Doing Vision: Ideology and Reality in the “Engine Room”

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Introduction

This study examines the authoring of a new organizational vision by a group of leaders in a newly established department in a Danish municipality.

The new department was established as two former departments in the municipality was merged as part of an organizational restructure – a restructure which was caused by a new organizational strategy of wanting to become a more agile and competitive organization. The study follows the leaders responsible for this new department, as they, on behest of the department leader Michael, begin the process of integrating the vision behind the restructure into their work and collaboration.

Leaders(hip) and vision is often framed in a perspective, which emphasizes leaders’ ability to disseminate vision and create followership. But such a perspective has neglected to examine the intricate and subtle negotiations that take place in implementing a vision; especially with regards to the putative “engine room” that drives the vision, namely interaction among leaders themselves.

This study explores how a new organizational vision is negotiated and authorized within the upper rungs of the hierarchy, and how this leads to new understandings of the leaders’ role in the restructure.

The paper begins by first introducing existing research that has focused on leaders(hip) and vision, and then explores how this links to theories of authority and authoring. Second, the case study on which this paper is based is presented. Third, a presentation of the ethnographic
methods, analysis, and study findings will be made. Finally, the contributions of this study and its implications for future research will be discussed.

**Leadership and vision**

The concept of vision is most often described as representing some idealized goal(s) to be achieved in the future (Conger, 1999, Ruvio et al., 2010). Hence vision sets a path for organizational action, as it “articulates the values, purposes and identity” (Ruvio et al., 2010, p. 145) of the organization and its members. This notion of vision has become highly popular in management studies and is most often framed as being intimately linked to the class of leaders (Kohles et al., 2012). This has led some scholars to view vision as primarily stemming from the management’s articulation of the organization’s wants, needs and future aspirations; for instance do Hatch and Shultz (2001, p. 130) simply define vision as the “management’s aspirations for the company.”

This means that for some time now, leadership research has strongly suggested that having an organizational vision is integral to leaders’ work (Bennis and Nanus, 1985). And scholars promoting such leadership theories argue that leadership itself to a large degree hinges on the ability of a leader to disseminate the organization’s vision successfully to the followers (e.g., Conger, 1999, Berson et al., 2001, Conger and Kanungo, 1987). In this perspective, dissemination of vision is seen as what turns employees into followers (e.g., Awamleh and Gardner, 1999) and separates ordinary leaders from superior leaders (e.g., Bass, 1990, Strange and Mumford, 2005).
But though such leadership perspectives have been valuable in shedding light on the subject of what leaders do in order to influence followers, they are also steeped in a leader–employee dualism in which vision is either examined through looking at how successfully leaders ‘sell’ their vision to their followers (e.g., Awamleh and Gardner, 1999, Berson et al., 2001) or how the employees react to this vision (e.g., Griffin et al., 2010, Kohles et al., 2012). This has created a theoretical approach to leadership wherein the relationship between leaders and vision is most often viewed as a one-way communication process, an act of transmission. This means that most research on leaders and vision has neglected to examine the intricate and subtle negotiations that take place in vision dissemination.

One scholar who has sought to rectify this lack is Gail Fairhurst who in 1993 opened the door to a more nuanced understanding of vision, when she showed that it was about more than just one-sided adoption or dissemination. Fairhurst, by looking at micro-level exchanges among employees, described how a vision was adopted and integrated into organizational talk and thus “echoed” in an organization. Her findings showed that merely articulating a vision is not enough and that “attention must be paid to the internal campaign to manage the vision” (Fairhurst, 1993, p. 366). Hence the vision might be disseminated in a few instances by the leader to his/her employees, but it is in the everyday discourse that the vision is integrated and brought to life. Notably, Fairhurst’s article looked at micro-level exchanges among organizational members, but only did so at the middle and lower levels of the organization. As such, though it shed light on vision as it appears on the micro-level, Fairhurst’s study did not shed light on vision talk as it happen at among senior level leaders. Currently, this is still an understudied population in vision studies.
And with several scholars emphasizing the importance of leaders in bringing about changes through vision, examining how vision takes place at the micro-level among leaders, in what can be described as the proverbial “engine room” of the vision, seems like fertile ground for a deeper understanding of vision.

