This study returns to the old question of “where” leaders work (Grint, 2005), that is to the positional aspects of leadership. We develop novel understanding of how leadership position can be linked with leadership change and development in an organization. Despite being considered a most traditional way of configuring leadership, positional aspects are quite seldom discussed in modern leadership research and are more or less replaced by processual and behavioral understandings of leadership.

Grint (2005) is one of the few leadership scholars to lately discuss leader position. He differentiated between ‘Leadership-in-Charge’ and ‘Leadership-in-Front’ referring to either vertical or horizontal positioning in an organization. Leadership-in-Charge refers to a hierarchical position of being on ‘top’ or ‘above’ somebody. According to Grint, such a position hints at coercive power, and the ability to drive changes, to enact the leader’s will. He continues that Leadership-in-Front refers to a position in a heterarchy or a network, and leadership is enacted through capability, skill, knowledge and the ability to act as a role model, guide, or as being ‘ahead’ of the followers. In his examples Grint links Leadership-in-Charge with higher level leaders, like CEOs, judges, and generals, and Leadership-in-Front with corporals, fashionistas, and guides.

In this paper we suggest a supplement to Grint’s discussion of positionality, a third spatial configuration of leadership as ‘Leadership central to a system’ in contrast to an peripheral position in an organizational network. We develop the spatial dimension of leadership, and seek new answers to ‘where leadership is effective’ through a case study of supervisory leadership change in an industrial organization. We track this case of leadership development process with the help of Complexity Leadership Theory (CLT) (Uhl-Bien et al., 2007; Uhl-Bien & Marion, 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). Leadership is a force affecting the behavior of various network agents. The agents include individuals, groups, and non-human parties, both tangible and intangible, who are connected in various ways.

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. The supervisors had over time migrated to an peripheral position in the facility, their role had reduced to conducting supportive and administrative tasks. The organization came to see this development as dissatisfactory and associated several problems in operative process management with this 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 put to us by an interviewee “turned into the leaders they were expected to be in the organization.”

We operationalize the leadership change as a change in the supervisors’ position in the Complex Adaptive System, a network operating over and around the production process in the brewery. We use the CLT concepts of administrative and adaptive leadership to show how the supervisory work and their leadership role and behavior changed. We discuss how for the changes to become efficient, contextual changes had to take place. The ‘leadership environment’ of the supervisors became redefined, this causing, facilitating, guiding and actualizing a change in the supervisory behavior. To be able to succeed in the new environment, the supervisors were required to assume new skills, tools, and routines. Yet, we argue that the leadership change can be explicitly linked to the repositioning of the leaders in relation to the production process.

Through our case study we develop new theoretical understanding of positionality of leadership. We also contribute to the ‘leadership distance’ discussion (Antonakis & Atwater, 2003; Collinson, 2005). We discuss positionality as a two-dimensional construct, consisting of direction (e.g. vertical, horizontal, central) and distance (e.g. proximal/far, frequent/seldom). 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 novel argument here is that the leadership distance literature has so far conceptualized distance only between humans as a function of the relationship of superiors and subordinates. We argue that to understand leadership success and effectiveness, we should also consider the distance between leader and key non-human nodes of the leadership network, in our case those being the production process of the industrial facility and the tools and equipment used to run this particular process. To become ‘true leaders’ for the production workers, the supervisors had return from the office to the production line.

References


