Leadership Development – a case of narrative distancing

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Summary

This paper draws on findings from an in-depth qualitative study within a Polish subsidiary of a multinational Pharmaceutical company to explore the case of narrative distancing in relation to leadership development. This company was at the time of the study undergoing a company-wide culture management project that slowly turned into a leadership development project. We explore here a subset of interviews from this qualitative study to explore the narratives connected to the identified need for leadership development within this company. Recognising the predominant focus in discursive leadership studies on empirically exploring leadership as interaction and narrative construction of leader identities, this paper adds to our knowledge of leadership through the analysis of three co-existing narratives of leadership that cut across all hierarchical levels in the organisation. The first leadership narrative framed leadership as a source and potential solution to current organisational ailments. The second one framed the responsibility for the development of leadership capacity as resting with the others, whereas the third one implicitly distanced the self from the leadership development need. This analysis helps to inform critically our understanding of the impact such narrative meaning-making may have on leadership development when driven through a top-down organisational project.

Key Words: Leadership Development, Narrative, Distancing
Introduction

Discursive and narrative studies of leadership (e.g. Larsson and Lundholm, 2010, 2013; Fairhurst and Cooren, 2004; Sheep, 2006; Clifton, 2014) are rising both in number and importance in seeking to contribute to the relational study of leadership and instilling rigour into the leadership studies field through their empirical analyses of how leadership is produced in organisational talk. Fairhurst and Uhl-Bien (2012) indeed argue that discursive analyses of leadership may be able to shed detailed light on how leadership is co-created in practice and illuminate processes of power and resistance within this relational process. To date, most of these studies focus on either leadership as interaction and interactional influence between leaders and followers (e.g. Clifton, 2006, 2014; Collinson, 2008; Fairhurst and Cooren, 2004; Larsson and Lundholm, 2010; Sheep, 2006), or alternatively explore discursive and narrative constructions of leader identities (e.g. Clifton, 2014). We seek to contribute to this growing body of empirical research through an analysis of narrative distancing from the personal identification with leadership capacity and need for leadership development. We explore how employees narratively construct a need for greater leadership capacity and how this is simultaneously – always – directed at others.

Our paper draws on findings from an in-depth qualitative study within a Polish subsidiary of a multinational Pharmaceutical company. This company was at the time of the study undergoing a company-wide culture management project that slowly turned into a leadership development project. We explore here themes and narratives from a subset of interviews from this qualitative study where organisation members across the company both identify the need for leadership development within this company and simultaneously, implicitly distance themselves from this by talking exclusively about others doing or not doing enough leadership and hence
Discourse, Narratives and Meaning Making in Leadership Studies

Empirical and conceptual studies on discourse and narrative work have exponentially risen within the field of leadership studies over the last decade or so. The thriving nature of this sub-field is reflected in several recent review articles (e.g. Fairhurst & Uhl-Bien, 2012; Fairhurst & Connaughton, 2014, 2014; Tourish, 2014) both praising the value of such studies for exploring more adequately the relational and socially constructed nature of leadership and providing a broad overview of existing contributions. Fairhurst and Uhl-Bien (2012) advocate that taking a communicative lens on leadership will move the field towards a relational approach as it assumes that ‘humans must use language to position themselves with respect to one another’ (p. 1045). They also encourage leadership studies to explore processes of ‘sensemaking and the potential
struggles over meaning wrought by diverging, relational, organizational, or socio-historical influences’ (p. 1046). We intend to explore an aspect of such struggles over meaning in relation to leadership and leader development through our analysis of narratives as sense-making processes wherein individuals position themselves in relation to the organisational context and the particular role that leadership and leader development take at that moment in time and in reflection on the recent history of the organisation.

Narrative sense-making has attracted some attention in the leadership literature and notably by Cunliffe and Coupland (2013) who draw on Gergen (2005) to highlight the role that narratives play in connecting actions, characters and roles within the workplace. They posit that ‘narratives are the means by which we organize and make sense of our experience and evaluate our actions and intentions’ (p. 66) and as such acknowledge that the processes of sensemaking and sensegiving are entwined with each other within narratives. Whilst Boje (1995) argues that narratives can be seen to be ‘deliberately authored and performed as a means of making sense of a situation’ (Cunliffe and Coupland, 2013, p. 66), Cunliffe et al. (2004) point out that narratives can also be seen as responsive struggles for coherence. They stress that narratives are often improvised, contested, situated and responsive performances that are contextually situated and temporal, reflecting a polyphonic process with multiple voices, narrations and contestation. Cunliffe and Coupland (2013) further argue that narratives can be seen to constitute a ‘crucial part of identity work where we are constantly trying to create relatively coherent narratives of our life’ (p. 69).