Following the path laid out by Fairhurst, but focusing on vision as it appears within the senior ranks of an organization, this study seeks to gain insight into the intricate and subtle (re)negotiations that take place in the everyday use of the vision in organizations. The study hence departs from the usual perspective on vision and leadership, which focuses on vision transmission and its effects, and instead looks at how vision appears at the micro-level among senior managers. Such a micro-level CCO inspired approach (Taylor and Van Every, 1999, Cooren et al., 2011) to organizational interaction means that organizational phenomena are to be explored through how they are brought off in communication. Relating this to vision, it means that vision is to be examined through its construction in organizational communication, as organizational reality is not given in hierarchies and structures, but is enacted in communication and through discourse (Ashcraft et al., 2009, Fairhurst and Putnam, 2004).

In this perspective visions can be seen as part of what Kuhn (Kuhn, 2008, Kuhn, 2012) calls “the authoritative text”. This refers to “an abstract representation of the entire organization and the connections between its activities, which portrays the relations of authority and criteria of appropriateness that becomes present in ongoing practice” (Kuhn, 2012, p. 553), that is, a sense of “who we are” (Kuhn, forthcoming). Thereby the authoritative text displays the “raison d’être” (Kuhn, 2008, p. 1236) of the organization, as it is a the reference point of organizational
meaning, constantly produced and reproduced in organizational communication.

And organizational members “vie to ‘author’ this text and speak in its name in ways that serve sectional interests” (Kuhn, 2012, p. 553). Such authoring means that organizational members, particularly managers (Taylor, 2014), “take on authority through their relationship with the organization” (p 25) through justifying “their actions as authentically translating the purposes of their organization” (p 27). In this sense vision appears and becomes constructed at the micro-level of organizational interaction, when an organizational member acts as an interpreter of the organization’s needs and wants through articulating the organizational vision. This means that leadership and vision can be explored at the micro-level through leaders’ attempts to “author” the organization through references to the vision, as they seek to authorize and make prevalent a certain interpretation of what the organizations idealized goals are to be.

However, by studying social interaction, an organizational vision is never strictly “authored,” but “co-authored” through the ways in which it is taken up, not taken up, partially adopted, resisted, transformed, etc. Vision, as any organizational phenomena, can therefore be seen as not just a fixed entity to be transmitted by a given organizational member, but as a social construct which is co-created in an ongoing “struggle” (Fleming and Spicer, 2008) to determine organizational reality. Hence it becomes vital for an exploration of vision to look at the discursive episodes in where the vision is “co-authored” by organizational members, as it is in the discursive co-construction of organizational reality a vision is given meaning.
To summarize, much research has been done on vision and leadership. It has been shown that vision and leaders(hip) are inter-connected and leaders have a high influence on vision dissemination. But there is still a dearth of knowledge in how vision takes place in the everyday interaction in the upper rungs of the hierarchy. This leads to the research question that drives the study:

RQ: How is a new organizational vision authored and adopted within the upper rungs of the hierarchy over time?

The Case

This study is part of a larger ethnographic study, which followed the meeting activities of a group of leaders in a Danish municipality during a period of organizational restructure. Specifically, the study focused on the merger of two departments into one new department and the newly formed leader group which was appointed to run this department. The merger of the two departments was instigated by an organizational restructure within a municipal administration called Main Administration (henceafter, MA). This restructure was put in motion to make the organization fit the overall municipal strategy, which had been created two years earlier. This strategy was based on the notion that the municipality needed to have a more externally focused perspective, where tasks and solutions had to be solved quicker to make the municipality able to provide better service to the citizens at lower cost. And this were to happen through a decentralization of responsibility and increased collaboration, both internally and externally in the municipality; and managers would have to be the spearhead of
the change and through this motivate the employees to work according to the new strategy.

In MA this overall municipal strategy was translated into a three values, which should bring about the change mentioned in the strategy, these were; 1) More agility. 2) More simplicity. 3) More value.

And in the effort to become more agile, simple and create more value, a new department was created. This department, which were to be called Organizational Advancement (hereafter, OA), was created through the merger of two existing departments, Information Technology (hereafter, “IT”) and Human Resources and Communication (hereafter, “HRC”). And in this merger a new leader team was created. Consisting of leaders from the former IT and HRM departments, the new leader group was constructed and lead by Michael, the former leader of the HRM department. Michael had been one of the architects behind the municipal strategy which lead to the restructure, especially on issues such as leadership and collaboration, and to some degree also acquired the position as leader of OA because he embodied this new strategy.

