leadership is transforming or being transformed by the situated organizational context at hand (e.g., Crevani et al., 2010; Cunliffe and Eriksen, 2011; Bolden et al., 2011).

Even though leadership gradually seems to have received increased attention in the construction companies studied, it is still clearly being overshadowed by certain pervasive

managerial ideals relating to the significance of having profound experience and expertise of construction – that is, being foremost task-oriented. The results suggest that the uptake and legitimacy of leadership practices are largely preconditioned by embedded practices that are linked to these dominant ideals; more specifically, it appears as if leadership has foremost been adopted and enacted to strengthen and sustain traditional work and organizing in these construction companies, rather than being used to change and improve it. This is most notable in relation to how the collective leadership styles serve to broadly govern and mandate a multi-level pattern of delegation of free and independent work, under which the homogenous group of “construction experts” continue to work according to their own best practices. This finding resonates well with previous studies that have explored the uptake of other change and development-oriented practices in construction companies, such as strategic plans (Löwstedt and Räisänen, 2012), strategy workshops (Löwstedt et al., 2018), and innovation management (Nam and Tatum, 1997); altogether concluding that such ‘exogenous’ practices tend to be downplayed and shaped by existing ‘indigenous’ managerial practices, rather than having much success changing them.

While leadership seemed to have been adopted to align with current construction management and organizing, the results also point out apparent tensions in relation to envisioned future states. Table 2 (category 4) lists the most pressing organizational challenges for construction companies, as perceived by the interviewed managers; elucidating a permeating need to transform organizing and management principles to support more efficient and standardized organizational processes (to, ultimately, increase construction production performance). This puts into serious question the appropriateness of leadership styles geared foremost to be responsive to support and govern the individualized freedom and independence that construction experts have grown accustomed to.

653

654 Altogether, this study points to a lot of internal ambiguity regarding the role that current
655 leadership styles might play to transform construction. Instead of trying to advocate for one
656 preferred leadership style, the results are rather pointing to the fact that this ambiguity is best
657 to be unpacked by paying more critical attention to the variances of leadership in
658 construction. The results suggest that the homogenous leadership styles practiced by the
659 managers can be linked to their homogenous professional backgrounds and profiles.
660 Following the lead of the few critical voices represented in the result section might, therefore,
661 offer an important reminder to start to question, or at least further explore, the dominant
662 views that seem to have established that the preferred leadership styles in construction
663 companies (for all managerial echelons) are those that are well aligned with current
664 construction organizing practices, rather than those that might challenge and transform them.
665 For change in construction, it might therefore be beneficial to have among the homogenous
666 group of ‘responsive listeners’, a manager that, at least occasionally, is leading in new future
667 directions, ‘using the whole hand’.

668

669 **CONCLUSIONS**

670 A growing number of construction researchers have pointed at a positive correlation between
671 leadership and enhanced performance in various dimensions in the construction process – as
672 it is *currently* organized. This study can conclude that certain distinct practices related to
673 leadership indeed are perceived to be of great importance for achieving high performance in
674 the work as a manager in construction companies. However, it can also be concluded that
675 these same leadership practices seem to preserve status quo in these companies, rather than
676 supporting change and development. The positive correlation between leadership and
677 performance is thus much more questionable, if considered from a long-term perspective. The

clearest example drawn from this study, is how current leadership processes pose a seemingly unresolved tension with change initiatives that seek to improve organizational performance by means of reorganizing construction companies according to more streamlined and standardized processes. It is suggested that this preserving leadership effect can be linked to the high (maybe too high) degree of homogeneity that permeates both the leadership styles and the professional backgrounds of the construction managers practicing leadership.

GENERALIZABILITY AND FUTURE STUDIES

This study was predicated on the need for a deepened understanding of how leadership processes relate to the specifics of construction. Based on this, the study was deliberately designed to foreground in-depth meanings over general causality. Because of this, there is an inherent limit to the generalizability of the findings. While the level of saturation would suggest that the results serve to represent situated leadership characteristics in the largest construction companies in Sweden, many different variations are to be expected, for instance, in construction companies operating in other countries. This is however not mainly related to the qualitative methodology used, but rather to the fact that it is well established that leadership ideals and practices differ significantly across cultural contexts (see Brodbeck and Eisenbeiss, 2014, for a review of this extensive field of studies). It is, therefore, unsurprising that studies that have tested leadership variations across cultural contexts in construction specifically have, indeed, found such differences (Giritli and Oraz, 2004; Mäkilouko, 2004; Wong et al., 2007; Kasapoğlu, 2014).

