The 13th International Studying Leadership Conference 2014, Copenhagen Business School

Conference paper: Being in the center – leadership change as the outcome of systemic repositioning

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**Introduction**

On June 14th 2014 the national football team of Italy faced England in Manaus, Brazil for their opening game of the World Cup. Italy was captained in the match by the Juventus midfielder Andrea Pirlo. Andrea Pirlo is world-renowned free-kick specialist and a deep-lying playmaker. Pirlo contributed heavily to Italy’s 2-1 victory by making 108 passes in the game, of which only five were misplaced. Team Italy controlled the flow of the game by dominating ball possession. Overall, Italy recorded the highest pass accuracy percentage in a game of any team in a World Cup match since 1966. Pirlo’s individual performance was later praised by both the Italian and UK press.

The joint performance of Pirlo and team Italy got us thinking about leadership. We noticed various manifestations of leadership on the pitch. We noted Team Italy manager Cesare Prandelli shouting orders from the side. Pirlo wore the captain’s armband because of the regular captain goalkeeper Gigi Buffon’s last minute injury. But what caught our attention most was the game controlling performance by Pirlo. Italy’s play tactic seemed to be to pass the ball to Pirlo and then expect him to make an innovative opening pass. As Pirlo was able to deliver, he was later lauded for his excellence. He was seen to lead the Italian game. Pirlo was named a leader in the pitch, and had been named a leader throughout his career. The former Italian national team manager Marcello Lippi called him ”a silent leader, one who speaks with his feet.”1 In Italy, nicknames of *l’architetto* ("the architect"), *il professore* ("the professor") and ‘the metronome’ have been used of him.

Yet, after giving the performance a second thought, what struck us as interesting was not only Pirlo’s extraordinary skill but the Italian play system that allowed his leadership to emerge: Pirlo’s favorite position on the pitch; in the centre, right in front of the defenders, holding and passing the ball rather than tackling opponent’s players, and the willingness of his team members to let him control the game.2 Both the operative roles of the players, their individual

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1 “Pirlo è un leader silenzioso: parla coi piedi” La Repubblica 29.3.2005.
2 In his autobiography (Pirlo & Alciato, 2014), Pirlo tells how in his youth his team members were envious of his skill and would not pass him the ball. He would have to fight both the opposing team and his own team members for the ball.
performance in those roles and the total team success seem to contribute a lot on who will be perceived as a leader. In Pirlo’s case, his leadership on the pitch is quite apparent, his task as a playmaker orchestrating the offence is easy to observe. Still, how could we use this thought of leadership as an outcome of systemic performance in other contexts?

In this paper we search for new answers to the question ‘where leadership is effective’. We use the concept of ‘position’ to discuss the matter. We show how the leadership literature has conceptualized position from three perspectives: vertical, horizontal and central. We link these views with key research paradigms within leadership research: leadership as unidirectional use of power resources, leadership as a dyadic relationship, and leadership as an emergent property of a system. We analyze our empirical case material as a positional leadership change with the help of Complexity Leadership Theory (CLT) (Uhl-Bien et al. 2008, Hazy & Uhl-Bien, 2013). CLT is a novel leadership theory which argues that leadership is a collective rather than an individual phenomenon: it is something that directs and emerges in a bound organizational system, a network called a Complex Adaptive System (CAS).

Our empiria comes from case study of supervisory leadership change in an industrial organization. We study how an industrial company, a brewery, redefined the content and role of its’ supervisory work and trained and coached its supervisors to assume a more central position in the production process of the facility; to become playmakers in managing the production. The supervisors had over time migrated to a peripheral position in the facility, their role had diminished to conducting supportive, and administrative tasks. The organization came to see this development as dissatisfactory, and associated several problems in the operative process management with supervisor superficiality and leadership lack. As a result of a formal organization development process the supervisors returned to ‘power’, assuming a more central position in the management of the production process, or as stated to us by a production manager “turned into the leaders they are expected to be in the organization.”
We develop new theoretical and practical understanding of the positionality of leadership. We provide new details on what positionality can be in an industrial, first-level managerial setting, and how positionality can be understood through network terms, using complexity leadership theory. Our goal is to rehabilitate position as a factor in the discussion of the emergence of leadership and show how positional analysis can provide new, fruitful insights into the phenomenon of leadership.

Leadership as position: three perspectives

Position has been a defining element of leadership ever since the first scholarly texts on it appeared. In his discussion of leadership as an essentially contested concept, Grint (2005) names it one of the four major forms or alternatives to understanding leadership and asks ‘is it WHERE ‘leaders’ operate that makes them leaders?’(emphasis original, ibid, p.18). In leadership literature we can pinpoint three different answers to this question, a) leadership as being on top of somebody or something i.e. vertical position, b) leadership as being in front of somebody i.e. horizontal position, and c) leadership as being in the middle of a network i.e. a central position. These rather implicit understandings of leadership position are developed in different fields of leadership research. In the next section we will discuss how position is understood in earlier leadership research.

In the early scholarly writing on leadership position was operationalized from a vertical point of view, which created on image of leadership as command and control (Crevani et al. 2007). The Fayolian/Weberian leaders were depicted as individuals applying top-down, unidirectional authority in an organization. Leaders were seen to draw from sources of managerial power. Barnard (1938) juxtaposed position based and personal power, i.e. leadership. Authority of position was declared independent of personal ability, whereas authority of leadership rested on the superior ability of the agent (Cartwright, 1965: p. 4). Position power was further differentiated to legitimate, reward, coercive, information and ecological power, while personal power was discussed as referent power and expert power. (Yukl, 2006: p. 149). In various textbooks listings of these classic power bases ecological power is often omitted. Cartwright
(1965:p. 20) described ecological power as influence where the influencer manipulates the influencee’s social or physical environment. He referred to Lewin’s (1951) term ‘social gatekeeper’ who controls the flow of material objects, information or personnel through organizational channels. Cartwright argued that influence by ecological control can be observed in virtually every kind of social setting. For example school teachers exert such influence in forming work groups, designing projects, and making seating arrangements. Therefore, control over the physical environment, technology, and organization of the work provides an opportunity for indirect influence over other people. Because behavior is determined in part by perception of opportunities and constraints, it can be altered in subtle ways by rearranging the situation (Yukl, 2006).

Managers were described to capitalize these resources, both positional and personal, in their work. Formal leaders had the opportunity, and were also expected to utilize their power (Smircich & Morgan, 1982). Yet, leadership research lost its interest in position as the field turned its attention towards leaders as individuals (Gronn, 2000; Yukl, 1999), studying their histories, traits and styles. The leadership field was colonized by competencies (Carroll, Levy & Richmond, 2008). This ‘inward turn’ now suggested that leadership emanated from the individual, not from any particular position in a particular setting. This emphasis is succinctly made visible by Day (2007, p. 22) who wrote:

“Certainly, one’s position in an organization can provide some legitimate position power and authority; however, leadership involves more than the mere exercise of that authority.” (emphasis added)

Our research aim is not to deny the importance of the individual, but to return to the positional aspects created by the organization from a novel perspective.