This study followed the weekly “leader group meetings”, where the leaders would gather and discuss issues of departmental relevance, often times centering on the organizational strategies and visions and the changes that followed in their wake.

It is within this scenario this study has been developed.

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1 None of these three values were ever overtly defined. For instance was it never specified what “value” exactly meant.
2 This was stated by Michael himself during an interview.
Methods

The data in this study stems from a 5 and a half month long ethnographic study of how leaders in new organizational positions establish authority.

The majority of the data was collected through observing and recording meetings. Firstly, meetings were deemed important sites of observation, as it was in meetings that updates on, and discussions about, the restructure and its progress often took place. Second, meetings were also evaluated as interesting sites of data generation because, as Angouri and Marra states, “a meeting is one of the most frequent and central work-related events in corporate environments” (Angouri and Marra, 2012, p 615), a statement which also held true for the leaders in OA, who’s working day typically consisted of attending several meeting.

The overall data generation set-up consisted of observing and recording 48 meeting (team, leader group, and department meetings)\(^3\); conducting and recording 14 in-depth interviews; and monitoring and selectively recording communication over the municipal intranet for the entire study period. This resulted in a total of 76 hours of audio recorded data, 23 hours of video recordings, 61 pages of field notes, and 70 pages of intranet website data. The meetings observed were selected to follow the leader group in OA (Department leader, Michael, and his team leaders, John, Thomas, Martin, Charlotte, Monika and Louise). Some 13 of 14 interviews were with members of the leader group; the remaining interview was with the leadership

\(^3\) Two other studies have also come from this data-set. Though both of these have touched upon the topic of struggle over meaning, none of them have focused specifically on “vision talk”. Furthermore, the data analysis, which is the basis of this study, was developed exclusively for this study.
consultant Christina, who was also involved in the restructure process. At all recordings, except three, the first author was present in the room.\footnote{The first author did not partake in the interaction at any of the meetings.}

A pragmatic iterative approach (Tracy, 2013) was used to analyze the data. An iterative approach “alternates between emic, or emergent, readings of the data and an etic use of existing models, explanations, and theories. Rather than grounding the meaning solely in emergent data, an iterative approach also encourages reflection upon the active interests, current literature, granted priorities, and various theories the researcher brings to the data” (Tracy, 2013, p. 184). The study’s method was thus tailored to live up to Suddaby’s (2006, p. 635) recommendation of seeking to “achieve a practical middle ground between a theory-laden view of the world and an unfettered empiricism”.

The data generation was done in the following manner. First, the data was subjected to an initial coding to produce an overview of the broad themes occurring in the data. Given that the restructure was based on an organization-wide new strategy, unsurprisingly a story of “new visions” appeared as a prevalent topic in the data. Such texts emphasized the perceived future of the organization and how this future were to be reached, thereby being in concert with Strange and Mumford’s (2002, p. 344) definition of vision as “a set of beliefs about how people should act, and interact, to attain some idealized future state”.

Based on this initial coding, a first-level data coding was performed to find the major vision themes in the data, which would then provide the basis for further, more detailed, coding. As the study took place over an extended period of time, it was decided that the first-level coding
of the data should be isolated to only include organizational texts produced and disseminated to employees from the management at the beginning of the study period. This was done to get a sense of the initial information delivered by management to employees about how and why they should achieve some ideal future goal.

As the overall data generation apparatus was set up to focus on the restructure itself, the study period did not include much observation data from before the merger took place. But it was possible to obtain intranet data dating back to the early beginnings of the change process. The intranet had worked as one of the main sources of information in the municipality and had been one of the key ways through which information about the new strategy was disseminated. Therefore it was decided that intranet data up until the official merger of the two departments were to be coded for themes relating to vision. Furthermore, to expand the understanding of the early incarnations of the vision, it was decided that the first department meeting in OA was also to be part of the first-level coding. That meeting was held on the day of the merger of IT and HRC and was a one hour long meeting, in which Michael presented what was going to take place in OA in the future to the employees of OA.

