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Barriers to leadership development: Why is it so difficult to abandon the hero?

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Abstract

Critical consensus holds that leader-centred leadership theories reproduce romanticism by exaggerating the impact of individual leaders. In contrast, a processual perspective views leadership as an ongoing social interaction involving all organisational actors. Developing such a processual leadership meaning, however, is not easy, especially as formal leaders are embedded in a business world that still supports the heroic image of a leader. Critical literature highlights the difficult road towards meaning development, on which leaders are confronted with various obstacles that can impede development. In order to better understand potential barriers to the development of a processual leadership meaning, we analyse the development of leadership meaning for EMBA students over the course of two years. In particular, we identify two hindering dynamics that show *how* a leader-centred leadership meaning becomes reconstructed and reinforced over time, despite receiving training input on a processual leadership meaning. Additionally, we generate insights on two patterns that explain *why* it is so difficult to abandon a heroic image by revealing the crucial role of one's sense of self-as-a-leader. Finally, we provide important practical implications for future leadership development.

Keywords

Leadership development, leadership meaning, processual leadership, management training, sense of self-as-a-leader, viability, heroic leader, complexity, tensions

Introduction

Critical leadership scholarship highlights the need for more leadership mindsets that respond to the complexities of contemporary circumstances (Kennedy et al., 2013). Such research has recently emphasized that leader-centred (heroic) leadership theories reproduce romanticism (Collinson et al.,

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2018) and calls for a processual perspective on leadership (Tourish, 2014). However, the struggle individual leaders face in their attempt to develop a processual leadership meaning is difficult and rarely explored (Alvesson and Jonsson, 2018). This article highlights the dynamics which hinder progress along the 'bumpy road' towards the development of a processual leadership meaning and, thereby, contributes to our understanding of how and why the heroic view on leaders solidifies.

We often find that leadership theory overemphasizes the influence of individuals. Such leader-centred leadership theories are condemned for their predominant emphasis on individual leaders when romanticizing their individual dispositions and abilities, depicting them as heroes and overestimating their influence and contributions (Alvesson and Jonsson, 2018; Collinson, 2011). Critical literature holds that leader-centred leadership theories reproduce romanticism by exaggerating the impact of individual heroic leaders. Such a romantic view 'can be equal parts bewitching, disingenuous and harmful' as it neglects and avoids the ruptures, tensions, and complexities leadership offers (Collinson et al., 2018: 1642).

Alternatively, a processual, communication perspective views leadership as an ongoing social interaction process involving all organisational actors negotiating for and determining agency (Tourish, 2014). Such a processual view on leadership implies that it is not possible to stand apart from complex organisational processes. Instead, all organisational actors find themselves in an ongoing process of co-/de-/reconstructing their social reality (Tourish, 2019). To develop leadership practices that are attuned to a complex, indeterminate, and ambiguous world (Carroll et al., 2008), scholars call for a mindset development about what leadership means by questioning and revealing the underlying assumptions about the nature of the social world (Kennedy et al., 2013).

Developing such a processual leadership meaning, however, is not easy, especially as formal leaders are embedded in an increasingly complex and ambiguous business world that, at the same time, still supports the idealized, unambiguous and cohesive 'heroic image' of a leader (Alvesson and Jonsson, 2018; Alvesson and Willmott, 2002; Sadler-Smith et al., 2017). Despite this difficulty, the critical conversation still lacks a deeper understanding of the struggle and its consequences for leaders and their leadership meaning. Thus, we aim to explore the following research question: 'Which dynamics hinder the development of a processual leadership meaning and instead solidify the heroic image of leaders?'

This article is structured as follows. First, we engage with the literature on leadership meanings from different perspectives and examine concerns from a critical perspective on the prevailing heroic image of leaders with strong elements of mythic masculinity. Second, we describe the methodological approach of our study, the analysis of which rests upon the data collected from the modules on leadership of an executive MBA management development programme. Third, we present our findings by depicting how and why leadership meaning develops over time. In particular, we show *how* analysing personal situations at work and deriving practical implications influence leadership meaning and, thereby, identify two core dynamics that hinder the development of a processual leadership meaning: the inability to apply a processual leadership meaning to one's personal situation at work ('leadership analysis' barrier) and the inability to derive processual practical implications ('leader impact' barrier). Additionally, our analysis elucidates two dominant patterns that help to explain *why* participants struggle when they aim to put a processual leadership meaning into practice. We identify the essential role of one's sense of self-as-a-leader and show that individuals persist in a heroic leader view regardless of what the programme input says. Fourth, we discuss our academic contributions and implications which suggest that, while working on developing a processual leadership meaning, individuals need to simultaneously establish a viable sense of self-as-a-leader, instead of falling for the seductive image of being or having to be a hero. With this, we provide useful practical implications for leadership development.

Theoretical background

Leadership meaning from different perspectives

A leadership meaning refers to a specific understanding of leadership, assumptions, and patterns of thinking which an individual or group may hold (Kennedy et al., 2015; Sveningsson and Alvesson, 2003). Such leadership meanings can be categorised into three basic perspectives. First, a leader-centred (heroic) meaning predominantly emphasizes the leader as person, personality traits of leaders, or their leadership styles. Leadership from this perspective means that leaders with specific dispositions—traits, ideals, values, skills, or interests—influence followers by showing effective leadership behaviour to reach organisational goals (Alvesson and Jonsson, 2018; Tourish, 2019). As this view centres mainly on leaders in their roles as managers and formal superiors, excessive and causal power and influence are attributed to them (Collinson, 2011; Collinson et al., 2018).

Second, post-heroic leadership theories focus on the importance of collaboration, consensus, dialogue and communication, based on accounts of collective harmony rather than power. Such post-heroic theories include terms such as 'distributed', 'shared', 'servant', 'quiet', 'collaborative', 'community', and 'co-leadership'. These approaches offer primacy to individual freedom of self-expression. Power asymmetries are neutralized in favour of collective work, harmonious dialogue, and consensus on key organisational goals (Collinson et al., 2018; Tourish, 2019).

Collinson et al. (2018) demonstrate that both of these leadership meanings, leader-centred and post-heroic, engage in a romanticized discourse reproducing assumptions that fixate on leaders or collectives in heroic terms and ignore the complexities of social reality. Critical literature problematises leadership concepts such as authoritarian leadership (Chu, 2014), hubristic leadership (Sadler-Smith et al., 2017), and monologic leadership (Cunliffe and Eriksen, 2011) for emphasizing the personal dominance and control of leaders. Such literature also criticises the positivity of leadership concepts such as spiritual leadership, transformational leadership, charismatic leadership, and authentic leadership (Alvesson and Jonsson, 2018; Collinson, 2011; Nyberg and Sveningsson, 2014), as well as post-heroic approaches that underestimate the potential negative influences of collective leadership practices such as, for example, group phenomena promoting ineffective decision-making and group members refraining from critical engagement or shirking responsibility. In addition, these leadership theories ignore the issues of emerging power asymmetries that may lead to exploitative, prejudicial, or oppressive practices (Collinson et al., 2018).