The second view on the positionality of leadership is the horizontal view, or in other words ‘leadership in front’ (Grint, 2005). The focus of research moved from the leader person to the relationship between leaders and followers. The early contingency models (see Yukl, 2006 for a summary) focused on this dyadic relationship, but did not ultimately reconsider the sources of
leaders’ influence outside the leader’s behaviour. The individualistic idea was that leaders simply needed adaptability; to be clever enough, to possess enough emotional intelligence or other relevant situational awareness to choose the appropriate response from their personal repertoire of behaviors. The ‘Substitutes for Leadership’ theory (Kerr & Jermier, 1978) was the first approach to seriously contemplate the relationship between elements external to leaders and followers. The theory proposed that leadership was not necessarily always and solely a question of personal competence – other organizational elements could have even dramatic effects on leadership. The difference from the earlier writings was that the unidirectional influence of leaders on followers was understood to be constrained by contextual factors. In their original paper Kerr and Jermier (1978) list elements categorized to subordinate personality, task, and organizational characteristics as possible sources of leader behaviour substitution or neutralization. Howell et al. (1990: p. 24) expanded the argument by suggesting that substitutes might actually remedy problems caused by weak human leadership by acting as enhancers of leadership. Over the years this theory has obtained both support and criticism (Podsakoff et al. 1995; 1993). To us, a particularly interesting leadership substitute named in the original theorizing is spatial distance. Kerr and Jermier (1978) considered physical distance a neutralizer: they argued that increase in physical distance may make leadership inefficient (see also Collinson, 2005).

Leadership-at-a-distance (Bogardus, 1927; Katz & Kahn, 1978; Napier & Ferris, 1993; Antonakis & Atwater, 2002; Collinson, 2005) is a small but lasting research tradition, which has studied the implications of distance between leaders and followers to leadership attributions, legitimacy and leader action outcomes. Over the years the tradition has published mixed results on the effect of distance. For example, Bogardus (1927) and Katz & Kahn (1978) claimed that a certain social distance was necessary for leader for retaining influence among followers. These suggestions were later challenged by Shamir (1995) who argued that charisma can appear in both socially distant and near leaders, and by Napier and Ferris (1993) who in their discussion of structural distance stated that ‘propinquity’, i.e. nearness in place and time is generally hypothesized to have a positive effect on various leadership outcomes. The mixed results can be partly explained by the variance in the ways distance is operationalized in the extant literature. The most comprehensive attempt to systematically theorize leader distance is made
by Antonakis & Atwater (2002), who suggested that distance should be operationalized to three independent dimensions: a) perceived social or psychological distance, b) physical distance, and c) perceived frequency of leader-follower interaction. Antonakis & Atwater progressed our understanding of leader distance by being able to illustrate the various spatial contexts where leaders work, which has been unexplicated in previous distance literature. Echoing Jaques (1989) we may argue that leadership tasks vary between different leader positions due to differing accesses to their followers. For instance, papal leadership (pope and his distant devouts across the globe) emerges through different practices than supervisory leadership (supervisors and proximal operators in an industrial setting). Still, Collinson (2005) criticizes the previous distance research of an untheorized focus on political and military contexts of charismatic leadership and argues that private or public sector organizations host contexts where distance dynamics may be very different.

The past leader distance literature does have one thing in common: it operationalizes distance as the separation between the leader and the follower persons. Therefore, it draws from the tradition where leadership is seen as a variable of the dyadic relationship. In addition, the leadership distance literature has omitted the discussion of what actually transpires between the leaders and the followers in various organizational settings, distant or proximal. Also, other related elements are at best listed as unexplored contextual moderators such as “the nature of the task, the use of impression management behaviors, instrumental or expressive orientations, and other personality characteristics, size, or industry type and other organizational constraints, and location or culture of the organization” (Napier & Ferris, 93: 349), leader hierarchical level or leadership substitutes like “follower abilities and various organizational systems and processes.” (Antonakis & Atwater, 2002: 677). To sum up, the distance research has with the exception of Collinson (2005) drawn its premises from the contingency school and, therefore, can be subjected to criticism directed towards that thinking.

Dubin (1979) criticized leadership research for its tendency to emphasize interpersonal, face-to-face relations, and for its disregard of organizational problems. Dubin argued that vast majority of leadership activity in organizations is non face-to-face (Dubin, 1979: 226). He coined the terms 'leadership of organizations' and 'leadership in organizations' with the 'of' referring to
strategic leadership by CEOs and the ‘in’ to leadership practiced on the lower levels in the hierarchy (Hooijberg, et al., 2007). Dubin’s criticism was pointed towards the operationalization of leadership as a property of the dyadic relationship. According to him, leadership includes and consists of much more than that.

The third view on leadership position emerges in several contemporary discussions on leadership: the social network studies on leadership (Balkundi & Kilduff, 2006; Hooijberg et al., 1997; Pastor et al. 2002; Mehra et al. 2006; Balkundi et al. 2011), collective (Contractor, DeChurch, Carson, Carter & Keegan, 2012), relational leadership (Uhl-Bien, 2006; Cunliffe & Eriksen, 2011; Fairhurst & Uhl-Bien, 2012), shared leadership (Ensley, Hmieleski & Pearce, 2006; Pearce & Conger, 2003; Shondrick, Dinh, Lord, 2010), collaborative (Collinson, 2007), the distributed leadership (Gronn, 2000, 2002; 2005; 2009; Spillane, 2005; Oborn, Barrett & Dawson, 2013), and complexity leadership (Osborn & Hunt, 2007; Uhl-Bien, Marion & McKelvey, 2007; Uhl-Bien & Marion, 2009) literatures. These literatures hold differing ontological, epistemological and methodological views (see Uhl-Bien 2006 for a discussion on entity based and relational ontologies), yet the common element is that they see leadership from a systemic perspective. Leadership emerges in a context (Osborn et al. 2002; Fairhurst, 2009), in a network consisting of multiple agents, from the relationships of these agents – not just between prescribed dyads, but between all agents important to a network. Despite the differing views on whether leadership is a property of a sociomaterial collective (Oborn et al. 2013) or rather constrained and enabled by such contexts, the unit of analysis is wider than in previous research; it is the collective (Contractor et al. 1212.), context (Endrissat & von Arx, 2013), network (Mayo, Meindl & Pastor 2003; Balkundi & Kilduff, 2006) or a system (Marion, 2008).

Some of this literature analyses leadership as egalitarily dispersed in such a system: any member in a collective can be a leader or a follower at times (Pearce & Conger, 2003; Hiller et al. 2006). However, with the image of Andrea Pirlo stuck in our minds, we describe the third leadership position archetype as being in the middle of the other other players, in the center of the pitch with a prescribed role structure in place with readiness to take improvised and capable action. Balkundi & Kilduff (2006) argued that ‘individuals who are central in the immediate networks around them and in the larger networks that connect them to others throughout the
organization and beyond the organization are likely to acquire a particular type of expert power-knowledge of and access to those few powerful others whose words and deeds control resource flows and business opportunities (Burt, 2005). Informal leadership is equated with centrality; more central agents tend to be perceived as powerful (Brass, 1984). Centrality refers here rather to ‘betweenness’ than ‘popularity’ (Kilduff & Tsai, 2003; Scott, 1988). Those who control the structural holes of a network gain social capital (Burt, 2000). And skillful use of these positional resources in everyday relating and organizing constructs the meaning and reality of leadership (Uhl-Bien, 2006).

The central position in an organizational network draws from both formal, prescribed and informal, emergent elements. Or as Balkundi and Kilduff (2006: p. 421) state it: “Patterns of informal leadership can complement or complicate the patterns of formal leadership in organizations.” The problem we see with distributed and shared leadership models is that they typically start with a contradictory setting – for example a comparison of vertical and shared leadership, as if they would be separate actions or performed by separate actors. Our view builds on the complementary argument, as we emphasize that leadership is especially expected from those who hold a formal superior role (Alvesson & Svenningson, 2003).