It is in relation to identity work and our narrative construction of ourselves in relation to others in the workplace, that Clifton’s (2014) work has been notably insightful. Drawing on contributions by Pye (2005) and Smircich and Morgan (1982), Clifton (2014) posits that
discursive or communicative approaches focus on leadership as a ‘distributed process of meaning making in which participants attribute leader identity to those having most influence in the process of meaning making’ (p. 100). He further argues and demonstrates empirically how participants can ‘talk themselves into being a leader through the use of narratives-in-action’ (Clifton, 2014: 100). Working with what he refers to as small stories, i.e. stories in situated interaction, and positioning theory, Clifton (2014) argues that this type of identity work allows an individual to perform his/her leader identity through several levels/layers of meaning making. He posits that at one level, the individual positions characters present in the story to each other and at another level him/herself in relation to those characters and the audience. At a third level, the individual then also positions him/herself in relation to hegemonic discourses or what Clifton (2014) refers to as master narratives. The act of positioning in the story is a discursive resource that enables the individual to actively shape and manage meaning and enact his/her own leader identity. It is important to note the role that master narratives play here and the extent to which the positioning and meaning making process is influenced by and influences such organisational and/or societal master narratives. Reflecting the tendency of dominant discourses of leadership to heroicise the person at the top and overemphasise his/her ability to bring about transformational change (see critique by Alvesson and Spicer, 2012), Clifton (2012: 161) argues that ‘access to discursive resources that are category bound to more powerful identities, such as chairperson, may skew the ability to do leadership in favour of people incumbent of certain organizational identities’.

Other discursive studies focussed on talk-in-interaction (e.g. Larsson and Lundholm, 2010; 2013) explore the role of influence and categorisation within the process of leadership, paying attention to how discursive strategies enable influencing of follower and leader identities.
They stress the embedded nature of such processes within the organisational and immediate work context. Larsson and Nielson (2014) take this interactionist focus to further explore the enactment of followership. They demonstrate similar processes of influencing and discursive strategies that enable participants to position themselves as followers and simultaneously attribute leadership to others.

Whilst we have provided a mere snapshot of some of the many existing studies taking a discursive or communicate lens, it is worthwhile noting that these studies have started to significantly contribute to our understanding of how leadership as a meaning-making process happens in practice. With a long history of traits-focussed and behaviourist studies of leadership, relying on questionnaires or structured interviews as the main tool of data gathering, such interactionist studies are much needed as they allow leadership conceptualisations to be more firmly rooted in and reflect the realities of practice. Yet, this effort to shed light on the leadership process has so far predominantly done so in an affirmative sense, where the process of doing leadership or enacting leader identity has been illuminated. Taking a critical stance, once could argue that this continues to feed into the prozac nature of leadership studies (Collinson, 2012) where leaders and leadership continue to be treated as something innately positive and desirable in organisational life. Whilst interest in counter-stories to this positive view of leadership has been equally flourishing, these have largely focussed on toxic and bad forms of leadership. What we are to date still lacking is an understanding of why, how and when individuals disassociate themselves with leadership and a leader identity. What role does the organisational context play and how may this be affected by master narratives or hegemonic discourse? Critical contributions such as Ford (2010), Ford and Harding (2007), Alvesson and Spicer (2012) have stressed the potential negative implications of a continuing heroic, masculine and individualist
bias in popular leadership discourse on practice. How may this manifest itself in narrative sense-making and meaning making processes at work? When and how may it contribute to enactment of leader identities as demonstrated by Clifton (2014) or indeed lead to disassociation and distancing from leader identities?

It is the aim of the rest of this paper, to explore narrative sensemaking as a discursive process of distancing rather than an enactment of leader identity. By drawing on qualitative data from an organisational context where leadership development was identified as a top priority by top management and cascaded down the hierarchy, we set out to explore themes and narratives in interview data that consistently, and over a period of time, exhibit signs of narrative distancing. We are particularly interested in exploring content and meaning within and across narratives to enhance our understanding of how this may contribute to identity work and meaning making processes in this organisation. Before delving into our analysis, we introduce first the organisational and research context as well as the methods employed for data analysis.