Third, we consider a processual view to be an alternative to the romanticism of leader-centred and post-heroic approaches. The processual view re-theorizes leadership 'as a fluid process emerging from the communicatively constituted interactions of myriad organisational actors' (Tourish, 2014: 80). Power and agency are neither concentrated in the hands of one leader nor equally shared in a collective. Leadership is socially constructed, deconstructed, and reconstructed by all organisational actors as they interact over time (Tourish, 2019). A processual leadership meaning focusses on the dynamic interactions of fluid relationships that enact social reality (Putnam, 2013). Such dynamic and fluid interaction between leadership and followership inherently generates ambiguity, contradiction, and conflict (Tourish, 2014). To develop leadership practices that are attuned to a complex, indeterminate, and ambiguous world (Carroll et al., 2008), scholars call for a mindset development about what leadership means by questioning and revealing the underlying assumptions about the nature of the social world (Kennedy et al., 2013). Putting such a leadership meaning into practice, however, is not so easy, especially in the face of lingering idealized assumptions and related expectations created by dominant conceptions of leadership at the organisational level (Ford, 2010).

The prevailing image of heroic leaders in increasingly complex and ambiguous contexts

Despite research that increasingly advocates for a processual approach to leadership, the coherent and unambiguous image of the heroic leader in leadership concepts seems to prevail and is heavily supported by business schools, managerial journals, and the popular press (Collinson and Tourish, 2015; Picone et al., 2014; Sadler-Smith et al., 2017).

Such a heroic image carries the danger of creating hubris that, as Picone et al. (2014) outline, can lead executives to champion oversimplified formulas for success, which can have serious consequences for performance. Individuals affected by overconfidence, over-ambition, and arrogance may lose contact with reality. In the 'illusion of control' (Langer, 1975), they overestimate their own abilities to predict events and to produce excellent results from uncertain conditions. Hubris, however, should not be reduced to the notion of overconfidence on the part of individual managers only (Tourish, 2020). The phenomenon is embedded especially in western cultural narratives. Business management has long been fascinated not only by the idea of the leader as hero but also as villain or tragically damaged individual (Grint, 2010; Sadler-Smith et al., 2017; Sinclair, 2007). This culturally shaped leadership discourse involves ideologies about what it means to be a leader with strong elements of masculinity in most cultures (Dennis and Kunkel, 2004; Ely et al., 2011; Ford, 2010; Snook et al., 2010). Such heroic qualities serve as 'models for privileged masculine behaviour' (Boon, 2005: 303), making 'the prototypical leader a quintessentially masculine man: decisive, assertive, and independent' (Ely et al., 2011: 476).

Gendered stereotypes of the heroic leader can lead to double-bind situations for both women and men. For women in leading positions, it creates a mismatch between the qualities attributed to women and the masculine qualities thought necessary for leadership. As Ely et al. (2011: 477) emphasize, what 'appears assertive, self-confident, or entrepreneurial in a man often looks abrasive, arrogant, or self-promoting in a woman'. Men can also easily find themselves in a paradox due to the mythic image of heroic leaders, which, according to Boon (2005: 301), offers them two alternatives: either they reject traditional definitions of masculine behaviour and take the risk of being labelled less than a man, or they embrace the behaviours that 'define the hero figure and pursue the impossible acquisition of superman qualities'.

Given the complexities and ambiguities of processes of organising, managers are hardly able to come close to such high ideals. Moreover, they are constantly confronted with tensions and contradictions due to multiple, competing demands. As Harding (2014) points out, leaders are 'powerful and powerless at the same time'. Formal leaders 'hold decision-making power over more and more issues, about which they often know less and less. They lead people whom they must trust to deliver, while simultaneously managing systems of surveillance that implicitly assume subordinates cannot be trusted' (Collinson and Tourish, 2015: 588). Leaders are constantly confronted with complexities and ambiguities, dealing with emerging contradictions; they are simultaneously presented with a prevailing heroic image and hampered by the fact that its high expectations cannot be met. This can put high pressure on leaders. Securing a sense of self in such contexts is a continuing, challenging, and self-conscious activity for leaders, a difficult situation to handle (Alvesson and Blom, 2018; Alvesson and Willmott, 2002; Carroll and Levy, 2010).

Methods

Research setting

We answer our research question 'Which dynamics hinder the development of a processual leadership meaning and instead solidify the heroic image of leaders?' by scrutinizing the

development of the leadership meaning of participants of an EMBA programme. Our research setting is a three-module leadership programme which is part of the curriculum. In the winter term of 2015/16, a cohort of 33 students attended the leadership modules. The demographic profile of this group aligns with the overall demographic profile of the business school students and graduates. Almost all of the participants were men (27 of the 33), with an average age of 38 years, most of them at the beginning of a classical vertical career with similar backgrounds regarding their provenance and level of education. They came from companies of different sizes (from sole proprietors to middle-sized and large corporations), different industries (from retail, manufacturing and high-tech companies), and in different fields and positions (from junior sales manager to head of R&D or CEO). However, given the embeddedness of the business school in a very industrial region, the majority of the trainees worked in middle-sized industrial and manufacturing enterprises that used management training to supplement their technical-engineering education. While their leadership experience ranged from 'major' to 'none (yet)', the majority of them were at the start of their management careers. All of them shared a common expectation towards the MBA, which was that it was meant to boost their careers.

The leadership modules are embedded in a classical EMBA programme with different trainers for three modules, with input on leadership, organisational behaviour, group dynamics, and change management. The introductory module aims to offer possibilities for participants to engage in new and different ways of thinking about leadership similar to the recommendations of Ford and Harding (2007), where constructivism as philosophy of science and their implications on the meaning of leadership are introduced. The consecutive training modules are designed to provide a wide variety of theoretical input, action learning settings with indoor and outdoor group exercises, and discussions as well as individual and group/peer reflections about the trainees' experiences and insights.

At the beginning of the term, the students were split into two groups. Each group participated in three leadership training modules, which were held in October 2015, December 2015, and January 2016. All modules lasted for three consecutive days at an external seminar hotel. As the two groups experienced their trainings simultaneously, we had the opportunity to accompany three of the six trainings—the first module of one group, and the second and third modules of the other group. After the trainings, students were asked to write and submit reflection reports, all of which we had access to.