Through the first-level coding the theme of “transverseness” appeared as the most prevalent vision theme in the data. “Transverseness” (Danish: tværgående) indicated texts which centered on a wish for more collaboration and knowledge sharing across teams, departments and administrations, more collaboration across skill-sets and professional expertises, and that such collaboration should be centered around projects, not skill-sets.

From this notion of transverseness a second-level coding was initiated, in where all leader group meetings (16 in all) were coded for episodes involving the topic of transverseness. Based on the
first-level coding, 3 linguistic markers formed the criteria for what was deemed transverseness talk. These were: 1) Talk about collaboration across professional teams and skill-sets. 2) Talk about leaders and employees having to span more areas than just their individual teams and expertises. 3) Talk about work being project-centric.

As tranverseness could refer to both external and internal collaboration, it was found beneficial to focus exclusively on internal collaborations. This was done because external collaborations most often revolved around creating better communication channels and more efficient meeting scheduling, whereas internal collaborations to a larger extent involved a whole new way of working and viewing one’s position in the department. Furthermore, and for the same reasons, only transverseness talk relating to the leader group was selected for further analysis.

This coding resulted in a total of 157 episodes involving transverseness talk during leader group meetings. These episodes were structured by their content and fell into 8 broader categories: 1) “Becoming one unit”, which dealt with the leader group needing to deliver aligned messages to employees and know what each other were doing. 2) “Becoming a team”, which was about the leader group needing to come together to become a collective of leaders rather than a group of individuals. 3) “Knowing each other”, which evolved around the leaders having to get to know each other better to work together and become a team. 4) “Needing each other”, which was centered on the notion that leaders needed each other to be able to fulfill their future role. 5) “Shared background and language”, which concerned a need to share a certain portion of knowledge in order to be better able to talk to each other and work together. 6) “Doing something”, a demand for things to happen; a sense of “less talk, more action.” 7)
“Frustration”, which refers to a general dissatisfaction with how things were going, often centered on things being too complex and nothing happening. 8) “Leaders are the key”, a category which involved talk in where leaders were described as essential for the new strategy to succeed.

These 8 categories were then arranged according to their temporal distribution in the data. This allowed for an understanding of how the categories, which represented micro-level discursive episodes, appeared across the entire period (see Appendix 1). From this it surfaced that the categories created clusters in certain time periods. Especially did the topic seem to cluster around two periods, mid to late April (approximately 4 weeks into the study period) and mid to late June (the end of the study period). Acknowledging this temporal difference in the distribution of topics, but not directly being able to explain the reasons for such distribution from the codes themselves, a detailed “micro-level” analysis of the data was performed. By assembling the main arguments about transverseness made in each episode and simultaneously keeping an eye out for any temporal variations, it was possible to see that the periods were not just differentiated by the distribution of categories, but also by a change in the way the topics were discussed and what they referenced to. As such the data divided itself roughly into three periods, each with its own understanding of what transverseness meant to the leader group.

It is the evolution of these three periods, which is shown in the following.

**Results**
RQ1

As mentioned above, by looking at speech as it appears in the episodes involving visionary talk, it was possible to get an insight into the evolution of the vision of transverseness. And what appeared was a story of how the meaning of transverseness was neither stable nor fixed, as it changed and mutated during the study period.

From the data it was possible to define three distinct periods, which each gave rise to a particular interpretation of what transverseness meant in relation to the leader group.

These three periods were.

1) “Starting collaboration”, which lasted 5 weeks and spanned 4 meetings
2) “Becoming tight-knit”, which lasted 7 weeks and spanned 7 meetings
3) “(not) getting things done”, which lasted 3 weeks and spanned 5 meetings

The following section will display how the vision, once seemingly quite clear, changed and became contested as it was integrated in everyday leader talk.

Period 1: Starting collaboration

The first period lasted from the very start of the study and 5 weeks forward. This period is heavily influenced by the conception that the leader group had to get started on their tasks – and to do that they needed to come together. This found its expression in talk about the need to be able to deliver coherent and shared messages to the outside world (employees and other departments/administrations), an emphasis on getting started and get projects and tasks
underway, and a sense of having to get to know each other better because they needed each other in order to complete the tasks that lay ahead.

These three topics were all emphasized by Michael from the very start, as he argued that to complete the tasks the leader group faced it was imperative that the leaders had shared responsibility. Some leaders would be in charge of certain areas, but it was crucial that everyone was willing to contribute and share some responsibility.