An organisation in need of leadership development

The data used in this paper comes from a bigger qualitative study in which we explored how organisation members work with and relate to a culture change project – an initiative which quickly embraced leadership development as one of its key priorities. In this paper we draw on insights we obtained in 65 interviews carried out at the outset and the end of the change initiative with participants across the organisation.

The company where the research was conducted is a Polish subsidiary of a well-established pharmaceutical multinational with its headquarters in the USA. The Polish unit was
strongly sales and marketing focused. At the time of data collection the subsidiary was seen to gradually recover from a recent turbulent past associated with its last expatriate General Manager who, after detection of some irregularities in the internal audit, froze all spending, and exponentially increased focus on all-encompassing compliance and bureaucracy. The related unprecedented staff turnover, as well as a sharp drop in sales and market share, were seen to have endangered the sheer existence of the subsidiary and posed a real threat of company closure by the HQs if the performance was not improved considerably. After his departure, the new, this time local General Manager, together with his largely new team of top managers initiated a number of material changes in the subsidiary aimed at improving the effectiveness and efficiency of the company, such as an aggressive motivational system for sales staff, simplification of procedures and some structural redesign. The culture change initiative, which with time started to drift towards leadership development, was seen to be a crucial aspect of the much needed organisational recovery process as it was hoped it could lead to desirable behavioural changes in staff.

The change initiative was undertaken with the help of a small local management consulting company which commenced by conducting what they referred to as a ‘culture audit’. It was in their report that they concluded that ‘the state of leadership in the company was very poor’, a finding which, paradoxically was welcomed by the new management team as it reaffirmed their observations and provided justification for a stronger focus on the intended leadership development activity.

Interestingly, in the consultants’ recommendations after the ‘culture audit’, cultural issues seemed to have been outweighed by the alleged acute need to invest profusely in building leadership potential and competencies in the organisation. In their recommendations, the
consultants emphasised the need to promote corporate values to become tools of everyday leadership activities and to build a leadership model that would encompass business and ethical issues. In their view, leadership should become the fifth corporate value. After the consultants’ report, leadership indeed became the subject of training sessions and a topic of a newly created Forum and Academy of Leadership, which was hoped would raise the employees’ awareness of leadership and encourage them to display leadership behaviours throughout the company.

In the rest of this paper, we explore the leadership narratives of different organisation members before and after the leadership development intervention. We illustrate that leadership was narrated as different fantasies and that these narratives always framed the others as responsible for the development of their leadership capacity. First, we introduce the specific subset of interviews and our data analysis methods.

**Methods**

Drawing on 65 qualitative interviews from the above mentioned wider research study into the culture change project at this organisation and company documentation pertaining to the culture study and leadership development, we engaged in a two stage analysis process. The first stage entailed reading through all interview transcripts with a view to highlighting and coding any emergent themes linked to participants’ views on the state of leadership in the organisation and their views and engagement with the leadership development aspects of the culture change project. We paid particular attention to how these were discussed in relation to the particularities of the contextual embeddedness of the subsidiary. We therefore looked closely at all passages in the transcripts that referred to leadership and leadership development and slowly build up first-
order and second-order themes (Gioia et al., 2013) across the 65 interviews to gain an overall picture of participants’ perceptions of leadership in their organisation and their views and attitudes towards the leadership development initiative. We also coded relevant organisational documents for the locally developed definitions of leadership and the presented rationale for leadership development.

The second stage of analysis then entailed looking for and extracting passages that were representative narratives of the second-order themes where participants talked particularly about their views of their own position in relation to the need for and engagement with leadership development. This second stage of analysis was further inspired by our reading of Clifton (2014) and his use of positioning theory to capture identity work within small stories. Whilst Clifton (2014) uses video-taped management meetings to analyse narrative-in-interaction, we propose here that the interaction between participants and interviewer in the context of the culture change project also represents a small story and as such a narrative-in-interaction. As such, the interview context and its specific focus on this project allows participants to reflect on the self in relation to the leadership development initiative and do identity work by positioning the self within the narrative in relation to others (Bucholtz and Hall, 2005) and particularly in relation to the need to be developed as a leader.