Once students graduated and had returned to their regular work schedules (20 months after the completion of the leadership training), we sent out an online link to a survey with open questions; 14 out of the 33 trainees participated in the survey. All 14 respondents were male. Thus, while we were able to obtain data from different sources at different times during the programme, the core of our analysis focused on the data from these 14 male trainees that enabled us to depict their intra-individual development trajectories over the course of two years (from October 2015 to November 2017), with an intense phase during the leadership modules (October 2015 to February/March 2016) and a follow-up phase (October/November 2017).

Data collection

Our data collection process was based on four main sources: (1) written reflection reports, (2) verbal reflections recorded during training, (3) handwritten notes of group observations during training, and (4) a survey with structured open questions. In addition, we had notes from programme directors on expectations on the overall programme. First, during the entire leadership programme, each participant submitted three written reflection reports. All the reports aimed to

reflect what was learnt during the training and apply it to the specific contexts of their workplaces, although depending on module and trainer, the tasks were formulated slightly differently. In addition, with reference to the study, the participants were asked to briefly answer three questions that specifically focused on (1) what they had learnt in the training, (2) how they relate those insights to their organisational setting, and (3) their plans for implementing their insights in daily work routines. Unlike the regular reflection, these additional questions were not graded. The reports (10–12 typed-pages each) were regularly submitted within a month after the training days had taken place.

Second, the first author of this article had the opportunity to participate in three training modules (all with the same trainer, the third author of this article) as a silent observer. During these modules, trainees were tasked with repeatedly reflecting on their impressions and thoughts gained during the training with their peers. The verbal reflections of the participants, which they had shared with the trainer and other trainees in the plenum, were tape-recorded and transcribed verbatim. Third, in this way, we collected data from handwritten notes based on group observations. Finally, after their graduation 20 months after the completion of the leadership training, we asked the participants to fill out a survey with open questions focusing on their experiences and finding metaphors for describing their leadership work. This online survey aimed to grasp the trainees' reflections on their own development and the programme, and to track changes in their leadership meaning and how they reflect on putting their plans into practice.

In summary, we collected data from various sources for data triangulation (Flick, 2013). Instead of conducting 'classical' interviews, we aimed at gathering narratives that referred to the trainees' own reflections (in different forms of written and verbal expressions) on how to put their leadership meaning into practice (Nygren and Blom, 2001). In addition, metaphors the participants used to describe themselves in their working environment enabled interpretation about how leaders engage with leadership and see and position themselves as leaders (Alvesson and Spicer, 2011; Ford, 2010). Even though in this case the written text was quite short, the images described complemented our interpretation. With metaphors, language is primarily 'imagery', and not merely verbal. Metaphor and narrative mutually support each other (Alvesson and Sköldberg, 2018). Thus, we consider both narratives and metaphors as verbalized accounts by which the trainees organize and give meaning to their experiences and evaluate their actions and intentions (Cunliffe and Coupland, 2012; Gabriel, 2018). As narrators, humans reproduce what they do as agents and vice versa (Tsoukas and Hatch, 2001). They shape, construct, and perform the self, experience, and reality (Chase, 2005). We supplemented these narratives with observations on their behaviours and interactions during the training (Angrosino, 2007).

Data analysis

Considering language as the central facilitator of meaning construction (Gabriel, 2018; Tsoukas and Hatch, 2001), the written reflection reports and the survey descriptions represent our main text source for the narrative analysis (Alvesson and Sköldberg, 2018). These accounts offered a rich framework for leadership research (Sparrowe, 2005) and enabled us to analyse the individual-specific and context-dependent nature of individuals' sensemaking (Brown et al., 2008; Orbuch, 1997).

According to the core principals of hermeneutic, narrative analysis (Alvesson and Sköldberg, 2018), we aimed at elaborating emerging patterns of interpretation in a dialogue with the text by developing a coherent whole of partial interpretations in its context. Similar to what Nicolini (2009) described for studying practice, we 'zoomed in' and examined all trajectories in detail; by

'zooming out', we aimed at revealing core patterns of leadership meaning development. The different text sources were primarily the written narratives that reflected on participants' leadership experiences against the background of what they had learnt in the training, as well as the metaphorical descriptions of how they picture themselves in their roles as leaders. Sources also included the short additional questions in the written reflection reports and the verbal reflection rounds with the trainer. All of these sources contributed to the development of an overall picture through a comparison of the different texts and interpretation of similarities and differences across narratives (Chase, 2005).

To study the linguistic and thematic patterns that emerged from the various data sources (Chase, 2005; Gibbs, 2007), we interpreted (1) the participants' underlying leadership meaning (leader-centred or processual), (2) how they attempted to put it into practice (ego-centred or processual analyses and implications), and (3) what this enactment did to them and their sense of self as leaders. First, when developing the category 'leadership meaning' from our data, we asked questions on the texts such as 'what are the underlying assumptions of the descriptions/images?' and 'what do narrators find important in leadership?' Second, when developing the category 'analysing personal situations', we asked questions such as 'how do narrators position themselves in the described situation (description)?', 'how do they explain the situation (reason)?' and 'what do they neglect while describing and interpreting (neglect)?' When developing the category 'deriving practical implications', we asked the question 'which strategies do narrators aim to pursue in order to improve the concrete organisational situation at work?' Third, when developing the category 'sense of self-as-a-leader' from our data, we asked questions such as 'how do narrators aim to develop their roles as a leader in general?', 'what expectations do they place upon themselves?', and 'which personal lessons have been learnt?'

On the first three categories that we built from the answers ('leadership meaning', 'analysing personal situations', and 'deriving practical implications'), we interpreted the process as to how analysing personal situations and deriving practical implications affect one's leadership meaning over time. In doing so, we generated Table 1 from our data. This table guided our data analysis and provides an overview of differences between leader-centred and processual leadership meanings as well as ego-centred and processual analyses and implications.

The analysis revealed two core barriers hindering the development of a processual leadership meaning. Being especially interested in these hindering dynamics, we were curious about the underlying dynamics of the two prevailing patterns that we found to concurrently hinder the development of a processual leadership meaning and solidify the image of the heroic leader. Thus, in the next analytical step, our fourth category ('sense of self-as-a-leader') helped us to answer the question of why these dynamics emerge. The different perspectives gained from the different researchers in their various roles, experiences, and backgrounds helped with interpreting the data and discussing the results for assuring the plausibility of our interpretations (Alvesson and Sköldberg, 2018).

The process of developing leadership meaning

In our research, we identify how analysing one's personal situation and deriving practical implications affect one's leadership meaning over time. In particular, after adopting leadership meanings which we identify as being either leader-centred or processual, trainees are asked to analyse their personal situations at work in the reflection reports. Our results show that trainees adopt two different perspectives when they carry out such an analysis, either an ego-centred or a processual perspective. According to our data, an ego-centred analysis mainly focuses on describing situations

Table 1. Differences between leader-centred and processual leadership meanings and ego-centred and processual analyses and implications.