Consider the example below:

**Example 1:**

1 Michael: Of course when Thomas has to talk about a collaboration with [another department], then it’s clear that it is really difficult to make a plan (by himself).

2 Thomas: And it is also really difficult to make a plan about the collaboration with administrations without talking to them. But how are we planning on finding out how we get that talk started, so we are conscious about our strategy or plan about that work, so we have a track to follow, so we actually can push some things through.

3 Michael: Yes. An input to that could be that each of us try to put ourselves in the place of that person that has to take care of a given interface, and then say “what does that person need to know?”

4 Thomas: Yes

5 Michael: And then we actually tell them that. Well, I need to know a lot about which interfaces exist today between [other department] and Organizational
Monika: yes, some mapping on that

Thomas: ... on the areas I do not know that much about. But I hardly know what to ask about, because I don’t know what I’m missing

[...]

Michael: ... It’s not just because you (plural) have to lift this task by yourselves. The idea is that you have the driving responsibility on this, but it is clear that for a lot of these things, it’s sort of a mapping task. If that is what you need Thomas, then it isn't necessarily you who have to start digging through it to (get a) map on this, then we have to find out who can help you do that, right?

As the excerpt above offers an insight into, in the first period Michael maps out how the leaders are expected to work in the new department. And the leaders, in this case Thomas, chime in on this understanding. Hence it seems that Michael is the able to “author” the new vision, as he is setting the tone for what the leader team needs to do differently now that they have to work in a new leader group in a new department. But his influence on the meaning of transverseness, as will be shown below, was about to be take a turn in a different direction.

Phase 2 – Becoming “tight-knit”:
The second period coincided with the introduction of a new framework for the leader group meetings.

4-5 weeks into the study period, Michael decided that every second of the weekly leader group meetings should either be fully or partially run by the leadership consultant Christina and should be dedicated to the development of the leader group. The reason for this was, as described in the first period, that Michael believed that making the leader group come together was essential for the success of the restructure.

Consider the example below where Michael informs the team leaders about why he had invited Christina to help them.

Example 2:

1 Michael: It is super important for me, as I have also mentioned, it has from the start been
2 a eehm that we create some eem both high quality, but also some
3 development eehm in the leader group in relation to that I actually see you, and
4 us, as the completely decisive and important factors in relation to us succeeding
5 with this project. And there are then many things that’s.. leadership-wise, it is
6 especially on the leadership part that we are doing something different than we
7 have done earlier. And therefore it is also super important that we will be able
8 to function really well as a team. And therefore I am also thinking that it is really
9 really important that we prioritize working on ourselves also. So important that
10 I think that we, I would like to prioritize that we, for the moment, use every
11 second leader group meeting on this development work
In Michael’s view, the restructure hinged on the leader group and it was imperative that they started working in a new (more transverse) way. To do this, they needed to function as a team and the involvement of Christina, as will be shown below, would only increase this emphasis. Michael and the leadership consultant Christina knew each other well and had collaborated together earlier in their career⁵, and seemed to be influenced by the same approach to leadership; an approach wherein distribution of responsibility was key and where an important aspect of leadership was to be in a coaching role rather than being at the forefront of the action. Michael trusted Christina’s abilities as a leadership consultant so much that he decided that he would in effect abolish his organizational rank in the sessions run by Christina, and enter the leader group on the same level as the team leaders, letting Christina be completely in charge.

Christina’s goal was that the leader group should become a ‘high performance team’. This required that they had to get to know each other better, and the way to achieve this was through getting to know themselves. Therefore Christina’s plan was that the leaders should focus on the question “who am I?” and emphasize listening to each other over seeking quick solutions.

Example 3:

1 Christina: So therefore my approach to this is that instead of you learning a lot of things out there, then you have to learn a lot about yourselves, you have to learn a lot

⁵ This was stated by both during interviews
3 about each other and through that we will go in and create that high
4 performance team.

For the following 7 weeks it was primarily at the leader group meetings run by Christina where talk about transverseness would take place. And, not surprisingly, at these meetings there were a great focus on being a team, getting to know each other, acting on behalf of the team, and creating synergies. This meant taking shared responsibility and letting the team be the governing entity, as the expressed ultimate goal of Christina was to have the leaders go from being “just” a group of leaders to be a tight-knit entity. She wanted them to become a “high performance team” in where people would not act on behalf of themselves but on behalf of the group – to the point where the separation between individual achievement and group achievement disappeared.