In this article we study how the organizational system contributes – constrains and enables the leadership of its prescribed leaders. Or to be more precise: how does the leaders’ position influence their everyday leadership actions and the meanings attached to them? Informed by the Substitutes of Leadership view, we also ask if it is only the collective of individuals we should focus on, or is there a more heterogenic network of agents at play, all contributing to the emergence of leadership at a certain point in time and space? Reiterating some of the ideas from the early positional views of leadership, e.g. Cartwright (1965) and in unison with the sociomaterial view (Orlikowski, 2007; Oborn et al. 2013), we suggest that this position is influenced by the material artifacts and shared practices present in the work and organizational context. In our conceptualization position is not just a place on the vertical ladder, i.e. the hierarchical command-control structure, it is also relating to other individuals and being in the core of organizational action.
To approach this research agenda analytically, we utilize the Complexity Leadership Theory (CLT) (Uhl-Bien & Marion, 2008: Hazy & Uhl-Bien, 2013). CLT offers us conceptual tools that help us see how formal position and emergent leadership are intertwined, something that the distributed leadership literature has more or less ignored. CLT studies the emergence of leadership on a system level, called Complex Adaptive System (CAS) (Anderson, 1999), taking into account the entanglement between administrative structures and adaptive systems (Uhl-Bien & Marion, 2009). Next, we discuss the key characteristics of Complexity Leadership Theory.

**Leadership position in a Complex Adaptive System**

CLT helps us understand leadership by exploring how organizational agents interact to produce desirable outcomes (Uhl-Bien & Marion, 2009). A key commitment within CLT is that leadership is shared among multiple participants, or agents (Uhl-Bien et al., 2008). Leadership processes and their outcomes result from complex patterns of interaction among these agents (Marion, 2008). Leadership is both position and authority and an emergent, interactive dynamic – a complex interplay from a collective impetus for action and change emerges when heterogenous agents interact in networks in ways that produce new patterns of behavior or new modes of operating (Uhl-Bien, Marion & McKelvey, 2008). This suggests that it is not only the existence of certain types of agents that is key for leadership, but also certain types of positional configurations between these agents. When leadership changes, it does so with the system: leadership and organizations co-evolve to new configurations (cf. Gronn, 2009). Leadership processes change the system; the agents that the systems are composed of or the interactions between these agents (Uhl-Bien & Marion, 2009). In short, leadership changes the way an organization functions, and is likewise changed as organizations evolve.

In CLT, organizations are viewed as both formal organizational structures and complex systems, called Complex Adaptive Systems (CAS), with emergent properties (Uhl-Bien & Marion, 2009). CAS are neural-like networks of interacting, interdependent agents who are bonded in a cooperative dynamic by common goal, outlook, need, and so on (Uhl-Bien, Marion
The structure and behavior of CAS are emergent properties; the actors produce these observable features through interaction (cf. Anderson, 1999). As CAS, organizations cannot be fully known or controlled in a strict sense. Rather, individual agents must find adaptive ways of operating and influencing within them. At the same time, these organizational agents are influenced and limited by the structures in which they are embedded. From the CLT perspective this organizational context is ubiquitous: Leadership always takes place within this dualistic context, characterized by varying degrees of stability and dynamism (Uhl-Bien & Marion, 2009). As such, leadership addresses organizations’ needs for both structure and adaptation (cf. Hazy & Uhl-Bien, 2013). Accordingly, leadership can affect an organization’s ongoing performance characteristics and its capability to adapt in the future (Hazy & Uhl-Bien, 2013).

CAS can be understood to consist of different human and non-human agents such as machines, texts, systems, and projects (Kilduff, Crossland & Tsai, 2008; Uhl-Bien & Marion, 2009). While human agents are driven by needs, non-human agents participate in interactions based on their physical (material, immaterial, functional) properties (cf. Marion & Uhl-Bien, 2001). The importance of such non-human elements has been recognized by leadership scholars, for instance in the form of different mediating structures, routines and practices (Hooijberg, Hunt, Antonakis, & Boal, 2007), or substitutes for human leaders (Kerr & Jermier, 1978), or material-semiotic tools (Mulcahy & Perillo, 2011), and proponents of sociomateriality who argue that there is an inherent inseparability between the technical and the social (Orlikowski, 2007; Orlikowski & Scott, 2008). New information communication systems (Coombs et al., 1992) and business plans (Oakes, Townley & Cooper, 1998) are examples of non-human agents that have been noted to shape both managerial structure and practice. In CLT terminology, these “indirect” or “substitute” forms of leadership result from interactions between multiple heterogeneous agents. The interactions give rise to emergent patterns of action, in which we can observe the structuring of leadership processes and outcomes (Uhl-Bien, Marion & McKelvey, 2008).

Leadership is known to be a concept that is difficult to define uniformly across varying contexts or studies (Grint, 2005: Ladkin, 2010). From a complexity leadership view, the
elusiveness of leadership towards precise one-off definitions results from the inherent complexity in the various situations that leaders encounter. Leadership in complex systems is more a matter of seeking to control the situation, rather than its results (Marion & Uhl-Bien, 2001). CLT approaches this challenge by focusing on the interactional aspects of leadership, and by further dividing leadership into functions responding to varying organizational needs (Uhl-Bien et al, 2007; Hazy & Uhl-Bien, 2013). For the purposes of this article, we will focus on two of the leadership areas present in CLT literature: administrative and adaptive leadership (cf. Uhl-Bien & Marion, 2009).

Administrative leadership refers to influence that operates through an organization’s formal structure and is based on authority (Uhl-Bien & Marion, 2009). It is preoccupied with the creation of coarse-grain structures that foster organizational performance (Hazy & Uhl-Bien, 2013). It relates to action taken within the context of formal rules and procedures, such as resource gathering, structuring of assignments, crisis management, and strategy formulation (Uhl-Bien et al, 2008). In such activities, leaders assume the role of a hierarchical superior, who alters organizational conditions based on his power of authority. In general, CLT research has been less interested in administrative leadership per se, viewing it as an established practice best suited for stable contexts (cf. Marion, 2008; Lichtenstein et al, 2006). Yet, these leadership behaviors still have important implications from a systems perspective: These activities affect not only how managers in organizations attempt to structure their context in a systematic manner, but also how their own interactions subsequently get structured. Administrative leadership actions thus lead to the repositioning of various organizational agents in relation to one another, including the formal leaders themselves.

Adaptive leadership takes the form of interactive processes among multiple agents, which result in adaptive outcomes responding to prevailing circumstances and perceived needs (Uhl-Bien & Marion, 2009). This form of leadership is generally seen as the most important aspect of complexity leadership theory: fostering organizational adaptivity and innovation (cf. Marion, 2008; Uhl-Bien & Marion, 2009). Adaptive leadership is a pattern of interaction in the complex organizational context. Participation in this interaction does not presuppose formal leadership

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3 “Leaders need to understand the patterns of complexity and learn to manipulate the situations of complexity more than its results.”
positions; agents with varying characteristics may be included. The roles of agents interacting in these processes can be obscure or shifting (Uhl-Bien et al, 2008), even though their behavior is considered intentional (Uhl-Bien & Marion, 2009).

Adaptive leadership processes can be associated with new emergent order within CAS (see Plowman et al., 2007 for an empirical investigation). In this sense, adaptive leadership is subject to retrospective evaluation. Overall, the discussion on adaptive (or generative) and administrative leadership functions has until recently (cf. Hazy & Uhl-Bien, 2013) remained relatively abstract and distant from practical application. One of the aims of our paper is to provide illustrations for these concepts in action.