	Leader-centred/ego-centred	Processual
Leadership meaning	A leader-centred leadership meaning implies that being a leader means • Influencing others to reach organizational goals • Having control over situations • Having a large scope of influence	A processual leadership meaning implies that leadership is • A social interaction process • Co-constructed by all involved actors • Determined by emerging and constantly changing power relations
Analyzing personal situations	An analysis from an ego-centred perspective *Description* • Describes situations from 'outside' • Predominantly focuses on others' behaviour • Hardly mentions own behaviour *Reason* • Blames others • Construes dominant, hardly changeable personal characteristics or pervasive group pressure responsible for others' behaviour • Neglects to examine how own behaviour may have co-constructed situations	An analysis from a processual perspective *Description* • Describes situations from 'within' • Mentions own and others' behaviour • Covers different perspectives *Reason* • Recognizes patterns and power relations which had been co-constructed by all involved actors • Asks for (legitimate) motives of others' behaviour • Scrutinizes own perspective • Can admit own fallacies • Asks for own (potentially unconscious or unnoticed) motives
Deriving practical implications	Practical implications from an ego-centred perspective: • Focus on own actions • Aim at being in control • Aim at increasing one's own scope of influence • Are based on linear thinking • Ignore the impact of interactions and reciprocal influences	Practical implications from a processual perspective: • Focus on interactions and reciprocal influences • Are keen to take a change in perspectives • Recognize productive potential of dissent • Ask questions to others • Are inherently interested in others' points of view

from one's own point of view, while a processual analysis describes situations from various perspectives and recognises patterns and power relations that are co-constructed by all involved actors. After analysing personal situations at work and being asked to develop personally focused action plans in their reflection reports, trainees derive ego-centred practical implications for how to act as a leader. In contrast to processual personal implications—such as asking for different points of view, being curious, and actively listening to others—such ego-centred implications mainly focus on how to increase their own power in order to 'be in control' and influence others. Eventually, trainees' practical implications influence their leadership meaning over time. Heroic expectations set for themselves transform into common expectations attributed to leaders in general.

The leadership analysis barrier (hindering dynamics #1): The inability to apply a processual leadership meaning to analyse one's personal situation at work

According to our analysis, trainees are indeed able to generate and reproduce new insights upon receiving training input on a processual leadership meaning. However, they are not able to apply these new insights to their analysis of personal situations at work. Upon receiving input about leadership from a processual perspective, trainees thoroughly take notes, even memorize, and descriptively summarize the processual view's paradigms in the reflection report. However, the newly acquired knowledge about leadership does not translate into their reflection on real-life situations. Instead, the analysis emphasizes the view of one single person, namely, the leader, and derives individual implications on how leaders can improve their scope of influence. Trainees are apparently unaware of the discrepancy between initially describing a processual understanding but refraining from applying it in the subsequent analysis.

Mixture of processual and leader-centred leadership meanings. Within the first reflection report, we identify some indicators of a processual leadership meaning. Trainees reproduce insights on a processual leadership meaning, which they received during the first training module. For instance, trainee 4 mentions the importance of distinguishing between 'truth' and 'perceptions'. He emphasizes how unfortunate it is when one's own observations are perceived as truth instead of interpretations.

> 'It is all about observing, which means that reality depends on the sensation and perception of the observer. For example, an observer may observe a conversation between two persons. If you interview all three persons, you may typically receive three different interpretations of the conversation. Often, unfortunately own observations are perceived as truth instead of the insight that it's a question of own interpretations. Perceptions of others reflect more of the observer than of the observed. (…) Behaviour of a person is always the result of the interplay between person and situation. (…) It is important to understand from which position things are said and how they are said. Also, it is very important to acknowledge different perceptions, there is no general truth'. (T4, RR1, Nov 15)

Most interestingly, within the first reflection report, trainees adopt a processual leadership meaning mainly when they reflect on leadership situations which they formulate in passive or abstract terms, but adopt a leader-centred leadership meaning mainly when they derive practical applications for leaders. For instance, in the same report as above, for trainee 4, leadership means that leaders appropriately influence employees, provide their subordinates with (preferably) objective feedback, and professionally analyse situations from which they derive appropriate reactions towards their subordinates. In short, according to this trainee's leader-centred leadership meaning, leaders should have control over situations and the power to adequately influence their subordinates, as leaders are the ones who have the responsibility to reach organisational goals.

> 'Leadership means influencing employees to reach organisational goals specified by the management. (…) Employees should have the chance to receive an as much as possible objective evaluation by their supervisors. (…) Leaders need to reduce complexity for their employees. (…) Leaders need to professionally analyse situations based on prevailing leadership theory and react according to the analysis results'. (T4, RR1, Nov 15)

To conclude, we detect a pattern that refers to several inconsistencies, based on a mixture of processual and leader-centred leadership meanings. While trainees acknowledge that leadership is

complex, different people have different perceptions and that there is no one-and-only 'right' approach to specific leadership situations (parts of constructivist assumptions underlying a processual leadership meaning), they still ask leaders to know and see more of the complexity, correctly interpret their environment, and professionally analyse situations in order to make the right decisions and adequately influence their employees (leader-centred leadership meaning).

Analysing personal situations at work from an ego-centred perspective. Even though trainees are able to reproduce elements of a processual leadership meaning within their first reflection reports, they are not able to apply these new insights to their analyses of personal situations at work. Table 2 provides an example of an ego-centred analysis by distinguishing description, reason, and what they neglect.

Instead of applying a processual leadership meaning for analysing personal situations, trainees describe the situations from their own perspective only, predominantly focussing on the behaviour of others and hardly mentioning their own behaviour (description). In cases where trainees do mention their own behaviour, they completely refrain from asking whether such behaviour may have co-constructed the situation (neglect). Instead, they warn of the potentially harmful consequences of others' behaviour. Ego-centred analyses construe dominant, hardly changeable personal characteristics (in cases when an individual attracts negative attention) or pervasive group dynamics (in cases when a whole group attracts negative attention) that are made responsible for others' behaviour (reason). For instance, in the case of trainee 2, the ego-centred analysis blames employee M's inability to admit mistakes and openly talk about his situation (strong emphasis on personal characteristics). However, he refrains from analysing whether the whole group may suffer from a culture of hiding mistakes and mutual blaming and how all actors might have co-constructed such culture.

Deriving ego-centred practical implications. After analysing one's personal situation at work, trainees derive ego-centred practical implications, which focus on one's own actions and aim at being in control, having an overview and increasing one's scope of influence.

