EMBODIED LEADERSHIP IN A VIRTUAL AGE –

WHAT CAN WE LEARN FROM THEATRES?

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1. Introduction

Both work and leadership are increasingly developing into digital and virtual space. We live in a digital time where people both in their work and privately spend more and more time in front of a screen. People communicate and relate to each other increasingly in virtual space because it is more efficient, easy and because everybody else does it. Leadership is more and more going on without people touching, sensing, feeling and seeing each other face-to-face. These organizational changes are not adequately covered in the leadership literature, but leading leadership researchers are aware that the practice field is far ahead of research. Al-Ani, Horspool and Bligh (2011) are stating that “there are significant gaps in developing new conceptual understanding of leadership of virtual or distributed groups or teams.” (p. 225).

Modern telecommunication and technology have created a new organizational reality with virtual work and virtual leadership being the rule rather than the exception, both within and across organizations and countries (Avolio, Sosik, Kahai and Baker, 2013; DasGupta, 2011). The fast developing and improving technology is a driving force, as well as environmental and productivity arguments, but it seems like everybody is heading in the same direction without questioning if this development is constructive and useful for all kinds of organizations and leadership relations.

While the theme has been poorly covered within the leadership literature, several researchers within information systems management, small groups and project management are treating virtual and distributed team leadership as a phenomenon in its own right (Keyworth and Leidner, 2002; Zigurs, 2003; Gurtner et al., 2007). Leaders are experiencing new kinds of leadership challenges, but existing leadership challenges are also altered when leading people virtually. Several interviews conducted with managers on different levels (Vaagaasar, De Paoli and Müller, 2015) confirm the general findings, so it is quite apparent that virtual space is introducing new challenges to leadership such as miscommunication because informal and bodily cues diminish, lack of trust and motivation when people have not met before, hidden disagreements growing into conflicts because people are less direct and confronting virtually, cultural misunderstandings because stereotyping increases when you don’t know people well and many other challenges reported (see De Paoli, 2015).

With an increasing use of digital media at work, general communication and collaboration challenges increases too. Challenges of increased digitalization, such as e-mail overload, work-life balance, lack of concentration, detachment is also increasingly reported, both in practice and research (Derks and Bakker, 2013).
There is an overall tendency in all the research on digitalization and virtual organizational life and that is to overlook the physical and bodily aspects of virtual communication and leadership (De Paoli, Ropo and Sauer, 2014). There is an attraction and fascination with technology and cyberspace that is striking, at the same time while the embodied and sensuous aspect of meeting face-to-face is completely overlooked.

Paradoxically, while most organizations and businesses have become truly digital praising the new communication technology, there is a part of organizational life that has remained highly physical and material; production processes in theatres creating new live stage performances. Digitalization and technology use have not had the same impact here as in other knowledge based work. Theatre production and leadership is highly physical and emotional (Sauer, 2005) as the staged performance is dependent on the creative interactions of people. Theatres are really a special context when talking about leadership as work modes, processes and habits are developed and ingrained throughout many years, also the creative direction of theatre plays. One of the absolute premises is physical presence for everybody when working with a play. The body is present and important in the interplay between the director and actors, so one can truly talk about an embodied and physical leadership. Theatre performances are in their nature physical and material, both due to long theatre traditions and because the end-result is a staged live-performance by people. The production process is also both material and physical as the first meeting between the theatre directors and actors marks the beginning of the process. At the same time, it is a context downplaying virtual communication, both during and in-between rehearsals. Interestingly, theatre directors and the theatre culture in itself have developed many rules and habits prohibiting or limiting technology when rehearsing; no mobile phones, no computers or any other electronic devices interrupting and ruining the art production process and limited or no use of e-mail. The theatre is indeed the opposite of most knowledge based work in organizations when it comes to digitalization. Because theatres have many resemblances with knowledge work, we think it is an interesting context to inquire into these issues;

*What characterize work processes in theatre production from an embodied and physical perspective?*

*Why is physical presence so important in theatres and on the other hand; why is digital and virtual communication downplayed?*