**Supervisory work**

Our focus in this study is the leadership of the 21st century industrial supervisors. With supervisors we are referring to the first line of management in an industrial setting. Throughout their history, supervisors have occupied a special place in management. Described as the first line of management by Hales (2005), supervisors have experienced many of the social and material transformations of modern organizations first-hand (cf. Patten, 1968; Nelson, 1974; Lowe, 1993; Kerr et al., 1986). Focusing on a certain formal group of leaders is of course itself a positional definition of leadership: we track a group of individuals expected to perpetrate to leadership action. Supervisory position has historically emphasized both technical, managerial and leadership activities (Hales, 1986). Indeed, much of early leadership research studied leaders on the first managerial level in an industrial setting rather than executives (House & Aditya, 1997; van Knippenberg & Sitkin, 2013).

Supervisors have been considered by some commentators as dated representatives of a past era of mechanistic organizations (Walton, 1985; White, 1994; Koch & Godden, 1996). However, we argue that supervisory work has evolved radically over the century and that this evolution is a revealing example of how managerial practice in general has changed in organizations. The earlier foremen of the 19th century worked as entrepreneurial managers for companies in need of workforce (Patten, 1968), and as technical experts for their unskilled laborers (Kerr et al, 1986; Lowe, 1993). This era of powerful supervisors came to an end with the adoption of
scientific management practices (Nelson, 1974), whereafter the role was reoriented towards the
tasks of controlling workforce and maintaining working conditions (Patten, 1968; Dawson,
1991; Lowe, 1993). In the mass production context supervisors employed a more limited role
of control activities, with the more strategic capacities residing in the upper managerial
echelons (Nelson, 1974). The unionization of workforce, new technologies, growing levels of
management hierarchies, and the development of specialist functions within organizations
((Roethlisberger, 1945; Strauss, 1957)) stripped the supervisors of their decision-making power
even further, leaving the controller role dominant.

More recently the focus of supervisory work has shifted towards more general and supportive
activities of managing operative work (Lowe, 1993; Mason, 2000), for instance quality control
or reporting. At the same time, supervisory work has also become increasingly occupied with
productivity (Järvinen, 1978; Hales, 2005). Furthermore, the growing role of development
activities and increasing co-operation with the workforce towards goal-achievement have been
noted (Järvinen et al, 1978). Supervisory work has also adopted some elements of business
management (Hales, 2005). Conflicting demands and increasing task complexity have been
noted to create various tensions between the different requirements and roles of managers
(Hales, 1986; Pfeffer & Salancik, 1975). Overall, we can observe a general trend moving from
the early entrepreneurial foremen, through the period of restricted autonomy in Tayloristic
mass production organizations, to the more networked and goal-oriented supervisors of
contemporary industrial and service organizations. From a complexity leadership theory
perspective we can see that while much of the supervisory work has historically been carried
out by administrative leadership premises, there are also hints towards increasing demands for
adaptive leadership characteristics. Changes in the production context, such as workers’
increasing technical skill and competence levels in specialist units or automation (cf. Kerr et al,
1986) have also been driving the supervisory role towards more networked and dynamic
characteristics. Subsequently, it’s been noted that modern supervisory work incorporates
holistic performance management characteristics (Hales, 2005).
Accordingly, some authors (Dawson & McLoughlin, 1986; Delbridge et al, 2000) have suggested that supervisor studies might benefit from more systemic or comprehensive research approach. Again, CLT with the notion of CAS allows us to focus on this aspect.

**Empirical context**

*Case organization*

Our research was carried out in the production unit of a Finnish brewery. The focal organization; i.e. the filling unit of the brewery employs circa 200 machine operators and technical service workers and 15 operative supervisors, working in three shifts. The filling unit consists of three production lines: a glass bottle line originating from the 1970’s, a can line established in the early 2000’s, and a reusable plastic bottling line harnessed in the mid-2000’s. The supervisors act as direct superiors both to machine operators in their shifts and also to technical service workers during evening and night shifts. The supervisors’ work role consists of both operational tasks such as managing product shifts and cleanliness control, and supportive tasks such as workforce allocation, production planning and reporting. The supervisors report to a production manager, who is a direct subordinate of the chief production manager in charge of the total production of the facility. In addition to the operative workforce and supervisors, the filling unit includes a maintenance unit, consisting of a maintenance manager, two maintenance supervisors and a number of technical service workers, and a development unit, with a development manager and two development-oriented experts.

A stereotypical view of an industrial production organization is that it is a static and thoroughly controlled environment. Such an organization seems hardly interesting from a CLT point of view that emphasizes the study of fast-paced, complex and turbulent contexts. Thompson (1967) argued that organizations attempt to seal off their technical core from environmental disturbances and create a stable and certain production process, something that wouldn’t have anything to do with emergence, chaos or complexity. However, such a view on production is dated, as uncertainties cannot be buffered out of the technical core in today’s highly competitive, customer-driven, rapidly changing business environments (Scott, 2001). This was
also the case in this particular organization. In fact, the filling unit’s daily operations were to a great extent targeted on reacting to the changes affecting production and trying to uphold the production flowing among the complexities swaying the system. The organizational system was not only complicated, consisting of static components cooperating in a predictable fashion, but it was complex, continuously adapting to unanticipated changes in market demands, targets, resources, and timelines (Uhl-Bien & Marion, 2009). The aging production line technology acts in unforeseeable ways: at times it ran perfectly at high volumes, sometimes it refused to operate for reasons easily identifiable, and sometimes it puzzled its operands for long periods of time. The production plan is sacred in production, the supervisors were not allowed to tinker the production volumes or timetables. Yet, external parties to production often changed the plan on a short notice, forcing the production to react. The human agents, i.e. individuals and groups also act in unprecedented ways: at times employees just did not appear on the site. The organization’s daily struggles included machine breakdowns, personnel shortages, increasing number of products, changes in production plans, peaks in sales due to marketing campaigns and seasonal holidays etc. The organization had to reorganize itself on a daily basis to the changing requirements it faced. The organizational stakeholders themselves considered the system unstable, complex and chaotic and we opted to analyze it as such (Tsoukas & Hatch, 2001).

**Situation/organizational need**

The organization’s primary concern of the time was the can line. The can line had the greatest production volumes, numbering in tens of thousands of pieces per hour, and the demand for the products was oftentimes greater than the production output. The company also produced a widening range of products, resulting in frequent product switches – presenting a time consuming activity that disrupted the already stressed production. In fact, the situation in the production was at times chaotic, mostly barely in control. The supervisors were a focal actor in the struggle to control the system, or at least they should have been.

The troubling situation in the filling unit in 2009 was characterized by the supervisors’ lack of control over what occurred on the production lines and how. A telling example revealed to us in an interview was how a production line went offline for multiple hours, without the shift
supervisor’s knowledge, as he was working on supplementary tasks in the supervisors’ office. As a consequence, the management of the filling unit felt that the supervisory role in the organization required ‘sharpening’. Top management wanted the supervisors to assume a more active role in managing the operations of the unit. There was too much inconsistency, too many individual practices and norms in how the supervisors lead the workforce, focus on the ‘wrong’ things in how the supervisors conducted their current business. As an interviewee put it to us, “The supervisors needed to be in charge of the production. They needed to become leaders.”