> 'I will pay way more attention to my leadership tasks. I will plan in more detail and delegate non-important tasks. I will reduce the complexity for my team. I will reconcile the goals and set the agenda so the teams keep sight of the goals. I will pay closer attention to the dynamics and norms of the group. I will apply the methods learned during the training modules, so my team reaches organizational goals more efficiently'. (T4, RR2, Jan 16)

> 'I will break up old patterns by splitting up the group members. I will take care of a good atmosphere in the team. I will clarify employees' expectations. I will provide employees with the possibility to try out new things. I will moderate in case of conflicts and encourage team members to reflect about the situation. I will keep an overview. I will develop employees by giving feedback'. (T10, RR2, Dec 15)

Ego-centred practical implications put strong emphasis on an individual's actions, but no emphasis on interactions. Trainees completely focus on what they themselves can do in order to improve the specific situation at work, but refrain from asking which consequences such actions might have for interaction with others. Such linear thinking suggests that 'right' actions—derived from 'correct' analyses—evidently lead to improving employees' efficiency and increasing organisational success. Trainees thus ignore others' possible responses to one's actions and the motivations behind these responses.

Table 2. An example of an ego-centred analysis.

Trainee	Description	Reason	Neglect
	Describes situations from 'outside' *Predominantly focuses on others' behaviour* *Hardly mentions own behaviour*	*Blames others* *Construes dominant, hardly changeable personal characteristics, or pervasive group pressure responsible for others' behaviour*	*What is not seen? What is excluded?* *Neglects to examine how own behaviour may have co-constructed situations*
T2 (RR2, Dec 15)	One of my employees (person called M) was hired due to his extremely knowledgeable background and expertise. Things went very smoothly in the beginning, and I was very pleased with his performance. However, over time, M had troubles in the team. Others, especially older ones, called him a 'know-it-all'. Also, his performance suffered, and M started to make severe mistakes. M's mistakes had negative consequences for others. After an escalating conflictive situation, M quit	• Group consists of strong personal characters • Group is divided into younger and older employees • M was one of the younger ones, but was still very outspoken, maybe too outspoken • There are different performance levels within the group • M polarized and split the group • M is very ambitious • M overextended himself • M is not able to admit mistakes • M should have admitted his mistakes and openly talked about his situation	The analysis describes own behaviour to some extent (e.g., supporting, giving in, mediating, and discussing) but still neglects to scrutinize how own leadership behaviour might have co-constructed the conflictive situation. There is no indication of trying to develop or change own perspective on the situation

Eventual leader-centred leadership meaning. Graduated and fully back to their working context, 20 months after attending the training, the (former) trainees clearly adopt a leader-centred leadership meaning. Initial processual elements are now missing in their narratives. As trainees derive leader-centred implications, they apply these practical implications to the general leadership meaning. Some examples of eventual leader-centred leadership meanings are as follows:

> 'Leaders need to create optimal conditions for the employees and then enable them to solve their tasks in a fast and efficient way'. (T1, survey, Oct 17)

> 'Leaders need to implement organisational goals by incorporating employees' interests to a most possible extent'. (T2, survey, Oct 17)

> 'Leaders need to be able to listen, recognize and promote talents, make decisions, ensure continuity, and prove social skills also in turbulent times'. (T4, survey, Nov 17)

> 'Leaders need to provide their employees with clear goals and develop and support them so they reach these goals'. (T10, survey, Nov 17)

According to these understandings, leaders have to have everything under control, an overview and a powerful scope of influence. This first category of hindering dynamics shows that even if some elements of the input are reproduced in the reflection reports, a leadership understanding from a processual view is not taken, and the seductive image of the heroic leader solidifies over time.

The leader impact barrier (hindering dynamics #2): The inability to derive processual practical implications for themselves as leaders

Upon receiving input on a processual leadership meaning, trainees confronted with the 'leader impact' barrier are able to reproduce new insights, they are also able to apply these new insights to the analysis of their own experiences. Hence, these trainees overcome the 'leadership analysis' barrier and are able to analyse their personal situations at work from a processual perspective. However, they lack the ability to derive processual practical implications from their processual analysis.

Processual leadership meaning. Within the first reflection report, trainees are able to reproduce insights on a processual leadership meaning, which they received during the first training module. They exclusively adopt a processual leadership meaning and refrain from reproducing any leader-centred leadership meaning. For instance, trainee 3 mentions that leadership cannot be equated with tasks of a leader, but understands leadership as a social interaction involving all actors.

> 'One important insight for me is that leadership cannot be equated with tasks of a leader. Instead, leadership is something that emerges through the contribution of all actors. Hence, leadership is not a personal competence, but an organisational competence'. (T3, RR1, Nov 15)

Likewise, trainee 12 also understands leadership as complex social interaction. Also, he acknowledges that different people have different perceptions.

> 'Leadership is understood as complex social interaction. Hence, the underlying reasons for success and problems are searched in the social of the organization and less in the individual. (…) One and the same leadership situation can be perceived in completely different ways by leaders, followers and observers. (…) I now understand leadership primarily as social process. (…) I have an interaction-based perspective on leadership'. (T12, RR1, Oct 15)

Analysing personal situations at work from a processual perspective. Trainees are also able to apply their processual insights to their analyses of personal situations at work. They analyse their situations by viewing themselves as essential parts of the situation and mention own and others' behaviour. Table 3 provides an example of a processual analysis by distinguishing between description and reason.

Processual analyses pay less attention to the individual and their personal characteristics. Instead, processual analyses recognize patterns and power relations—which have been co-constructed by all involved actors—ask for (legitimate) motives of others' behaviour and own (potentially unconscious or unnoticed) motives and scrutinize their own perspectives.

Table 3. An example of a processual analysis.

Trainee	Description	Reason
	Describes situations from 'within' (uses 'we' instead of 'they') *Mentions own and others' behaviour* *Covers different perspectives*	*Recognizes patterns and power relations which had been co-constructed by all involved actors* *Asks for (legitimate) motives of others' behaviour* *Scrutinizes own perspective* *Can admit own fallacies* *Asks for own (potentially unconscious or unnoticed) motives*
T3 (RR2, Jan 16)	Many attempts to better get along with each other failed. When the situation with C escalated, I had already quit inwardly and started my application process at the new job When I now describe the problematic situation at work, I notice that the focus on the concrete conflict with my colleague gets more and more lost. I more and more attend to describing situational factors. I want to strongly focus my analysis on the overall situation, as the conflict with C—in my opinion—is an important element, but it only can be understood from explaining the context Despite good individual contacts, the sense of unity was not very strong when I took over the head of department and it did not get better but became worse over time. We did not have real interactions and discussions. For me, this is a sign that we did not work together as a team but rather worked as individuals next to each other	It was very interesting to see that I adopted the very same behaviour which I criticized—namely, that the managing director is too much involved in operative tasks. This behaviour was transferred as identical pattern to my unit Now I understand that my behaviour of not paying too much attention to leadership tasks and mainly focussing on operative tasks led to chaos and unplanned actions It is possible that C has not done too much wrong, but had bad luck to be—subconsciously—picked by me as the scapegoat, as I experienced extreme pressure by the time, he entered the organization. Maybe I have projected my challenges onto his person. Maybe his way of doing things is 'right' in other organizations, but it collided with our culture, which can be considered very flexible and chaotic A very important factor is that—beyond doubt—C and myself found ourselves in a very competitive relationship, even though I really did not like to admit this

Deriving ego-centred practical implications. Even though trainees are able to analyse their situations from a processual perspective, they are not able to derive processual practical implications from these analyses. Instead, trainees derive ego-centred practical implications, which focus on their own actions and aim at being in control, having an overview and increasing their scope of influence.