*What can be learned regarding embodied and physical work and leadership processes in theatres relevant for other kind of work and organizations?*
**What kind of implications are there for work and leadership in comparable organizations?**

This paper addresses the importance of physicality of work and leadership in a virtual age. We are questioning what happens to embodied leadership when leadership relations in knowledge based businesses today increasingly are going on virtually. Although there has been a considerable amount of research about what is interchangeably called virtual leadership, e-leadership, distributed leadership and team leadership, the majority of this research is overlooking the importance of physicality of leadership. There has been an extensive stream of research especially about challenges in virtual team leadership and virtual leadership in general, describing and analyzing the main challenges leading in the virtual space. The field of study is in an early stage, with lack of common understanding of the phenomenon and many loose ends. There is a need for more reflections, more research and more theorizing about the technological revolution leadership and leadership processes are going through. Although there has been substantial research about the effect of new technology in organizations, its impact on leadership and organizational issue is rather scarce. It seems that leadership researchers acknowledge that new technology highly affect how leaders lead and also how teams interact virtually, but also that there are other aspects of organizational life undergoing changes; “We set out here to examine how leaders lead virtually, as well as how teams interact virtually, but this is in our view only a very small piece of the transformation that is occurring in organizations as a consequence of introducing advanced information technology.” (Avolio et. al., 2013:2)

Virtual groups, projects and teams communicate and work synchronously or asynchronously through such technologies as telephones, electronic mail, bulletin boards, audio/video/data conferencing, automated work flow, electronic voting and collaborative writing (Coleman, 1997:59). The last years have offered even a vaster range of internet based software for virtual work and social media such as FaceBook and LinkedIn. While technology defines the virtual work unit, geographical and organizational distance seems to be central to define virtual leadership; “Virtual leadership is often defined as leading a geographically or organizationally dispersed group of people. Some even introduce the notion of global leadership for global, virtual teams characterized by national, cultural and linguistic heterogeneity.” (Zander, L. Mockaitis, A.I. & C.L. Butler, 2012)

Some teams are only partly virtual, because they include members who work remotely only part-time. This condition occurs with telework (Vartiainen et. al. 2007). In telework, employees work part-time in the office and part-time away from coworkers. Teleworkers may work at home, at telework centers or satellite offices, at customer work sites, or in hotels and airports while traveling. Telework is a form of virtual work because employees are separated
from one another and may meet in person only infrequently. Moreover, information and communication technologies must be used to exert leadership, share work, and manage team processes.

Our curiosity into the embodied and technology free theatre world developed living in one of the most digitalized parts of the world, the Nordic countries, where everyone from the infant age owns a laptop and a smartphone, and where most transactions, either economic or social, are through the internet. We feel we live in a social experiment, experiencing what technology is doing to our relations and social interactions in organizations. The embodied and physical aspect of leadership is prevalent in the business world too, although technology has invaded it, and the embodied aspect is downplayed. Researching the theatre field, knowledge- and team based to achieve creativity, may shed light on an overseen aspect in today's organization. Researching the theatre world may help us to understand better what we gain and what we lose when influencing people.

The current leadership discourse has shifted into a deeper interest for leadership as practice (Carroll et al. 2008; Raelin 2011) and followingly also more in-depth qualitative research approaches such as the grounded theory approach (Kempster and Perry, 2011). We follow up on these new approaches to leadership with an empirical in-depth study of leadership as practice in an event producing knowledge based environment; namely the theatre world.

Given the recent emphasis on the materiality of leadership (e.g. Special Issue of Leadership 2013) and the embodiment perspective on leadership getting stronger footage in leadership research (e.g. Hansen, Ropo & Sauer, 2007; Küpers, 2011; Ladkin, 2008; Ladkin & Taylor, 2010; Melina, Burgess, Falkman & Marturano, 2013, Ropo, Sauer & Salovaara, 2013; Sinclair, 2005), physicality needs to be included also in the research of virtual leadership. We look at the theatre field devoid of technology to inquire into how physicality of leadership may matter to leadership in virtual space. Theatre directors purposely choose to lead creative processes in material spaces devoid of technology, we question why? While most managers in organizations are running fast to keep up with the technological race, theater directors do the opposite.