Our case, drawn from the Swedish context, shows how the ongoing adoption of ‘modern’ leadership ideals in construction companies is ridden variously with both alignments and tensions. ‘Modern’ could be seen as denoting contemporary perspectives of leadership, as it

is portrayed both in leadership research and popularized discourses; that, at least in Sweden, are foregrounding people before tasks, coaching and listening before directing and telling, and informal empowerment before formal and more coercive power. Seeing the increased interest and adoption of such ‘modern’ leadership ideals happening in an industry that is often criticized for being ‘unmodern’, could indeed be interpreted as a promising sign. However, zooming in on the details of these processes indicates that the transformative potential of leadership appears to be disappointing in these construction companies. Rather than a sign of inconclusiveness, these findings reflect the inherent dynamics that underly the local enactment of leadership as a certain social practice that never solely (or maybe not even mainly) is invented ‘in-house’, but is also embedded on the level of societies, as various national and cultural versions.

A strengthened leadership agenda in construction research would be characterized by a detailed understanding of the differences between general relations and variations of leadership and those that can be linked specifically to the situated construction context. By prioritizing the detailed meaning of leadership processes in construction companies, this study offers analytical rather than statistical insights (Taylor et al., 2010; Yin, 2013). Therefore, the value of the findings in this paper is not mainly to be judged by how well they represent an objectified and general reality of leadership in construction, but rather by which consequences they produce (Ellis and Bochner, 2000). One such fruitful consequence would be a future stream of leadership studies by construction researchers that are characterized by an enhanced methodological richness, variously prioritizing both rigor and relevance.

DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

Some or all data, models, or code that support the findings of this study are available from the corresponding author upon reasonable request.

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980 **TABLES 1 and 2**

981 *Table 1. Overview of the overarching themes used in the interviews.*

Professional background and competencies

We asked the managers to tell us their professional stories, starting with their educational backgrounds, followed by a description of their career trajectories leading up to their current positions. We also asked them what professional requirements (competencies and experience) had qualified them for their current managerial position.

Leadership definition and orientation

We asked for their definitions of leadership and then for a detailed description of their own leadership philosophies, styles, and practices

Leadership practice

This perspective informed our follow-up questions throughout all the interviews. Rather than only letting them talk about leadership in abstract and general terms, we constantly asked them to provide concrete and detailed examples from day-to-day organizational life, linking leadership to the actual conditions of their work.

Leadership differences

We asked how leadership is different in the construction industry compared to other industries and contexts. While almost none of the managers had any actual experience from working in any other industry, their reflections on the perceived differences offered a rich stock of accounts that elucidated the specifics of construction in terms of a leadership context.

Leadership in change

We asked if and how the leadership styles had changed from past to present time. We also asked them to speculate about the future, specifically to reflect on the role that leadership

might have for the wide range of challenges faced by construction companies and their managers.

982

983 *Table 2. A detailed overview of the analytical process.*

Selective code: Leadership vis-à-vis other skills	Axial codes: Informal and formal work requirements	Open codes: Skills and experience needed for the job
Result Category A: “Adding leadership on top of construction expertise”	Work requirements	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Construction skills (18) • Business skills (10) • Team Building skills (6) • Organizing skills (6) • Leadership skills (5)
	Grounds for promotion	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Strong track record of construction management (17) • Ambition (8) • Personal characteristics (7) • Leadership (4) • Collaboration (3)

EXPLANATION RESULT CATEGORY A: The **Open codes** are keywords used to describe the skills and experience required in their jobs (numbers in brackets indicate the number of interviewees that included them as part of their descriptions). Only keywords mentioned in more than one interview are included here. The **Axial codes** distinguish between how they described the work requirements in general and how they answered the direct question: “on what basis did you get promoted to your current position?”. While there exist many possible overlaps across the **Open codes** listed here, the aggregated **Selective Code** represents the strong preference and priority given to construction expertise, experience, and track record, in which other skills, including leadership, are given secondary importance. This analytical inference is further supported by the fact that an aggregated summary of the managers’ professional backgrounds shows that 20/24 of the managers have worked their whole careers in construction companies, and only 4/24 have been recruited from other organizational contexts. Number 1 of these exceptions was recruited from a real estate company. Number 2 started the career in construction and switched over to the transport sector for a brief period of time, but then missed working in construction and therefore returned back. Number 3 worked in academia as a researcher and was recruited to the central functions working with organizational development. Number 4 had a profile that stood out, by having experience from working as a manager in a large multinational car company.