> 'I should have paid more attention to my leadership tasks. I should have delegated operative tasks. I should have reduced the complexity for my team. I should have promoted team cohesion. I should have communicated clear roles. I should have confronted the managing director. I should not have the aspiration to be 100% fair and nice. I should have passed on the pressure received from above'. (T3, RR2, Jan 16)

> 'I will actively help to improve the situation and refrain from accepting the circumstances powerlessly. I will influence proceedings with the help of specific tools and methods'. (T12, RR2, Dec 15)

Similar to trainees captured in HD#1, trainees hindered by the 'leader impact' barrier (HD#2) also aspire to have control in order to improve their specific situation at work. They focus on how to act themselves, instead of asking how to interact with others. By applying such linear thinking in this regard, trainees refrain from adopting processual practical implications such as taking a change in perspectives, asking questions of others, and being interested in others' different points of view. In short, eventually these trainees also begin to ignore the power of interaction and reciprocal influences when they reflect on how to improve their specific situations.

Eventual leader-centred leadership meaning. Graduated and fully back in their working context, 20 months after attending the training, the (former) trainees replace their initial processual leadership meaning with a leader-centred leadership meaning.

> Initial processual leadership meaning:
>
> 'One important insight for me is that leadership cannot be equated with tasks of a leader. Instead, leadership is something that emerges through the contribution of all actors. Hence, leadership is not a personal competence, but an organizational competence'. (T3, RR1, Nov 15)
>
> Eventual leader-centred leadership meaning:
>
> Leadership means to "follow a clear route; take time to analyse a situation; take time to respond to employees; take on superior goals and translate them into clear goals for the team." (T3, survey, Nov 17)

Eventually, the process of HD#2 results in the same outcome: these trainees also apply their leader-centred practical implications to the general leadership meaning.

The role of one's sense of self-as-a-leader

After presenting our results on *how* a leader-centred leadership meaning solidifies and reinforces over time, we now attend to our interpretations as to *why* such meaning prevails. In particular, we find two patterns associated with the trainees' sense of self-as-a-leader that help explain why trainees get caught in two hindering dynamics and uphold a leader-centred leadership meaning. Both patterns reveal that trainees are not able to abandon the hero.

Pattern #1: Striving for control; trainees avoid ambiguity and insecurity and keep a sense of self as a hero

We find that trainees, especially those who have difficulties in applying a processual leadership meaning for analysing personal situations (HD#1), focus their learning in the course of the training on being able to stand apart from the complex situations with which they are confronted. For instance, trainee 1 is convinced that leaders need to give 'their best' by profoundly educating themselves in order to succeed in 'correctly' dealing with prevailing problems and assuring their impact.

> 'What I also wish from the training is to represent a classical change process in form of a laboratory. So, one can actually see such cases in the lab situation. Then you can analyse the cases and implement your insights in real-life problematic situations and also recognize such situations earlier'. (T1, verbal reflection at training module 3, day 1, Jan 16)

His lesson learnt is 'I have to get it under control to become a better leader'. Improving conceptual competences, accumulating leadership expertise, and having worked out the details of a plan A as well as a plan B, all lead trainee 1 to feel in control and prepared. The more trainee 1 listens to the statements of the trainers and peers about what leaders need to do, the more trainee 1 strives for being in control, overview, and power.

> 'I will reflect on my decisions in a more active way in order to try to observe the situation from all sides in order to reduce the probability of an error of assessment'. (T1, RR1, Nov 15)

> 'I noticed that the laboratory enabled us to see the obvious. And I hope that my learnings consolidate and next time, when such situations occur, I can hopefully think about which theory I could adopt, whether I am on the right track or whether I should change my behaviour'. (T1, verbal reflection at training module 3, day 2, Jan 16)

> 'A leader can gain self-confidence through a good preparation. Hence, I have learned to even better prepare myself'. (T1, RR3, Mar 16)

> The training was "very positive as I was lifted out of the daily routine, improved my self-reflection and documented the next steps for the future in a written form". Which factors helped? "Concrete, written plan and hence a better self-control". (T1, survey, Oct 17)

According to our analysis, not only trainee 1 but also all other trainees, who are trapped in HD#1 due to the 'leadership analysis' barrier, make their sense of self-as-a-leader dependent on being superior in terms of being more prepared, more knowledgeable, more attentive, more observing, faster, and more flexible than others. In cases where trainees recognize discrepancies between their own and the target performance, they explain these discrepancies with personal deficits and use the trainings to reduce such deficits and master leadership expertise. Upon investing resources in understanding human behaviour and partly succeeding in influencing others' behaviour—which they understand as their own success—trainees perceive more and more competence, overview, and control. The following metaphors describe their increased self-efficacy.

> FROM AN ANIMAL TAMER TO NOAH ON THE ARK: "Through intensively dealing with the topic of leadership, I think I matured as a leader and I am more noticeable as a leader (…) [Back then] I felt like an animal tamer, who had to simultaneously drill and showcase ten different animal breeds while the show did not excuse any mistakes. (…) [Now,] I feel like Noah on the ark who slowly and steadily unites the animals which follow one goal". (T7, survey, Oct 17)

> FROM A HEN TO A COCK: "[Back then I felt] like a hen in a chicken house. [Today, I feel like a] cock on a little elevation, which overviews the chicken house". (T1, survey, Oct 17)

> FROM EUROPEAN CUP TO WORLD CUP: "[Back then I] competed in the European cup, hence, I reached the next step, however, I was far from entering the world cup. [Today], I completed first runs in

> the world cup. But to get to the top level, there's still a lot to do, personally, internally in the organization and also external to dos. It got much better, but time management still needs to be optimized. Leadership runs, but I still need to produce more pressure towards the team". (T6, survey, Nov 17)

Pattern #2: Having self-doubts; trainees engage themselves in complexity but still believe that they need to be heroes