**The aesthetic, embodied and physical aspect of leadership**

Leadership literature in general seems not particular interested in emotions (Wennes, 2006), aesthetics (Koivunen, 2003) or body (Ropo et al, 200X). This study will address some of these dimensions of leadership in hope to achieve a greater and deeper understanding of leadership of knowledge work (production) in theatres and to discuss its relevance for
leadership in organizational contexts. We argue that to understand leadership in virtual space, we need to understand the embodied and physical production processes in theatres. We also believe that this will provide a better understanding of leadership in general.

As already mentioned, the physical aspect of leadership is an emerging and growing part of leadership research (e.g. Special Issue of *Leadership 2013*) and many articles have been published about different aspects of embodiment (e.g. Küpers, 2011; Koivunen and Wennes, 2011; Ladkin, 2008; Ladkin & Taylor, 2010; Sinclair, 2005; Ropo, Parviainen and Koivunen, 2002; Ropo, Sauer & Salovaara, 2013). Ladkin and Taylor (2015) have also addressed the topic in a book on the physicality of leadership.

These perspectives fall into the larger field of research of organizational aesthetics, emerging in the mid-1980s, largely as a protest against the rational paradigm that dominated organization studies at that time (Koivunen and Wennes, 2011).¹ Researchers of this field, such as Strati (1989, 1999), Gagliardi (1990, 1996), Ramirez (1991, 1996), Guillet de Monthoux (1993, 2004) and Linstead and Höpfl (2000) emphasized that aesthetic factors, such as emotions, intuition, symbols and sense perception have as equally important role in organizational behaviour as cognitive activities.

Guillet de Monthoux et al (2007) define aesthetic leadership as consisting of flows between three fields of organizing: management, administration field and the aesthetic field. If management is suited to economists and administration to lawyers, the aesthetic field is “the ground for play and improvisation among collaborate artists” (ibid., 267). Aesthetic leaders must map and maintain the three distinct fields and ensure the free flow between these flows. The triadic action provides an answer to the dilemma of dualisms that often plague the everyday in arts organizations. The studies in the book by Guillet de Monthoux et al concern aesthetic leadership in different empirical settings – in both artistic and other type of organizations. Soila-Wadman (2007) and Köping (2007) point out that leadership is relational, created in relations between people, artefacts and other objects.

Ladkin (2008) explores what leading beautifully might entail by analyzing a concert experience from Royal Albert Hall. In addition to defining beautiful leadership to consist of mastery, congruence and purpose, she calls a lot of attention to leadership as a bodily or embodied practice. The missing body in leadership has also been noted by Ropo and

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¹To see a thorough review of organizational aesthetics, see Taylor and Hansen (2005) and an analysis of aesthetics as a methodology, see Strati (2000:13-14) and Warren (2008).
Parviainen (2001), Sinclair (2005) and Strati (1999). Ladkin describes how the leadership performance of the conductor was “inclusive, accepting and creating of a safe environment” (2008:33). Moreover, the conductor was very present to the moment at hand. Here Ladkin (2008) draws attention to a very important point: most leadership literature emphasizes the leader’s ability to envision to future – to the extent that they almost fail be to present. Bodily presence inherent in classical music and modern dance has also been addressed by Koivunen (2002, 2003) and Parviainen (1998, 2002).

To sum up this literature review, there are three main concepts that are studied: Köping (2007), Soila-Wadman (2007) as well as Guillet de Monthoux et al (2007) all describe how aesthetic leadership is a relational activity between participants, artefacts and objects. An ability to make aesthetic judgments was named critical for aesthetic leadership by Lindahl (2007), Guve (2007) and Soila-Wadman (2007). Embodiment is discussed by Ladkin (2008), Ropo and Parviainen (2001), Sinclair (2005) and Strati (1999). But in spite of these contributions, the main conception of leadership is still mainly bodiless, senseless and emotionless. We will build on the growing field of physical aspects of leadership and develop the thoughts further.