Selective code: Overall Leadership Approach	Axial codes: Leadership themes	Open codes: Keyword used to describe leadership
Result Category B: “Responsive Leadership”	Listen (rather than telling)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Listen (19) • Trying to understand the needs of others (15) • Facilitate open dialogues (9) • “See” others (8) • Negotiate consensus (8) • Coaching (6)
	Being personal and flexible	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Adapt/adjust leadership to different personalities (15) • Be skilled in the ‘people business’ (15) • Be friendly and informal (14)
	Accommodate needs	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Trying to accommodate the work-related needs of others (17) • Trying to accommodate the personal development of others (14)
	Responsiveness (11)	The English translation of the Swedish word “Lyhördhet”, the meaning of which encapsulates a combination of the three previous axial codes: listen and understand the needs of the employees, with the purpose of trying to accommodate those needs by being flexible

EXPLANATION RESULT CATEGORY B: The three columns here represent a three-step aggregation of the managers’ leadership descriptions (only descriptions used in more than one interview is included here). “Responsiveness” is listed both as the overall **Selective code** and one of the four **Axial codes**. This is because it was used both directly as a leadership keyword as well as representing a central notion in the descriptions of leadership styles, that permeates all the **Axial codes**. 11/24 of the managers used “Responsiveness” directly

when describing their Leadership style. In addition to those, eight managers used a combination of *all* the other three Axial codes in their descriptions, altogether indicating that 19 of the 24 managers foregrounded “Responsiveness” as their overall Leadership Approach.

Selective Code: Responsive Leadership as an organizing principle	Axial codes: Logical linkages between Responsive Leadership and daily managerial work tasks and organizing challenges	Open codes:
Result Category C: “The alignment between leadership and current organizing principles”	Delegating “freedom with responsibility” (evaluating work outcomes rather than work methods)	Same as Category B
	Allowing high degrees of flexibility for work tasks is a requirement for the complex problem-solving needed	
	To listen (rather than telling) was perceived as the most effective way to empower employees, which in turn supports task performance	
	Marked a clear contrast to more directing and coercive leadership styles that were deemed inappropriate in general (key metaphors: “NOT being a dictator”, “NOT being a micromanager”, “NOT pointing with the whole hand”)	
EXPLANATION RESULT CATEGORY C: Category C prolongs Category B to link “Responsive Leadership” to the corresponding organizing principles. This analytical step thus reviewed all the concrete examples and explanations of “Responsive Leadership” as it was used to support the situated managerial work tasks and organizing challenges in the construction companies studied.		
Selective code: Comparing axial codes with Result Categories B and C	Axial codes: Organizing principles	Open codes: Organizational challenges (ongoing and future)
Result Category D: “The tension between leadership and future organizing principles “	Standardization	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Digitalization (12)• Standardization (11)• Reduce costs (10)• Sustainability (9)• Productivity (8)• Efficiency (8)• Industrialization (7)• Attract new competence (6)• Centralization (5)• Increase number of women (4)• Safety (3)• Decrease building time (2)• Knowledge transfer (2)• Increase Innovation (2)• Change the macho culture (2)
	Centralization	
	Integrated multi-level processes	
	Top-down directions (Mandatory, rather than guiding)	

EXPLANATION RESULT CATEGORY D: The **Open codes** list all the organizational challenges (ongoing and future) mentioned by the interviewees (including only those mentioned in more than one interview). The **Axial code** column represents the most accentuated organizing logics that were linked to these challenges. The **Selective code** represents the overall tension found by comparing the converging logic throughout the **Axial Codes** with the Result Categories B and C. In the result and discussion sections we draw also on the fact that most of the organizational challenges outlined here are directly or indirectly related to an overall strive to improve the performance of construction processes and organizing (regarding a variety of different performance dimensions, such as time, cost, quality, productivity, efficiency, waste elimination).

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