According to our data analysis, trainees are not able to derive practical implications for themselves as leaders from a processual view due to the 'leader impact' barrier (HD#2), as they struggle with their self-expectations of living up to the vast requirements of being a heroic leader and concurrently have doubts about whether they will ever be able to do so. For instance, trainee 3 struggles after a group exercise in which he volunteered as leader. The exercise aimed at illustrating how group dynamics and power relations emerge through the contribution of all actors in order to reflect on the limitations of contemporary classical leadership approaches (heroic and post-heroic) as too trivial (Von Foerster, 1984) for addressing the complexities of social situations. Even though trainee 3 seems to have cognitively absorbed the overall intention of the group exercise, he describes how overwhelmed he was when experiencing the power these dynamics imposed on him. After this experience, trainee 3 analyses his personal situation at work from a processual perspective. However, when he is asked for his practical implications, he realizes what the complexities, the nonpredictability, and the emergence of power relations might imply about him as a leader. Instead of accepting complexities, unpredictability, and power relations as inherent elements of our social world, these complexities are framed negatively with stressful consequences for him personally. He feels caught in a struggle of having to lead unleadable situations. During the time of the training, trainee 3 concurrently quits his job with a formal leading position and takes on another job without a formal leading position. It seems the reflection from a more processual view helped him to understand what was going on in the past, especially regarding power relations and asymmetries and how easily they can change. However, the conclusion he draws for himself is that he does not want to be confronted with the conflict he experienced in his working and training situation.

> 'I have already severely changed my daily work routine as I changed my position as R&D head of department leading 10 employees in a small firm to a position as product lifecycle manager without any leadership responsibility in a larger firm. This very much corresponds with my insight that it is personally very important to me (…) not to take direct leadership responsibility for employees'. (T3, RR1, Nov 15)

The stressful feeling seems to prevail when he describes himself in his current working situations 20 months after the training

> Which metaphor describes your current working situation? "Submarine commander and operator: you don't see everything and still you permanently come under fire, but you still have to pursue your goals; having a widely distributed team that is not always readily available; permanently mediating between people who are jointly working on a task; passing on information; settling conflicts". (T3, survey, Nov 17)

While trainee 3 still recognises and accepts the ambiguity and complexity of situations (he takes different roles concurrently, he is aware that he cannot oversee everything and that there are different perspectives and conflict), his sense of self-as-a-leader represents heroic expectations (having to pursue goals, mediating, and settling), which seems to put him under enormous pressure

('permanently under fire'). As a consequence, trainee 3's personal lesson learnt is 'try to be calm and take things easier'.

> 'I have to learn to cope with them'. (T3, survey, Nov 17)

> 'Take things that did not go as planned more easily and not to perceive them as personal failures'. (T3, survey, Nov 17)

Discussion

Critical research highlights the need for developing leadership mindsets that are attuned to a complex, indeterminate, and ambiguous world (Kennedy et al., 2013). However, developing such a leadership meaning is not easy, and the struggle individuals face in their attempt to do so is rarely explored (Alvesson and Jonsson, 2018). We contribute to research by carefully examining this struggle. In particular, we identify two specific barriers that hinder the process of leadership meaning development and find two dominant patterns that contribute to explaining these hindering dynamics.

First, the 'leadership analysis' barrier refers to the inability to apply a processual leadership meaning to personal situations at work. Trainees reproduce the training content with regard to the necessity of acknowledging the complexity and ambiguity of leadership as a co-constructed social interaction process. However, we elucidate inconsistencies with regard to how they apply this knowledge to analysing personal situations at work and, even further, how they neglect this knowledge when they reflect on practical implications regarding their own behaviour as leaders. Second, the 'leader impact' barrier refers to the inability to derive processual practical implications. Trainees who are able to apply a processual leadership meaning to their personal situations at work still derive ego-centred implications with regard to their roles as formal leaders.

Most interestingly, eventually both dynamics result in preserving, reverting, or switching to a leader-centred leadership meaning that hinders the sustained development of a processual leadership meaning. When analysing why a leader-centred leadership meaning prevails over time, we identify the crucial role of one's sense of self-as-a-leader.

We theorise that one reason for the emergence of HD#1 due to the 'leadership analysis' barrier is the ignorance of dissent in order to avoid insecurity and ambiguity with which the trainees are confronted. Such avoidance of insecurity and ambiguity can be viewed as another kind of resistance (Carroll and Nicholson, 2014) to training input controversial to predominant leadership concepts, and eventually to leadership meaning development. We furthermore hypothesize that insecurity avoidance and the continuing aim of striving for control can increase the dangers of hubris.

In avoiding ambiguity and insecurity, leaders do not ask for dissent and different points of view. Instead, trainees search for confirmation, actively listen to experts, study to become leadership experts, and gain more information that helps them becoming better (superior) leaders. We believe this is supported by peer influence. According to Snook et al. (2010), the influence of a reference group is an important condition for the development of a self-concept. The wish to see support from others is even greater the murkier the ambiguity about the future (Festinger, 1954). While Snook et al. (2010) recommend using this peer dynamic to foster leadership development, our results show its possible restricting influence. This restricting influence is supported by a homogeneous reference group embedded in a context with culturally shaped ideologies about what it means to be a leader (Ely et al., 2011; Picone et al., 2014). In this regard, the important aspect of gender plays an essential role in explaining the identified dynamics. We suggest that a heroic image solidifies much more in a predominantly male group than in a more diverse, gender-balanced group.

Reinforcing behaviours and attitudes are influenced by various contextual, organisational , and social forces (Sadler-Smith et al., 2017), such as the systematic pressure for success, a high level of reward, and the acquisition of power, as Tourish (2020) shows in his study. When individuals have a heroic sense of self-as-a-leader, individuals are forced to keep up appearances (Ford et al., 2010) and are permanently confronted with the need to live up to unrealistic expectations (Alvesson and Blom, 2018). Thus, naturally, the burden of never satisfying one's aspirations seems less frightening than acknowledging dissent and having to face the fact that one cannot control the complex situations they are part of.

On the other hand, learning about and absorbing such a view is one thing, practicing it by 'doing leadership' is another (Kelly et al., 2006). The 'leader impact' barrier that we find in HD#2 shows that even if trainees are able to apply a processual leadership meaning to their personal situations, which allows them to describe personal experiences and explain the emerging dynamics from a processual view, they do not derive processual practical implications for themselves as leaders. Thus, even if individuals cognitively develop such a processual mindset and are able to put such understanding into practice and engage with complex processes, they are directly confronted with paradoxes, conflict, and contradictions with which they struggle to cope. We theorise that one reason for this struggle is that trainees who see themselves as part of the complexity they are acting in develop self-doubt, because they do not distance themselves from the prevailing expectations of having to be a heroic leader.