**Work and leadership in the virtual age – where are the bodies, senses, emotions and relations?**

Research about virtual leadership in the field of information systems management is mainly practice oriented raising the challenges of collaboration and leadership (e.g. Kayworth and Leidner 2001; Zhang and Fjermestad 2006; Wakefield, Leidner and Garrison, 2008; Pauleen, 2004; Zigurs, 2002). Studies are mainly addressing virtual leadership problems, such as poor communication, lack of trust and good relations, motivation, and conflict, difficulties in following-up performance, misinterpretations, and difficulties generating ideas virtually (Aubert and Kelsey, 2003; Bell and Kozlowski 2002; Carte, Chidarambaram and Becker 2006; Malhotra, Majchrzak and Benson 2007; Pauleen 2004; Townsend, De Marie and Hendrickson 1998). While these studies address the challenges of virtual work due to the technology, the same technology is offered as a solution to better relations and leadership, such as using communication media with higher information richness and more telepresence (Zigurs 2002). This is the only time researchers of virtual teams and leadership mention bodies and physicality. For instance, they report that while traditional teams make their physical presence known in a variety of ways, like body language, voice, style of dress and so on, these informal cues are lost in virtual environments (Malhotra, Majchrzak and Rosen, 2007; Zhang and Fjermestad, 2006). They argue further that a technological new kind of physical presence has to be established, namely a distant presence, or telepresence (Zigurs,
2002). This word is often used in the context of virtual reality to mean the experience or sense of being present in a place different from one’s physical location, i.e. the sense of ‘being there’. Generally speaking, the more vivid and interactive a medium is, the greater the likelihood that team members will experience telepresence according to Zigurs (2002). According to this referred literature and research on virtual teams, it is posited that leaders need to learn how to use the vividness and interactivity of media to make their presence felt in a positive way. Following this line of reasoning, the natural tendency is to look for a technological equivalent of face-to-face techniques for making one’s presence felt. There are even systems projecting a body-sized image of a person in real time. Media richness focuses on the characteristics of rapid feedback, language variety, personalization and multiple cues. The greater the ability of a medium to provide for those characteristics, the richer the medium is. Technology is seen as the solution to countless challenges in virtual work. Many good technological communication solutions have been developed throughout the years, while at the same time managers report across industries that simple and accessible software such as Skype is the most frequently used. The advanced solutions are both costly and need planning, such as booking of the videoconference room etc.

Beyond suggesting a better use of technological advices to deal with the identified problems in virtual work, another proposed solution has been to reinstate the responsible, strong leader, following up relations and controlling actions and tasks (Wakefield et al. 2008; Pauleen 2004). There seems to be a firm belief that virtual leadership challenges can be fixed either by better communication technology or a strong leader following up members tightly.

Although most research on virtual leadership is devoid of bodies, senses, emotions and relations, one of the few books on virtual leadership goes in depth in describing how some senses like listening and hearing become more important than others (Caulat, 2012) and the importance of the ability to bodily and intellectually prepare for a virtual meeting, in order to be able to focus and experience a fruitful meeting. Another contribution by one of the authors, revealed that aesthetic consciousness of self and others intensifies in virtual communication, especially in relation to the senses of seeing and listening (De Paoli et. al., 2014). Perception of the self is made possible on Skype in a way that you do not experience in face-to-face meetings. Other sensuous cues also become central in virtual communication, so there is a need to sensitize the physicality and to develop skills to perceive and act on it.

However, even if there is some physicality in virtual cooperation, what is there about physical presence and embodied leadership that is important for knowledge work and organizations? What can knowledge based organizations learn from an environment that is highly physical
and embodied, namely the theatre world? We question here the need for physicality in leadership or if ‘virtual physicality’ is as good as ‘face-to-face physicality’ by relating to leadership of theatre arts production; an area that has remained highly physical and embodied in a digitalized world.