Hence, the company joined in a publicly funded development program managed by consulting company. The consulting company was specialized in doing diagnostic organization development (Bushe & Marshak, 2008) and had extensive experience of working with industrial organizations. The development project’s objective became to strengthen the leadership role of the supervisors. Targets were set to increase teamwork, enhance cooperation between maintenance and operations, empower the supervisors to make operative decisions, and set and enforce clear-cut rules and norms for operative practices. This was to be done with new supervisory practices and routines, meeting procedures, role setting and individual coaching. The consultants executed the project between Spring 2009 and December 2010.

We, the organization scholars, entered the program via the consulting company. The funder of the development program wanted to include an academic research partner in the process, and was willing to fund an independent research project following the development effort. After negotiations, our formal role was defined to follow the development effort and provide feedback to consultants and the companies, but not participate in any further development actions in the organization.

Our interest and data collection

Our initial research interest lay in describing the work contents of the supervisors. We were interested in assessing whether supervisory work varied from the earlier studies conducted in Finland (Järvinen, 1978) and globally (e.g. Hales, 2005). We were also interested in witnessing whether the development interventions executed by the consulting company would provide any change in the supervisory work.
We collected data from the case on three occasions: during Fall-Winter 2010-11, February 2012 and February 2014. Our primary data consisted of stakeholder interviews. We interviewed supervisors, the production managers, HR and development managers, and consultants. In the interviews the interviewees reviewed and reflected on the theme of supervisory work change. We discussed the intentions of the change effort, the participants’ reactions to them, new supervisory work practices and processes and changes in the formal and informal roles of the participants. Some interviewees (production manager, consultant, one supervisor) were interviewed twice during the research process. The aim of our interviews was to find out what changes had taken place in the organization, how they had affected the work of the supervisors and how these changes were perceived by the various stakeholders. Our data collection rounds were timed so that we would get the immediate reviews right after the change project was finalized, then a year after. We later returned for a third data collection moment in 2014 to do some supplementary data collection, and to confirm and complete some of our conclusions with the corporate stakeholders.

In addition to interviews, we reviewed approximately 1300 documents related to changes in the filling unit. These documents included notes, project plans, meeting memos, reports, and training material dated between 2006-2011. The files included detailed information on previous and the current development initiatives, quality group activities, performed audits and reviews, and supervisor instructions to name some. These documents had been authored by supervisors, managers and the consultants.

Our Analytic process

Our initial approach towards the research data was realist: we focused on changes that were operational and jointly acknowledged by our informants. We first categorized our data using situational maps (Clarke, 2005) where we identified salient actors and elements in the given setting. Our second step consisted of forming a narrative of the case (Langley, 1999), first in a very strict timeline-based form, then a more rich description of the change process. The scene emerging from the evolving narrative presented the supervisory work change first and foremost as a change in the operating environment of the supervisors. We were also impressed by the strong view held by our interviewees that the change in the organization was in supervisory
leadership. We went looking for explanations that would synthesize both these observations. As our aim was to get ‘behind the story’ of idiographic supervisory work change and achieve analytical generalization (Yin, 2003), we started looking for supportive theory that would help explain our observations. We wanted to move from describing the patterns of organizational change we observed (domain of experience) to the structures, generative mechanisms and contingent factors responsible for them (domain of mechanisms) (Tsoukas, 1989:556) We contrasted our observations with several research literatures. In this abductive stage of recognition and structuring (Ketokivi & Mantere, 2010), we started with research discussing the contextuality of leadership (Osborn et al., 2002), continued with distributed leadership (Gronn, 2000, 2002; 2005; Oborn, Barrett & Dawson, 2013) before settling with complexity leadership (CLT) (Osborn & Hunt, 2007; Uhl-Bien, Marion & McKelvey, 2007; Uhl-Bien & Marion, 2009.) We felt that CLT was able to provide more pertinent answers to how the positional change had affected the leadership impressions held by the organizational stakeholders than other leadership theories. We came to see how the individual production lines constituted different CASes in the organization: The hierarchical organization with its different functions (production & maintenance) was targeted at the production lines, trying to keep them going. The bottling/canning of beverages was the core task of the organization, and the hierarchy was supposed to deliver it. Yet, each production line had its own practices, procedures and challenges and the organization acted differently on them. We focused our analysis on the can line, where the changes in the supervisory practice and the total organizational conduct were most vivid. In the following stage, we interpreted the observed changes using CLT as a way of translating singular interventions into a more holistic interpretation of supervisory leadership change; how the changes in the CAS affected the leadership behavior of the supervisors and the leadership interpretations of organization members. Our aim became to both theoretically abstract our observations and to investigate the relationships and linkages between our adopted concepts in this particular case context (Tsoukas, 1989: 559).

Results
The organization before the changes: supervisors as peripheral adaptors in the CAS.

As described in the case background section, the operations in the can line were in an unsatisfactory state prior to the development process. The can line organization was unable to handle the escalating production volumes and range of products in a manner that would fit the requirements set by the top management. The production was troubled by unplanned stoppages, personnel problems, and conflicts between production and maintenance. The aging production line technology coped badly with the high production tempo, and the operators argued that the production volumes set for the production line were unrealistic. Despite a ten year history of lean-based production development projects, the can line operators were in practice unable to effectively function as a team or take responsibility for the smooth operation of their own work areas.

The supervisory role in relation to the production line had become marginal. Formally, the supervisors were expected to lead the operations on the can line. However, in practice their efforts were focused differently. Majority of the supervisors work time was spent in the office located in a different floor, apart from the production line. Supplementary work tasks filled their day: they worked on the various IT systems and reporting procedures. Their daily understanding of the production line emerged through the various IT systems rather than through direct observations in the production site. In effect, over the past years the supervisors’ daily work had diffused into the conduct of supportive and administrative tasks, such as operator work hour reporting, product plan monitoring, shiftwork resourcing etc. These tasks had the effect that the supervisors visited the actual production line only irregularly. The actual work role of the supervisors resembled the prescribed supervisory work role more in letter than in spirit. The supervisors had become peripheral in relation to the physical can filling line: a) their work consisted to a great extent of tasks that were related to the physical can line only indirectly, b) their reporting role towards other stakeholders outside production had become relatively more important, c) their contacts with the operators in the can line were mostly linked to these supportive tasks, d) they visited the physical production line only sporadically, and then mostly in problem situations.
This prior diffusion of supervisory work content was not a result of explicit change process but had taken several years. Rather, there were multiple reasons for the change of the operative position of the supervisors in the production process. Our interviewees described how the previous organization development projects enforcing a lean paradigm had underlined the importance of operator self-management. The supervisory role change had been left undiscussed in the earlier projects. This had resulted in a situation where the operators were expected to take more responsibility for operative problems and the supervisors were expected to allow more leeway to them.

Another dominant explanation for the inefficiency and peripheral position of the supervisors was the relentlessly active role of their superior, the production manager. The production manager’s activity was a shared “issue” for all of the supervisors in the organization. In effect, through a prolonged historical development, the manager had assimilated the role and associated tasks that historically had belonged to the supervisors. The organization’s rule of thumb had become, as it was expressed in an interview:

“And the rule was, for supervisors, if you have any problems, call ‘Bob’, call him, the production manager. […] Three o’clock at night, if there’s a problem, you have to call him.”

As a result, the supervisors and the operators had been disengaged and did not possess the necessary knowledge and skills required for solving technical issues. Nor were they informed of issues that were currently pressing or had taken place in the previous work shift. Instead, it was the production manager who was always on top of everything – further stabilizing his position as the focal person in the unit. Bob, in effect, had become a central attractor (cf. Hazy & Uhl-Bien, 2013) for the production unit CAS: interactions revolved around the one person who had made himself accountable for the whole unit.