In what follows, we present outcomes of both stages of analysis and highlight implications for our understanding of narrative distancing and implications for organisationally based leadership development programmes.
Findings

Our analysis revealed three co-existing narratives (second-order themes) of leadership in the studied organisation: leadership as a source and potential solution to current organisational ailments, the narrative of leadership development as the responsibility of the others and the implicit narrative of the self as unaffected by the need to be developed as a leader.

Narrative of leadership as a source and remedy for organisational ailments

The view of leadership across the majority of interviews was one of something desirable and worthwhile that had the potential to turn the company around:

[Our company] is a company that needs to change. What need an understanding of leadership, we need to talk about it. … Nowadays a true change can only be carried out by a leader. (Adam, executive)

However, simultaneously, leadership was presented as missing in the organisation and urgently needed. The perceived poor state of leadership in the organisation was cast as a serious problem which contributed to organisational poor performance. More specifically, calls for more leadership centred around the need for a vision and direction for the organisation as a whole which grappled with keen competition as well as a more general perceived need for more initiative-taking and assuming responsibility.
We need to tell ourselves very clearly where we are and what we are trying to achieve. …

We are missing a vision for the company’s development, …a sensible one without any nonsense. (Lukasz, middle manager)

People need to see where we are heading. (Kamil, sales representative)

[When I joined the organisation] I noticed a lack of managers and leaders…. When our company went into crisis, when things started to go wrong, the best managers, as always, left first, so those who stayed are not so go-head, they don’t have this drive¹…. How I understand somebody with this drive? I am thinking of somebody who is pro-active and not reactive. I understand this as a manager who has a high level of leadership, so somebody who has a leadership profile – they like taking risk, they like managing risk.

(Adam, executive)

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Narrative of leadership development as a task for others

None of the groups of organisation members that we spoke to, however, saw the problem with missing leadership as lying with them. The task of leadership development was always located with the others. The executive team discussed in interviews the activities that they were undertaking themselves, pointing to the success of their actions, and simultaneously singling out middle managers as the ones who needed to work on their performance by embracing and displaying behaviours that they framed as leadership:

¹ The original word used is in fact a lean word from English - ‘power’ and indicates high energy levels and drive.
Our managers … have a problem with decision-making…. They will discuss for a long time, wonder…. They are independent when it comes to business decisions, but not on a higher more strategic level so that they would look more strategically at their business. They are more decisive when it comes to hospitals, where to sell, what to sell … They [don’t think] about their group, who fits where, to see who … has some career path, where to push people upwards so that there is constantly influx of new blood, so that there is always this positive change. I get the impression that they say: ‘Finally, I have a full team’. They think that if they have a full team, it will stay like this for five years. They don’t have this awareness. This is, in my view, down to education. (Ewa, executive)

The middle managers, in turn, largely talked about themselves in relation to their supervisory responsibilities for their teams. They typically referred to themselves as bosses and supervisors who ensured that their subordinates did what they were formally expected to do. Their narratives were strongly rooted in the nature of their work, which was notably most visible in the case of area sales managers who talked of their need to control and monitor their staff’s sales results as their primary responsibility:

There is always this pressure, how much you have sold, what you have done. I feel this control over me. I think that this translates onto the reps, because if you hear this from your boss, or the boss of your boss, then I expect the same. (Igor, middle manager)
Interestingly, the middle managers also often expressed a strong preference for distributed leadership undertaken by self-managing teams where the need for their intervention would be reduced and instead responsibility would be assumed by the employees themselves:

I would like to have a piece of mind, … experienced reps. This type of is probably impossible. [I would like to have] competent staff who know what they need to do and I would not have to take hundreds of calls to give information. …[I would want] that they call me with a solution. (Igor, middle manager)

[my subordinates] are very mature in terms of their age and experience, they are very independent and definitely one of the kind. It’s strange that people like this can build a team but they are very good at what they do. (Iwona, middle manager)

The most common narrative across all hierarchical levels, however, framed leadership as the responsibility of the General Manager who was expected to provide a vision and act as an enabler so that others could do their jobs:

[The GM] has a real challenge ahead of him. (Adam, executive)

[The GM] needs some time now to familiarise himself with everything and to take decisions which will help the whole company move ahead. (Romek, sales representative)

We all worry that we have so few products, …, because we do not have anything new registered and our old products are going to have generic [equivalents]. Everything is
down to the boss [emphasis added] to show that you can live with this and even grow.