Methodological perspective

The methodological strategy behind our study of embodied leadership in a virtual age is comparison. As virtual practices increasingly permeate the organizational contexts in which leadership take place, we argue that it might be fruitful to study contrasting organizational and leadership practices. In order to better understand the complexity of the organizational practices in virtual times, we also need knowledge on the embodied character of leadership practices. Even if virtual spaces are more and more common, bodies do not disappear. By contrasting the virtual work processes with highly embodied work processes, we aim at developing knowledge that will shed light on the complex nature of work organizations and leadership practices of today.

The comparative logic that we apply in this study can be characterized as a “voyage of discovery” (Ågotnes 1989). According to this line of reasoning, comparison is not only about making lists of similarities and differences between different cases. Comparison is a way to develop understanding of a phenomenon by contrasting one case with another. The insight into embodied leadership, by studying theatres, can in turn be used as a perspective to shed light on virtual leadership practices. This research strategy might help us to detect tacit assumptions and blind spots in virtual leadership practices. As mentioned earlier, theatres represent a part of organizational life that has remained highly physical. In line with Flyvbjerg’s argument for the scientific value of case studies (Flyvbjerg 2004), the physical aspect of leadership practices might be seen as a ‘black swan’ in virtual leadership practices. Flyvbjerg refer to the famous example of Popper: “All swans are white”. Popper argued that just one observation of a black swan would falsify the proposition. Following Flyvbjerg, the falsification in turn can stimulate further investigations and theory-building. Even if we live and work in an increasingly virtual context, virtuality is not all there is to it. Embodiment and physicality can be seen as a black swan that needs to be studied in order to develop adequate theory on virtual leadership. Following this logic, the study of theatres might lead to knowledge that is relevant to a wide range of organizations. Not least will the study be relevant for knowledge work organizations with increasing use of virtual tools. The study will of course also be relevant to other high performance organizations and other organizations in which each individual has to be physically present in order to carry out a task or a project.
By using empirical insight from the organizational theatre field, we wish to come up with some new understandings of the benefits of physical and embodied leadership in a virtual age. This research has an inductive and exploratory approach as previous research about the physicality of virtual leadership is very limited, both within general leadership research and not least within the virtual leadership research field. Our aim is to generate insight about the embodied and physical aspect of theatre production to develop some propositions illustrating how physicality may matter or not matter when the digitalization of organizational life has reached a high degree. By contextualizing the issue of physicality we follow up on the quest for practical relevance in leadership research (Tushman et. al., 2007), but also argue for how leadership theory should be developed in line with the needs of the knowledge era (Uhl-Bien, Marion and McKelvey, 2007).

Empirically, we base the study on different data sources. In the first part of our empirical study, we utilize projects that we earlier have carried out in the theatre sector. Data from two studies are particularly relevant. In a case study of a Norwegian theatre (Det Norske Teatret) we conducted qualitative interviews with theatre managers, theatre directors, actors, administrators and technical staff. This study was published as a Ph.D. dissertation (Røyseng 2007). In another case study of an anonymized theatre in Norway we carried out qualitative interviews with the theatre manager, dramaturg, actors, administrators and technical staff (Kleppe et. al., 2012). The data from the two studies provides insight into the working environment and processes in theatres. However, we see that this material is not sufficiently specific on the rehearsal and production processes. Therefore, we will follow up with some more inquiries of leadership processes of theatre production. In the second empirical part of our study, we will therefore carry out focus group interviews with a sample of leading theatre managers and directors in Norway. The interviews are scheduled to be in February 2015. Lastly, the third part of our study will be based on our analysis of relevant documents and materials from the theatre field. Several leading theatre managers and actors have published biographies describing and providing interesting insights into the leadership of production processes in theatres. There is also a lot of relevant material in the newspaper- and magazine press, that we will draw on.