A processual perspective on leadership suggests placing more emphasis on the promotion of dissent and difference than the achievement of harmonious dialogue and consensus (Collinson et al., 2018; Tourish, 2019). Leadership seen in such paradoxical, conflictual, or contradictory terms (Collinson et al., 2018) and understood as an ongoing negotiation process that socially constructs power and agency implies that it is not possible—for any organisational actor including those in formal leadership positions—to stand apart from complex organisational processes (Tourish, 2019). 'This is not to imply those in formal leadership positions should avoid seeking consensus, or refrain from advocating particular points of view. But it is to argue, that they should also recognise the productive potential of dissent' (Tourish, 2014: 89). This, however, as our results show, seems to be more than a difficult endeavour.

We argue that this is only feasible if trainees develop a *viable* sense of self-as-a-leader. Our results suggest that self-doubt hinders the development of a viable sense of self-as-a-leader. Thus, we warn that an unbalanced and unmindful promotion of dissent and difference may overwhelm, shut off curiosity and open-mindedness, and put leaders under high pressure ('feeling of being constantly under fire').

Being a heroic leader implies the ability to exert rational, extensive, and purposeful influence on other actors to achieve putatively positive outcomes. According to the heroic image, leaders are asked to have everything under control and exert influence to a greater extent than is possible (Tourish, 2019). Overall, our results suggest that the difficulty of putting a processual leadership meaning into practice emerges from the prevailing heroic expectations that dominate the sense of self-as-a-leader.

With a heroic sense of self-as-a-leader, individuals aim for being in control and superior compared to others, as the role of a leader seems to necessitate the power to decide, steer, interfere, and influence others. In contrast, a viable sense of self-as-a-leader refers to both (1) accepting—or even appreciating—that control is an illusion and (2) acknowledging that leaders—just as all other organisational actors—permanently co-/de-/reconstruct social reality. An important step in developing such a viable sense of self-as-a-leader is to differentiate between leadership (meaning) and

(a sense of self as a) leader (Tourish, 2019) as two inextricably intertwined elements. Against this background, individuals should be better able to reflect their own role, impact, and responsibility.

According to our results, we warn against neglecting the embeddedness in a cultural context that supports the idealized image of a heroic leader. As long as trainees—after being taught to think differently—return to an unchanged work environment where the culture and experiences of most people are aligned to precisely the kind of leadership models that the training is trying to challenge, it is extremely difficult to abandon the hero.

Practical implications

According to Kennedy et al. (2013: 10), 'new ways of thinking about leadership as emergent, relational, and collective are becoming evident in leadership theory and practice. This is causing orientations to leadership development to shift from approaches that are predominantly concerned with building skills to those that are concerned with questions of mindset'. Despite this—in principle—positive development, we can also observe and agree with Collinson and Tourish (2015) that charismatic and heroic models of leadership are also embraced by many business schools and their students alike. The very setup of a leadership training programme inherently promotes power/dependence relationships in terms of the trainer being the authority who teaches, influences, oversees, and even grades the performance of the trainees and the students being the ones who carefully listen and learn (Iszatt-White et al., 2017; Nicholson and Carroll, 2013).

It is difficult to implement different thinking into such a context (Ford and Harding, 2007) while we expect trainers to be heroic teachers, we ask trainees to learn to accept the fact that there is no such thing as a heroic leader. Such thoughts lead us to acknowledge that leadership meaning development in the context of leadership training is extremely challenging and in itself contradictory. Complexity should neither be ignored nor become too overwhelming. In this respect, we derive a number of important practical implications on how leadership training may promote leadership meaning development.

In order to overcome the 'leadership analysis' barrier, we suggest that trainings support individuals in adopting many diverse—even contradictory—perspectives on specific situations. This implies that trainees should learn to appreciate the 'productive potential of dissent' (Tourish, 2014) and recognise the utmost importance of critical analysis and reflexivity (Collinson, 2014; Cunha et al., 2017; Sadler-Smith et al., 2017; Willis, 2019). 'Leadership is socially constructed and interpreted and (…) "it" could mean very different things to different actors in different situations' (Collinson and Tourish, 2015). Hence, the more the perspectives are represented in the context of training, the more the learning about leadership can be achieved. Leadership trainings may thus benefit from diversity by including women and men of different ages, abilities, ethnic origins, religions, or sexual orientations.

In order to overcome the 'leader impact' barrier, trainings need to provide ample opportunities for practicing, engaging with, and experiencing tensions, paradoxes, and contradictions (Kennedy et al., 2013). However, our study suggests keeping a balance between promoting conflict and dissent on the one hand and still being mindful not to overwhelm trainees on the other hand. When trainees struggle, generate self-doubts, take things too personally, and adopt narrow-minded perspectives, critical and reflexive leadership trainings are asked to support trainees even more in reflecting on these experiences from a processual perspective.

Finally, leadership trainings are taking place in the context of our complex, indeterminate, and ambiguous world (Ford et al., 2010). As usual work environments nowadays serve to reinforce

heroic leadership meanings, we suggest leadership development trainings to take place in situ and in the context of the whole organization in order to become sustainable.

Limitations

Every study has its limitations. In this study, the dataset would have benefited from additional data. For instance, one limitation concerns the lack of data from female participants. Another limitation was our ability to attend training modules held by only one trainer, as we think that participating in training modules held by other trainers would have enriched the data. In addition, conducting narrative, in-depth interviews with all 14 participants—as well as their colleagues, subordinates, and supervisors—held regularly over some longer period of time would have provided us with even richer, more longitudinal, more diverse, and more comparable data. Once such data have been collected, we invite future scholars to investigate how and why leadership meaning and sense of self-as-a-leader develop over time in even more depth. For instance, one may find that the two hindering dynamics may interrelate in terms of time. To what degree does ignoring ambiguity and insecurity rest upon previously feeling overwhelmed? How much is feeling superior and in control based on concealing one's past insecurity? To what extent is the nature and the dynamic of our results fundamentally different for female leaders? Questions like these may help to further expand our understanding of leadership meaning development over time.

Conclusion

Living in a complex, unpredictable, and ambiguous world implies embracing its complexity, unpredictability, and ambiguity. Embracing our world's complexity entails valuing the vast complexity of leadership practice, with all of its facets and diversities. However, this is only possible through simultaneously developing a viable sense of self-as-a-human, which suggests acknowledging complexity as an inherent element of our social world, while also accepting that no one—not even leaders—can ever have complexity 'under control'. This does not suggest giving up on trying to better understand complex situations, as we see it as the responsibility of all humans to learn and understand. However, we also strongly advise individuals to refrain from generating any self-doubts if things do not go as planned, but to remain curious and keep wondering why things might occur the way they do.

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