This is a rather difficult mission [for the GM]. (Iwona, middle manager)

As the above quotes indicate, the dominant narrative of leadership as the responsibility of the General Manager could be found in interviews with executives, middle managers and employees. It was, however, the narrative of leadership understood as the developmental responsibility of all employees that was officially sponsored and subsequently acted upon by the organisation.

Enacting the leadership development narrative

In order to promote leadership in the subsidiary, the General Manager, with the help of external consultants, put forward a definition of leadership that comprised both leadership competences and corporate values. As a result, a local leadership model was created that included: professional leadership competences, moral values and the power dimension (ambition, intrinsic motivation and drive). This type of leadership was called n-level leadership and it was said to be a form of leadership that ‘lived up to the expectations of the modern changing economy’. As it was described in the organization’s memorandum:

What kind of leaders should effective managers be, managers who have the competences to carry out short and long term goals of the company in a rapidly changing and highly competitive environment? N-level Leaders meet all these requirements! These are leaders
who have and combine three dimensions: strong moral values that let them weather even the toughest moments, strong professional competences allowing them to lead people and organizations and a high level of energy, ambition and self-motivation - the power dimension.

The document later explained what these particular dimensions meant. As a result, a two-page leadership definition was created. The definition included a detailed description of 20 features and an even more comprehensive list of 24 behaviours that characterized an effective leader (see appendix 1). This leadership model was first presented to managers at a forum devoted to leadership that was part of a leadership awareness and development project and later to the sales representatives. Interestingly, the behaviours that were presented as part of the local definition of leadership overlapped, to a large extent, with those that were discussed by the executives in our interviews as largely missing in the organisation and therefore needing further development among the middle managers and other non-managerial staff.

The distributed, n-level leadership philosophy, as it was called, was cascaded to staff by different layers of managers. This formal approach was undertaken notwithstanding the fact that the empowering philosophy that was communicated was hoped to dismantle the need for hierarchy and formal authority in the eyes of staff when it came to the matters of leadership so that they would be more inclined to engage in leadership behaviours themselves. Paradoxically, this cascading design was depicted to us as distributed leadership in action:
We have focused on one basic factor, namely leadership, and we have carried out quite interesting training both for managers and for reps. It was based on us delivering a leadership programme for managers, with the help of an external consultant …, so the executive team did this for the middle managers, then middle managers did this for the reps. So this was, by definition, a guaranteed engagement of given employees, because they had to prepare given topics. So this was quite an interesting dose of leadership knowledge. (Szymon, GM)

Despite, however, this declared commitment to leadership development and the introduced leadership fora, we did not discover much change in attitudes among staff when we interviewed them again the following year, notwithstanding such expectations from some of the executives:

In my view, there should be change, because there are projects and because of they way of operating, things should have improved. (Janusz, executive)

This observation was supported by the participants themselves who often admitted that they could see more vision coming from the top of the organisation now, but still not in the form of distributed leadership, as was hoped:

I think that leadership has not improved much even though there is focus [in the organisation] on leadership… (Ewa, executive)
I think that leadership coming from the top is visible. I get the impression that we have some sort of direction; there is the person of [the GM] who is the \(^2\) leader here, who knows what he wants and that he gives [us] the impression of aiming for a goal. But I [also] get the impression that leadership fails on the middle level. I have a good example of area sales managers who, in my view, are not performing their role which they probably should be performing. I get the feeling that they do not want to take responsibility for leadership. They prefer to pass this responsibility on to somebody else. It is an unhealthy sign for me when your employee calls you with a question and the area sales managers tells them: ‘I don’t know, call the office.’ This is avoiding the challenge that they should be a source of decisions for the employees, a source of information, an authority…. We still need to work on this. (Natalia, employee)

Middle managers still expressed a preference for self-managing teams and talked of themselves as primarily supervisors who had to monitor, control, communicate expectations and give feedback, rather than leaders. Some of them did in fact refer to the criticisms that they were facing as not displaying the desired behaviours, locally defined as leadership, but simultaneously pointed to difficulties they were facing themselves:

\(^2\) It is difficult to determine from the original quite whether the participant is talking about the GM as being the leader in the organisation, or a leader.
I get the impression that our ideas are not often implemented, they are not considered. …

Even at our last meeting we had two or three very concrete ideas that we wanted to implement, that got dismissed. (Igor, middle manager)

Staff, on the other hand, presented themselves as independent and simply getting on their job which they knew best:

It is not that we are doing our tasks without thinking. … We have our own outlook on the situation…. You can tell that our voices … have reached the decision-makers. …. We see what the doctors respond to, what interests them. (Marcin, sales representative)

This is a very independent job. There is responsibility is to be self-motivated for work, to set oneself targets and to keep raising the bar so that you want to get out of bed in the morning. (Kamil, sales representative)

Executives, similar to the first round of interviews, continued to talk of themselves as changing the organisation by implementing projects, introducing policies, motivating staff with the help of the new motivation system or the planned incentive trip. It was still the others that had to be developed as leaders.