Hence a subtle shift in what transverseness means appeared in the second period, as the focus shifted from wanting to know what the other leaders were doing, i.e., what knowledge others possessed that could be useful in one’s own work, to getting to know the other leaders because one had to enter into a tight-knit team together with them. It went from being focused on performing tasks to creating a team. This shift was seemingly brought off by Christina taking the reins of the leader team development and becoming a dominant “author” of what such a vision meant. Again resistance was sparse in this period and the team leaders seemed to willingly follow the goals laid by Christina. Voices of slight frustration was raised from some team leaders, but this did not involve resistance against the vision of becoming a tight-knit team, but
involved a sense of annoyance that the leaders did not have enough knowledge about each other yet – and this hindered them in being a team and completing their tasks.

But the sense of frustration continued and changed shape, as will be shown in period 3.

**Period 3 – (Not) Getting things done**

In the third period a sense of impatience and frustration appeared. There was a sense of going nowhere fast and that all the talk they did at the leader group meetings did not translate sufficiently into action. It was the team leaders who raised these concerns, as they argued that the leader team needed to become more concrete and they needed to stop talking so much and start doing more. Things had become too complex and the leader group had closed around themselves, which was hindering them in turning ideas into action.

It was suggested by the team leaders, at several points, that the reason why they were going nowhere was because Michael, as the highest ranking leader, had to be clearer and make more autonomous decisions. It was more important to get things started and then adjust along the way than to discuss every little detail and get everyone on board. But at the same time, a feeling of not knowing each other well enough still existed. The topic that they needed to get closer to each other to be able to act transversely, was still an issue of concern.

Hence there seemed, in the third period, to be an oscillation between wanting to get things done, even if this meant abandoning the ideal of having the group make the decisions, and having a tight-knit group which would make highly informed decisions based on the collective knowledge of the group.
Consider the following example:

**Example 4:**

1 Martin: I think that there are times where we just have to say that it might be that we
2 won’t arrive at the right decision, but right now it is actually important that we
3 make a decision..
4 Louise: Mmm
5 Martin: … (more) than it is 100 percent correct, right? And such things
6 Louise: Yes
7 Martin: And then just eehm help each other realize that when we have to adjust it on
8 the next meeting or two, three meetings later or something like that, then it’s
9 not because we are terrible (at it).. when we made the decision, but that was
10 what we did at that time, right?
11 Louise: Yes
12 Martin: And therefore I can follow… it might be that you sometimes have to be in
13 charge of the necessary decision Michael...
14 Michael: Yes
15 Martin: … which might not be the completely correct one.
16 Michael: Yes. Louise has given me the same feedback, so a pattern is forming
17 Martin: Yes. But. Yes. But I can also understand why, and it is also a position where one
18 perhaps have to be the one who is the one that recommends it, as far as we
19 have been able to go for now
20 Michael: Mmmm
21 Martin: Or just say “that is what we do. We are not hovering around such things
22 anymore, this is what we do”
23 Charlotte: Mmm, some decision will be made
24 Martin: Yes, and it is (short pause) and then one can say that it is sorta you that must..
25 so the rest of us can.. Of course the rest of us could lean back and say “that’s
26 what Michael said. I said something else, but that’s what Michael said. So he’s
27 on his own now” and such things. That’s of no use, because when you say that
28 that’s the way it is, then it is just as much because we haven’t been able to talk
29 our way through to a 100% (correct) solution.

In the example above we see how Martin first argues that Michael should sometimes just take
charge and make a decision, even though all in the leader group does not necessarily agree on
this. But at the same time, he acknowledges that when Michael has to make autonomous
decisions it is because the leader group has failed at reaching an agreement together, i.e. has
failed to act as a team.

In general the third period was influenced by a sense of wanting things to be less complicated,
but also a sense that they needed to get closer to each other. It was argued that the leader
group had spent too much time on themselves and too little looking outside the leader group
and this had resulted in too few decisions being made, and the ones that was made, had taken
too much time reaching. But at the same time, they still needed to get to know each other
better and they still needed to keep developing as a team – which would require even more
talk and spending more time looking at themselves.