To make things worse for the organization; whenever the supervisors did lead the can line operations, there were added problems. The supervisors relied on adaptive behaviors; different supervisors and operators found their individual ways of participating in leadership processes. In the operator and supervisor interviews especially the inconsistency in supervisors’ leadership
behavior was announced problematic; one supervisor might enforce particular rules, regarding for instance expected time usage or production rate, while others might not. For example, one of the burning issues in the organization was the motor speed of the production machines. The formal top management objective in the organization was to run the machines as fast as possible to match the production needs. The increased speed caused more equipment malfunctions and added disruptions to the flow of production. The operators criticized the speed increases and were not willing to follow the set speed targets. The supervisors were expected to enforce and control the top management goals, yet only some of them acted accordingly. As stated to us by an employee: “The rules varied according who happened to be in the supervisory shift.”

These issues indicate that the CAS was lacking an effective administrative leadership function. The supervisors had been unable to set common ground for how they acted towards production issues. In complexity leadership terms, the supervisory leadership consisted of (individually) adaptive behaviors towards production issues. It is worth noticing, though, that these problems were not present in the administrative tasks of the supervisors. In the supplementary tasks, the supervisors were coordinated and able to produce “a collective front” towards the various stakeholders, including the operators.

This situation on the can line was a cause of distress for both the supervisors and for top management. Both parties were dissatisfied with the circumstances. Supervisors voiced their concerns, such as “we have no job here” or “what is it that you really expect from us?” Top management was not satisfied with the operative performance of the production line. The analysis leading to a new development project focused on making the supervisor a focal party in the daily operative management of the production line. Interestingly, the vision for the new supervisory role was a reminiscence of the historical supervisors of the past. Prior to scientific management, the supervisors had been product and production experts (Masters) with direct responsibility of running the operations (Kerr et al, 1986; Lowe, 1993). The organization wanted to develop local responsiveness; supervisors and operators should be able to cooperate and solve most of the issues without involvement from the production manager or the maintenance unit, and more effectively so. Top management wanted to increase the
organization’s problem solving capability and speed. This required increased interaction among supervisors, operators and maintenance personnel, and increased engagement with the production line for all involved parties – which were currently seen to be lacking. Furthermore, it was assessed that supervisors could take on more responsibilities for developing the unit’s functioning in the longer run through special tasks or projects. In CLT terms, they wanted the adaptive leadership function of the CAS not to rely on the production manager’s presence or availability.

Supervisory work redefined: Supervisors as central actors in the production line CAS

The changes implemented in the organization followed a technostructural organization development agenda (Friedlander & Brown, 1974). Plans were made to change supervisory practices and responsibilities to develop interaction between the supervisors and the organization’s various stakeholders rather than start with the personal competencies of the supervisors. From a CLT perspective, the desired change could be understood as an attempt to increase both administrative and adaptive leadership functions in the organization (cf. Uhl-Bien & Marion, 2009), focusing both on structural and interactional aspects of the supervisory work. In an interview, the change consultant summarized his development philosophy on this point as:

“first you fix management, then leadership”.

The change in the supervisors’ work was accrued through various interventions: Reviewing and revising the supervisors’ responsibility areas and tasks, installing new practices to facilitate interaction between supervisors and various stakeholders, and a change in their superior’s operative role. Reviewing and revising the supervisors’ responsibilities aimed to legitimize change intentions and to encourage the supervisors to act in new ways. As an example, increased emphasis on supervisors’ responsibility in problem solving was scripted into these documents. According to these practices, the supervisors were instructed to more actively seek
responsibility in case of machine failures. Other examples of these responsibilities included such as upholding standards of work safety, professional conduct, or cleanliness and order of the physical environment. In effect, the supervisors were now expected to weave into a central leadership role in the context of these disruptive episodes; to ensure that the required linkages between the machinery, operators, maintenance unit, work shifts, error reports and the supervisors themselves were established. When we interpret these plans from a CLT perspective, we see how they intended to make the supervisors a central node in the can line CAS network. They were placed in a position where the topical, realtime information about production would run via them. They would be the first ones reacting to unintended impulses and organize the everyday operations. They would no longer be able to solely manage their tasks from the office through IT systems, but these new requirements would turn them mobile: they would have to be present on the physical production line, working with operators and maintenance face-to-face.

These new behavioral requirements ‘pushed’ the supervisors closer to the daily operations of the can line. They were expected to be aware of the daily details of the operations and react to them. The new role expectations required adaptive leadership behavior from the supervisors: act according to the situation requirements – solve the problem so that the production plan can be continued. Yet, the increased adaptation was to happen from a new, more central and established position, a position shared by all the members of the supervisor group. Individual adaptation would no longer do; the supervisors would need to have a common operative code of conduct.

As a part of clarifying the supervisors’ responsibilities, the production manager, Bob (along with his frequent accomplices, the development manager and the department manager) was removed further away from the daily operational activity. Following discussions with the consultant Bob was willing to relax his dominant role within the unit. His professional career had started in maintenance and he had a tough time separating from his beloved machines. Still, he successfully remained committed to the decisions made about his role change. As it was explained to us, he had become: “More distant, and was taking care of these, these higher-level issues; organizing the week, the production week, and gave the responsibility to the shift,
clearly.”. Removing the prior central attractor from the network created an open ‘responsibility space’ for the supervisors to grasp, further placing them in a more central position within the CAS. The operators were no longer able to point the problems to Bob, but they had to involve the supervisors. Whenever the operators needed management in operative problemsolving, they would turn to supervisors. Even if the supervisors were not really competent during the early phases, this procedure further enforced the supervisors to a more central role in the problem solving situations on the can line.

The supervisors were now being engaged in every day problem solving, interacting with operators and maintenance personnel along the production line. With support from the consultant, the supervisors rehearsed problem solving in situations that were previously performed by their superior. This change allowed them to increasingly participate in the adaptive leadership function frequently necessitated by the production line’s operational challenges.

The objective of bringing supervisors closer to shop-floor and the workers was also supported by developing the supervisors’ interactional practices. A new daily meeting was put in place, with a required participation from supervisor, operators, and maintenance personnel. In these supervisor led meetings, the state of the production, current issues and other pressing matters were discussed. The aim was to create and stabilize new interaction patterns for the stakeholders, facilitating the emergence of further adaptive processes within the unit. The consultant created scripts for the meetings and coached the supervisors in running the meetings. A story told to us by an interviewee tells about the difficulty of assuming the new responsibilities. In the first meetings, the supervisors would at times answer production-related questions with a “I have no clue” phrase. The unit management would respond to these situations with a counterphrase “You have to know. Go and find out.” In time these episodes came to an end.

The production manager also started having weekly meetings with the supervisors, which provided a new arena for increasing the supervisors’ involvement in, and awareness of, current issues. In this context, the supervisors were also assigned participant roles in the weekly meetings of neighboring departments or units, such as logistics or the laboratory (quality
control). As a result of these changes, the supervisors were also positioned to take a more active role as information brokers and boundary spanning actors in their networks, cooperating more directly with the maintenance organization, for instance.