**Leadership Development – narratives of others**

The findings presented above reflect the company’s focus on leadership as a core value of the business and the corresponding need for and aim to develop greater leadership skills amongst
managers through the values and leadership development project. This was mirrored throughout the interviews with employees and entailed the above outlined three interconnected narratives. The first narrative across these interviews was the view of leadership as a source and solution of organisational ailments. Employees with and without managerial position equally talked about the need for more leadership in the organisation and simultaneously (second-order-theme) how others needed to develop as leaders or at least demonstrate more leadership behaviours (second-narrative).

The final narrative discussed in the findings section was that these narratives of both current lack of leadership as well as consequently the need for leadership development were always focussed on others and never on the self. As such, the interviews represent similar to Clifton’s (2014) narrative analyses an insight into how speakers position the self and others in narrative and as such ‘manage meaning of who they are in relation to other stakeholders’ (Clifton, 2014: 103). Yet, unlike Clifton (2014) who posits that ‘through managing the meaning of the organization in the story world, they (the speakers) talk themselves into being a leader as a situated professional identity’ (103), our narratives revealed attachment to the identities of a boss and supervisor and an implicit distancing from leader identities and consequently the need to develop one’s own leadership capacity. Before and after the leadership development programme, narratives consistently focussed on leadership as associated with others, typically the General Manager, rather than themselves, despite the official focus of the leadership development project on promoting n-level, so distributed, leadership. Interestingly, even staff in leadership positions looked for leadership elsewhere – in their accounts, leadership was supposed to come from the top of the company, but also be displayed by their staff. The approach to leadership as located at the top of the organisation strikingly reflects Clifton’s (2012) argument that positional power
gained through hierarchical roles are likely to skew our sense-making of where influencing as a core leadership activity is located. The narratives of the self as developing leaders were consequently the exception rather than the norm.

Additionally, and linked to the reported strive towards the adoption of leader identities (Ford and Harding, 2007) our data point to the strength and persistence of hierarchy-based identities, namely the one of a boss and supervisor, which are strongly rooted in day-to-day practices and experiences of work. As our case has shown, in certain organisational contexts, these traditional identities might still offer more appeal to middle managers than the more abstract identity of a leader. We suggest that our findings can be linked to the contextual embeddedness of our case study. The studied organisation, as we explained earlier in the paper, was highly bureaucratic, where formal authority firmly shaped the experiences of its members. In light of the observed attachment to the more traditional identities, the officially sponsored engagement with leadership development might in fact have been misplaced as it appeared to have failed to capture middle managers and other employee’s imagination. Had the development programme been more firmly rooted in their everyday experiences, rather than expressed in more abstract leadership terms, it might have been able to affect more change in behaviours.

We argue that the narrative distancing from leadership development need has implications for the success of the leadership development project implemented within this company. The implicit positioning of the self outside the role of the developing leader within these narratives may reflect individual’s attitudes towards the leadership development project and ultimately influence their openness to ‘being changed’. It may further be a sign of the pervasiveness of the heroic leader myth that has been argued to dominate the leadership literature (Alvesson and Spicer, 2010; Ford et al., 2008) and both allow employees to engage in the fantasy
of being ‘rescued’ by a strong leader as well as make it impossible to become this saviour. Those interviews captured after the conclusion of the leadership development work in this company reveal a mixed success of the leadership development project in creating the ‘needed’ leadership capacity as some continued to call for more leadership. Those employees (mainly sales staff) also continued to blame others for not having what it takes to be a leader. The otherness of leadership is therefore still prevalent in these later interviews, suggesting – we argue – that alongside the organisation’s fantasy of distributed leadership, as expressed by top and middle managers, there may be other, counter-fantasies present such as that of the strong leader. These possibly competing fantasies and the distancing of oneself in relation to leadership seem to outlive and possibly counteract the impact of leadership development work within this company.