Interestingly, no solution to this problem appeared in the study period.

What is seen in third period is the notion of transverseness as a focal area being contested by the team leaders. As shown by Holm and Fairhurst (forthcoming), resistance and authoring are two sides of the same coin. In the act of resistance lies the act of authoring an alternative interpretation of what the organization is about. Hence the team leaders are seeking to re-author the authoritative text and reestablish a sense of “we-ness”, which corresponds to their interpretation of what OA is and should be; in this case, that transverseness is not necessarily the main focal point of the leaders’ work.

To sum up, through looking at the entire study period a pattern arises, where it is possible to see subtle shifts in the meaning of what it means to be transverse. To begin with, the notion of transverseness is tightly connected to the idea of something practical, to the idea of doing tasks and exchanging knowledge to colleagues. But over time and as a consultant is invited in, this changes towards a more introvert focus on the leader group itself, where importance is put on achieving synergies and high performance through being a tight-knit unit. Finally, overt frustration about having become to introvert appears and a wish for “less talk, more action” arises.
We thereby see a story of a leader group much focused on creating solutions and doing practical tasks\(^6\), who over time loses this orientation to focus more on how to become a team.

**Discussion**

Through an ethnographic investigation, this study tracked the changing meanings of an organizational vision in a leader group. The case study produced 157 episodes involving talk about the vision of transverseness, from which it was possible to show how authorship of the vision shifted over time, as it was accepted, invited, relinquished and resisted in the leader group meetings. Hence the study shows an example of multiple interpretations of the vision of the organization authored by multiple, sometimes contesting, co-authors.

Specifically, the research question of this study sought to understand how a new organizational vision was authored and adopted within the upper rungs of the hierarchy over time. An iterative analysis showed three different periods in which the vision was distinctly (re)authored and given meaning. These were: 1) “starting collaboration”, 2) “becoming tight-knit”, and 3) “(not) getting things done”.

Taken collectively, these periods show how *managerial vision is not stable, but is subject to change as multiple authors seek to speak on behalf of the organization*. Whether it was Michael who sought to implement his ideas of what the new department should be like, Christina who was invited to further help Michael’s ideas take form, or the team leaders who supported or

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\(^6\) This is acknowledged by both the leaders themselves during interviews as well as from statements made by Christina.
resisted such ideas, the meaning of what it entailed to be a member of OA shifted and mutated, as it was constantly (co)authored in organizational interaction. This study thus shows how the authoritative text of the department was continuously authored, thus giving a micro-level insight into how the understanding of how the notion of “we-ness” change over time.

Much research has argued that leaders are key actors in disseminating a vision and the implementation of a vision is directly linked to leaders. As such, one could argue that vision talk as it takes place among leaders themselves, the putative apostles of the organizational vision, would constitute the proverbial engine of the vision, as it is through the leaders that the vision must be spread. But so far research dealing with vision as it takes place within leader circles has been sparse. This study seeks to rectify this and follows a group of leaders as they negotiate their role in an organizational change process. Through this focus it is possible to demonstrate that the relationship between leaders and vision is more complex than often described in traditional vision research. The vision is not some stable and fixed text that lies ready for the leaders to disseminate to followers, but is negotiable and constantly changing as different stakeholders seek to author its meaning.

This makes the contribution of this paper twofold.

First, it sheds light upon micro-level leader talk, an under-studied focal area in leader vision studies. Second, considering that leaders have traditionally been perceived as the engine of vision dissemination, the study shows how a leader group (the proverbial “engine room” of the vision) seems hard-pressed to spread the vision as they can barely come to agreement upon what the vision means to them. The study therefore opens up for a more nuanced
understanding of the relationship between leaders and vision, as it shows that vision dissemination is not just a straightforward case of spreading knowledge to employees, but also requires extensive meaning making among leaders themselves.

The contributions of this study and its limitations are tightly connected. In the case, the leader group acted according to a leadership ideology which can most accurately be described as “distributed leadership” (Parry and Bryman, 2006). This allowed for open discussions and negotiations in the leader group meetings, which highly benefitted the study. But it also raises the question of whether such overt negotiation of meaning would also have taken place in a scenario with a more autocratic leader at the helm. Hence there might be concerns that the findings of this paper are a result of a particular leadership style as much as it is a result of leading in general.

References

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