We want to draw attention to the professional aspect of theatre production, which is highly dependent on interdisciplinary input from several professional high-competent individuals. Its team- and project based, knowledge dependent and professional character together with theatres quest for creativity within specific budget- and time limits, make the theatre world interesting and comparable to many other knowledge based organizational settings. We posit that it is relevant to infer insight from the theatre world to other knowledge based settings such as research, consulting, service industry and partly also the public departmental sector.
together with the health sector, because they too are highly dependent on interdisciplinary knowledge, team- and project based with one central professional leader and lastly also people dependent and partly oriented towards developing a performative event.

Here comes a list of characteristics of theatre production to define the empirical setting:

- Traditional work approach (specialization of work)
- High performance organisations
- Knowledge work organisations
- Space specific production processes
- People dependent
- Manual work developing towards more advanced stage technology (body is the tool)
- Produces live performances
- Each individual has to be prepared, physically present
- Project approach (planning, production, performance)
- Produces an event performed for an audience

**Analyzing work and leadership processes in theatres from an embodied and physical perspective**

1. Describe theatre traditions and culture
   - Theatre is people dependent
   - Theatre is amongst other things expression of bodies, speech, feelings

Theatre as a physical manifestation of art, the art does not exist without the physical existence of the body, this is in opposition of visual art that has a product as its end, theatre is people and body dependent, theatre performances are the physical expression of bodies, quality of theatre performances are directly linked to how body expression is on the stage, fluidity, bodies in process, flow,

-Live-performance

People performing live here and now,

- Personal and person dependent

Public bureaucracy is formal, more rational, more technical, not person dependent, while theatre performances have to be personalized to be good, to be true (troverdig), to be interesting, each person on the stage personalize their own personal perception of role
according to themselves. Stanislavski-tradition is based on that each person searches their inner self, themselves, their feelings, bodily sensations to perform a given role (Ladkin and Taylor, 200(?)). The fourth wall is the audience,

- Charismatic culture
Strong and characteristic personalities and expressions are sought for, charismatic personalities are connected to physical aspects, bodies, appearance,

- Theatres are usually collective expressions of people and bodies
Bodies in interaction, bodies interrelating, bodies

- Space dimension – bodies on the stage
Theatre relates to the stage, scenography, costumes and props. Bodies exist in relation to the performing space, you can not separate the one from the other. Rehearsals happens at the theatre, not elsewhere.

- The fourth wall- the audience
Actors use themselves, their bodies to communicate with the audience, bodies communicate.

- The emotional aspect of bodies
Theatre performances with no emotions (both positive and negative) do not perform well (Erika Sauer), emotional aspect can be seen connected to bodily expression, more emotions = more bodily expression,

- Media challenge – why are theatre performances still popular?
Concern in the 80-90ies for the disappearance of theatre performative arts because of costs, because of competition from films, TV, internet, digitalized products, Now theatre audience statistics show a stable development, theatre performative arts is surviving despite competition from several media and entertainment offers. It may be because of the bodily live element, emotional element, Bodies communicate something that is sought of.

2Describe work and leadership processes in theatres and theatre production from an embodied and physical perspective

Director is bodily present in the rehearsal, more than just watching, He or she is close to bodies and people, work through their bodies, interact with bodies, touch?

Phones and interruptions of external people, whatever, is not allowed

Rules for protection of rehearsal process, sacred aspect of work processes, mystified, not talked about, detached
The sacred is what is kept apart, the most sacred in a church has to be pure and apart, relics, things should not be dirtied, sacralizing objects, in theatres this is the embodied work process, the rehearsal is the most sacred in the theater. Student and management groups not allowed entrance, not even in the lobby.

Very little use of digital communication internally

Communication happens face-to-face, bodily connected, no office and knowledge based culture, embodied knowledge, theatre people have no preferences for mail communication, they like sms and cellular phones,

3 Describe and analyze the importance of embodiment and physicality in creative leadership processes in theatres - for focus, concentration, motivation, creativity, engagement, identity formation,

4 What can we learn from theatres regarding embodied and physical work and leadership processes?

Conclusions
References:

Sage. 469-478.