**Implications for practice and future research**

We have in this paper explored the phenomenon of narrative distancing we encountered in a company undergoing a culture change project in relation to leadership development. Drawing on a two stage analysis process of 65 interviews from a larger qualitative project, we shared both second-order themes across the data set as well as illustrated the process of self positioning in relation to leader development in selected narratives from the interviews. This has helped to highlight narrative distancing as a discursive practice and identity work that employees and managers engaged in, in the context of an organisationally driven leader development initiative. By firmly locating leadership in others – and particularly at the top of the organisation – participants talked themselves out of the responsibility of taking on leadership and the need to be developed as leaders. This seemed to undermine the organisation’s attempt to distribute
leadership practice and skills throughout the organisation and hierarchy. So far, this focus on narrative distancing is missing from the leadership literature and our paper contributes to our understanding of the content and meaning of narrative distancing as a discursive practice to enhance our understanding of how this may contribute to identity work and meaning making processes in this organisation.

We have argued that narrative distancing may negatively influence organisational attempts to develop leadership throughout the organisation as employees and managers are likely to disassociate themselves with the organisational identity of the leader and as such the need to be developed as a leader. Future research into leadership and leadership development needs to take the insights from this exploratory study into other organisational contexts to analyse the existence and meaning of narrative distancing further. Empirical studies may look to compare top-down leadership development programmes with development initiatives that are instigated from the bottom-up. It may further explore differences according to industry, culture and/or size of organisation.

Findings from such research need to inform leadership development practice and recognise potential barriers to employees identifying themselves as leaders. Reflections on positioning of self in relation to others and dominant discourses is further important and worthwhile of being given attention to in leader development settings.
References


Ford, J., and Harding, N. (2007) Move over management; We are all leaders now. Management Learning, 38(5): 475-493


Appendix: Table 1. List of leadership features and behaviours as defined by the management of the organisation

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Features</th>
<th>Behaviours</th>
<th>Other</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. strong moral values:</td>
<td>1. works effectively</td>
<td>1. is not tied to a position but implies a managerial role as managers can turn into leaders</td>
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<tr>
<td>- achieving</td>
<td>2. effectively manages the team</td>
<td>2. effectiveness is an imperative</td>
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<tr>
<td>- pioneering</td>
<td>3. achieves company’s goals</td>
<td>3. judged by results and the way they were achieved</td>
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<tr>
<td>- care</td>
<td>4. puts the good of the company and the team first</td>
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<tr>
<td>- endurance</td>
<td>5. completes all projects</td>
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<tr>
<td>2. ability to adapt to the changing environment</td>
<td>6. observes ethical standards, law and other regulations</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>3. ability to lead teams</td>
<td>7. shows respect for the rights of all employees, their features and individual plans looking for win-win solutions</td>
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<tr>
<td>4. ability to manage the necessary change</td>
<td>8. cares about the company</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>5. ability to put forward the best solutions to clients</td>
<td>9. respects company’s history and tradition</td>
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<tr>
<td>6. ability to set and build company’s strategy and vision</td>
<td>10. suggests evolutionary changes</td>
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<td>7. ability to ability to inspire people</td>
<td>11. assures continuity and adaptation to the new business environment</td>
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<td>8. ability to develop people</td>
<td>12. assure commitment of others</td>
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<tr>
<td>9. ability to set ambitious goals</td>
<td>13. builds organizational structures in a skilful manner</td>
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<tr>
<td>10. ability to stimulate people to carry out ambitious goals</td>
<td>14 builds business processes</td>
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<tr>
<td>11. good professional background</td>
<td>15. builds a healthy work environment for the whole</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>12. knows how to make tough business and personal decisions</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>13. has and uses/ is guided</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Person</td>
<td>14. can communicate openly and effectively</td>
<td>16. assures the best conditions for the development of self-motivation and creativity of all employees.</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>15. is hard-working</td>
<td>17. constantly learns</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>16. has work-life balance</td>
<td>18. uses the newest solutions and knowledge to implement ideas</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>17. is aware of his/ her higher ability to lead</td>
<td>19. influences subordinates, colleagues, supervisors and clients</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>18. has a lot of energy and enthusiasm</td>
<td>20. observes their individual work hygiene</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>19. is ambitious</td>
<td>21. builds the company</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>20. is self-motivated</td>
<td>22. builds client service</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>23. brings about client’s satisfaction</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>24. leads to company’s prime</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>