The supervisors’ personal competencies were not completely overlooked during the change, however. One of the development program’s explicit goals was to transform the supervisors into agents that could help solve most common technical issues, many of which occurred repeatedly. This would in turn allow the product lines to run at a faster pace, as surfacing issues would be less disruptive and quicker to fix. Together with the top-management, the consultant set new expectations for the supervisors to gain a more active role in technical problem solving. The project groups created new routines and standardized operating practices for these crucial situations to implement the transition. The practices also described new roles for operators and maintenance specialists, who would now work as a single group with the supervisors. The vision was that supervisors become agents who are able to react quickly and efficiently: to pull these resources together whenever necessary and coordinate the repair efforts while also maintaining an advisory role. Increasing the supervisors’ technical skills was seen as paramount to this transition, while these new routines were also expected to strengthen these skills. The consultant reported how he had witnessed cases of successful cooperative problem solving by supervisors, operators, and maintenance personnel working under the new guidelines. The supervisors’ increased competency with the production equipment increased their credibility in the eyes of the operators. In the past the operators had known that asking the supervisors for technical help would not result in anything because they did not really know more than the operators. In the new situation, the supervisors became increasingly familiar with the machinery and were, as time passed, able to really help the operators in machine breakdowns. We argue that this technical competence helped the supervisors legitimize a leadership position in the group: in the eyes of the operators, the knowledge of machines is a key resource in managing the product line.

In the previous paragraphs we have described the changes more or less from a normative point of view. The intention in the organization was to activate the supervisors and make them a focal character in running the everyday operations. Our follow-up interviews and archival
analysis revealed how the intended consequences actualized. The new role set and the new supervisory practices have lasted in the organization. The various operative meetings with the different stakeholders are in place, and seen as beneficial by the organization members. According to the final report of the development project the organizational change is deemed successful, the production problems are solved more efficiently than before, and the new supervisory actions are key to the enhance practice. Our interviewees call this a change in supervisory leadership, “They are now running the show in production.”

More variance was seen in how the individual supervisors reacted to the new requirements. According to our informants, there still was a lot of difference in the individual performances of the supervisors. Some of the old supervisors had not been able to ‘step up’ to fill the new requirements. “Some supervisor’s performances can be pretty anemic”, was an interpretation made by a middle manager. In fact, during the early phases of the development project, a couple of the old supervisors were deemed unable or unwilling to adapt to the new requirements and these individuals left the organization. We acknowledge these individual differences in leadership performance, but emphasize that in this paper our focus is rather on understanding how the positional change affected the image of the supervisors as leaders in this organization. The middle management was also at times unable to act according to the new agreements. We heard of cases where Bob and the maintenance operatives had forgotten to call the shift supervisor to take part in a test run of a repaired piece of equipment.

In summary, the set of implemented changes in supervisory work repositioned the supervisors in the CAS: supervisors changed from marginal, peripheral agents to a more central CAS agent. The supervisors became active in the CAS, rather than trying to work on the CAS from the sidelines and fail in the effort (i.e. monitoring production status from a computer screen in the office, filing shift reports). Other stakeholders would no longer by default seek out the production manager for questions concerning production, nor did the supervisors have to reply “I have no clue.”, when asked. Supervisors became more active in machine repair situations, working with operators and maintenance personnel. Being able to positively affect the material context was central in the production context, even if the supervisors wouldn’t be required to “pick up a screw-driver” by themselves. The supervisors’ technical competence increased
during the process, but it emerged as an aftereffect of them being an active party in the management of maintenance. The practice where the supervisors led the new shift and crossfunctional meetings enabled and enforced them in becoming the knowledgeable party in issues related to the everyday organizing of the production line. The new tasks, practices and roles turned the supervisors into leaders of production in the eyes of their superiors, peers, and subordinates – something that the formal position in the vertical hierarchy had not done.

Discussion

Our primary intent in this paper has been to reassess the significance of position to leadership. Our goal was to rehabilitate organizational position as a factor in the discussion of the emergence of leadership. Historically, position was acknowledged as a primary source of leadership. During that time position was considered primarily as an authority-based, hierarchical position of being on ‘top’ of others. Lately leadership research has to a large extent disregarded it, considered it a false premise, or considered it as self-explanatory. To most leadership scholars, ‘true’ leadership has been something other than what originates from the ‘place in the corporate ladder’. The vertical reading has been shunned and depicted as outdated. The vertical conceptualization was more or less challenged and replaced with a horizontal orientation inherent to dyadic readings of leadership. The horizontal reading of leadership depicts it as a phenomenon between equals who assume the roles of leader and/or follower more out of their free will than because of the constraints placed by organizations on their members. Lately, leadership scholars have come to consider leadership as a property of a wider unit of analysis; a collective, a group, an organization, or a system. This ontological turn invites a new reading of position, that of a configuration of relations between agents in an entanglement of a prescribed structure and an emergent network of everyday organizing. We used the phrase of being in center of things in contrast to being in the periphery to describe a leadership position in a network. We discussed this reading of leadership position through research applying a social network analysis perspective. We applied the network view of position using Complexity Leadership to describe and dissect a case of supervisory leadership
change in an industrial organization. We depicted how supervisory leadership had become sidetracked because the supervisory work tasks and responsibilities had moved the supervisors away from the actual production of the facility. Increasing focus on supplementary tasks had turned the supervisors into peripheral actors in the everyday organizing of the production. They had become actors who were in a weak position to handle the leadership requirements emerging on the production line, and were more or less substituted by their superior. The repositioning of the supervisors to a central position in relation to the everyday organizing of the can line both helped and forced them to assume a leader role and fill the expectations that were addressed to them as formal superiors in the organizational hierarchy. Our description shows how either a hierarchical reading of the organization’s command-control structure or a horizontal reading of the relationship between the supervisors and the operators would have been insufficient to illustrate how the bases of supervisory leadership changed in the organization.

We wish to make four remarks based on our study.

The first remark addresses the benefits of conceptualizing position from a network perspective rather than from a vertical/horizontal line perspective. Leadership theory is evolving to adopt new frameworks and units of analysis. The focus is drifting from leader individuals via the properties of dyadic relationships to systemic understandings of leadership. Position as a concept could and should be adapted to the emerging readings of leadership. Our study joins a group of still rather few studies that consider the element of position from an explicit network perspective, the others being the studies applying social network analysis (e.g. Balkundi & Kilduff, 2006; Hooijberg et al, 1997; Pastor et al. 2002; Mehra et al. 2006; Balkundi et al. 2011). Yet, our study uses the network more as a descriptive metaphor than a rigorously operationalized variable. The studies applying an Actor-Network-Theory view (e.g. Fairhurst & Cooren, 2009; Mulcahy & Perillo, 2011) with their view of leaders as hybrids of human and nonhuman actants also hold similarities with our view. Still, we consider the supervisors in this study from an entity-based perspective (Uhl-Bien, 2006) and describe how the position in the CAS or ‘leadership environment’ influences both the realistic means to lead available to the supervisors, and the impressions held of their ‘leadership’ in the organization. The network
position held by the supervisors was constituted by several factors. The building blocks included the supervisors’ managerial targets; their formal role descriptions; the tasks issued to them; the routines, practices, and procedures they applied and participated in; the actions of other stakeholders: their superiors, peers and subordinates and what they did on the production line and in the various meetings – all these influenced how the supervisory leadership manifested. The sociomateriality of everyday leadership (Oborn et al. 2013; see also Orlikowski & Scott, 2008; Orlikowski, 2007) is vividly illustrated in how the supervisory leadership both emerged and changed in our case organization. We also argue how it was this changing sociomaterial context, the CAS, and the supervisors’ changing position in it that triggered the individual changes. The supervisors in our study did need to reflect and develop their identity, skill set, and relationships to fulfill the new requirements. Yet, we argue that without the changes in the CAS no fundamental change in the supervisory practice would have emerged (see Watzlawick & Coyne (1990) for a description of the role of contextual change in psychotherapy).

Our second remark considers the relation of leadership to the position within the network. We applied the terms peripheral and central to describe the changing supervisory network position. Social network analysts have developed various metrics (degree centrality, betweenness, eigenvector centrality, see Balkundi & Kilduff, 2006; Wasserman & Faust, 1994 for more details) to operationalize centrality in a network. Yet, to our purpose a more generic, metaphorical description is sufficient. Centrality in our reading consisted of two elements: being in the middle of the network; being a liaison person (Lawrence & Lorsch, 1967) between other agents, and being close to the other CAS agents. Holding a central position, and controlling the flow of resources, e.g. information and/or materials is a position recognized by various scholars. Terms that have been used to describe such position are for example ‘social gatekeeper’ (Lewin, 1947), ‘tertius iungens’ (the third who joins) (Obstfeld, 2005), ‘central attractor’ (Hazy & Uhl-Bien, 2013), ‘obligatory passage point’ (Callon, 1986), ‘a deep-lying playmaker’ (Andrea Pirlo). The supervisors were placed in the new position by making them run and participate in specific meetings with the other stakeholders, making them responsible for the coordination of the production. These new practices made certain that the critical information required in the organizing was flowing through the supervisors. The new practice
portfolio offered the supervisors the resources required to lead the system. Some of the supervisors adapted to the new role requirements and grasped the new resources eagerly. For them, the new job description was what they had wanted for a long time. These supervisors learned to become the new playmakers on the production line. Some felt discomfort about the increased responsibilities, and were unwilling to assume the new role. These individuals either were let go or they independently left the company.

The second element of being central is being close to other agents. Here our results link with the leadership distance discussion. Before the change, the supervisors were what Antonakis and Atwater (2002) called ‘hands-off leaders’: physically and socially close, but who maintain infrequent contact with their followers. The new position turned them into ‘proximal leaders’: physically and socially close, and frequently in contact. Yet, we argue that the defining relationship in the case was not so much between the supervisors and operators, but within the triad composed of supervisors, operators and the production line. In the past, the supervisors worked mostly indirectly with the production line and therefore were distant from the operators who worked directly with the production line. The changes moved the supervisors closer to the production line, where the operators had been all along. The crucial element is how the production line was the joining agent for the operators and the supervisors. This nonhuman agent connected the human agents. After the changes, the supervisors and operators had an immediate, shared area of responsibility in a needy actant who required their daily attention. The proximity to supervisor-operator relationship emerged through the physical facility and equipment. Contrary to popular understanding of leadership, the supervisors were not so much leading the operators but the production line. The human side of leadership relationship was subsidiary to leading the production.

Our third remark discusses the actual content of the supervisory leadership role. As described in our results section, our informants named and described the new, active, participating

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4 A somewhat similar point about the shared or differentiated contexts and their impact on leader-follower distance is raised by Collinson (2005: p.235-236) who describes a British offshore oil and gas company whose top executives had no clue of the actual safety culture on their oil rigs. In his example, the doubting executive had never visited an oil rig.
supervisory action as leadership. The supervisors were expected to be in charge, know the answers, and assume command (Grint, 2010) in problem situations. This may not sound very fashionable in a time when facilitation and coaching methods are in vogue. Rather than focus on social skills and human-operator relationship, the organization emphasized and valued technical competence from its supervisors. It is interesting to remember that the organization had a history of various lean management projects where operator self-management and empowerment had been emphasized. These projects, however, had not solved the operative problems plaguing the can line operations. The top management in the organization moved course from the lean ideology of self-organizing teams and reconfigured the supervisor as the everyday organizer, a model reminiscent of supervisory work profiles decades ago. It is also worth mentioning, that there was another, newer production line in the brewery, a reusable plastic bottling line, and on that production line self-organizing operator teams were working very satisfactorily even before the development project.

The change in the supervisory work has been described rather deterministically. We admit that our story of supervisory change depicts the supervisors as objects of change, who more or less accepted their fate and followed the rules set for them. The group of leaders and leadership we study does not resemble for example the leaders discussed in authentic leadership literature (e.g. George & Sims, 2007). Positional change has been depicted to drive individual change, again a view that may not be deemed very popular according to Dialogic Organization Development (Bushe&Marshak, 2009) community. Our story is one-dimensional in this sense. The individual supervisors had to do a lot of sensemaking, and soulsearching. There was resistance from the supervisors, operators, and the maintenance towards the intended changes. Our study has discussed low-level leaders, whose role is much more restrained than their higher-ups’ (Blankenship & Miles, 1968). Yet, we argue that for our research purposes the constrained leadership context has been helpful. The explicit goals and limited timeframes inherent to supervisory work helped us observe how the development interventions changed the leadership context and repositioned the supervisors in the production line CAS.

Our fourth remark is related to Complexity Leadership Theory and the relationship of administrative and adaptive leadership. Before the changes the can line CAS was in a state of
overly adaptive leadership. The can line had adapted to constantly rising production pressures by adopting practices that were seen as damaging for the organization, e.g. production speed moderation. Individuals had found ways of coping with the challenges largely by disengagement: supervisors avoided difficult contact with operators, operators ran the machinery at a reduced pace of work, and also, as an illustrating example, called the maintenance personnel and abandoned their working stations to have a break when machinery became inoperable. Supervisors’ superior, Bob, filled in during emergencies.

The implemented changes redefined especially the administrative leadership practices in the organization, with their focus on job descriptions, formal procedures, meetings etc. Still, an interesting observation is that the interventions did not simply lead to an increase or decrease in one type of leadership function within the CAS. The stereotypical understanding of a leadership development intervention might be that organizations want more adaptive leadership and less administrative leadership. Instead, the changes in this case study point to an increase in both administrative and adaptive leadership. These seemingly conflicting goals were presented in the corporate documentation in ways such as: “We need more discipline” and “Focus on the person”. The new formal practices did unify and reinforce administrative leadership. On the other hand, the routines also created new spatial and temporal opportunities for adaptive leadership. To further enable this adaptive role, it was seen as necessary to strengthen the supervisors’ technical competence.

Dividing leadership into the categories of administrative and adaptive helps us assess the overall functionality of a CAS. We can pinpoint actions that are routine and bureaucratic, actions that are flexible and agile, and ponder what are their desired proportions. Yet, we should be wary of the interrelationship and recursivity of the phenomenon behind the concepts. Some scholars see them as contrary rather than complementary or cumulative, as can be seen in research settings where vertical and shared leadership are targeted to different individuals and are dissected as different practices (Ensley et al. 2006). Previous CLT literature has discussed the relationship between these two aspects of organizations and leadership on a conceptual level (cf. Osborn & Hunt, 2007; Uhl-Bien & Marion, 2009). One central finding in this study is
that in the case organization the process strengthened both administrative and adaptive leadership, an aspect put to words earlier by Uhl-Bien & Marion (2009: p.633):

“Our approach moves beyond traditional literature in that it adopts complexity thinking to delve more deeply into the inner-workings of informal processes, and suggests that informal and formal dynamics within a bureaucracy are most effective when they are entangled as a unified dynamic (we do not isolate them as separable events as earlier researchers have done).”

Our study shows one example of how this can happen in practice. Administrative and the adaptive can be seen to close on the phenomenon from the ‘What’ and the ‘How’ interpretations of leadership action. CLT literature has emphasized the emergent and the dispersed as many other contemporary leadership theories. We return to the importance of prescribed and centralized and argue that these elements are not considered enough in the contemporary leadership literature.

References


